INSTITUTIONALIZED ANTIRACISM

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Although place matters in different ways to different people, it is in place that people live out not only their aspirations, but their struggles. The rise of municipal antiracism marks a desire to meet the needs of local communities. Despite facing numerous challenges in developing and delivering effective antiracism programming, there remains great potential for institutionalized initiatives to effect change. Maximizing the potential of institutional actors to contribute to this fight strengthens the scope and potential effects of antiracism work. While grassroots social movements continue to be highly visible in Canada, institutionalized efforts are on the rise and, as such, demand examination. In this article, I explore the effects of backlash and limited resourcing on the effectiveness of initiatives and reflect on strategies to mitigate and address these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Despite facing numerous challenges in developing and delivering effective antiracism programming, there remains great potential for institutionalized initiatives to effect change. In this chapter I explore where institutionalized initiatives —those that have been formalized into an organizational setting— fit within the landscape of social change. Are they the locus of racism, as some definitions of racism would suggest, or are they promising sites for transformation? I endeavour to answer these questions by reviewing the context of this work, including its challenges and opportunities. As a geographer, I believe that "place matters." Although place matters in different ways to different people, it is in place that people live out not only their aspirations, but their struggles.

WHAT ARE RACISM AND ANTIRACISM?

Over the last half century the concept of "race" has undergone considerable debate. However, contemporary scholars working the field agree that race is a social construction—that it is a category that has been constructed and is not "pre-given." This work follows in the tradition of research from UNESCO in the 1950's in which claims of the biological foundation of race are debunked. Despite research refuting the scientific truth of race, the concept continues to serve as a marker of human difference that carries real impacts (Jackson 2000, 669). Racism can be broadly defined as "the assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, as well as the institutional policies, processes and practices" that emerge from conceptualizations of race (Henry and Tator 2006, 5). Racism is an ideology that is used to organize and perpetuate the power relations in society (Essed 1990, 44). Racism can take many

forms, falling along a spectrum of more overt instances (e.g. racial slurs and hate crimes) to more subtle ones (e.g. stereotypes and jokes).

By virtue of the range of the forms of racism, antiracism can also appear in multiple arrangements when put into practice. According to Henry and Tator (2006, 40), an antiracist approach "focuses on an integrative and critical approach to the examination of discourses of race and racism and an analysis of the systems of differential and unequal treatment." Examples of antiracism include the creation of policies governing the equitable treatment of employees, the incorporation of marginalized histories into educational curricula, recruiting a diverse and representative workforce, engaging in public protests or rallies, developing culturally sensitive training, and creating space for the stories of those affected by discrimination.

While on the one hand antiracism requires critical reflection and analysis of social systems and practices, it must move beyond reflection to action in order to effect change in the lives of racialized individuals. Calls to address racism through scholarship and activism are guided by the belief that re-situating antiracism research can bring about more effective social change (Kobayashi and Peake 2000). Within the literature on antiracism is work that centres the state (or government, more generally) as a leading perpetrator of racism. Such a perspective suggests that institutional policies and practices are critical in the perpetuation of racism (Henry and Tator 2006, 4) and that antiracism stands in opposition to white hegemony and the dominant cultures as articulated through the state. Other conceptualizations of antiracism view racism as having roots not only in systemic practices and ideologies, but in individual acts as well.

INSTITUTIONALIZED ANTIRACISM: PROMISING SITES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The study of institutions can be a productive approach to the study of social life. In many respects, it can be used to bridge the gap between macro-level theory and micro-level practice. As it relates to antiracism, "The study of organizations represents an appropriate and timely next step in the progression of research in the socio-political sphere. … It builds on the collection of work on social welfare to include a focus not only on the role of government in the promotion of equity, but of non-governmental organizations taking up the fight against racism" (Brooks 2014, 69). In particular, the "relative formalized structure of organizations allows for the study of operational factors and power relations at play within them, revealing key strategic points of intervention…" (Brooks 2014, 79).

A decade ago, Piven (2004) argued for a focus within antiracism on the actions and ideas that affect the lives of citizens and how change is brought about by people responding to them. Such a call can be at least partially addressed through the study of institutionalized antiracism. Whereas non-governmental actors have tended to turn the spotlight on municipalities to identify opportunities to improve the social landscape, an increasing number of municipalities are taking on this important work as a part of their mandate and commitment to their constituents. Municipalities are well-positioned to undertake anti-discrimination work that has traditionally been the purview of non-governmental organizations and groups. Despite interest on the part of scholars to study the rationale and functioning of antiracism work, there is a marked absence of research theorizing and analyzing the institutionalized efforts of institutions, including municipal governments. Within the limited scholarship that exists, multiple challenges and responses can be identified[1].

