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To cite this article: Maureen Emerson Feit, Jack Brandon Philips & Taylor Coats (2022) Tightrope of advocacy: Critical race methods as a lens on nonprofit mediation between fear and trust in the U.S. Census, *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 44:1, 23-45, DOI: [10.1080/10841806.2021.1944586](https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2021.1944586)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2021.1944586>



Published online: 05 Jul 2021.



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Tightrope of advocacy: Critical race methods as a lens on nonprofit mediation between fear and trust in the U.S. Census

Maureen Emerson Feit^a , Jack Brandon Philips^b, and Taylor Coats^a

^aNonprofit Leadership, Seattle University, Seattle, Washington, USA; ^bPolitical Science, University of Texas, Arlington, Texas, USA

ABSTRACT

In this study of nonprofit engagement with the census, we argue for an expansion of the research toolbox to include critical race methods as an essential lens on public and nonprofit administration. By foregrounding race and racism, illuminating power structures and discourses, and centering the knowledge and practices of nonprofit staff as street-level workers, critical race methods reveal the processes of construction that shape and influence a seemingly objective count and highlight the roles that staff play as mediators in the conflicts between fear and trust that are inherent to racial governance in the United States.

KEYWORDS

Nonprofit organizations; critical race theory; critical qualitative inquiry; street level bureaucracy; census

Introduction

The US Census Bureau has increasingly come to rely on community organizations to reach the “hard to count.” Charged with securing an accurate headcount of all persons living in the U.S. regardless of legal status, the Bureau has a record of struggling to fully count populations with “real or perceived” barriers to “full and representative inclusion” in the U.S. (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Disparities in the count regularly fall along the lines of race and ethnicity with non-Hispanic whites more likely to be overcounted and with Latinos, Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, African Americans, and American Indians and Alaska Natives consistently undercounted. In the lead up to the 2020 census, the Bureau urged nonprofit organizations with “deep community roots” to “play a vital role as trusted messengers and validators in the count ahead” (Hall, 2017). National civil rights organizations also urged community organizations to get involved, emphasizing the high stakes of census data which is used to reapportion representation; draw congressional and state legislative districts, school districts and voting precincts; enforce voting rights and civil rights legislation; shape the distribution of more than \$800 billion in federal dollars to states; inform decisions by policy makers, businesses and nonprofits; and serve as benchmark for nearly every

CONTACT Maureen Emerson Feit  feitm@seattleu.edu  Nonprofit Leadership, Seattle University, Seattle, Washington, USA.

Presented to ARNOVA on November 13, 2020

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

survey in the United States in the decade ahead. They urged their members to step in and serve as partners in the census by tapping into their personal and organizational networks, engaging local media, canvassing neighborhoods, and conducting outreach to share the message that “everyone counts” (AAAJ, 2019; NNIRR, 2019).

The Bureau’s need for “trusted messengers” was amplified by the escalation of explicitly anti-immigrant and white supremacist rhetoric, policy and practices in the months and years leading up to the April 2020 launch of the count. The Trump administration’s attempt to add a citizenship question and the refusal to address Latino groups’ concerns about the confusion caused by questions of “Hispanic” ethnicity created a direct link between the census process and the expansion of punitive immigration policies including increased border enforcement; increased arrest, detention and removal of immigrants; separation of families; weakening of due process; reductions in refugee admissions; and limiting of asylum claims (Pierce, 2019). The administration’s rejection of proposed sexual orientation and gender identity questions on the 2020 census continued a long history of erasing the presence of LGBT individuals in data and policy making (Velte, 2019). And, as civil rights groups warned, the administration’s attempts to impose a new “public charge” rule to limit access to public benefits risked creating “widespread fear” that threatened to hamper an accurate count (KIND, 2019).

Through the census partnership program, community organizations were asked take on the complex role of administering a state policy and practice that is deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of race, racial categories and citizenship in the United States. As Alexander & Nank argue (2009), community organizations have been increasingly called upon to address government failure, specifically the failure to establish relationships of trust and accountability with citizens and residents. As mediating structures, community organizations are expected to provide the public sector with a “point of access into communities where they can begin to generate bonds of trust with citizenry” (p. 365). Scholars who have studied community organizations in the U.S. have characterized them by their small to mid-sized budgets, more informal and less bureaucratic structure and their deep connections with the residents and neighborhoods where they are located (Cnaan & Milofsky, 2007; Vermeulen, Minkoff, & van der Meer, 2016). For the purposes of census outreach, community organizations were desirable for their social capital, or the “relationships based in patterns of reciprocal, enforceable trust” that enable people and institutions to access resources particularly the bonding social capital generated by homogenous groups that share culture, language and norms (Schneider, 2009, p. 644). As street-level bureaucrats, the staff of community organizations were charged with using their discretionary power to deliver public policy to their constituents (Smith & Lipsky, 1993). What remains to be understood are the ways that staff approach and negotiate this role, not just as representatives of the state but as service providers and advocates with often intimate understanding of the roots of the mistrust in government shared by their constituents. As one of our respondents noted, nonprofits must continuously walk this “tightrope of advocacy.”

Following Guy (2019), we argue for the value of expanding the research toolbox to include critical qualitative methods, and critical race theory specifically, as essential methods for public and nonprofit administration. By foregrounding race and racism, de-normalizing social norms and assumptions, and illuminating power structures and

discourse (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), critical race methods enable us to challenge the claims of objectivity and colorblindness which reinforce whiteness as a norm (Heckler, 2017). Censuses gain their legitimacy through claims to objectivity and political neutrality: the power of the data and statistics they produce require it. Critical race methods allow us to reveal the “processes of construction” that shape and influence a seemingly objective count (Kertzner & Arell, 2002; Ruppert, 2008) and approach census enumerators not as “detached registrars” but rather as “active participants in the political, legal, and social constitution of race and attendant racial claims” (Reynoso, 2001, pp. 533–534).

