Social Justice in Organizational Change • Social Justice in Organizational Change: An Inclusive Anthology

Introduction: Social Justice in Organizational Change

Kimberly S. Scott¹ Dorie Ellzey Blesoff Yabome Gilpin-Jackson Sonya Kaleel Ngoc Nguyen

¹Northwestern University

Published on: Feb 14, 2023

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/3ce644834b948b6a

License: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0)
Chapter Reviewers: Nicole Dessain, Ranjani Iyengar, Jessy Gelber

Please read the About page for the full list of SJOC contributors and community members.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

James Baldwin (1962)

We endeavor to articulate as honestly as we can our collective starting point and our individual perspectives on topics relating to this big question: How might we evolve the practice and study of organizational change to advance commitment to social justice? As with any big question, there are a number of spin-off questions that emerge, for example: How might we critique, disrupt, and re-imagine organizational change to accelerate social justice? Where are racism and other forms of oppression implicitly baked into the dominant theories of organizational change we have been trained in? How might we embed equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice into all aspects of organizational change instead of treating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) as a separate type of change? In what ways do our experiences with and understanding of DEIJ impact our study and practice of organizational change? Our big question isn’t new, and most of the ideas we present here aren’t original. However, we are committed to elevating this work because we believe that it is necessary for those of us in the field of organizational change to individually and collectively engage in developing a broader awareness of what is harmful about the intellectual and conceptual legacy of our field and the practices we continue to rely on today. We are committed to relearning the roots of human-centered and holistic approaches found in Indigenous and traditional cultures and found in voices who have resisted Western cultural domination but have been silenced, ignored, or commoditized. We are “reflecting in public” to make a contribution that we hope will enable our dialogue to deepen and our field to evolve.

While some may criticize the elevation of anti-racism and anti-oppression as politically-charged activism that has no place in the scholarly literature or practice of organizational change, at no time is our work as change scholars and practitioners value-neutral or bias-free. Indeed, a controversial “debate” series about diversity in the field of psychology reveals a critical need for more attention to our values, biases in publishing, and the need for more learning and dialogue to understand how racialized experiences impact our work (Bartlett, 2022; Roberts, 2022; Roberts, Bareket-Shavit, Dollins,Goldie, & Mortenson 2020). The theories, analyses, plans, narratives, action items, facilitation techniques, and tools we use in this domain are developed by people who have made choices about how to “best” do this work. These choices are grounded not only in our own perspectives and values, but also in the perspectives and values of our research, our colleagues, and our teachers. How we talk, think about, and collaborate with others to study and change organizations is informed by what the disciplines and fields we draw from have determined to be credible knowledge about organizational change. It is our responsibility as researchers, practitioners, leaders, and educators to think
critically about this, the underlying assumptions, biases and values, and to be mindful about the choices we make in doing this work.

In this introductory chapter, we offer our reasons for convening writers and reviewers to construct this anthology, our hopes for this project, the approach we have chosen to take, the context influencing us, and our invitation for your participation. As we share our hopes, we invite you to reflect, hone in on your own hopes and inquiry, and find the best match for your own intentions.

**Our Purpose**

This project began as part of a larger effort, led by Dr. Juliet Aiken, to develop a massively authored, free online textbook that re-envisions Industrial-Organizational psychology research and practice using anti-racist and anti-oppressive principles as a foundation and framework. The collaborators of what we now call our Social Justice in Organizational Change (SJOC) community and anthology focused on the area of organizational change, setting out to provide an opportunity for students, practitioners, leaders, instructors, and researchers of organizational change to:

- Engage in critical thinking about the background, underlying assumptions, and current practice of organizational change and change management in order to disrupt and demonstrate deconstruction of the dominant values and narratives of change leadership.
- Approach their work with an awareness and explicit acknowledgment of the oppressive assumptions, power inequalities, methodologies and tools that permeate our field.
- Consider perspectives from emergent voices coming from those who have experienced marginalization, who come from non-Western contexts, or who teach Traditional Indigenous Knowledge.
- Offer practitioners organizational change methods and tools grounded in anti-racism and anti-oppression perspectives.
- Identify and provide perspectives that are more expansive, inclusive, and power-sharing from those who have experienced marginalization, who come from non-Western contexts, and who teach Traditional Indigenous Knowledge.
- Discover through this process opportunities for more connectivity and exploration in community for those interested in intentional dialogue and sharing of experiences.

What started out as a single chapter about organizational change has become this anthology project, which will remain open and massively authored for as long as there is interest in continuing this work.

**Our Approach**

There are three operational principles we generally have united around to create chapters.

1. **Make explicit how we are doing this work and invite critical feedback.**
As we raise awareness through critical reflection we can begin to acknowledge bias, drawing from our own experiences as well as scholarly sources that have examined bias. When we explore models of organizational change, we can analyze their origins, their impact, and how some models have been used to maintain power or to create more equitable and inclusive organizations. We seek to be transparent and stay open to feedback so that our impact can align with our intention.

