

# Critical Management Studies at Work

Negotiating Tensions between Theory and Practice

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## 17. Racial inequality in the workplace: how critical management studies can inform current approaches

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Many researchers before me (see for example Nkomo 1992) have suggested that a dramatically different perspective on race in organizations must be taken to increase the relevance of organizational research and practice. Nkomo pointed out that 'Organizations are not race-neutral entities' (p. 501), and called on organizational scholars to consider alternative paradigms and research questions. More than fifteen years later, many of these questions still need to be addressed. This chapter revisits how racial inequality is addressed in American organizations and suggests some changes to the ways managers and others are educated about racial inequality, and how the issue is managed in organizations. I chose the lens of the critical management studies (CMS) literature because it encompasses alternative paradigms that question current practice and research. This CMS-informed approach to racial inequality will examine the current state of affairs in US organizations and offer some alternative perspectives and possible options beyond diversity training based on my reading of some of the relevant CMS literature. As such, this is not an exhaustive study of all that CMS can add to this topic. Rather it is an exploration by an organizational researcher who is troubled by racial inequality and interested in alternative approaches that may be useful to practitioners who address these issues.

First, I present an overview of racial inequality in the US, and the changes in the workplace since legislation required equal opportunities for more US workers. Following this, is a discussion of the backlash against the initiatives intended to create equal opportunities, namely, affirmative action and the ensuing rise of the diversity industry. In the next section a critical approach is outlined and used as the basis of suggested changes in current approaches to workplace racial segregation and inequality.

## RACIAL INEQUALITY IN THE USA

Race continues to be a factor in the allocation of power and resources in organizations and in US society at large, with Whites controlling a disproportionate share (Danziger and Gottschalk 2005; Huffman and Cohen 2004). The civil rights legislation of 1964 attempted to address the issues of access to education and employment opportunities for White women and under-represented racial minorities, but disparities in employment across racial groups are still significant, particularly between Blacks and Whites (Brief, Butz and Dietch 2005; Huffman and Cohen 2004). According to the United States Equal Employment Opportunities Commission's most recent data (2007a), Whites are over-represented proportionally in professional and managerial occupations and under-represented in service jobs, while Blacks and Hispanics are under-represented in professional and managerial occupations and over-represented in service occupations. For example, White men make up 36 per cent of the private industry workforce, yet they comprise 55 per cent of all officials and managers, in comparison with racial minority men, who comprise 16 per cent of the workforce but only 9 per cent of officials and managers. The differences in occupation are subsequently reflected in the wages of racial groups, with Blacks and Whites disproportionately represented in the low and high ends of the income spectrum respectively (Grodsky and Pager 2001; Huffman and Cohen 2004).

## BACKLASH AGAINST AFFIRMATIVE ACTION – RISE OF THE DIVERSITY INDUSTRY

Racial minorities and White women gained substantial ground between 1966 and 1990, as organizations complied with the 1964 legislation that made racial discrimination illegal, but the rate of change slowed in the 1990s when they ran into the so-called glass ceiling, while their White male counterparts with no more experience or education were promoted on what David Maume (1999) dubbed the 'glass escalator'. Asian-Americans on the other hand are faring better than any other non-White group, in terms of wages, but their movement into, and within, the managerial ranks is still restricted; they tend to be funneled into professional rather than managerial roles (Cheng 1997; Woo 1994). Notwithstanding the slowing pace of change, and their continued domination of organizations, Whites began reacting negatively to the changes and a backlash against affirmative action began (Crosby, Iyer and Sincharoen 2006).

During the 1970s and early 1980s, affirmative action legislation was

strongly enforced, and organizations hired compliance specialists; when political pressure reduced the strength of enforcement in the 1980s, these experts shifted their focus to diversity training (Kelly and Dobbin 1998; Konrad 2003). By 2003, 75 per cent of Fortune 500 companies in the USA had diversity training programs, and 36 per cent of all American firms had them, while only 22 per cent of the workforce was in an organization required to comply with the affirmative action laws (United States Department of Labor 2003). The diversity training industry has grown steadily since then and currently generates US \$8–10 billion per year, as more organizations attempt to both avoid lawsuits and realize the benefits that the proponents of the business case for diversity have proffered (Hansen 2003). The size of the diversity training industry and the amount of money spent creates the appearance that organizations are improving the work environment, but attitudes and behaviors have not been significantly impacted and individual and class action discrimination lawsuits continue to be filed against US organizations, according to the data gathered by the US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (2007b). While this may be coincidental, conclusions about the business case for diversity or the effect of training programs are hard to make in the absence of data, as organizations are not collecting data on the effects of diversity programs (Kelly and Dobbin 1998).