THE CHALLENGES OF INSTITUTIONALIZED ANTIRACISM

The rise of municipal antiracism marks an aspiration to meet the needs of local communities. But this objective exists in tension with factors that dampen the possibility for, and effectiveness of, anti-discrimination work. Several scholars have explored the factors that influence the effectiveness of anti-discrimination, though few have looked at institutions in their study. In the sections that follow I identify some constraints and explore promising strategies that may be applied to mitigate them. Although the focus of this chapter is on work to address racism, many of the findings can be extended to reflection on broader anti-discrimination work.

BACKLASH: POWER SPEAKING

Backlash has been described as "the sound of power." For organizations engaging in antiracism, backlash is a common dimension of their work and their ability to effectively identify and respond to it significantly enhances the potential success of their initiatives. Backlash has many sounds and to date, most scholars have taken for granted that its meaning is widely understood. For those who have focused backlash as the centre of investigation, its insidious character is often cited. Speaking to the workings of backlash Faludi (1991, xxii), an American scholar of the woman's movement, writes:

> *"Although backlash is not an organized movement, that does not make it any less destructive. In fact, the lack of orchestration, the absence of a single strong-puller, only makes it harder to see—and perhaps more effective."*

Continuing on this theme, other scholars have noted that "political backlash campaigns are most successful when they foster an environment in which those who seek redress for the cumulative effects of historic oppression are further marginalized" (Bakan and Kobayashi 2007, 65). Three forms of

backlash that are particularly relevant to the work of municipalities include the dismantling of change initiatives and the limited or insufficient provision of resources, the invocation of structure rigidity, and the denial of racism.

1) The intentional withdrawal of support and/or resources of an equity position or initiative is often justified on the basis of "prioritization" that necessitates the redistribution of resources. The dismantling of initiatives can be done in seemingly benign and unintentional ways. In many cases, the rationale for termination is founded on practices of prioritization that position equity as peripheral to the core function of the institution, and as such, lower in concerns for funding and staff resourcing. While it is reasonable to expect that policies and programs will shift as they are developed and implemented, and that some initiatives are by design short— or medium-term in duration, trends in the de-prioritization of equity, and the resulting reduction in resources they are allocated, should be examined in order to ascertain the climate of anti-discrimination within an institution. Resources are essential to any institution's work. As such, budget exercises become crucial in decisions about what work gets done. In situations where antiracism work is done by individuals or groups working in relative isolation (in physical, political terms) from decision-making structures, acquiring resources can be critical to begin or continue work. In times of financial constraint it is not uncommon to see increasing demand for "more to be done with less" by fewer people.

At the municipal level, a withdrawal of resources can signal backlash against particular kinds of initiatives. While the intention of the shift in support may be unclear and the processes through which it happens, uncertain, the impacts can be damaging. In some cases, changes in municipality elected representatives and key staff positions results in planning exercises that re-position equity work in dramatically different ways. Planning cycles are fundamental to a municipality's work and though change can be a necessary and positive force, it can also have unforeseen impacts. In the context of equity work, changes in representation and staffing and the associated planning exercises can lead to dismantling of existing programs and dampening of new efforts. Municipalities are not immune to financial restriction. As Andrew (in this issue) notes, they typically have few sources of revenue and possess relatively little flexibility in the use of their revenue compared to other levels of government. In some cases, social and political tensions that surface in periods of limited municipal resources can be exacerbated by decisions to "maintain the status quo." For marginalized groups, individuals, and allies a failure to act against oppressive ideologies and practices can be understood as backlash.

2) Invocations of structural rigidity take their power from the "status quo" and processes that avoid or stall change. Structural rigidity can be the result of the negotiation of institutional processes, but it can also be deployed as a means to defer action. The need to "get permission" to undertake anti-discrimination work can serve as an "out" for those not truly interested in promoting change and as a major barrier for others who champion, sometimes in isolation, the cause.

Histories of antiracism work vary from one organization or municipality to another. While there is no formula to determine which have been, or will be, successful in their work, conditions of flexibility and openness within the organization allow for adaptations and accommodations that can ultimately enhance initiatives and their results. Unfortunately, hierarchies can limit the flexibility of staff members working to address discrimination because it can take time to navigate formal channels for planning and approvals. In larger municipalities where the coordination of numerous departments with potentially complementary mandates is complex, structural rigidity can be an unintentional consequence of institutionalization. However, in other cases a desire to avoid "rocking the boat" or "making a problem where one doesn't exist" can be hidden and given power through structures (e.g. policies, work place cultures, decision-making practices). Whether intentional or not, those with decision-making power have the opportunity to ensure that municipal processes do not interfere, and in fact, augment the timeliness and uptake of anti-discrimination work.