A critical race approach which centers experiential knowledge (Ravitch & Carl Nicole, 2016) also leads to greater insight into the complex ways that nonprofits serve as social locations for the enactment of the race-based contradictions inherent to democratic governance in the United States. The partnership program was enacted unevenly across the United States, with Democrat-lead states more likely to encourage and provide financial support for census outreach strategies, and Republican-led states less likely to make similar investments. Based on a critical qualitative study with the staff of nonprofit organizations in Washington state and Texas, we trace how nonprofit staff are navigating two conflicting functions simultaneously: both defending and challenging the status quo. Our findings highlight how the staff negotiated the tension between supporting, embodying, and representing the bureau’s goals and serving as catalysts for resistance and liberation (Couto & Guthrie, 1999).

Critical race methods

Critical approaches have challenged our assumptions about nonprofits, volunteerism and philanthropy, providing new insight into how we “frame the field” and its roles and effects (Eikenberry, 2013). To be critical is to “dig beneath the surface of (often hidden) historically specific social structures and politics” to illuminate how they lead to oppression and reveal pathways for change (Sandberg, Eikenberry, & Mirabella, 2019, p. 2). Understanding nonprofit organizations and action from a critical perspective is vital to the development of both theory and practice (ibid). The necessity and urgency for critical approaches that reveal the ways nonprofits both cooperate with and oppose state action has only escalated as nonprofits take on more responsibility from the public sector and democratic norms are eroded in the U.S. and around the world.

Methodologically, much of the critical turn in nonprofit and philanthropic studies has focused on discourses that circulate and circumscribe action in the sector, particularly discourses tied to professionalism and the market. With an attention to narrative and power, scholars have highlighted the paradox of private foundations that seek to end racial equality but are more invested in the legitimacy of philanthropy than structural change (Jensen, 2013), and the claims to legitimacy that nonprofit make through the neoliberal rhetoric of individual self-actualization and fulfillment (Balanoff, 2013). Scholars have also considered the questions of agency, locating both an unevenness in the adoption and enactment of these discourses by those on the ground (Dey & Teasdale, 2013), and forms of resistance in counter-stories or counter-narratives (Sandberg et al., 2019). More recently, scholars have deployed critical qualitative

methods to confront the role of nonprofit organizations in perpetuating racial and gender inequalities (Heckler, 2017; Willner, 2019).

This paper builds on and extends these analyses by using critical race methods to examine the roles that nonprofit organizations play in mediating between state-based racialized policies and practices and citizens and residents of the U.S. Critical race theory was developed by scholars and activists dedicated to the study and transformation of the relationship among race, racism and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Originally developed as a critical lens on the law and the “very foundations of the liberal order,” CRT has been applied to other disciplines including education, American ethnic studies, sociology and public health (p. 28). Core tenets of CRT include a recognition that (1) race and races correspond to no biological reality; rather they are historically-specific social constructions that society “invents, manipulates, or retires” as needed (2) racism is deeply ingrained in the both the founding and everyday business of the U.S. (3) colorblind concepts of equality make racism difficult to address (4) racism advances the interests of white elites and working-class whites (5) race intersects with other forms of identity such as gender, class and sexuality and (6) those who have experienced racism have important and unique perspectives on the systems that perpetuate oppression (p. 36).

In recent years, scholars have argued for the application of CRT to the study of nonprofit organizations. Willner applies the CRT concept of interest convergence to illuminate how managerialist tendencies reinforce a relationship of dependence and unequal power between social justice organizations and external stakeholders (2019). Jung (2015) uses CRT to examine the ways that traditional fundraising practices of art museums perpetuate exclusion. Feit (2018) applies CRT to nonprofit human resource practices and nonprofit management curriculum. Heckler (2017) uses CRT to trace the impact of white supremacy in public organizations. Nickels and Leach (2021) argue for the application of CRT, feminist and intersectional approaches to challenge so called colorblind or neutral research practices and to center the lived experiences and sense-making of those within a broad nonprofit context.

Through this research, we build on this growing body of scholarship to apply a critical race lens to the role of nonprofits as mediating structures, and nonprofit staff as street bureaucrats who implement state policies and practices. As critical race theorists have demonstrated, race and racism are deeply ingrained in American institutions and systems, tying whiteness with power and control and ensuring that policy is often the result of “very real struggles and conflicts” that are deeply implicated in the material and ideological work that is done to legitimate and extend race inequity (Gillborn, 2016, p. 44). Scholars have argued that nonprofits operate as “buffers” between the state policy and service delivery, their altruistic origins and relative independence distancing them from government coercion (Smith & Lispky, 1993); “bridges” and “links” communities with the state, charged with protecting the wealth and assets of a particular community (Mendel, 2003); and “building blocks of representative democracy,” passing information between the grassroots and government, reducing isolation, filtering extreme ideas, and fostering engagement among citizens and with government (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Harris & Milofsky, 2019). Critical work on race allows us to ask how nonprofit organizations buffer, bridge, and build representative democracy in relation to racialized projects of the state.

Furthermore, CRT recognizes race as a social construction that has to be continuously made and unmade, pointing us to new questions about how nonprofit staff use their discretionary power to informally construct and reconstruct policy in the course of everyday organizational life. With the retraction of public services, nonprofit organizations have taken up the charge of “delivering” public policy to constituents (Smith & Lipsky, 1993) with significant consequences for those they serve. Front-line staff in street-level organizations “not only *do* policy work but are manifestly responsible for making policy work” (Brodkin, 2011, p. i253, author’s emphasis). Nonprofit staff, like public administrators, may use a variety of adaptive strategies to “meet the numbers” required of them, often in face of underinvestment in infrastructure and increased surveillance of their work. As Gooden (2014) argues, staff can be pivotal to the implementation of public policy with important consequences for race and equity, a particularly “nervous area” of government. Through their discretionary action, staff shape how an organization “considers, examines, promotes, distributes, and evaluates” the provision of public justice (Gooden, 2014, p. 9). They are responsible for socializing the expectations of clients to “the appropriate to the level of resources,” helping constituents “be effective in securing benefits while smoothing out relationships” between clients and public agencies, and serving as a form of “social control with respect to public rights and claims of citizenship” (Smith & Lipsky, 1993, p. 14) ultimately determining “who gets what and how” (Brodkin, 2011).