Thus far we have discussed inequality of access by various racial groups in the American workplace, the changes catalysed by affirmative action, the backlash against those policies, and the rising popularity of diversity training as an alternative. Now we turn to consider how CMS might help understand this situation from a different perspective, and develop some alternatives.

## A CRITICAL APPROACH

A key similarity among CMS scholars is the 'questioning of taken-for-granted, both about practice and its social and institutional context . . . identifying and questioning both purposes, and conflicts of power and interest' (Reynolds 1998, p. 192). This questioning is the central strength of the CMS approach, and I will draw on the work of those who are asking questions about the supposed success stories of diversity training in organizations (for example, Prasad and Mills 1997). At this point I now turn to the questions that arise for me as an organizational psychologist, and to the CMS-inspired approach that has changed my perspective on these questions. The major touchstones are the following: the social construction of organizational problems; the questioning of basic assumptions

through critical reflection; the historical and sociological perspective on organizational issues; and the post-colonial perspective on racial inequality. These are not the only aspects of the critical management literature that pertain to this issue, but they are important starting points and will now be considered.

### **Problem Definition – Who Frames It and What Is Not Included?**

One of the basic assumptions of CMS is that problems in organizations are social constructions reflecting the agendas and interests of the most powerful constituents (Alvesson 1984; Fournier and Grey 2000; Reynolds 1998). As it is currently framed, the increase in numbers of White women and racial minorities has been constructed as the problem to be addressed rather than the resistance from White men. In the diversity training literature I see an unquestioned assumption that the problem is the 'diversity' for which workers and managers need to be 'trained', not the resistance of the Whites who do not want to work in racially integrated workplaces. Steffy and Grimes's critical examination of personnel/organizational psychology (1992) helps contextualize the use of diversity training as a reflection of how managers address problems. They contend that the function of human resource management is to respond to organizational issues as they arise in such a way as to maximize productivity with the appropriate policies and procedures. When civil rights legislation required organizations to address discrimination, the issue was framed as a problem brought in from the outside, and not a problem of resistance from within. The power to define organizational problems, to name who or what is the source of those problems, is central to how racial inequality is constructed and reproduced. As a few women and racial minorities have made their way into the managerial ranks, White men have constructed a new problem – reverse discrimination – in spite of the lack of evidence to support their claims (Pincus 2000). When an organizational constituency has the power to define a problem, the solutions will suit their purposes, and the trope of reverse discrimination has become a powerful tool in shaping organizational policy choices.

The focus on White men as beleaguered victims of reverse discrimination exemplifies how organizational issues are determined by the most powerful organizational and societal constituents. Many White Americans are unaware of how history has shaped current organizational demographics and how that history affords them access to and mobility within the workplace (Pincus 2000). However, group-based power differences are not currently an important element in the discussion of diversity, which essentially serves the status quo (Hernandez and Field 2003). The perspective offered by Steffy and Grimes (1992) suggests that we turn our

attention to who defines the problem and how that perspective may be limiting current initiatives.

Managers might be less biased decision makers if they were aware of how racial attitudes and organizational policies are shaped by economic, political and ideological patterns (Wetherell and Potter 1992). For example, White managers have different attitudes towards Blacks and Asians, who fare differently in organizational mobility (Cheng 1997), and this can be traced back to the history of intergroup contact, which evolved based on economics, political and historical events and ideological trends (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). If managers learned about the current and historical patterns of employment for demographic groups they would at minimum have an opportunity to see how their decisions can reproduce or potentially change the patterns of racial segregation in the workplace. Managers are not aware of these patterns because it is not part of management education, which has divorced itself from a sociological and historical approach (Reynolds 1998).

