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Engaging race and power in higher education organizations through a critical race institutional logics perspective framework



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Engaging today's issues in higher education requires strong analytical tools that can address the complex nature of our institutional systems and their involved actors

(Manning, 2013). I contend that through the utilization of a more complex organizational framework, one can conduct deep analysis of organizations by taking sociological, political, anthropological, and post-modern examinations of higher education. An interdisciplinary examination of organizations provides a multi-faceted lens from which to interrogate higher education and can "help administrators, faculty, stakeholders, and students better understand the challenges of a postmodern, complex, and globally connected world" (Manning, 2013, p. 3). This frame provides an analytical tool that attends to issues of race and racism, power, oppression, resistance, and justice in how actors make or do not make decisions – a component that strengthens the study of organizations

and restores dignity and humanity to our communities. What I forward in this paper is an adapted frame based in neo-institutional organizational theory that I call the critical race institutional logics perspective (CRILP).

I argue for a more dynamic understanding of organizational systems that complexly includes the experiences of the member communities embedded within those organizations and how broader societal structures (i.e., neoliberalism, race, racism) organize university life. CRILP then provides a way for researchers and those interested in university life to identify the organizing principles of institutions and how those principles influence actor agency and experience. This type of analysis is particularly important when working with communities of color and studying issues of diversity, equity, and justice, topics from which this framework was originally configured to study.

I first provide a brief overview of the institutional logics perspective (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) and offer additional concepts and frames for better understanding high education institutions. I offer both a methodology and applied example from a recent study looking at how institutional logics related to diversity, equity, and justice influenced how faculty of color understood diversity, equity, and justice in the doctoral admissions process to illustrate the ways this framework can be employed. Lastly, I provide a few additional examples of persistent problems that can be studied through this framework.

Institutional Logics Perspective

This section outlines the Institutional logics perspective in its current form. The Institutional logics perspective as an organizational analytic highlights both material and symbolic aspects of institutional life, while also incorporating the relationships of individuals and organizations (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) identified macro (societal), meso (organizational or institutional field), and micro (individual) levels of analysis, arguing that a multi-level analysis is required for a full understanding of any institution. Essentially, institutional logics are the “socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 2).

Institutional Orders

The institutional logics perspective is based on a set of institutional orders, understood as the “key cornerstone institutions of society” (Thornton et al. 2012, p. 53). Thornton et al. (2012) described institutional orders as:

A governance system that provides a frame of reference that preconditions actors’ sense making choices. The cornerstone institution connotes the root symbols and metaphors through which individuals and organizations perceive and categorize their activity and infuse it with meaning and value. (p. 54)

The defining institutional orders in United States society are family, community, religion, state, market, profession, and corporation. These cornerstones help actors within their institutions (e.g., universities, businesses, neighborhoods) to make sense of the values related to being a member of that institution.

Field-level Logics

According to Thornton et al. (2012), fields are influenced by theories that provide a coherent set of logics, frames that provide identification within a field, narratives that link theories and frames (or the symbolic and material), and resource environments or regulatory actors.

Theories.

Thornton et al. (2012) recognized that theories and institutional logics are not the same. Theories “need not reflect actual organizing practices, and may serve instead as political instruments mobilizing support for institutional change” (p. 153). This is different in that logics are ideological bases present in an institutional order that attend to structural, normative, and symbolic dimensions of institutions.

Frames.

Frames act as cognitive and symbolic markers that signal to actors within an organization the organization’s meaning (Thornton et al., 2012). Deployment of these markers often helps observers to translate the institutional logics of those organizations. Within universities, strategic plans, mission statements, and value statements provide these cues and link to larger institutional orders.

Narratives.

Narratives are the most concrete iteration of field-level logics by providing evidence of the existence of institutional orders and their inherent logics and by helping actors to make sense of the university. Through integrating theories and frames, narratives “give meaning to specific actors, events, and practices, whereas frames are general symbolic constructions, applicable across a wide variety of practices and social actors” (p. 155).

Resource environments.

Thornton et al. (2012) identified additional influencers that affect the way that logics play out within organizations. Within higher education, accrediting bodies, legal proceedings, and governing associations may act as mediating bodies that affect organizations.

