



## Agenda for Sociology at the Start of the Twenty-First Century

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# GETTING IT RIGHT: SEX AND RACE INEQUALITY IN WORK ORGANIZATIONS

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One of sociology's major accomplishments in the last quarter of the twentieth century was establishing that race and gender matter at work. We have been far less successful in explaining why workers' sex and race affect their employment outcomes, however, especially why jobs are segregated by sex and race, and why whites outearn people of color and men outearn women. When sex segregation first attracted attention, its high level of incidence led scholars to hypothesize *universal* explanatory processes: gender-role socialization, the domestic division of labor, patriarchal impulses by employers, male workers' responses to competitive threat. Because most readily available data were for workers, researchers concentrated on individual-level explanations. Despite a growing body of research on why the sexes aspired to, pursued, and abandoned more or less sex-typical occupations, and why race and sex were related to earnings, neither line of research has illuminated why race and sex inequality exists to varying degrees across work organizations.

A few researchers recognized that understanding on-the-job inequality required studying work organizations. From them we learned why some California establishments were more or less segregated in the 1960s and 1970s (although there wasn't a lot of variability to explain; Bielby & Baron 1984), and the factors that led California state agencies to become more or less integrated during the 1980s (Baron et al 1991). These and a handful of other studies have shown that levels of inequality in work organizations are affected by organizational demography, organizational leadership, the degree to which personnel practices are formalized, recruitment methods, external pressure, and the availability of slack resources. But we failed to grasp their most important message: Inequality at work does not just happen; it occurs through the acts and the failures to act by the people who run and work for organizations.

The first challenge for the twenty-first century in this area of sociology is to formulate empirically realistic accounts of how a range of jobs are filled in a cross-section of organizations. These accounts must be based on interviews with informants at multiple levels in the organization. Researchers must learn what if any organizational constraints determine how the opening came about, who specifies the necessary qualifications, and who can authorize exceptions? Who

defines the applicant pool, whether anyone has an inside track, and if so, who, why, and with what result? What is the demographic composition of the pool? Of the decisionmakers? At what levels are relevant decisions made, and what are their consequences? Does the decision create expectations about future job-assignment decisions? Given the way that a position is filled, how likely is it that someone of an atypical race or sex could be appointed? Are there other ways the job in question could be filled and that other positions are filled that would alter these probabilities? In short, we need to identify the actors, how they define the situation, whose definitions prevail, and why.

Gaining access to organizations is feasible, especially if we don't view our object as catching discriminators in the act. Numerous work organizations open their doors to ethnographers and survey researchers. Unfortunately, few of the latter have been interested in race and gender inequality. The reasons employers are more or less indifferent to workers' sex and race will be found in variability within and across establishments in personnel practices, organizational arrangements, and the actions of managers and workers, and we must design our studies to capture that variability. Getting it right will require multiple in-depth organizational case studies whose designs are sufficiently uniform to permit comparative analysis. The mandate for such a concerted effort must come from sociologists committed to understanding gender and racial inequality in work organizations. A research consortium may provide the most productive structure.

A second challenge is to close the gap between reality and our explanatory frameworks. Scholars theorize race and sex inequality in organizations primarily either in terms of active exclusionary processes such as discrimination or status closure or in terms of structural discrimination. The former assumes that segregation and other unequal outcomes stem from out-group antipathy or competitive threat. Social psychological research suggests an important alternative: in-group preference (Brewer & Brown 1998, Fiske 1998). Although opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998) and status closure (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993) are consistent with in-group preference, conflict-based approaches may distort its etiology. The effect of acting on a preference for a subordinate from one's own group may equal that of indulging an aversion, but these are theoretically different phenomena, and the organizational practices that effectively reduce race and gender inequality stemming from the former almost certainly differ from those that minimize inequality resulting from the latter.

Turning to structural discrimination, although the idea that discrimination is built into organizational structures is sociologically attractive and although examples of structural discrimination exist (work schedules designed with in-group members in mind, requirements that predictably exclude certain groups), there is little contemporary evidence of structural discrimination. Moreover, the premise that much employment discrimination is structural implies greater indifference to race and sex by organizational personnel than social psychological research suggests (Heilman 1995) or employers acknowledge (Wilson 1996). The discretion many personnel decisions entail invites stereotyping, evaluation bias, and

attribution error by decisionmakers, and these almost certainly maintain inequality. Rather than assuming structural discrimination, we need to assess its prevalence, forms, and loci. And we must investigate how organizational actors use structures to heighten or minimize the importance of race and sex.

Work settings vary in the extent that they disadvantage people of color and white women. Much of this variation reflects real organizational differences in the limiting or licensing of exclusionary and inclusionary behavior by owners, managers, and workers. Identifying the covariates of this variation within and across organizations is the *only* way to explain race and gender inequality at work (e.g., Nelson & Bridges 1999). Who gets what job is the product of the actions of individuals (who are motivated partly by the sex and race group to which they belong) and the organizational practices that to varying degrees constrain and are circumvented by individuals. Getting it right requires getting serious about the questions we pose and the ways we try to answer them.

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