### **Has the Problem Definition Supported Collusion?**

While it is tempting to suggest that there is money being wasted by organizations because diversity consultants are colluding with White male managers to maintain the status quo, a broader view of the situation suggests that the issue of racial inequality has simply been left unaddressed by American society. Indeed, human resource managers and the diversity-training consultants they hire have merely responded to the problem as defined by organizational leaders. Does this imply that diversity consultants are colluding consciously or unconsciously with organizational leaders not to advocate for substantial change? Diversity professionals are making a living by training individuals to become aware of and respect differences, but this has not altered the status quo (Hernandez and Field 2003). However, they appear to have been left to address the issue of racial discrimination without much support from organizational leaders (Brief and Hayes 1997). A recent study comparing the relative effectiveness of diversity policies found that the most effective policy is the establishment of a centralized cross-functional organizational body that is responsible and accountable for addressing diversity and inequality (Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly 2006). Rather than relying on diversity training alone, such an approach would involve organizational resources from all functions, and establish accountability throughout the organization.

Since the problem of racial inequality remains substantially unaddressed in the nation at large, the methods that many diversity consultants have employed appear to reflect the ideology of the country as a whole. It is

widely believed that America is a meritocracy and that those who do not succeed simply don't deserve it because they did not work hard enough (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). This ideology is communicated throughout American society in many ways and diversity training that focuses only on individual awareness of differences is one example. Centralized organizational responsibility and accountability for diversity and equality is a very different approach and the fact that it increases the effectiveness of all diversity programs suggests that accountability at multiple levels is needed (Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly 2006).

### Rethinking the Ahistorical Individual

The individual focus employed by diversity trainers also reflects the approach taken by mainstream race researchers in the USA. As Wetherell and Potter (1992) point out in their analysis of racism in New Zealand, the social psychological focus on the individual has dominated the study of racial attitudes, particularly in the USA, and this has influenced diversity-related initiatives. As Prasad (1997) has elaborated, organizations are themselves products of culture and history, and American organizations have been influenced by the myths of the American frontier and the protestant work ethic. This link from the individual to the intergroup and the historical societal levels reframes our understanding of how individual racial attitudes are formed and how much more is required than brief training programs about individual differences. This is not to suggest that just learning a bit of history is going to change the nature of an intergroup conflict. It will however increase the awareness of how power dynamics in organizations reflect the history and intergroup tensions of the society in which they are embedded (Prasad and Mills 1997). One recommendation is that managers learn how they have been shaped by the history of intergroup relations and cultural tensions, and what that means for the advancement opportunities of different groups within organizations. My own experience as a White Canadian doing research in the USA on racial inequality has deepened my awareness of how my attitudes have been shaped and how my own blind spots have developed. Our attitudes are not individual inventions. We are socialized into particular cultures, hence a broader understanding of this is helpful to anyone trying to comprehend how that socialization impacts our current work.

As many CMS scholars assert, social and cultural arrangements are constructions that can be reconfigured (Alvesson 1984; Fournier and Grey 2000). When this is taken as a starting point in examining a problem, the consistent patterns of who dominates the hierarchy in organizations become an object for examination rather than a natural outcome.

The emancipatory intent of CMS, the historical, sociological approach, the challenge to the myth of objectivity, and the assertion that managers are pursuing an agenda that can reinforce stereotypes and inequities are all elements that have been missing from the discourse of diversity in American organizations and from diversity education (Acosta 2004; Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Deetz 2003; Konrad 2003; Linnehan and Konrad 1999; Litvin 2006; Marsden and Townley 1996; Nord and Jermier 1992; Proudford and Nkomo 2006). The insights of CMS scholars are a natural addition to the analysis of and response to the complex issue of racial inequality, and how diversity initiatives might evolve. In this conceptualization, all organizational constituents need to participate in the conceptualization of organizational change, members of the dominant group as well as those who feel marginalized. For example, Clayton Alderfer's work on systemic organizational change (1987) involves all stakeholders. His race relations analysis and change process is grounded in the belief that race and gender affect one's perceptions of organizational inequality, and therefore all perspectives are taken into consideration in the design of organizational analysis and change.