Critique

Critiques of the institutional logics perspective point to two weaknesses. First, Thornton et al. (2012) noted that in earlier versions of their framework, and in classical institutional theory, institutions were often assumed to change devoid of a human component (see institutional isomorphism; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, even in the current iteration of the institutional logics perspective, the role of identity is mainly discussed in a cognitive manner. However, a

discussion of power is not completely exhausted. Second, organizations do not exist independent of external forces. The institutional logics perspective understands external forces as central to the understandings of organizations and the symbols, norms, and culture within organizations. However, the framework falls short of implicating any particular theoretical perspective. I contend that race and racism and neoliberalism are the most pervasive forces affecting higher education institutions.

Critical Race Institutional logics perspective

In the following sections, I strengthen the institutional logics perspective through linkages to two encompassing theories: neoliberalism and Critical Race Theory. I then provide multiple additional critical considerations for understanding actor agency (see figure 1).

Neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism can be applied as a theoretical frame to understand how society is organized as a whole (Harvey, 2005), affecting all aspects of society and therefore education, and as an institutional order itself (i.e., market order) dictating specific policy and action within an institution singularly (see green area in figure 1). Neoliberalism is a global economic theory and resultant set of practices that consequentially deregulate business in order to maximize profitability, extend the chasm between rich and poor, engage in a project of global expansion, neo-colonialism, and fiscal austerity for social services and support for marginalized populations (Harvey, 2005). Higher education is not immune from the effects of the policies dictated by neoliberal logic, best seen in the decreased funding of state public universities, increasing contingent faculty workforce, and the increase in globalization narratives (e.g., study abroad, remote campuses, international student admissions; Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Giroux, 2015). Cantwell and Kauppinen (2014) recognized neoliberalism as a “regime that restructures higher education systems and organizations through regulation, funding streams, and linking organizations that tie the academy to the state and the market” (p. 5).

Neoliberalism directly interacts with higher education by dictating the types of actions that the university must make in order to survive in a time of fiscal austerity and increasing costs of running a university.

The consequences of neoliberalism are a widening economic chasm between elite White and low-socio-economic people and people of color. This system reinforces a White supremacy that operates under the auspices of color-blindness.

Through a CRILP framework, one can examine the ways that various resource environments play a role in dictating to university actors through its logics a neoliberal outcome. Particularly, how do Boards of Trustees, politicians, and alumni provide market forces on the university to behave in a particular way? These market forces have the potential to engage universities as service-providers, and students to increasingly view higher education as a service industry needing to appease student-customers and attract new students through commercialized endeavors like new fitness facilities, high-end residence halls, and enormous elite athletics departments.

Relatedly, within a neoliberal system, everything and everyone can be owned. The commodification of bodies, particularly bodies of color, toward profit maximization is seen readily in admissions booklets and websites (Osei-Kofi, Torres, & Lui, 2013). The context of higher education in the U.S. today relies on making market-based decisions that drive organizations to make choices that are devoid of humanistic consideration (Giroux, 2002, 2015).

Critical Race Theory.

The second encompassing theory is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Centralizing the experiences of communities of color allows one to better understand the effects of organizational behavior on those communities. Critical Race Theory helps to complicate broader understandings of institutional orders by allowing an examination of the economic, historical, societal contexts that affect racial and ethnic minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001;



Image by Natalie Battaglia

see green area of figure 1). The institutional logics perspective operates with an understanding of actors as simultaneously navigating multiple logics. However, by analyzing the role of actors through the lens of race and racism there is a strengthening of the analytical trustworthiness of the institutional logics perspective.

Intrinsic to critical social theories is a discussion of power, who holds power, and how power is utilized to control bodies. Power is the “the multiplicity of force relations that are diffuse, polyvalent, creative, and inextricably tied to knowledge, truth, discourse, and practice” (Metro-Roland, 2011, p. 144). Critical Race Theory is one such theory that centralizes the power tensions across race and seeks to illuminate how racialized people understand and experience the world. Organizations are not insulated from the societal contexts in which they are embedded (Thornton et al., 2012); therefore, racism as a permanent societal ill permeates each organizational structure in society, including universities.