Close attention to language and discourse, a cornerstone of critical race theory, provides a lens on the process by which nonprofit staff participate in the process of transforming socially constructed categories of race and gender into seemingly objective facts. Rather than pursuing a colorblind objectivity that lies “beyond race, gender, and class” (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), critical race scholars have urged us to challenge the assumptions that objectivity is attainable or even desirable and have invited us to question how truth claims can mask power and oppression (Briscoe and Khalifa, 2015). Critical race methods recognize discourse as an important form of social action (Clarke, 2005; Jaworski & Coupland, 2014) leading us to investigate the “complexes of ideologies, discourses, practices, and policies” (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015) that were developed, to justify and maintain “historical, economic, and socio-political issues of oppression and disparities across race” and the intersections with gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability (Pasque & Perez, 2015, p. 140). Discourse analysis traces the dense and complex webs or systems of signification that produce, legitimate and maintain ideologies and truth claims (Clarke, 2005), and considers how the pressure of social and institutional norms are brought to bear on the identities and classifications of individuals (Clarke, 2005; Foucault & & others, 2010).

Finally, we build on critical race theory’s understanding that power operates on and through the creation of different subject identities, paying attention both to the ways that states establish, reinforce and govern through racial categories and to spaces and possibilities of resistance and subversion (Gillborn, 2016, p. 47). CRT scholarship, grounded in a sense of reality that “reflects the distinctive experiences of people of color,” leads us to decenter whiteness as the standard and to seek voices and lived experiences of people of color. CRT embraces the subjectivity of perspective and uses storytelling to “expose and challenge social constructions of race” (Taylor, 2016, p. 7).

Counterstories may reveal the contingency, partiality, and self-serving quality of majoritarian stories that order our world, call attention to neglected evidence, and offer interpretations and perspectives that engender insights (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). A critical qualitative approach which centers experiential knowledge (Ravitch & Carl Nicole, 2016) also leads to greater insight into the complex dilemmas and strategies that staff use to walk what one respondent called the “tightrope of advocacy” between the needs of the state and the fears and interests of their constituents.

Census as a technology of racial governance

Critical methods provide an analytic lens that views the census not as a “simple reflection of an empirically existing reality,” but rather as a process of defining, collecting and organizing observations about individuals in society (Ruppert, 2008). As Foucault argued (2010), census counts have been an essential technology used by states to render a society governable, using systematic classification and enumeration of collective identities to make a population knowable and legible to the state. Statistics are essential to modern political culture: Modern states have used censuses to form boundaries around social categories and “construct an infrastructure of numbers” that serves as the source of state legitimacy and shapes the regulatory capacities of state authorities themselves (Ruppert, 2008).

Census-making has been essential to the racial and ethnic projects of modern states, reflecting struggles over “how human beings will be recognized and understood politically and legally” in racially stratified societies” (Reynoso, 2001, p. 533). Watts (2003) terms this “racial government,” or the process by which a population in a given political space is “separated into allegedly distinct groups using ‘racial criteria’ and those groups are then subject to different modes of administration” (p. 30). Census counts using racialized criteria were essential strategies of European colonial rule: The British colonial government in India introduced and reinforced caste distinctions through the census (Cohn, 1987), and in Australia, colonial censuses were central to dispossessing Aboriginal peoples and establishing white sovereignty over land (Watts, 2003).

As critical race theorists highlight, the census helps to create racial logics that are foundational to structural forces, institutions, policies, and norms, that reproduce and maintain inequality in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Omi & Winant, 2015), where census enumeration has always been “inextricably bound up with race” (Skerry, 2000, p. 3). Since it was first established under the Constitution, the census has played a central role in creating racial and ethnic categories, quantifying the demographic weight of those categories, and linking those numbers to democratic representation and redistribution (Schor, 2017, p. 13). Early censuses built on a classification system already in formation in colonial America that associated “White” racial identity with freedom, “Black” racial identity with enslavability and “Indian” racial identity with erasure and exclusion. From its inception, the U.S. census associated whiteness with possession of property, enslaved people as property, and linked political representation to the system of slavery, stipulating that “free persons” including indentured servants would be enumerated as whole people, while “Indians not taxed” were excluded and “all other persons” would count as a fraction of a whole person (Thompson, 2016).

In the decades that followed, racial categories shifted with each census schedule, illustrating what Omi and Winant (2015) describe as the volatility of race in the U.S. Each shift reflected the social anxieties of their time and reinforced the political agendas of those in power. In the early nineteenth century, debates over the census largely focused on how the information would be used to depict the realities of slavery. For the 1850 census, for example, Southerners argued for the elimination of proposed questions that would record the names, children, family ties, and place of birth of enslaved people for fear that such information would make enslaved people “seem more human” (Thompson, 2016, p. 58). By the turn of the century, “palpable native sentiment” resulted in a classification system that legitimized a belief in five distinct races as listed in the census: White, Black, Chinese, Japanese and Indian. As additional categories were added, only nonwhite categories were considered separate races. Whiteness was defined negatively: more by what it was not, than by what it is (Thompson, 2016). First US Marshalls and then hired enumerators were charged with visiting homes and assigning residents by race and ethnicity, using their discretion to implement any instructions provided by the Bureau.

