

Economic Sociology: Selected Doctoral Theses

“Essays on Organizational Inequality”

Author: Summer Jackson (2021)

Committee: Katherine Kellogg (chair), Ray Reagans, Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan

Abstract:

What are the policies and practices associated with building diverse, equitable, and inclusive (DEI) workplaces? Past studies highlight a combination of demand- and supply-side constraints that create a ‘thin labor market’ for candidates from underrepresented backgrounds. For my dissertation, I conducted a 20-month ethnographic study of DEI initiatives at a fast-growth technology firm (“ShopCo,” a pseudonym). I employed a longitudinal, comparative research design to follow different DEI initiatives and conducted observations, interviews, and analyses of archival materials to explore issues of race, gender, and socio-economic status in the workplace. My dissertation seeks to contribute to our understanding of how and when organizations can attract, hire, and retain individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. In Chapter 1, I examined ShopCo’s efforts to increase representation of racial minorities in technical positions and reveal a previously unrecognized barrier to hiring racial minorities into organizations: repugnant market concerns. In Chapter 2, Basima Tewfik (coauthor) and I theorize on the relationship between microaggressions and systemic prejudice. We offer a precise definition of microaggressions at work and propose how multi-level responses (i.e., target, workgroup, and organization) to microaggressions can intensify and amplify to either inhibit or facilitate organizational progress on addressing systemic prejudice.

“Essays on Status Recognition and its Consequences for Top-Talent Mobility and Productivity”

Author: Brittany Bond (2020)

Committee: Roberto Fernandez (chair), Emilio Castilla, Erin Kelly, Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan

Abstract:

Organizations increasingly rely on status recognition to motivate members toward higher performance. Yet status recognition inevitably invites social comparisons. Although research in organization theory and strategy has focused on the returns to, antecedents of, and relative advantages of status recognition, whether, when, and to what extent bestowing status recognition outweigh the costs of social comparison remain open questions. My dissertation contributes to this scholarship through experimental field and archival research that illuminates the unexpected ways status recognition influences motivation, mobility, and productivity. This leads me to identify, in my first essay, how the preservation of self-image leads employees to make costly employer exits even when there are no material, career, or reputation concerns to nominal status under-recognition. In my second essay, I demonstrate how highly relational managers are more likely to artificially inflate employee performance evaluations, how this overvaluation leads to persistent underperformance, and how structured management can counteract this downside to close managerial relationships. My third essay (coauthored with Ethan J. Poskanzer), demonstrates how specialists’ productivity improves after engaging in tasks that these professionals are recognized as being relatively inexpert in relative to teammates and their area of specialization. The settings I study in this dissertation pertain to professionals operating in high-status organizations: a highly competitive multinational pharmaceutical company and Major League Baseball. Overall, my dissertation contributes to our understanding of how status recognition influences motivation, mobility, and productivity in unexpected ways and among top-talent professionals in particular. This research has implications for organizational and strategy research on social status, motivation, and the management of performance review systems.

“Social Exchange and Valuations in the Market for Contemporary Art”

Author: James Whitcomb Riley (2020)

Committee: Susan Silbey (co-chair), Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan (co-chair)

Abstract:

The first essay draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork to examine the puzzle of why galleries discipline collectors –who provide much-needed financial capital –for appearing too motivated by profit. Whilst art worlds have strong norms that enjoin artists to avoid the naked pursuit of profit and instead affect an air of “disinterestedness” (that is, a concern only for universal virtues and aesthetic qualities such as truth and beauty), why might art dealers demand that collectors similarly conform to such norms? This study addresses how (and why) galleries enforce conformity to the art-world norm of disinterestedness among collectors as part of an array of tactics they deploy to “protect” their artists from price volatility that could depress demand for the artist’s work. The findings suggest a paradoxical resolution. Although galleries framed such discipline as a moral imperative, a key implication of this study is that enforcing a norm that disavows extrinsic rewards such as fortune and fame ultimately supports a profitable business and investment strategy. The second essay (coauthored with Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan) also draws on an 18-month ethnographic investigation examining the rise and proliferation of International Art Fairs (IAFs) in the global art market. This study contributes to our understanding of how the construction and extension of market platforms shapes market dynamics. On the surface, the explosive growth of IAFs in the contemporary art market reflects the greater efficiency that market platforms typically offer, both for facilitating exchange and for expanding access. But past research on market construction does not prepare us for either of the two main findings of this paper. The first is that market participants (and especially the mid-size galleries that dominate the fairs) are deeply ambivalent about the fairs’ value relative to the cost of participation. The second main finding—that galleries (and others) believe they must participate in order to be visible in the market—affords insight into how markets vary in their visibility and opacity; how such variation shapes status competition; and how markets that are designed to increase efficiency may have the unintended consequence of exposing and thereby cementing hierarchy.

