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Viewpoint Article

Representative Bureaucracy Theory and the Implicit Embrace of Whiteness and Masculinity

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Abstract: *Throughout much of representative bureaucracy literature, scholars have primarily focused on the representation of people seen as other in the professional workforce—people of color and women. However, whiteness and masculinity have been central to the development of public administration as a field of scholarship and practice. As a field, we have often avoided explicit discussions regarding the impact whiteness and masculinity. We argue that silences around race and gender have significant implications. Using representative bureaucracy as a frame, we seek to highlight how acknowledging whiteness and masculinity in our scholarship can help provide a more comprehensive understanding of race and gender in public administration.*

Evidence for Practice

- Traditionally discussions of representation in public administration focus on women and people of color, overlooking the ways that whiteness and masculinity have shaped outcomes in our field.
- By directly addressing whiteness and masculinity in public administration scholarship, the field can gain a deeper understanding of race, gender, and inequity.

[Correction added on 14 March 2022, after first online publication: Domonic A. Bearfield's affiliation has been corrected in this version.]

Representative bureaucracy scholarship largely began as a normative discussion about the makeup of bureaucracies and how they should be more inclusive in western democratic nations. Initially conceived by Kingsley to address problems of class and gender representation in the British civil service (1944), the early focus of representative bureaucracy scholarship centered on legitimacy—workforces reflecting the community would be seen as more legitimate in modern democratic societies. Kingsley (1944) made these arguments without regard to race—he was largely focused on class issues. Reflecting on the bureaucracy, Long (1952) wrote of the democratic nature of the federal civil service and his belief that it could effectively reflect the will of the public. Building on these early normative arguments, Van Riper (1958) and Krislov (1967) argued in the 1950s and 60s that representative bureaucracy could also be used to explore the under-representation of people of color, specifically Black constituents, in American public sector positions. Underlying these early normative arguments was the assumption that bureaucratic organizations that reflect their constituents, reflect the interests of those constituents (Kingsley 1944; Krislov 1967; Long 1952).

Mosher's (1968) work in the late 1960s shifted the discussion from a purely normative one to a theoretical framework that could be tested

empirically by arguing for a distinction between passive and active representation (Rosenbloom and Featherstonhaugh 1977). Research has since primarily focused on these two forms of representation, passive and active. Passive representation emphasizes that bureaucracies reflect the demographic characteristics of constituents (Selden 1997; Sowa and Selden 2003), while active representation emphasizes attempting to reflect constituents' interests (Keiser et al. 2002). Scholars have also explored symbolic representation in public management. Symbolic representation suggests "that the mere existence of a passively represented bureaucracy can itself translate into benefits for the citizenry—without any actions being taken by bureaucrats" (Ricucci and Van Ryzin 2017, 25).

Prior research suggests that symbolic representation is associated with enhanced government legitimacy (Ricucci and Van Ryzin 2017; Ricucci, Van Ryzin, and Jackson 2018). More recent literature has contributed additional nuance to this discussion, speaking to the complex dimensions of representative bureaucracy and the significance of individual lived experiences (Headley et al. 2021).

Whether normative, theoretical, or empirical, representative bureaucracy scholarship has historically focused on who is missing from public employment. This focus on who has been left out is important

and has been essential in moving the field forward in discussions of social equity and social justice. As a field, we must know how the presence of traditionally underrepresented groups (i.e., people of color and women) in public service roles shape organizations and outcomes. However, the focus on who is missing, has led us to overlook the actions of those who have historically had the most representation across public sector organizations—White men.

Our purpose is to highlight how acknowledging whiteness and masculinity in our scholarship can help provide a more comprehensive understanding of race and gender in public administration. Using representative bureaucracy as a frame, we argue that whiteness and masculinity are implicit in much of this scholarship, but rarely addressed directly. By overlooking the representative actions of White men (i.e., what bureaucratic actions they have taken to reflect the interests of constituents that share their identity), we have reinforced whiteness and masculinity as an ideal type within public administration. We then suggest how the field might move forward. Ultimately, we cannot make progress on racial and gender justice as a field, if we do not talk about how race and gender shaped the very foundation of public administration in the United States—this comes from understanding the latent presence of whiteness and masculinity.