The 1960s brought major changes. As civil rights policies were enacted, census data also became central to their implementation. Legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 required the federal government to monitor discrimination based on race and ethnicity (Hattam, 2005; Thompson, 2016), the fusing of individual and collective identities around the construction of race became a precursor to claiming equal rights (King, 2000), and civil rights group became increasingly invested in accurate decennial counts. In 1977 the Office of Management and Budget issued Statistical Policy Directive No. 15, Racial and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting, as a means to provide “a common language for uniformity and comparability” in government statistics (Rumbaut, 2009, p. 25). The OMB directive stressed that race and ethnicity are social-political constructs that should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature, explaining:

“This Directive provides standard classifications for recordkeeping, collection, and presentation of data on race and ethnicity in Federal program administrative reporting and statistical activities. These classifications should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature, nor should they be viewed as determinants of eligibility for participation in any Federal program. They have been developed in response to needs expressed by both the executive branch and the Congress to provide for the collection and use of compatible, nonduplicated, exchangeable racial and ethnic data by Federal agencies.”

At the same time, the directive defined and codified a complete set of categories to be applied universally to all federal agencies for the first time (Rumbaut, 2009; Yanow, 2002). The directive also signaled changes to ways that census data was collected from individual respondents. The Bureau shifted from hired enumerators to a system of self-identification, relying on individuals to identify their race and ethnicity “as they [saw] fit” (Hillygus, 2006, p. 45).

In recent decades, civil rights groups have advocated for changes to the census survey to ensure more accurate counts, particularly for groups that had been erased or diminished by survey questions. Concerns about differential undercounts of certain racial and ethnic groups were not new (King & Magnuson, 1995), but the expanded federal aid, civil rights laws and reapportionment decisions placed “new burdens” on the federal

census and population statistics in general (Anderson, 1988, p. 224). Undercounts resulted in multiple lawsuits after both the 1970 and 1980 censuses; while the rulings on these lawsuits were “ambiguous,” they laid the groundwork for broad-based coalitions of local officials, civil rights activists and congresspeople to demand to be included in planning (Anderson, 1988). After another undercount in 1990, community leaders advocated for the Bureau to partner with community organizations that had the trust of historically undercounted communities. The Bureau responded by ramping up a public information campaign and launching a partnership program between the Bureau and companies and organizations with “established networks” in what were labeled “hard to reach” or “hard to count” populations (Tinajero, 2000, p. 186). Community partners, chosen for their “access and credibility” with historically undercounted groups, formed committees to develop local outreach strategies. By the 2010 census, partners were taking a range of actions to improve outreach in “hard to count” communities. The Bureau reported that 257,000 partners offered 400,000 outreach activities and more than 3,000 partnership specialists provided assistance in 145 languages, resulting in “\$97,000,000 in value-added” to the census (Hall, 2017).

Trusted messengers in an era of mistrust

In the lead up to the 2020 Census count, civil rights groups warned that an atmosphere of fear and mistrust threatened to dampen participation, particularly among traditionally undercounted groups. Accelerated federal immigration and other law enforcement activity, combined with escalating anti-immigrant rhetoric, provided the background for the Commerce Secretary’s announcement in early 2018 that the 2020 census survey would include a question about citizenship status. Even after the Supreme Court ruled against the administration, and the question was removed, civil rights groups conducted focus groups in which respondents indicated a lasting fear that dampened their willingness to participate in the count (Vargas, 2020). The Census Bureau’s own focus group research identified complex attitudes and concerns among groups expected to respond at low rates, including representatives from low-income, historically undercounted race and ethnic groups with large or complex household arrangements (Evans et al., 2020). The Bureau concluded that barriers included a “lack of knowledge” about the purpose, content, and process of the census; a “lack of evidence” that would counter fears and reasons not to respond, and “apathy” (ix). Noting concerns about “confidentiality and privacy,” they cited responses from Asian American participants who shared concerns about language access and security scams, Black or African-American participants who described little hope that the census would benefit their communities, strong distrust in the government and concerns that the government would misuse their information, Latino participants who expressed “intense fear” that the information would be shared with other government agencies to locate and harm undocumented immigrants and their communities at large, and Native Hawaiian participants who were concerned that the result of the household questions would be shared with landlords and lead to eviction.

Yet, even as the Bureau recognized patterns of mistrust, they were pulling back from the outreach and in-person visits that had been essential strategies for reaching

undercounted groups in previous decades (Vargas, 2020). Citing the need for lower costs and greater efficiency, the Bureau doubled down on a digital strategy, automated many functions and reduced in-person visits to non-responding households, resulting in a smaller temporary workforce and fewer field offices. The Bureau also canceled survey and field tests planned for some of the most challenging places to enumerate, including Puerto Rico and reservations in North and South Dakota and Washington state. Delays in hiring and onboarding partnership staff further delayed the work of partnering organizations to develop their messaging and strategies.

Citing the need for community organizations “with deep community roots” to serve as “trusted messengers,” the Bureau doubled down on its partnership strategy (Hall, 2017). Community organizations were viewed as ideal “surrogates” for the Bureau to “mitigate the mistrust” that prevented people from participating, including non-English speakers, undocumented immigrants, people experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ persons; children under the age of five, people with mental or physical disabilities; and people who do not live in traditional housing (Chapin, Kim, Lopez, & Belton, 2018). Private foundations were encouraged to identify and support community organizations that could do outreach that would overcome their constituents’ fears of confidentiality and government misuse of data, lack of faith in government effectiveness, and general distrust “in all levels of government” (McGeeney, Kriz, Mullenax, Kail, Walejko, Vines, García Trejo, 2019).