Critical Race Theory, originally out of critical legal scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989), is comprised of six main tenets. First, race and racism are present and permanent in today’s society and central to understanding how one understands society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Whiteness as property is the second tenet. This means that Whiteness can be owned and provides one with many societal privileges (Lipsitz, 2006). White privilege affords White people with certain benefits, passes, and subsidies that racial minorities often do not receive as a result of their racial/ethnic identity and phenotype (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Third, liberalism and meritocracy are not suitable levels of due diligence in regulating historical issues related to race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Liu, 2011). Color-blind racism is employed by those with power to maintain said power in order to marginalize people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Stories of meritocracy are often heard from those with the most power and privilege to maintain it. Fourth, individuals’ identities are intersectional and therefore should not be understood singularly, nor should identities be thought of as competing in an “oppression sweepstakes” (Yosso, 2005, p. 73). Fifth, Critical Race Theory is not a theory of Black-White, but rather of understanding the experiences of all minority racial and ethnic groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Lastly, counter-narratives and individual stories are powerful tools for uncovering racial injustice.

Actor Agency in CRILP

Neoliberalism and Critical Race Theory help set the context for where universities and their communities sit today. In a CRILP framing of organizational studies, both the macro and the micro are privileged in the exploration of the organization and the ability to identify organizational influences on human action.

To do so, I suggest that we must look at the following interlocking concepts: 1) identity, power and agency, 2) decision-making and action, 3) resistance, 4) civility and collegiality. These concepts are represented in the bottom row of the blue section in figure 1.

Identity, power, and agency.

The institutional logics perspective falls short of explaining how societal frames such as racism, sexism, or homophobia work to help or hinder an actor’s ability to activate goals and intentions, identify with certain social identities, or maintain cognitive space to challenge oppressive logics. However, who is allowed to make decisions in any given situation is cursorily addressed and attributed to “diverse actors’ commitment to alternative logics” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 99), rather than the role an actor’s identity plays in enabling that agency. The discussion of power remains under-examined in the model, leaving room for more abundant analysis to take place. Understanding an actor’s identity, power, and agency in relation to “polyvalent power,” which exerts force from multiple directions at all times (Metro-Roland, 2011), is central to this framework.

Intrinsic to critical social theories is a discussion of power, who holds power, and how power is utilized to control bodies.

Decision-making and action.

Power directly influences the ways that people are able to act and also places onto those people labels related to their ability to act in authentic ways. However, who is allowed to be authentic and by whom must be interrogated in alignment with a CRT framework of challenging dominant narratives. Authentic leaders are people who can align past experiences, thoughts, affect, values, beliefs, and act in accordance with those constructs (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Those unable to do so are seen as inauthentic. As institutional leaders, people make a variety of decisions that influence the future of their organizations. Weber (2009) provided a useful set of social actions to analyze how and why people make certain decisions. His four types of social action were 1) instrumental-rational, 2) values-rational, 3) affectual, and 4) habitual (or traditional) orientation.

Resistance.

Resistance in its various forms, both enacted and in compliance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) is important to understanding how people of color may react or not react in a given situation. Being authentic often requires one to decide which aspects of their identity to make apparent to others. Choices must be made about when to “pass” or when to “live in” that identity. Performing normative behaviors is seen as a “survival” technique for some (Jones et. al, 2012, p. 713). In essence, there is a feedback loop of contemplation and action that occurs for actors within a social setting. This feedback loop may determine how people make decisions based on their amount of resiliency, additional external factors, pressures, motivations, or absolute values.

Civility and collegiality.

Entwined within this feedback loop is the power and control in discourse and the rhetoric of civility and collegiality. This is of particular interest when discussing how people of color, including faculty, engage in discussions around diversity, equity, and justice. Stockdill and Danico (2012) noted that “when [people] from oppressed groups speak out against systemic institutional and cultural factors...many faculty and administrators view them at best as non-collegial and at worst as the sources of conflict” (p. 17). Just as post-racialism hides a racist’s actions from clear sight, oppression and marginalization are hidden behind civility and collegiality rhetoric (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Invoking the rhetoric of civility and collegiality disempowers people of color from engaging in authentic dialogue by silencing their voice for fear of being seen as a “conflict,” or acting distinctive from the normative trope of a person of color within a given institutional context (Haag, 2005). This understanding of authenticity complicates the institutional logics perspective understanding of actor agency and one’s ability to maintain ones’ self, while also attending to organizational dynamics and change.