Problems from What is Left Unsaid

Representative bureaucracy theory is a significant area of research in public administration, making substantial contributions to our understanding of diversity and equity in citizen-state interactions. With its focus on equity and diversity, it is an area of research ripe with the opportunity to explore whiteness and masculinity, and the problems that can arise when these concepts are not given appropriate attention. Specifically, by not exploring the implications of whiteness and masculinity, representative bureaucracy theory implicitly establishes White men as neutral, taken-for-granted actors, while placing the burden of resolving equity issues on historically marginalized groups.

Our focus here, is on what is not said and the problems that arise from not taking on discussions of whiteness and masculinity directly. We seek to highlight the inferences that have been created by avoiding critical and empirical investigations of values and motives of White male bureaucrats. By recognizing and addressing these underlying problems and their implications, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of race and gender in the context of public organizations.

In organizational scholarship, masculinity and whiteness have traditionally been positioned as the implicit norm within organizations (Bishu, Guy, and Heckler 2019; Nkomo 1992). From early feminist critiques of the administrative man (Denhardt and Perkins 1976) to more recent scholarship exploring how to create human resource practices that do not reinforce masculine gendered norms (Mastracci and Arreola 2016), it is apparent that masculine identities are deeply rooted to the field's understanding of public service. Looking back at the field's genesis, Stivers (1995, 2002) notes that during the Progressive Era, men interested in reform were often criticized by politicians in a manner that questioned their masculinity. In response, these men sought to connect masculinity with the ideals of scientific management so they would not be

thought of as unmanly. Specifically, when criticized for wanting to end the spoils system, they leaned on ideals of science and rationality, as a way to separate themselves from qualities often associated with women (Stivers 1995).

With a few notable exceptions, whiteness is a relatively new concept in public administration (Blessett et al. 2019; Lopez-Littleton 2016). We define whiteness as the social and legal benefits given to those who have been allowed to identify as White (Brown et al. 2003). We use the term “allowed” because as Roediger (2005) points out, for many immigrants there has been a journey toward whiteness, meaning that many of the people we consider White today were not considered so during previous eras of our history. Because whiteness is seen as valuable (Brown et al. 2003), it has always involved gatekeeping, with communities bonding together to use skin color, ethnicity, or geography, to deny those benefits to others. It is important to note that whiteness is often seen as the norm (Bonilla-Silva 2006), and as a result people of color are often put in the position of having to demonstrate their value, while the beneficiaries of whiteness are assumed to be valuable until proven otherwise. Heckler (2017) has suggested that whiteness is, “part of the institutional setting of public organizations” (176), that creates prescriptions on how public employees should conduct themselves. Combined, masculinity and whiteness help create an implicit standard for what identities are often associated with public servants.

When whiteness and masculinity are held as the standard for public service identities, it is important to consider the consequences this has for public servants that do not possess these characteristics. Role congruity scholarship provides a helpful lens to explore this issue. Within organizational settings, role congruity theory proposes that incongruity between stereotypes of a social group and assumed prototypic behavior of specific organizational roles leads to prejudice (Eagly and Karau 2002). For instance, women may receive harsher performance evaluations in managerial positions thought of as more masculine due to the perceived incongruence between feminine traits and managerial jobs (Eagly and Karau 2002; Funk 2019). Research on racial role congruence suggests that compared to White employees, people of color are often seen as incongruent with managerial jobs (Chung-Herrera and Lankau 2005; Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips 2008). A mythos rooted in the Progressive Era origin story of the mostly White, mostly male, strong, scientifically minded bureau men (Stivers 1995), whiteness and masculinity are often an implicit standard used in both research and practice throughout the field.

Because whiteness and masculinity have traditionally and presumptively been seen as the standard, White and male bureaucrats have largely not been linked to outcomes for community members aligning with their identities. So, while the outcomes of women and clients of color are tied to bureaucrats matching their identities, outcomes for White male clients are rarely linked to White male bureaucrat's performance. Stated another way, we have studied the impact of active representation among women and people of color but have not explored this topic among identities that are not considered to be historically marginalized.

In short, what we see here is the myth of neutrality (Portillo, Bearfield, and Humphrey 2019), which presents White men as

neutral and objective actors whose behavior does not require specific analysis, while the behavior and actions of historically marginalized groups require examination. By not discussing the performance or outcomes of White men, they are presumed neutral while their counterparts are presented as actively representing constituents. By not addressing whiteness and masculinity in organizations much of the scholarship implies White men are a neutral category of comparison.