Methods

The study was constructed from document review and a total of thirty-three interviews with staff of organizations engaged in census outreach and advocacy between March and July of 2020 in Washington state, which invested heavily in census outreach, and in Texas, which did not. These two states offered an important contrast between the impact of a state government that funded and encouraged community organizations to conduct outreach (Washington state) and a state government that did not (Texas). State-level investment in the census was uneven across the U.S. By the end of 2019, twenty-six state governments had appropriated millions of dollars, while twenty-four largely Republican dominated states had not dedicated any money to census efforts (Wilson & Wines, 2019). In Washington, early organizing by a coalition of advocates resulted in more than \$15 million from the legislature: up to \$7.5 million was available to nonprofit organizations, local and tribal governments, and/or other entities and coalitions across the state for on-the-ground education, outreach, motivation, and assistance efforts related to the 2020 census (Batres-Boni, 2019). Private funders, including the state’s largest community foundation, pooled public funding with private donations and granted to community organizations with histories of reaching the “hardest to count” communities in the state. The statewide nonprofit association coordinated with the US Census Bureau to distribute messaging and facilitate regular strategy sessions, providing a venue for organizations across the state to develop, shared and then adapt their census outreach campaigns. In Texas, by contrast, the state legislature declined to appropriate monies for census efforts in 2019. Several large private foundations stepped in to raise funds and coordinate outreach strategies across the state. With less time to build

coalitions, the funding in Texas was more likely to be awarded to larger nonprofit organizations with a broader, often state-wide focus. As a result, there was much less coordinated investment in smaller, community organizations that were representative of the primary constituents served, and any support that was allocated came much later in the process.

The team of researchers began by reviewing documents from the federal Census Bureau related to the partnership program. We also reviewed the census outreach materials developed by national civil rights groups focused on encouraging outreach among specific populations. Next, we defined the “organizational field” for the study to include the networks of organizations across Washington and Texas that were engaged in the census effort. As Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) stress, organizations do not act in isolation from each other, and instead operate in a larger field that shapes possibilities for action. We reviewed relevant documents Washington and Texas state governments, and regional coalitions of city, county and philanthropic foundations that were funding and facilitating outreach in each state.

As a result of Washington state’s approach, there were a “multiplicity of institutional forms” (Powell & Bromley, 2020) engaged in census outreach in Washington, including 146 nonprofit organizations that were funded through the state’s census fund to specifically reach “hard-to-reach” populations. These funded organizations were primarily 501c3 organizations selected for their ability to conduct outreach with specific populations. Most were concentrated in Western Washington, and many had small or very small budgets. We developed a purposeful sample of 24 organizations. As Ravitch and Carl Nicole (2016) explain, purposeful sampling allows the researcher to reach individuals who have specific knowledge or experience. In this case, we sought maximum variation in the primary populations served by the funded organizations (including African; Asian/Pacific Islander; Latinx; immigrants and refugees; Native American; People of Color; LGBTQ; homeless; veterans; and youth) and a range of budget sizes that reflected the heavy investment in smaller organizations (including very small (8), small (7), mid-sized (4), large (4) and very large (2)). The majority of the staff we interviewed were themselves representative of the primary populations served by their organizations. In addition, we interviewed a representative of a community foundation and a city official who were both central to the distribution of the state monies in the region.

Our sample of organizations in Texas required a different approach. Of the 7 interviews we conducted with staff from organizations that were engaged in census outreach in Texas, the majority were from larger, established nonprofit organizations. Their staffs were less likely to be representative of the constituents they served and the majority of those we interviewed identified as white. In addition, we talked with staff from a large private foundation located in Texas that funded the organizations to do outreach in Texas.

The focus of the interviews was to understand the motivations, meanings and micro-processes, or everyday attitudes and behaviors, that staff were using to navigate their organization’s involvement in Census 2020 (Emirbayer & Johnson 2008). All individual interviews were semi-structured, consisting of eight guiding questions regarding the census outreach work that they and their organizations were undertaking, including “How did your organization decide to get involved in the census this year?” What is

your organization doing for Census 2020?” “How has your Census work changed with the pandemic?” “Do you have any concerns about the privacy and security of the data collected from your constituents?” and “How are you working with partners?” Interviews were conducted in English, ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length, and were audio recorded and transcribed.

During analysis, we built on Clarke’s (2005) approach to situational analysis, which combines grounded theory and discourse analysis, attending to the word choices, arguments, claims, motives and other purposeful, persuasive features of language through which knowledges are produced, legitimated and maintained across interviews and documents. Following grounded theory, we began analysis as soon as there was data, using open coding to review interviews and developing provisional theory of the findings (Clarke, 2005). The first and second authors conducted independent line-by-line reading of each transcript and assigned temporary labels to particular phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). All three researchers met bi-weekly to discuss and develop consensus around codes. Once all interviews were complete, we used axial coding to compare codes within individual interviews and across all interviews and documents. Specifically, we paid attention to ideology (including official messages about the census produced by public officials), subject-making (moments when respondents invoke ideology to describe the census) and negotiations (moments when subjects were negotiating the meaning of the census and census categories for themselves or their constituents). Following critical race theory, we also paid attention to counterstories as moments when subjects were countering the official statements, modifying their meaning or providing alternative meanings and ideas. During the final phase of data analysis, selective coding, we worked to develop a theory of that described the perspectives of staff who were engaged in census outreach. We identified a key distinction between staff who worked closely and shared an identity with a specific racial, ethnic or other minoritized community and those who did not. We argue that the representative staff performed a much wider range of social and emotional labor, drawing from their own knowledge, perspectives and experiences as members of a minoritized community to negotiate and mitigate mistrust in government. This labor was largely invisible or unacknowledged by staff who were not representative of their constituents.

Limitations

One limitation to this study is the size and scope of the sample in comparison to the national scope of the census. With a focus on two states, the study is not representative of the full breadth and depth of responses to the partnership program across the other forty-eight states. The size of the sample within each state was also limited and additional perspectives could improve the rigor of the study by introducing other perspectives from staff and community organizations engaged in outreach. As COVID restrictions ease, this research team is interested in additional purposeful sampling through outreach and fieldwork to gain deeper context for racial and ethnic-specific community organizations engaged in census outreach across Washington and Texas.