“Essays on Workplace Practices in Different Institutional Settings”

Author: Duanyi Yang (2020)

Committee: Thomas Kochan (co-chair), Erin Kelly (co-chair), Greg Distelhorst

Abstract:

This dissertation consists of three essays investigating how organizational policies operate within different institutional contexts and in the face of migration, demographic shifts, and globalization. The first essay examines why, given apparent widespread violations, some migrant workers choose not to pursue remedies. Using survey data from China, I find only one fourth of surveyed workers who experience labor law violations interpret their experiences as labor rights violations, and workers’ social relationship with the employers prior to migration explains some of this gap. This essay extends worker grievance research tradition within labor relations by drawing on research from the sociology of law and immigration to understand how these subjective interpretative processes and social identities outside of the workplace influence grievance behaviors.

The second essay investigates whether flexible working time policies reduce the likelihood that individuals leave their employer. Using linked employer-employee data from Germany, I find that by addressing mothers’ needs at a critical period in their lives, flexible working time policies encourage women of young children to both remain in the labor force and continue building their careers in a given establishment even in context with extensive state policies that support work-family reconciliation. Further, I find flexible working time policies reduce young workers’ likelihood of turnover. It suggests the policies can play an important role in helping young workers develop their human capital and advance their careers.

The third essay studies an international self-regulatory initiative—the SA8000 social responsibility certification—focused on labor standards. Using industrial microdata from China, we find firms that self-regulated exhibited higher average wages than non-adopters even in context without effective surveillance and sanctions. To explain this puzzle, we theorize about self-regulation in pursuit of reputation-sensitive buyers. These buyers privately monitor their suppliers, making up for deficiencies in the broader institutional environment and reducing the expected returns of low-road firms bribing their way into self-regulatory institutions. Consistent with our theory, we find exports increased markedly after adopting self-regulation and domestic sales did not. This essay also provides further specification of the challenges of improving labor standards privately through supply chain standards.

“The Global Integration Challenge: Global Management Teams, Temporal Difference, and Constructing the Identity of the Global ‘Other’”

Author: Laurel Grassin-Drake (2019)

Committee: Donald Lessard (chair), Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan, Eleanor Westney

Abstract:

In this thesis, I investigate the challenges of global integration in the context of a large global components manufacturer (CC) who closely interacts with a small number of similarly global customers.

First I draw on a unique data set: observations spanning thirteen months of the weekly virtual meeting of the global account team responsible for the largest customer. I examine the process of external organizational identity construction of the ‘other’ in the context of a close, dependent relationship, characterized by multiple boundary-crossing links across space and time. I find that in constructing the customer’s global organizational identity (OI) the team is also co-creating their own global OI. Further, the processes by which the team constructs the customer’s OI to answer the question ‘who are they?’ parallels well-documented internal processes used by organizational members to answer ‘who are we?’ The results demonstrate that in such close organizational relationships, identity processes answering the questions ‘who are they?’ and ‘who are we?’ inextricably co-constitute each other, making it problematic to privilege the insider view of OI over the outsider view.

In addition, when the OI of the ‘other’ appears to be incoherent, results show that a dependent, external stakeholder, despite being effectively unable to exit the relationship, can still activate voice to enforce the OI of the ‘other.’ The range of voice mechanisms notably includes using the customer’s hierarchy from outside to discipline and shape the customer’s behavior from within. The strength of the intervention is associated with identity threat and the ability to exercise voice. In the case of CC, a fundamental breakdown in the customer’s global hierarchy disabled their ability to exercise effective voice. Instead, they accepted the new state, despite its high identity threat, and defaulted to loyalty and adaptation as the only option.

