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Introduction to the Demography Volume

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Introduction to the Demography Volume

Abstract

[Excerpt] This volume represents another effort by *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* to focus on a crucial issue in organizational sociology. In some of the previous volumes, we concentrated on organizations and professions (Volume 8, 1991), the structuring of participation in organizations (Volume 7, 1989), and the social psychological processes in organizations (Volume 3, 1984). This volume concentrates on one of the most important emerging issues in organizational sociology—the issue of organizational demography.

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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INTRODUCTION TO DEMOGRAPHY VOLUME

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This volume represents another effort by *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* to focus on a crucial issue in organizational sociology. In some of the previous volumes, we concentrated on organizations and professions (Volume 8, 1991), the structuring of participation in organizations (Volume 7, 1989), and the social psychological processes in organizations (Volume 3, 1984). This volume concentrates on one of the most important emerging issues in organizational sociology—the issue of organizational demography.

Studies linking status characteristics to workers' attitudes and behavior have a long and well-developed history in organizational research. However, prior to the 1970s, research focusing on status characteristics virtually ignored the potential mediating impact of group composition (Zedeck and Casio 1984). More recently, a growing number of researchers have recognized that the context of social relationships, defined by the distribution of status characteristics among organizational members, often determines the impact of the characteristics on individual and organizational outcomes (Kanter 1977; Pfeffer 1983; Stewman 1988). This observation forms the basis of a rapidly-growing body of theory and research on organizational demography.

Despite the proliferation of work in this area over the last decade or so, a number of important theoretical issues whose resolution is crucial in the study of organizational demography have been neglected. These include both conceptual problems of measurement (e.g., when is it appropriate to use a simple arithmetic mean, standard deviation, or other measure of the distribution of a given characteristic among members?) and problems of underspecification in the theoretical logic of proposed causal relationships (e.g., what is the nature of micro-level processes underlying observed macro-level relationships?). These problems are, of course, often closely related.

The general aims of identifying such problems and suggesting solutions constitute the thread that connects the papers in this volume. The first section provides a broad overview of central methodological and theoretical issues in contemporary work in organizational demography, issues that are all too often glossed over in empirical studies.

In the opening essay, Mittman focuses on commonly-blurred conceptual distinctions in the study of organizational demography, and identifies some of the related issues of empirical measurement. Wharton's analysis turns to a specific theoretical problem, the links between the demographic composition of work groups, individual perceptions and attitudes, and group dynamics. To make these links, she begins by reviewing two traditionally disparate literatures, psychological work on the development of social identities and sociological work on ethnic mobilization. The integration of these

literatures provides a basis for exploring organizational dynamics involving groups defined by race and gender. In a related vein, the third paper by Bacharach and Bamberger specifies a number of differing theoretical assumptions concerning social psychological processes that underlie observed relations between demographic variables and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. They offer a typology of demographic research, based on the nature of measurement (relational or non-relational) and on the level of analysis (individual or systemic), and illustrate the utility of the typology in a review of work involving three frequently-studied variables in demographic research: stress, withdrawal, and performance.

The papers in the second section, by Konrad, Winters, and Gutek and by Shenhav and Haberfeld, test and extend the implications of several established theoretical analyses of organizational demography. Konrad and her co-authors compare four theories of the effect of gender composition on social psychological outcomes for individuals, and derive competitive hypotheses from these theories. They further develop the theories by specifying conditions under which predictions derived from each will hold. The tests of these predictions, based on a sample of work groups taken from a wide variety of organizational settings, suggest some of the complexities involved in gaining a full understanding of the consequences of demographic composition for work group members. In the second paper, Shenhav and Haberfeld seek to clarify the way in which the institutionalization of evaluation criteria in organizations affects demographically-linked outcomes. They do this by examining the impact of paradigm uncertainty in scientific fields as a predictor of change in fields' demographic composition and wage levels. Consistent with arguments advanced by Coombs and Davis-Blake (this volume), their results indicate both a very high level of inertia in gender composition and, as suggested by other analysis conducted at the organizational level of analysis (Pfeffer and Davis-Blake 1986; Pfeffer and Langton 1988; Tolbert 1986), a close association between gender composition and the distribution of rewards and resources.

The papers in the third section focus specifically on the practical implications of demographic research. Davis-Blake notes that empirical analyses have often suggested that a number of common organizational problems can be avoided by changing the demographic mix in an organization; however, as she points out, the close association between organizational demography and wage and promotion structures often makes this solution unfeasible. She discusses factors that contribute to strong inertial tendencies in the demographic composition of organizations, and draws out some of the implications for staffing and compensation practices. Similarly, Coombs begins with the recognition of problems that limit change in the demographic composition of an organization. He then turns to literature from organizational development to suggest ways of dealing with organizational problems associated with demography. Her describes a number of commonly-used techniques for the management of group relations that can be used to create an atmosphere in which diversity is accepted and valued.

Organizational demography is likely to become an increasingly important area of research in the future for a number of reasons. On a theoretical level, demographic studies often imply linkage between macro and micro phenomena. Thus, research on demography presents an obvious place for the development of general models and methods for studying such linkages, the development of which has been argued to be vital to sociological theory (Coleman 1989). Furthermore, as cross-national mobility

increases throughout the world (e.g., the United States, Europe, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia), the demographic constraints on and within organizations may have important policy implications.

Although organizational demography may appear to some as a relatively narrow area of investigation, the papers in this volume testify to the fact that the methodological, conceptual, theoretical, and analytical problems that must be faced in demographic analyses of organizations are relevant to all organizational studies.

As illustrated in these papers, organizational demographers are constantly concerned about the problem of the appropriate unit of analysis. Some suggest that data be gathered on the individual level, while others maintain that it should be gathered on an organizational level. Clearly this issue of aggregation is relevant to the classical debate in organizational behavior involving the over- or under-reification of organizational forms, structures, and patterns.

Another issue that is illustrated by these papers is a classic problem of measurement. In operationalizing constructs to be measured in organizations, is it appropriate to use absolute scores, ratios, or change scores? Different answers to this question stem from fundamentally different images of the organization.

The papers in this volume illustrate the traditional Durkheimian dilemma faced by organizational theorists. If certain phenomena are accepted as *sui generis* social facts (e.g., the percent of women employed in the organization, the percent of men over 96 years of age, etc.), then how do we interpret these social facts in the context of conscious social action which is organizational life? For Durkheim, this was exemplified by the gap between suicide rates and acts of suicide. In organizational behavior, this problem is reflected in the gap between measures of discrimination and a tacit or explicit decision not to hire a particular candidate. Demographic composition may present the parameters, specify the constraints, or identify the initial conditions, but as many of these papers illustrate, those parameters and constraints must be converted from "social facts" to a Weberian notion of meaningful social action.

In sum, placing these papers in the larger context of organizational behavior underscores not simply the dilemmas inherent in the study of organizational demography, but some of the basic epistemological issues in research on organizations.