### CRITICAL REFLECTION

One of the key concepts that the CMS literature offers to this discussion is the necessity of critical reflection. It is missing from the education of managers (Reynolds 1998; Reynolds and Vince 2004), and from the diversity training offered by human resource professionals and diversity consultants. Reynolds (1998) makes the case for critical reflection in management education, and his list points to many of the missing pieces in the treatment of race in American organizations: the questioning of assumptions; the social rather than the individual focus; the attention to power dynamics; and the concern with emancipation. Because management is 'not a neutral or disinterested activity' (Reynolds 1998, p. 190) this kind of interrogation is essential to locating and naming the interests, the power imbalances and the manner in which they are reinforced and reconstructed in daily practice in organizations.

There is a need for critical reflection and questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions about how racial dynamics affect how people work in organizations (Acosta 2004; Litvin, 2006). If management is not a neutral practice, and it reflects the political and economic interests of White male owners and managers (Nkomo 1992; Proudford and Nkomo 2006), then racial dynamics and inequality can be fruitfully examined in this light. This simple observation changes the focus of any question in an organization,

moving our gaze from the individual to the societal level and to the analysis of the broader power relations that undergird those found in the organization. The issue of race in American organizations needs the kind of critical reflection that brings about change in thinking, in management education and in management practice. If managers learn how to reflect critically on how their racial attitudes and behaviours have been molded, they may be less likely to discriminate unconsciously. Furthermore, if accountability for equality becomes an organization-wide issue, as Kalev and colleagues' research suggests it should, managers may find more support for different behaviour through shared accountability (Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly 2006).

### Ignoring History and Sociology

The severing of the connection between behaviours within organizations and the social structuring of interactions in society (Marsden and Townley 1996) has left the issue of race relations in organizations in somewhat of a vacuum. An historical perspective on the demographic patterns in US organizations might shed some light on how workplace differences are managed, particularly a perspective that would address the legacy of slavery. The historical relationships of slavery, with the concomitant beliefs in White superiority and legal discrimination against African Americans are not so distant; racial discrimination was made illegal in the USA just over 40 years ago. In order to address what goes on inside American organizations, one needs to acknowledge the social relations of the society at large. Not to acknowledge this serves the purpose of the owners, because within the 'boundary of private property' they are free to serve their own purposes (Marsden and Townley 1996, p. 663) rather than the interests of the workers who are part of that 'property'. When we think of racial issues and private property, what comes to mind is the historical development of American corporations, which is interwoven with the development of slavery (Cooke 1999).

The postcolonial literature provides an important foundation for examining the effect of history on current organizational practices. While it is a diverse literature that cannot be simply defined, an important characteristic of much of it is the inclusion of colonization and slavery as a central element in the history of US corporations and the development of management theory (Cooke 1999; Mir, Mir and Upadhaya 2003). This is omitted from the history that organizational psychologists are taught, and even Loren Baritz's history of industrial psychology, aptly named *Servants of Power* (1960), does not include the role of slavery. This remains a painful part of US history, and the backlash against affirmative action policies may

well be embedded in the wish to avoid having to address that past. The theories of modern or aversive racism suggest that many Whites believe they are not racist, that they accept Blacks as equals. What the researchers find however is that even those who want to believe they are not racist feel ambivalent about Blacks (Dovidio and Gaertner 2000; Gaertner and Dovidio 1986).

The postcolonial theorists, who look at the issue of racial attitudes more broadly than social psychologists, also suggest that this is the case. As Prasad (2003) describes in an overview of postcolonial theory, the colonial discourse contains ambivalent messages about the nature of Blacks, simultaneously describing them as animals and as obedient servants. Such ambivalence creates instability in the colonial discourse and, and in order to shore up the superiority of Whites, the negative stereotypes and 'old stories' must be repeated (Prasad 2003). This brings to mind the successful racial discrimination lawsuit brought against the oil company Texaco. Taped conversations among White executives of Texaco included a host of offensive terms to describe their Black co-workers (Hansen 2003). Considering such behaviour, it is difficult to believe that the problems associated with diversity are solely the 'diverse' workers entering the workforce and not the racist attitudes of the White managers. Postcolonial theory makes clear that there are historical cultural issues that impact intergroup dynamics in organizations (Prasad 2006), and so it is important to examine the social environment that allowed White executives to behave in this way rather than simply suggest that they are just a few of the 'bad apples' out there (Prasad and Mills 1997).