The use of CRT and qualitative methods, while complementary, could be viewed as introducing bias into the study and reducing methodological rigor. Critical race

theorists have argued for a different approach to the question of bias and rigor. Concerned with recovering or highlighting the experiences of minoritized people who are positioned on the margins of society (Treviño, Harris, & Wallace, 2008), CRT practitioners are upfront about the role that shared history, identity and experience plays in research. The team of researchers integrated awareness of our own positionality in the design and analysis of this study, including our racial/ethnic identities (1 African American, 1 Latino/indigenous, and 1 White), gender identity (2 women and 1 man), sexual identities (1 LGBTQ+ and two heterosexual) and citizenship (3 U.S. citizens). Rather than view lived experience solely through the lens of “bias” that weakens research validity, CRT approaches researcher positionality as a strength that can facilitate the examination of the effects and lived reality of racism in American society (Romero, 2008). The researchers’ lived experiences of dispossession, disenfranchisement, discrimination and representation added to the analysis, bringing attention, resources, and action to the nature of how marginalization affects the process of the US Census.

Results

The following section presents findings that reflect a spectrum of interpretations and approaches to the census, ranging from staff who saw their roles as transmitting the information provided by the Bureau, those who approached their responsibility as adapting and translating the messaging from the Bureau, those who emphasized their role in building trust and reassuring their constituents and those who articulated the complex tradeoffs that they were making as they both acknowledged the real concerns of their constituents and fought to have them counted.

Census outreach as a transactional process

During interviews, a small number of respondents described their role as transmitting or “pushing out” the messaging from the Bureau, tending to see the relationship between government and their constituents as straightforward and the census as transactional. All identified as white and did not share a common identity with the hard-to-reach populations they were trying to reach. They tended to downplay both the partisan nature of the census and lingering concerns about the government’s potential misuse of personal information. One respondent explained,

I don’t think we’ve had any concerns as an organization. I think the citizen question [has been addressed]. We’ve incorporated messaging to try and offset that. I know there’s a lot of organizations that are predominantly serving the immigrant population that have put out great resources and so we’ve tried to use those and we’re coming out with more Spanish-language resources in general.

Another respondent expressed hope for the census as catalyst for the common good:

That would seem very political, but who doesn’t want to be counted? Who doesn’t want roads? Who doesn’t want healthcare or Medicare or child nutrition in their community? I think it’s a lovely common denominator and a base from which we can help create the common good.

These respondents identified the cause of the undercount as lack of information among certain communities, and the solution was for their organizations to provide missing information about the census process. Using formal processes like focus groups and less formal consultations with bilingual coworkers, they evaluated and selected among the Bureau materials that they believed would resonate with their constituents. Another respondent explained:

When we entered into this work, we thought, we're not going to reinvent the wheel. We're not going to create any materials or approaches. We've just got to take the best of all the different reservoirs and share them.

The messaging they used tended to emphasize the benefits of the census count, particularly for children and communities.

When we focused our messages on: Your son is in head start? Did you know that the number of head start slots is because of the census data? And then they're like, "What?" And then we can go and talk a little bit more about how that's used to support funding for those different programs.

When the families they served puzzled over how to count their children, the staff were charged with "clearing up information" and helping them translate their family structures for the census.

Census outreach as mediation

A second group of respondents described their role in the census in different terms, stressing the cultural and linguistic labor they performed to complete outreach to their constituents. By contrast with the first group, these respondents shared some form of identity with their constituents, including race, ethnicity and/or sexual identity. Two themes emerged from the ways that these respondents described their mediating role in census outreach, with considerable overlap from respondents: translation and bridging or trust-building.

Mediation as translation

Some respondents stressed their empathy with the struggles that their constituents had with the questions on the census schedule and described their role in terms of translation. Part of the issue, they explained, was the need for greater language access than the 12 languages in which the Bureau provided translations of written materials, requiring community organizations to locate or provide additional translations for their constituents. Respondents also emphasized that the wording of the survey questions were written from a dominant culture perspective:

You have to be able to ask the right questions and the culture and language. When we look at the census, it's written very white.

Thus, staff dedicated their time and attention to adapting materials to reflect and resonate with their constituents, working toward what Wilson (2013) calls "meaningful" language access, often through one-on-one conversations with constituents as they puzzled through the survey questions.

Translation also involved bridging the gaps between the Census categories and the ways people live their lives. For East African communities, staff needed to address confusion about the category of “African-American.” For tribal members, staff described the challenge of reaching community members who moved between urban areas and their reservations:

As an urban organization, the census means one thing, but our tribal family means something else. There are community members who may travel back and forth. I had one tribal member who said she was living on her rez in 2010 and she got this thing in the mail. She didn’t know what it was so she threw it away. There’s a lot of confusion.

For Latino or Latina constituents, staff had to work closely with them to separate race and ethnicity and interpret their racial identities within the racial distinctions in the census survey, which rarely fit the ways that people self-identify. One respondent explained:

A lot of the community is confused by that. From what I’ve learned, it’s the census’ way of pushing Mexicans specifically to identify us as white. So I’m really against it. I just tell people to use “other” and put Latino or Mexican or whatever their mixed status is. But there’s definitely been a lot of questions about that.

Several described drawing from their understandings of their own racial identity to advise their constituents:

They ask your ethnicity and then the race and there’s no like Latino, Hispanic, anything. So we have been telling them to go ahead and mark “other” and put down what they identify as. Because how it was explained to us was your skin color and how you identify that. Yeah, but that question needs to be fixed and they need to add Native American because I identify as Chicano.

Others encouraged their Latino/a constituents to reject the notion of race:

We don’t have a race. What I say is don’t check off anything if you don’t want to. And so I think that made people feel a little bit more comfortable because we don’t fit in just one box... When folks heard that they could write in how they want to be identified, that made them feel a little better.

And emphasized the power of self-identification:

You can identify yourself however you identify yourself which was brand new in this census. So instead of just saying you’re American Indian, Alaska Native, you can actually write—in your language if you want—who you are.