I also go beyond the experience of this single team to examine the broader role of global management teams and virtual meetings for cross-regional control, coordination and collaboration at the firm, and the challenge posed by differential time zones. Results reveal that time differences should be treated as a social variable embedded in local standards and norms, or “temporalities.” In addition, I demonstrate that collectively agreed norms of ‘sleep time’ significantly limit the firm’s ability to integrate globally and generate structural disadvantages for specific geographies. Moreover, while technology ameliorates geographic distance, it amplifies the problem of time. Thus it is vital that geographic distance and time be separately modelled and theorized in international business research.

“Essays on Social Norms”

Author: Minjae Kim (2018)

Committee: Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan (chair), Roberto M. Fernandez, Oliver Hahl, Katherine Kellogg

Abstract:

The first essay addresses why people might conform to norms that they do not endorse. One explanation is pluralistic ignorance: when everyone appears to endorse a norm, even nonendorsers will conform so as to feign their commitment to the group's values, thereby exacerbating the misperception. But this explanation is limited because people seem to even conform to norms that are widely known to contradict the group's values ("visibly unpopular norms"), to the point that their conformity appears insincere. I argue that such insincere conformity is an especially potent signal of commitment because it shows that one is willing to sacrifice one's personal preferences on others' behalf. Using both qualitative and experimental methods, I study the visibly unpopular norm prescribing excessive drinking in after-hour business gatherings in South Korea. The analysis indicates that an insincere conformist to the drinking norm is perceived as an especially committed relationship partner. An important implication is that some norms might persist not despite the fact they contradict group members' preferences but because of this contradiction.

The second essay (coauthored with Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan) addresses why norms might not persist despite their wide popularity. Recent research suggests that many norms may be upheld by closet deviants who engage in enforcement so as to hide their deviance. But various empirical accounts indicate that audiences are often quite sensitive to this ulterior motive. Our theory and experimental evidence identify when inferences of ulterior motive are drawn and clarify the implications of such inferences. Our main test pivots on two contextual factors: (1) the extent to which individuals might try to strategically feign commitment and (2) the contrast between "mandated" enforcement, where individuals are asked for their opinions of deviance, and "entrepreneurial" enforcement, where enforcement requires initiative to interrupt the flow of social interaction. When the context is one where individuals might have a strategic motive and enforcement requires entrepreneurial initiative, suspicions are aroused because the enforcers could have remained silent and enjoyed plausible deniability that they had witnessed the deviance or recognized its significance. Given that the mandate for enforcement might be rare, a key implication is that norms might frequently be under-enforced.

“Essays on Knowledge Sharing and an Opt-in Evaluation Process among Investment Professionals”

Author: Tristan Botelho (2017)

Committee: Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan (chair), Roberto M. Fernandez, Ray Reagans

Abstract:

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of recently popularized opt-in evaluation processes. These processes have been democratized such that ratings are provided no longer solely by experts, but commonly by any audience member who has experienced an offering (i.e., good, candidate, or service) and chooses to rate its quality. The goal of these democratic evaluation processes is to collect independent ratings from evaluators in order to triangulate on a representative and unbiased signal of quality. Across the three chapters of this dissertation, I study various aspects of an opt-in evaluation process to uncover the mechanisms that affect evaluative outcomes. To do so, I use data from an online knowledge-sharing platform and its opt-in evaluation process in the investment management industry where investment professionals share investment recommendations.

In Chapter 1, to gain a better understanding of the platform under study, I focus on the conditions that bring these professionals together to engage in knowledge sharing, despite the associated risk of losing competitive advantage. In Chapters 2 and 3, I turn my focus to the evaluation process, in particular, examining who opts to evaluate and how factors unrelated to an offering's quality affect the evaluative outcomes. Chapter 2 examines

how social influence, measured as exposure to the ratings from past evaluators, affects the likelihood that subsequent ratings occur and the types of ratings an offering receives. Chapter 3 examines how search costs and uncertainty facing an evaluator affects the likelihood of gender bias in the amount of attention and types of ratings an offering receives.