In service of critical reflection, our review of organizational change is informed by recent literature on racialized organizations (Ray, 2019), postcolonial scholarship (e.g., Banerjee, 2021), and critical examinations of psychology, management, and organization studies (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Garbes, 2021; Gonzales, Kanhai, & Hall, 2018) among other inspirations for critical thought. This work identifies race as an unavoidable element of organizations and institutions, where racism and exclusion are produced and maintained through organizational practices, policies, and norms. Even interventions designed specifically to promote diversity, equity, inclusion and justice risk acquiescence to white-dominant structures in order to survive.

"Without rethinking modern professional standards in American organizational fields—often created by well-educated white men in an era of legalized racial segregation—organizational attempts at racial inclusion shall continue to be merely invitations into a white-dominant world, contingent on white discretion." (Garbes, 2021, p. 14)

To illustrate this point, let’s consider a common step in change design and implementation: a reliance on benchmarking and “best practices.” These methods are vulnerable to the “white institutional isomorphism” described by Garbes (2021) and more generally by DiMaggio & Powell (1983). Like other professionals, organizational change practitioners face pressures to conform to industry standards, particularly when uncertainty and novel or unclear circumstances exist, potentially leading to the adoption of exclusionary practices within and across fields. Garbes (2021) describes this as mimetic isomorphic pressures, where “organizations model themselves off existing legitimated paradigms” (p. 11). While practices that are commonly adopted as “legitimate” may be viewed as race-neutral, without critical examination they may replicate exclusionary mechanisms.

A critical review of organizational change theory and practice can reveal the limitations of the work on which it was built while maintaining its important contributions (e.g., see Gonzales, Kanhai, & Hall, 2018). We adopt an approach similar to Gonzales et al. (20018) whereby we assume that current change theory and practice are not neutral or value-free (nor is it free of context and history), and that nothing should be taken-for-granted in interrogations of organizational change. What this means is examining the language and framing of our work—along with the underlying values and power dynamics enabling it—are as important as questioning the tools and methods we use.
2. **Illuminate multiple ways of knowing to invite inquiry and dialogue, examining thinking (our own and others) rather than providing answers.**

How we understand and teach about organizational change can be transformed if we adopt a shared commitment to multiple ways of knowing, or epistemic heterogeneity (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Warren, Vossoughi, Rosebery, Bang, & Taylor, 2020). Students can benefit from learning the “normative forms of knowledge” used in our field to practice organizational change, but we risk limiting the potential of change to achieve just, equitable outcomes if we fail to consider epistemic heterogeneity in the study and practice of change. This requires expanding the body of literature and practices we use in our field, in addition to critically examining new and existing approaches. Even if we adopt change approaches that appear to be transformative, reflexivity must be an ongoing demand. For example, Bang & Vossoughi (2016) demonstrate how learning and participatory design research can result in assimilation into existing inequitable systems when the underlying values and forms of knowledge go unchallenged: “Without expansive views, equity work becomes directed toward more effective forms of compliance and participation in inequitable systems and forms of life” (p. 175).

Inviting inquiry, dialogue, and a commitment to epistemic heterogeneity can be extended to our review of organizational change concepts as well. For example, let’s consider how “resistance” is defined, framed, and “managed” in organizations. Resistance and dissent imply different perspectives, alternative values, and opportunities for making visible multiple ways of seeing and knowing. As explained by Bang and Vossoughi (2016), by expanding our perspectives and views of what counts as legitimate knowledge, “moments of dissent and the responses, negotiations and navigations that follow may be key sites in which we can learn more about the challenges to change, authentic forms of democratic dialogue and collective movement” (p. 185).

3. **Create content that is accessible and amenable to a variety of learning needs.**

Facilitating an open, massively-authored project requires that we establish some guidelines for SJOC authors and reviewers. Here are some of the guidelines we follow:

- Write each chapter so it can stand alone but remain aligned with our big question and purpose.
- Allow for diversity of lived experiences and perspectives connected to the overall intention of this project. Actively seek perspectives from underrepresented groups to promote citation justice.
- Use story-telling and images as a mode of communication, to embody the work.
- Be reflexive in your research, and assume an iterative approach. This work will never be final, and that’s one point we are trying to make with this project.
- Look at the content from the perspective of readers and how we might support the multiple learning needs they bring.
- Share both what the insight is (what did I learn) and how it emerged (how did I learn it).
- Give and receive credit for contributions. We list the authors and reviewers of SJOC chapters. We use the creative commons license of “Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike” to recognize thought leadership,
foster ongoing learning, and encourage others to build on this work as long as they credit the authors and license any derivative works under identical terms.

Why Now?