Accepting the selection bias problem in the literature where positive results are more likely to be published, there is an inference in the representative bureaucracy scholarship that suggests that women and bureaucrats of color can help improve outcomes for women and people of color, while still improving the outcomes of all people. It is important that we extend this understanding of representation, acknowledging that White men may improve the outcomes of those they socially align with. When extending this view of representation, an additional question worth asking is if White men are capable of improving outcomes for others, while still improving outcomes for those they identify with. We are not suggesting a new version of racial or gender essentialism here, where people are only compelled to help those who share their racial identity. There is evidence that individuals of all races can feel a legal, moral, or professional obligation to serve those who do not share their racial or ethnic backgrounds (Penn 2021). Still, this question has not been consistently asked, but is essential to understanding inequitable outcomes.

When empirical research began to suggest that bureaucrats of color improved the experiences of constituents of color, some began to voice concerns that these benefits might be achieved at the expense of White constituents. While women and people of color have been found to improve outcomes for clients sharing their identity, research has shown their ability to also improve outcomes for all constituents (Meier, Wrinkle, and Polinard 1999). Representative bureaucracy scholarship confirming that the presence of historically underrepresented groups does not create problems of distributional equity is essential to understanding the contributions these groups make to public sector organizations. However, it is concerning this is a question asked of marginalized groups, and not groups that have historically held more dominant positions in society and public organizations. If our goal is to deepen our understanding of representation, we cannot allow assumptions to prevent empirical investigation.

Moving Forward

As a field, we have failed to recognize the ways in which our scholarship has implicitly reinforced norms and values that potentially harm marginalized communities and public servants. Our purpose here is to apply a critical lens to public administration scholarship. While representative bureaucracy is the focus of this work, the critical lens used could be applied to several other areas of public administration research. For instance, given recent discussions and research on election administration (Portillo, Bearfield, and Riccucci 2021), it is vital to explore the ways in which whiteness and masculinity are connected with who can vote and which votes will count. As a field of practice, it is tremendously important to be clear in what we say, but also in what we mean. Scholars throughout the field of public administration have conducted a substantial amount of research highlighting the

inequalities in public organizations. As practitioners look to this body of research for ideas on how to make their organizations more fair, equitable, and inclusive, the need to be explicit about what we mean, and what we do not, becomes abundantly clear.

In recent years, representative bureaucracy theory has emerged as a dominant approach for empirical examinations of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in the field (Bearfield 2014). In addition, representative bureaucracy presents an area of research where we can begin to have this conversation and enhance our understanding of diversity, equity, and representation. To truly understand why women, people of color, and other marginalized groups are underrepresented in the workforce, we must do more to lay out the historical and legal case that produced the inequality. Much of the lack of representation in public sector organizations are the result of legal, cultural, and local administrative decisions that sought to harm historically marginalized groups. Without this context, readers are left with an incomplete understanding of the systemic problem of underrepresentation—as if women, and people of color, were left out by accident, or even worse, as result of their own decision making.

To address these concerns, we must begin to take a deeper look at the ways whiteness and masculinity shape the values, practices, and ideas in our field. By failing to explore whiteness, what we often see in the literature is White normativity, or the idea that certain “cultural norms and practices” exist that allow whiteness to appear as the standard or right (Ward 2008, 564). Recently scholars have posed that whiteness, as well as masculinity, is an institution (Heckler 2017, 2019). To address White normativity, scholarship suggests “interrogating whiteness” by identifying and questioning assumptions about whiteness that are often latent in practice and research (Grimes 2002). This process allows us to explore how whiteness has become institutionalized in our organizations, even when they are racially diverse, and recognize what the implications of this are for concepts like equity and justice.

Similarly, scholars invite us to consider how organizations are gendered (Acker 2006). Stivers has argued that as a field, we have focused on the masculine nature of public service since our very founding (Stivers 2002). More recently scholars have asserted that we have become oblivious to the ways that gender is infused within public organizations (Doan & Portillo Portillo, Bearfield, and Humphrey 2019), highlighting the need to explore how masculinity has become normed within organizations. Several scholars have argued that intersectionality can provide critical insight into the way that gender, race, and class inform decision-making in public organizations (Bearfield 2009; Breslin, Pandey, and Riccucci 2017). Ultimately, masculinity and whiteness blend into the organization, reinforcing the idea of women and people of color as “other” and outsiders in the field. Moving forward, it is important that we as a field, begin to question how whiteness and masculinity underly our research and practice.

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