In the next and final section I am going to introduce briefly some suggestions for rethinking current approaches to addressing racial inequality in the workplace.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR A CMS-INSPIRED APPROACH

So what would a CMS-inspired approach to creating more truly egalitarian workplaces for all include? The major touchstones discussed from the CMS literature include reconsidering workplace race relations in the light of the structural historical dynamics of US society, rather than continuing to pursue changing individual attitudes through diversity training. This approach dovetails well with the recent research of Kalev and her colleagues (2006), who found that structures of responsibility within the organization were effective in increasing racial diversity among managers, while diversity training was the least effective. The structures included dedicated staff roles, interdepartmental committees and coordination

plans. Their research found that across the more than 700 US firms they surveyed, there was a significant drop in the number of Black female managers after diversity training programs. While the reasons for this are not known in detail, the fact that the number of Black female managers decreased after a program intended to raise awareness of racial inequality in the workplace may reflect some sort of backlash among Whites. It also highlights the lack of effectiveness of programs aimed at simply changing the attitudes of individuals, a point which others have made as well (for example, see Wetherell and Potter 1992). The staff roles, committees and plans dedicated to diversity were found to be much more effective by Kalev *et al.* (2006); this may be so because the structures provide clear norms for decision making and behaviour, and create structures of accountability.

So how can one infuse such structures with the spirit of the CMS approach, one that creates a space for critical reflection and potentially involve more organizational voices, both of the dominant groups and the marginalized, in creating structures of accountability? I now consider one approach that is solidly founded on an understanding of power and the effect of historical intergroup relations on racial segregation and organizational dynamics.

#### **Education and Interventions Based on Embedded Group Relations Theory**

One type of intervention that has potential as part of the process of creating effective structures of accountability is a group relations framework that focuses on authority and leadership in organizations. Clayton Alderfer (1987) developed a model and multi-stage intervention for improving race relations in organizations. His model examines the embedded social groups within organizations (for example, based on gender and race) and the meaning that emerges from the patterns of segregation or integration throughout the organization. This approach would be an effective aspect of an integrated organizational program to decrease racial segregation while also addressing status concerns of the dominant group. The finding of a recent study of willingness to support policies to increase racial equality in the workplace suggests that both status concerns and hidden hostility of Whites towards Blacks may be factors in negative reactions to racial integration in the workplace (Johnson 2007). Johnson's results suggest that both affective responses and status concerns impede the willingness of Whites to support racial equality. Alderfer's model includes a steering committee comprised of representative members of all the races and gender groups in an organization, so the process would involve White men and White women, thus potentially allaying fears of rapid loss of status for

them individually or as a group. Concerns about loss of status were salient for both White men and women in the workshop component of Alderfer's intervention model (Alderfer *et al.* 1992). While no definitive conclusions can be made regarding how specifically to mitigate status concerns, Alderfer and colleagues found that the workshop and the intervention did have an important effect on the White participants, for whom the fear that increased racial equality would hurt Whites was decreased.

Alderfer's workshop and intervention are concerned with questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions about racial and gender segregation in the workplace and how this reflects the broader social and historical context of the organization. The focus is social rather than individual, and pays particular attention to the analysis of the socially and historically based power relations that are imported into the organization. This is just the sort of focus that CMS scholars have applied to other organizational issues.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The CMS literature adds valuable dimensions to the analysis of race relations in American organizations. I have briefly outlined the problem of racial inequality in these organizations, with domination by White men, and limited freedom of choice and movement for White women and racial minorities. I have suggested a few of the insights of CMS scholars that appear immediately useful to this analysis, though by no means is this discussion complete. Finally I have briefly outlined how linking some of the principles of CMS with a group relations approach and recent research findings might be useful in conceptualizing a different approach to addressing racial inequality in the workplace. I hope that this has served to introduce the reader to the richness that CMS scholars can bring to this important issue.

If diversity practitioners have created a niche for themselves working on racial diversity in the American workplace, but have not succeeded in improving the status of women and racial minorities, what then is the role of the academic who wants to help practitioners address the problem more effectively? This is similar to the question that others have asked regarding the role of CMS researchers in influencing management practices generally (Reynolds and Vince 2004). My answer is similar to theirs. By using the CMS literature as a guide to examine the assumptions that undergird the design of diversity initiatives, and engaging in a critically reflective dialogue with managers and consultants, we may begin to design interventions that alleviate racial inequality within organizations.

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