Mediation as bridging and trust building

Some staff also interpreted their role as addressing and mitigating the mistrust their constituents held toward the government and the census process. Constituents came to them with questions about the potential surveillance power of census enumerators. Will they come to my house? Will they share my information with other agencies? Some staff attributed this fear to their constituents’ past experiences with repressive governments that had used their information and their identities against them.

When you’re dealing with folks that have come from very repressed or oppressed regimes—not to say that the United States is any any less oppressive in certain areas—but highly oppressive regimes their hesitation to trust government is a huge obstacle...

Staff also noted the crucial role that shared identity played in their ability to engender trust. One funder emphasized recognized that this shared identity was crucial for census outreach.

In [Washington state], multiple foundations started to provide funding for nonprofit organizations to come up with innovative ways to engage that whole section of community in the census, understanding that organizations led by people of color more likely have the ear and the boots and the trust of community, right?

As they adapted the materials and messages provided by the census to the language and culture of their constituents, they also recognized that these messages would be better received if they came from people speaking and relating to their community in an informal, more authentic way. One staff member recorded themselves speaking directly to constituents and that read as “more organic” than the material shared by the Bureau. Other staff members spoke of identifying volunteers from a wider range of backgrounds who could serve as spokespeople, allowing them to reach communities “untouched” by census efforts. One staff member described purposefully seeking volunteers from different backgrounds to share the message:

Typically, at least here in Washington, I know when we’re focusing on the Latino community, it’s mostly the Mexican Latino community [but] it is not really one small community. There are people from Honduras, El Salvador. So we really wanted to make sure we were we were getting them involved as well. A lot of our messages, I think they really believed in the message.

Beyond getting messages out to a wider audience, staff also saw their role as reassuring constituents. Some reassured their constituents about the security of their information, emphasizing the legal protections in place, the practice of de-personalizing the data, and the punishment for census official who share personal information. One staff member saw their role as communicating a firm belief in those security measures.

I firmly believe that because we’re all OK with the information—I’m going to trust that. And if you trust me [you will trust them], which is the whole point of community-based organizations doing this work

Another described their role as a broker of trust between the government and the community:

Those of us who, if we look like them, they’re going to trust us. Not only that, we’ve been around long enough, and people in the community, just general people in the community and government agencies, whether they’re local or state level, recognize, oh, yeah, they have credibility. They’re trusted sources as well. So, it’s both sides. Not only does the community have to trust you, but government agencies have to trust you as well. This work has to be done in partnership, upstream and also downstream.

Census outreach as tradeoff between trust and mistrust

A third group of staff shared a more complex reaction to the census, describing the ways that they weigh the risks and benefits of the census for their constituents and puzzle through the messages and strategies to use. The majority of these respondents shared an identity with historically undercounted communities and had well-developed political analyses of the history and practices of the U.S. census. These respondents recognized the expectations

placed on them to translate, bridge and build trust between the government and their constituents, but they weighed this role against the potential risks and harm that participation in the census could cause their constituents.

For respondents, the origins of the census as a racial project shaped their understanding of their roles in profound ways. One staff member shared:

The only place that acknowledges slavery is the census clause because you've got to count Black people as three fifths of a person because they're enslaved... [The census] has always been a very racialized, contested thing because obviously, the distribution of political power and resources is what politics is about, so it shouldn't be a surprise.

Another described their awareness and concern of the historical misuse of census data against communities of color.

As a Japanese-American, I understand it pretty well because my family got incarcerated, and Japanese-Americans are the most major historical example of a breach of confidentiality in the census: the reason that we have all these protections in place. I know that Muslims have also been targeted. So I really try to be deeply respectful when people don't feel safe. I never just tell them, "Just trust me. Just trust us." It's always a tough line there.

One respondent described the census process as data collection that was "never really intended to include anyone but white folks" and connected to a historical mistrust of the information shared by government officials:

What we know is that our communities of color have a historical mistrust of government information. Even though the Census, bless their hearts, they made all these materials in all of these languages, we also know that our communities of color [...] have that historical mistrust of government..."

Another respondent offered an explicit analysis of the structural racism inherent in the census and tied the introduction of the citizenship question to a fear among white people as minoritized communities become the majority in the country.

We are in the midst of a demographic shift. I personally call it a demographic war. [The citizenship question] was a bomb, right? It was a malicious bomb. When they take action on communities of color, they know what they are doing. They use terror tactics like the citizenship question. Tell me, what is the purpose of a citizenship question? There are other mechanisms they can use to find out who is a citizen and who is not... This is not to find out who is a citizen and who is not. They throw a bomb to scare everyone.

Another extended this, connecting the threat of a citizenship question with the failure of multiracial democracy.

I think the most important problem and project at this time is that multiracial democracy doesn't function and it's very visible in the census. The citizenship question coming from Trump is just an echo of that. It's a through-line.

Respondents noted how their constituents feel disengaged with the U.S. government. One respondent who works with college-aged constituents explained that their constituents are angry and do not want to interact with the government at this time. Others noted that their constituents see the government as disengaged from them.

I work with a community that is mostly Latinos. It's not very well taken care of. The community itself doesn't receive a lot of support from the government. There was a lot of

the crime rate in there. The streets are not very clean. Not a lot of lights around and holes in the streets.

As they described their role, respondents struggled to rectify the tensions between the failures of government and the need for more resources and recognition of the communities they serve. One respondent explicitly connected their own risk assessment with the outreach and messaging strategies they developed, asking “how do we pivot in terms of being creative without putting anyone at risk?” Another puzzled through the risk to their organizations

As a trusted organization in the community, certainly our name is on the line if something were to go different with them and then how do we mitigate that is another thing that, yes, keeps me up at night.

One respondent described it as a “double bind” between securing the resources that their transgender constituents need and forcing them to misgender themselves.

Queer identity is also so political inherently. Now, you’re in a double bind if people aren’t counted, we’re not going to have the resources we need... Let’s say you’re a trans organization and you deal with the gender question ... How are you going to talk to your members about this? Because on one hand, you cannot not do the census... Your community will have less resources. You’re going to have to perform a misgendering of yourself. There’s this obvious distrust. Why [...] am I going to fill out a form that doesn’t have a place for me?