CRILP in Action

In this section, I explain how I utilized CRILP in a recent study and provide other examples of how to apply this framework. The origin of this perspective derives from a study I conducted between 2014-2015 that examined how the norms, values, and behaviors of higher education institutions influenced the way faculty of color made doctoral admissions decisions in higher education and student affairs programs (Squire, 2015). By utilizing this new framework, I was able to examine multiple levels and directions of influence on actors and factor in how one’s race and other salient identities led faculty to engage in particular behaviors in the admissions process. In keeping with the analytic approach and transformative theoretical commitments outlined in the paper to this point, it was important

to centralize the participants’ racial identity and their intersecting identities as race and racism are still pervasive in today’s society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Additionally, the current state of higher education as a market-driven entity led me to think about the ways that neoliberalism has permeated the policies and practices in higher education, particularly admissions, and the ways that the outcomes of these policies and practices affect the work of diversity, equity, and justice, and those who do that work.

My methodology was critical race methodology (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology required me to center the voices of people of col-

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or through the framing of Critical Race Theory and through my methods, analysis, and ultimately data presentation, discussion, and implications. Specifically, I noticed how bodies of color were being used to market universities, how international students were centralized as important to the functioning of the university, and the explicit and implicit connections of the university to the broader city or state. This multi-level analysis is important to the critical race institutional logics framework.

The combination of both organizational-level and actor-level analysis plays an important role in painting a broader (e.g. neoliberalism’s pull on higher education as a field), and yet specific, picture of the landscape of higher education (e.g., HESA programs as a discipline). As a result, decision-makers can attend to specific ways that higher education can change to become more equitable and just organizations. In this study, I studied one particular discipline. Attending to the discipline is important within the institutional logics perspective.

Within the university context, disciplines shape a faculty member's worldview and are influenced by broader organizational level logics (Lamont, 2009). As a main organizing structure for faculty, examining specific discipline organizational structure provides context for better understanding individual doctoral programs.

Additional Frame Deployments

As researchers, we must be better at bringing to light the polyvalence of power and the influence of neoliberalism in wielding this power on marginalized communities, particularly those of color. Organizational studies provide both illumination and tangible change solutions. In this section, I provide two examples of topics whose study would be strengthened by such an approach.

One such topical area is the study of the experiences of service staff of color on college campuses. This is a growing segment of the campus population as a result of continued privatization and outsourcing. People in this role tend to be people of color. Due to this reality, the experiences of this population are of particular interest. Maintaining (or restoring) the dignity of the employee stems from the interrogation of general working conditions and the ways the power of hourly wages, anti-union movements, privatization, and benefits gouging maintain systems of power over the movement, choice, and opportunities of people of color in these roles. Continued privatization allows for a neoliberal theoretical lens to be utilized in order to examine the ways that service people understand their experiences in relation to logics that position them as bodies to be used and not supported. Through CRILP, one may examine the ways in which diversity is

explained and applauded in campus staffing statistics, the ways that information is conveyed to a general public, and utilized to maintain status quo or to show increases in campus diversity and equity.

Another area of interest is the examination of the physical spaces in which the campus is situated. For example, a researcher may ask, how does the campus define and normalize "community?" By examining mission statements, strategic plans, or capital projects, one may examine how campus encroaches on community, keeps out community, or subsumes community. Through analysis of language and comparisons to actualized missions or plans, a researcher unveils the ways that neoliberal logics are contradicting community-based action. This examination is particularly poignant in universities located in city-centers with large communities of color in surrounding neighborhoods, particularly if those universities espouse community or social justice missions. A study such as this might engage leaders in broader discussions about admissions access to campus from local communities, community-based research opportunities, unnecessary cost to the university due to overly controlling behaviors in the community, and more.

Conclusion

Today's society is plagued with many ills. CRILP provides one way in which scholars and practitioners can make systemic change in their institutions and unveil the ways that campus communities can support communities of color. Building equitable campuses is imperative toward forwarding a more just society by providing capital building opportunities and broader positive societal benefits. However, these must be

examined at the level of their effects on the human experience and personhood. Through the critical race institutional logics perspective, one can begin this journey and further the potential of our higher education institutions for doing the work of social justice.



Image by Natalie Battaglia