Inequality Regimes: Gender, Race, and Class in Organizations

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Two feminist problems:

- How to understand gender, race/ethnicity, and class as intersecting processes.
- How to understand barriers to creating equality in work organizations.
One Answer: Inequality Regimes

- Much societal inequality originates in work organizations.

- A way to think about the concrete, simultaneous production of “class, gender, and race.”

- Inequality regimes = processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and race inequalities within particular organizations.
Work organizations all have “Inequality Regimes.”

- Definition of inequality in organizations. – systematic disparities between participants in power and control over:
  - goals, resources, and outcomes
  - work place decisions
  - opportunities
  - security
  - pay
  - respect
  - pleasures
Inequality regimes are highly various, fluid, and changing.

- **Variations** occur in:
  - Bases of inequality
  - Degree of inequality
  - Processes and practices
  - Visibility
  - Legitimacy
  - Controls and compliance
  - Competing interests
  - Organizing for change
Bases of Inequality

- **Class** = differences in control over and access to the means of provisioning. Gendered and racialized. Intrinsic to employment.

- **Gender** = socially constructed differences between male and female.

- **Race** = socially defined differences based on physical characteristics, culture, and historical oppression.

- **Other differences** - sexuality, ethnicity, religion, age, and physical abilities.
Degree of Inequality

- Degree of inequality varies from
  - Steep hierarchy to
  - Flat team structure
  - High wage differences to
  - Low wage differences
  - Severe power differences to
  - Power sharing
Organizing Processes that Produce Inequality

- Organizing work into jobs and hierarchies.
  - Most hierarchies are authoritarian, undemocratic class hierarchies.
  - Most hierarchies are patterned along gender and race lines.
  - Jobs are bundles of tasks seen as “suitable” for gendered and raced categories of people.
  - Job expectations are modeled on the image of a white male person with no responsibilities for children and family demands.
Organizing Processes - continued

- Recruitment and Hiring
  - Existing gender and race of job holders may define who fits.
  - Gender and race may be basis of exclusion.
  - Hiring through networks increases gender and race inequalities.
  - Images of appropriate gendered and racialized bodies influence perceptions and hiring.
Organizing Processes -  continued

- Wage setting and supervisory practices
  - Wage setting and supervision are class practices.
  - Race and gender wage differences are often created in bureaucratic practices.
  - “Women’s jobs” are often in lower wage categories than “men’s jobs.”
  - Gender and race affect assumptions about skill, responsibility, and a fair wage for jobs and workers.
  - Gender and race shape (class) interactions between employees, co-workers, and supervisors.
The Visibility of Inequalities

- **Visibility** = the degree of awareness of inequalities.
- **Visibility varies** with the position of the beholder: the privileged tend not to see their privilege.
- **Inequalities are taken for granted**, except by those who are disadvantaged.
- **Heterosexuality** is also taken for granted.
- People in dominant groups generally see **inequality** as existing “somewhere else,” not where they are.
The Legitimacy of Inequalities

- Visible inequalities are often seen as legitimate, or inevitable.
  - Class is highly legitimate in U.S. organizations.
  - Gender and race inequality are less legitimate than class.
  - Gender and race processes are more legitimate when embedded in legitimate class processes.
  - Beliefs in market competition, inherent biological differences, racial inferiority, and the superiority of certain masculine “traits” all legitimate inequality.
Control and Compliance

- Direct – bureaucratic rules, rewards, coercion, violence, including “normal” violence.

- Unobtrusive and indirect – technologies, information flows, professionalized decisions, selective recruitment.

- Internalized, including pleasure in work.

- Belief in legitimacy of control, fear, self-interest.
Competing Interests and Change

- Inequality regimes may be challenged and changed
- Interests in change often differ, conflict
- Gender and race identities may impede
- Workers often seek more equality and control
- Management often seeks efficiency and cost reduction
Lessons from Affirmative Action, Pay Equity and Diversity

- Legitimacy of inequality, fear of retaliation, and cynicism limit support for change
- White women benefited the most
- Outside governmental enforcement is essential
- White male workers and mid-level managers may oppose equity efforts.
- Diversity efforts may be contradictory
Lessons from efforts to build teams and worker participation

- **Wide variation**, but no great success, in reducing gender (and race) inequality
- **Colleague supervision** may be coercive
- **Male workers** don’t want to give up advantages
- **Top management** never gives up control
- **Gender and race structure** of workplace remains
- **Ideal team worker** is as masculine as old style bureaucrat
- **Strong gender identities** can undermine change
Globalization and Change in Inequality Regimes

- Inequalities are externalized
- New segmented organizing forms
- Shifting and porous boundaries
- Third world workers a gendered, low wage labor pool
- Employees’ insecurities increase
- Visibility up; legitimacy down
- White male advantage may seem threatened.
Conclusion

- Gendered and racialized class relations are created in inequality regimes.
- Inequality regimes are complex – sub-units may be more egalitarian than the organization as a whole.
- Inequality regimes are changing rapidly as managements deal with competition and global change.
- Change toward greater equality is possible, but difficult, because of entrenched economic interests and allegiance to gendered and racialized identities.
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