3) Many people believe that improving equity for marginalized groups is not necessary. The attitude may be a product of ignorance, or it may be a tactic to avoid questioning the advantages afforded to dominant segments of society. Denying racism exists requires less work than accepting it and allows one to sidestep the need to question structures and processes. When racism is shown to exist it is often identified as an isolated incident involving "deviants", not "people like us." Despite research and data that evidence the persistence of racism as a barrier to meaningful citizenship in Canada, there remain individuals who deny the realities of discrimination faced by others. At the institutional level, recognizing racism and accepting claims of racism as legitimate may entail the acknowledgement that the institution and the local community in which it is located are not meeting their full potential.

It is critical that municipalities challenge claims of the denial of racism. The demographic makeup of municipalities across Canada differs tremendously from coast to coast to coast, and from rural to urban settings. The most meaningful change; therefore, can only be undertaken with widespread community support and through the inclusion of a diverse range of perspectives and voices at the decision-making table. Municipalities are well-positioned to bring together communities to share stories of what it means to live out advantage and disadvantage. Through these conversations and activities greater awareness and empathy can be cultivated and deniers of discrimination can learn about the realities faced by their neighbours. Municipal governments, through their policies,

statements, and programs, can highlight the need for equity work, the reasons why it is important, and what gains can be made by working as a collective.

MONEY TALKS . . . AND SILENCES

As discussed above, resourcing is of critical importance to antiracism work. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s the structure of many Western democracies were transformed within the paradigm of market regulation. This neoliberalism is a set of rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques that make it possible to govern "at a distance" (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996). The reconstruction has as its foci the institutionalization of management and performance measures with the goal of increasing competition, fiscal restraint, and the adaptation of "business practices." It is characterized by the reconfiguration of the state with arguably little concern for social interests in the distribution of resources. While it is possible that there are different configurations of neoliberalism—that it takes different shapes in different places—the study of the changes brought about through the transformation are critical to understanding the contemporary landscape of institutional antiracism.

Neoliberal funding regimes, which take as their foundation the ideologies and practices of dominant market approaches, position anti-discrimination work as peripheral, especially in periods of financial constraint. Funding is increasingly uncertain, increasingly short-term, and equity initiatives, which can be seen as falling outside of the formal work of institutions, are often vulnerable to cutbacks. In some cases, these funding regimes create conditions in which individuals must contribute their time and energy on a voluntary basis in matters that are considered beyond the scope of their work. Increasing restraints on funding also result in heightened competition within institutions and the instability and the vulnerability can discourage medium- and long- term antiracism work. Compromises on the kinds of initiatives that are taken up are made, with short-term initiatives taking priority because they more easily align with funding cycles and resources. Unfortunately, the neoliberal funding regimes do not account for the complexities of racism and strategies for social change. Instead, they promote "quick and easy" solutions which produce varying degrees of success.

Processes of neoliberalization can be recognized within the municipal landscape of social change. Neoliberal funding regimes affect the equity work of municipal governments in several ways. Many municipal governments work within the context of real or perceived financial constraint. When money is tight social services, including those for the most vulnerable segments of society, are the ones that are most readily cut. This tactic is successful by virtue of the relative powerlessness of these communities to challenge the processes through which municipal priorities are identified and the subsequent actions that are taken. When municipal revenue is not in a real period of hardship, discourses of financial restraint may be used to create the perception of crisis and promote competition among programs and issues. Unfortunately, social services and community-building initiatives are often positioned in direct competition for resources. Staff members working within municipal governments are frequently drawn into, or are agents of, neoliberalization. Given the option of letting equity work fall to the wayside, many staff members take on the role of champion and further municipal efforts voluntarily, on top of their daily roles and duties. While it is promising to observe such dedication, it raises questions over the influence of existing systemic barriers within the municipality on possible avenues for change.

BEING STRATEGIC CAN LEAD TO SUCCESS

The contexts in which institutionalized antiracism is undertaken are many and complex. One that is particularly influential is the political, in which there are multiple actors each with their own, sometimes competing, agendas. According to Flint (2006, 25), "geopolitical agents work toward their goals, but their chances of success and the form of their strategy is partially dependent on context." By examining the context of antiracism, actors or institutions can better under the potential of their work. It is only once this knowledge is acquired that strategic decisions and maneuvers can be made to further antiracism. Some very basic strategies can be effective to set the stage for antiracism work and promote its ongoing success. All three of the strategies outlined below speak to actions that involve, at least to some extent, internal work, but which all are intimately linked to the way in which antiracism is rolled out.

LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Institutions can be faced with different challenges than their grassroots counterparts. One hurdle is their perception as credible, trustworthy, and effective actors by communities and other organizations working in the field. Without these fundamental qualities, it is difficult to gain access to, and the support of, marginalized groups. An important first step in negotiating this transformation is to do the internal work to become a model of inclusivity and equity. One way to begin this work is to identify and support champions within the organization. A second is to undertake assessments of internal policies and practices to identify strengths and gaps. The potential for improvement is ever-present and the intention to take on this work is important to highlight. Creating equitable and inclusive environments is an objective that requires consistent and long term work. It is conceivable that there is no official "end point" to equity work; that there will always exist the potential to enhance the social landscape. For this reason,

assessing where an organization stands is critical to identify next steps, but also chart a future course. Internal work can involve benchmarking equity initiatives and their results, deliberating over processes of decision-making, setting priorities and methods of work, and the identification of specific barriers that impede better results. For municipal governments and their partners, these action areas are particularly relevant and given proper attention, can lead to positive outcomes.

MAKE THE CONNECTIONS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In times when resources for equity work are limited, decreasing, and/or non-existent, partnerships are one way to get work off the ground. As a strategy partnership is also an effective approach to mobilize solidarity and experience. Partnership can be developed as a means to solicit expertise from stakeholders in a range of domains including public service use, civic participation, research, and program development. Collaboration can generate buy-in in the community when partners as selected strategically, valued for the expertise, and given the opportunity to make meaningful contributions. As a strategy partnership can be a mobilizing force for initiatives; not just in terms of getting them off the ground, but promoting authentic impacts. The reach of anti-discrimination initiatives can be broadened when reputable partners are active in their communities and this, in turn, the distribution of benefits to a greater number of individuals and groups. Despite the many advantages to partnership, there are also associated challenges when bringing different stakeholders together. In all cases the objectives of the partners should align with the goal of the partnership and clear structures and protocols should be in place to ensure effective and efficient work.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Words matter when it comes to promoting inclusion and eliminating discrimination. On one hand, the right choice of words can gain important allies. On the other, the wrong choice can offend, alienate, or even worse, generate backlash from the very groups that are needed to undertake the work effectively. Part of the anti-discrimination movement has focused on naming discriminations. In doing so, the realities of those experiencing marginalization are validated and made visible. By naming them we stake the claim that they exist and that they should be examined and addressed. For the same reason that it is important to name discrimination in it many forms, naming anti-discrimination policies and practices as such makes the statement that they are intentional.

But it can be difficult to find the right words. In an effort to be as accurate and inclusive as possible, it is a good idea to put energy into researching the language that is in current use. Consulting with community leaders is a good way to learn how specific groups and communities would like to be identified and the act itself can be seen as a gesture of good faith. Glossaries of terms are also published by many organizations including human rights agencies and antiracism organizations (e.g. the Canadian Race Relations Foundation). Finally, researchers working on issues of race and racism spend considerable time examining language in the literature and have experience working with marginalized groups. Reaching out to these actors can build institutional capacity and promote positive interactions in the community.

CONCLUSION

The forms and effects of discrimination are ever-changing. So too must the responses we employ to combat them. Maximizing the potential of institutional actors to contribute to this fight strengthens the scope and potential effects of antiracism work. While grassroots social movements continue to be highly visible in Canada, institutionalized efforts are on the rise and, as such, demand examination. Institutionalized initiatives face challenges but the individuals and groups that champion anti-discrimination work are dedicated to their work and approach challenges with creativity, practicality, and determination. Despite setbacks, formalized antiracism initiatives can enjoy the benefits of institutionalization; be it through resources, political support, expertise, partnership, or other spatial advantages.

Reflecting on why place matters in antiracism, it has been written that, "not only is an antiracist struggle situated, but it occurs most effectively through an engagement of the places where it is most strongly manifested" (Kobayashi and Peake 2000, 398). The landscape of equity continues to change as do the sites for action. Exploring institutionalized antiracism advances opportunities for better understanding and negotiating social change. It brings us closer to understanding effective change and provides us with additional tools to further the fight against racism. An exploration of institutionalized antiracism, including at the municipal level, helps form an understanding of how place matters and how we can create better places in which to live.

NOTE

The findings of this chapter are based in part on previous research on institutionalized antiracism published by the author in 2014. The research explored institutionalized antiracism initiatives at three different research sites including a Canadian university, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In particular, the antiracism work of these three organizations was examined in relation to negotiations of backlash, neoliberal organizational transformation, and geopolitical context.

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