Another respondent stressed that their role was to walk a “tightrope”: not guaranteeing safety, but not alarming their constituents so much that they do not participate in such an important count.

Part of our work was to fight very hard against the citizenship question. We coordinated efforts to supporting awareness but also tried to avoid causing too much panic. So it was a tightrope that we had to walk through. How do we message the idea of filling it out as much as you feel comfortable filling it out and we’re not going to say whether or not to fill it out? It’s very bad, so we don’t like it, but we still need you to fill it out.

Respondents described a variety of strategies to address this double bind. Some described their role as “forcing” the government “to include us in how data is collected” and adapting the system to make it work for them.

Well, here’s another system that was not designed for me, but this is what I have and how can I adapt it to work for me, right?

Many saw their census work as directly tied to advocacy at the national and local level. One respondent saw their participation in the census as a responsibility to her community. Another described her role in terms of empowerment and mobilization:

My motivation for engaging with the census was: how do we empower our communities who have been so disconnected, so marginalized, so discriminated because of this current administration? How do we give voice back, and how do we empower communities again against—not against but—yeah, I’m going to say against the current administration?

And one respondent expanded on the need to work with national civil rights movements to remain vigilant.

Well, yes, clearly I’m always concerned because I don’t trust our current administration. Our mission is to support, motivate, encourage and advocate for all Latinos and

communities of color, particular DACA students. That's always on the forefront of my mind—how can this information be used for greater good or for greater evil? I'm always keeping this at the forefront of my mind and keeping vigilance... What is happening with this information?

Many pushed back against the idea that their constituents are “hard to reach,” noting the impact of patterns of underinvestment in communities of color and shifting the responsibility to the government to build relationships and trust with their communities:

These communities are not hard to reach if you have the relationships. These communities are not hard to reach if you have the trust. These communities are not hard to reach if you make your services and information equitable. There is no excuse... Every time I hear that, I'm like, no, we're not hard to reach. You just haven't been doing your due diligence.

Others described the need to hold the government accountable, pushing back on the Census and asking directly if they will share information with immigration officials.

The thing we've also been trying to do, [through our coalition work] is reframing—not punching downwards on our communities to participate, but showing them that we are pushing upward on our local government, on our state government, on our federal government, on all these different agencies to show that we're advocates for them.

They explained their desires to “not just do the work of government” and convince their constituents to do the same, and the challenges they face in acting as representatives of community organizations that actively advocate with government and maintain the trust of communities they serve.

Conclusion

In this study, nonprofit staff assumed a range of approaches to their census work, often tied to the bonding capital they shared with their constituents and shaped by their analyses of the causes and impacts of government failure for the historically undercounted. The use of critical race theory created a path to understanding how staff mediate the responsibilities of serving as trusted messengers for their communities, obtaining resources for their communities, and exposing their communities to the potentially risky consequences of government surveillance. Those who were not representative of their constituents were much more likely to see their outreach role as straightforward and transactional. By contrast, those who shared an identity with their constituents—including shared experience with discrimination based on race, ethnicity, immigration status or sexual identity—described their work along a wider continuum of translation, bridging and trust-building. Some explicitly worked to make up for the historical government failures and grappled with the challenges of taking the “complicated identities of people” and classifying them “into seemingly simple and coherent racial groups” that the census form demands (Thompson, p. 13). Those who had the clearest analyses of the history of racial governance in the US shared the complex challenges of negotiating tensions between the very real fears of state surveillance and the need for their constituents to be seen, heard and counted.

These findings suggest more attention is needed to understand the role that staff of community organizations, particularly those that foster bonding social capital with

minoritized communities, play in racial formation in the United States. More than street-level bureaucrats implementing a government policy, staff who share a minoritized identity with their constituents had to grapple with the implications of that policy for their constituents. Those who drew on their shared histories, languages and cultures performed a kind of labor that is both undertheorized and all too often underrecognized in theories of nonprofit action. We call for the development of greater empirical and theoretical understanding of the contradictions that community organizations face as they mediate between the racialized projects of government and their constituents. Much of the literature on the social capital of these organizations has emphasized their trust-building role, but we have much less understanding of the importance of recognizing and mitigating the historical mistrust that has resulted from past harms. This study also raises broader questions about the responsibility of the U.S. government in building trust with all residents of the United States. Until then, nonprofit organizations, particularly community organizations led by and for minoritized communities, will bear a responsibility for acknowledging, grappling with and mitigating mistrust in government. Given the stress that the federal government is placing on community partnerships, and the uneven support of census outreach across the states, we must ask questions about the level of investment needed to ensure the capacity of community organizations and the compensation of staff.

We also argue for critical race methods in the study of public and nonprofit administration. CRT may offer an important lens on the street-level work of nonprofit staff, illuminating the dense knowledge, experience, and deliberation behind the delivery of public policy to their constituents. As Nickels and Leach (2021) argue, we need to explicitly interrogate systems of power and individual experience and center the stories of BIPOC, women and other marginalized groups in our research praxis (p. 11). By centering questions of race and power and seeking the counter-stories of those who are doing the work, these methods point to the explicit and implicit ways that nonprofit staff and their organizations are engaged in the social construction of race. Staffs' counter-stories highlight the labor that staff of color undertake on behalf of constituents who must continuously make the claims of rights and citizenship. They also allow for more nuanced understanding of the conflicts and contradictions that operate behind the numbers, exposing spaces of both reinforcement and resistance to the practices of racial governance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Maureen Emerson Feit, PhD is Director and Assistant Professor of Nonprofit Leadership at Seattle University.

Jack Brandon Philips, PhD, is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Taylor Coats is a Graduate Research Assistant with Nonprofit Leadership at Seattle University.

ORCID

Maureen Emerson Feit  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5190-9594>

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