The term “inflection point” seems an appropriate description of the volume and weight of complex challenges currently apparent at every level of social and planetary existence—personal, familial, community, societal, national, international, and environmental. As we started writing in 2021 (and continue today) we found these challenges to be impactful on our lived experiences, our awareness, our points of view, and our writing. Most of the SJOC contributors so far are located in North America, primarily the US, so our perspectives also are grounded, and limited, in that context. Here we highlight some of the challenges and macro-trends influencing our beliefs about why it is important to bring a social justice lens to organizational change.

- Climate disasters are increasing, amplifying the harm of environmental injustices:
  - A wide array of climate crises brings anticipation of destruction of whole regions or countries, primarily poorer countries and communities.
  - Power imbalances, including access to resources, impact how climate change is experienced through economic instability, food and water insecurity, and forced dislocation due to climate disasters, famine, political persecution, and war. Climate refugees will cross national boundaries and need new homes.
  - The unwillingness of industrialized nations to act collectively to address the cost of climate change reduces the likelihood of addressing the rapid developments and the global nature of the crisis.

- The Covid-19 pandemic made clear that in all major social institutions change can happen quickly, underlying assumptions can be challenged fundamentally, and collective coordination and resource-sharing are required for survival.
  - Existing economic and social disparities were intensified during the pandemic, illustrated in structural dynamics of governmental policies and investments, scientific institutional priorities, distribution and transportation mechanisms, data-sharing, and relationships among countries.
  - In the employment domain, employees needed much more flexibility to balance work and family demands in a pandemic. Companies relied on technology to enhance human factors/job attitudes (i.e., utilizing Zoom to facilitate team communication/connection vs. implementing monitoring software to micromanage employees working remotely). With new way of working revealed, employees reconsidered their options for work and pushed for changes to the employment relationship.
  - Health and well-being rose to the forefront regarding ongoing capacity to work, and economic priorities sometimes conflicted with workers’ health priorities. Some industries were impacted more intensely than others.

- Social discourse in the United States has shifted, shining new light on the struggle for power and social justice.
In 2020 we saw an increase in public awareness of anti-Black Police brutality cases, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and more open conversations around antiracism work and the need to address America’s systemic racism. Organizations (especially large ones) faced pressures to respond. There was an increase in public messaging, employing specialists in the DEIJ field and, in some cases, measurement of actual change in inclusion and belonging.

Less than two years later, consistent with prior moments in history when progress is made, there are organized efforts to diminish awareness of Black history, outlaw the teaching of critical race theory, remove funding for DEIJ in public institutions, eliminate LGBTQ rights, and prevent women from accessing reproductive health care.

Our Invitation

Our community of SJOC contributors invites you to engage with the information shared in this book, reflect on your reactions and experiences, and use what is most relevant for your own purpose. We invite you to collaborate in this project, whether you are a student learning about organizational change, an instructor teaching organization change at any level, a practitioner or organizational leader interested in reflecting, critiquing, updating and refreshing your thinking, an academic interested in critical commentary heavily influenced by a practitioner’s perspective, or someone interested in connecting to a community of inquiry and practice around this question.

Delving into this big question is a journey. We are all at various points on the journey and may even be on parallel but different journeys. Some of us are in the process of unlearning something, or challenging others to unlearn something, having been trained in the “culturally dominant lens” of Western thought. So deeply ingrained into our mental models of how organizations should work, we may find ourselves having difficulty saying goodbye to something we’ve built, or identified with, in the past. Yet, deconstruction of our assumptions is integral to deconstruction of dehumanizing systems.

Some of us are in the process of reimagining or experimenting with new ways of solving organizational and social equity gaps, and finding the nuances of making shifts that have profound effects on all members of organizations and their surrounding systems. Inherent in this process is the acknowledgement and learning from traditional cultural values and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, as well as quantum science and understandings of complex adaptive systems, that provide a holistic and integrated sense of the connectivity of all living systems.

Some of us may be swimming in the messy middle between deconstructing and reconstructing, in the realm of possibilities to be anchored in what is important and what values stand the test of time. At the same time this involves some letting go of the known and the old, it is a fertile and sometimes joyous time of discovery and rediscovery of empowerment and collaboration. This is a time when changing the narrative, inside and out, forms the foundation for transformation.
Wherever we are in our learning journey, whatever our experiences or roles may be, and wherever we are in the world, we can use this opportunity to understand that everything is a fractal of the broader systems that we find ourselves in, in singular contexts, locally and globally.

We can keep learning. Together.

**References**

Citation practices are known to be biased and underrepresent marginalized groups, particularly in the sciences. In writing this chapter, we sought to proactively choose references that reflect diversity of thought and scholars representing a wide range of social identities. Following recent recommendations for citation justice, we attempted to audit our references by identifying the race and gender of cited authors using publicly available information from social media profiles and online biographies. While this method is limited, and information could not be obtained in all cases to discern race or gender identity (and this method cannot account for intersex, non-binary, or transgender people), our goal is to promote equitable practices in research. This audit suggests that our references contain ~56% author of color (64% first author) and ~43% women (36% first author).


