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USING A ROLE-DRIVEN RACE EQUITY REFORM APPROACH TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF AMERICA’S HISTORY OF RACISM ON FOOD INSECURITY

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Abstract

Food insecurity, or the lack of reliable access to sufficient quantities of nutritious food, affects African Americans and other minorities disproportionately. This paper examines how America’s history of racism created and sustains the Nation’s racially disparate food system. Food insecurity contributes to hunger. This paper contemplates disparities in other American systems, including education and criminal justice, as exemplars of the broader ramifications of hunger. Finally, the paper examines the potential of individual action to address problems in any system. It champions the adoption of a role-driven race equity reform strategy as a tool to confront the current food insecurity. The strategy emphasizes the capacity of individuals to use the inherent authority of roles at any level of an organization to create change. The paper contends that individual actors, both within and without the food system, can work toward achieving more equitable outcomes in the Nation’s food system.

Keywords: Race Equity Reform, American Food System, Racism, Food Insecurity

Introduction

Racial inequality has become the norm in American society. Racism, racial inequality, and their consequences are inseparable from American history. It is impossible to discuss the geographic expansion of the country without talking about how Native Americans were deprived of their land, forcibly relocated, or exterminated altogether. One cannot talk about the economic growth of the country without acknowledging that Africans were kidnaped, enslaved, and exploited for the financial gain of others. Arguably, these inequalities both stem from and exacerbate the individual, institutional, and systemic racism present in almost every facet of American life – from politics to economics and even the food system. Common manifestations of racial disparity are the result of individual action. Individual action, or more specifically, individual action of those committed to aligning themselves to the goal of equity, is necessary to advance any efforts in pursuit of racial equity in all systems.

Racism is not merely the presence of racial prejudice. Racism is “racial bias and prejudice combined with dominant currents of social and institutional power that work systemically for whites and against people of color” (Ammons et al., 2018). The metaphorical butterfly wing flap that created the “tornado” of racial inequity tearing through the Nation is the collection of actions started immediately following the end of slavery. For example, the refusal of the Department of Education to establish schools for children of color and the simultaneous exclusion of freedmen from the workforce, because of the excuse of a lack of formal education are cases in point. These two things worked together to contribute to the gaps in educational attainment and socioeconomic advancement that separated majority and minority communities in the Antebellum South and continue today.

During Reconstruction, the “except as punishment for a crime” clause in the 13th amendment to the United States Constitution allowed Southern gentry to incarcerate newly freed black men and force them to go back and work in the fields from which they were recently emancipated. The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) practice of denying of loans, grants, land use, and technical support to African American and other minority farmers while approving the same for white farmers created, sustained, and expanded significant disparities (Hinson and Robinson, 2008). These policies allowed plantation owners to survive the loss of its free labor force and later allowed white farmers more options when adapting to industrialization, scientific advancement, and increasingly complex regulation. When banks and insurance companies used tactics like “redlining” to systemically deny financial backing to people of color, existing racial disparities were exacerbated. These things combined to create the disparity people of color confront today in the system responsible for cultivating, sustaining, regulating, and distributing the Nation’s food supply. Today, things like food deserts continue to permeate communities of color (Hilmers et al., 2012), and many of the causes for that reality can be traced back to systemic barriers created more than 150 years ago. This article seeks to not only examine the reality of racially disparate food insecurities in America, but also to introduce a strategy that could be used to combat racial inequities in this and others interconnected systems.

Are Americans Really Hungry?

One of the most overlooked manifestations of America’s history of racial inequalities appears in the food system. In 2015, the USDA reported that nearly 13% of U.S. households lack reliable access to sufficient quantities of affordable, nutritious food to lead a healthy life (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018). The USDA considers such households to be “food insecure.” The data also indicated that while food insecurity varies in severity, and is present in every American county, the rates are considerably higher in Black, Hispanic, and Native American households (Ammons et al., 2018).

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) sponsored the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP), a series of surveys that sought to investigate the realities of food insecurity and childhood hunger. It distributed a series of surveys to families and asked questions concerning hunger. Respondents were divided into three categories – “not hungry” “hungry”, or “at risk for hunger,” based on the number of questions or particular issues they answered in the affirmative. The results of that survey showed that children in poverty were three times more likely to report that they were either hungry or at risk for hunger (FRAC, 1991). Because African Americans and other minorities make up a disproportionate percentage of those in poverty (Semega et al., 2017) and the sample did not differ statistically from the population at large, it is safe to infer that a significant portion of those that reported “being hungry” or “at risk of hunger” were minority children.

The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities [APLU] (2017) developed a report that outlined the current problem of food insecurity and the challenges that would need to be addressed to combat them. In the report, the APLU pointed out that, although the United States produces enough food to feed everyone in the country, minority households are still more susceptible to facing this problem; however, it failed to identify the reasons why. Because of this, the Inter-Institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability (INFAS) criticized the APLU for “skirting the issues pertaining to racism in the food system” and missing the fact that “racial equity is both a current egregious fault and a future necessity for the sustainability of U.S. and global

food systems” (Ammons et al., 2018). The report also outlined the need and opportunities for all food system-related academics and academic institutions to contribute significantly to ending racism in the American food system.

Consequences of Hunger

The effects of the concentration of food insecurity in minority communities have much more significant ramifications than mere hunger and the discomfort that accompanies it. Poverty is a potent predictor of functional problems in children (Paul-Sen Gupita et al., 2012). One of the reasons for that is the fact that children living in households below the poverty line are likely to experience hunger. A study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics shows that hunger can lead to reduced cognitive abilities, reduced attentiveness, and increased behavioral issues (Kleinman et al., 1998). Children in situations where the access to food is not secure are thus at significantly greater risk of falling behind both socially and academically.

It is well settled that access to food correlates heavily with academic development. Programs like the USDA’s School Breakfast Program that supplements state operation of nonprofit breakfast programs in schools (USDA, 2018a) and the National School Lunch Program which uses a similar scheme to provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day (USDA, 2018b) have sought to combat this very issue. Initiatives to provide breakfast and lunch to school children have not only been implemented by the federal government, but have also been championed by private entities, such as the Black Panther Party which created the “Free Breakfast Program” in 1969, to provide breakfast for children from low-income households each day in Oakland, California (Milkman, 2016). The Department of Health and Human Services’ Head Start Program and other pre-K programs are additional proof of the generally held understanding that early academic success can serve as an indicator for future social, professional, and financial achievements.

It follows that access to food has the power to either amplify the potential trajectory of a child’s life or diminish it. Thus, there is little debate that access to nutritious food, or the lack thereof, can significantly impact a person’s lifetime successes. It also follows that racial inequity in food security helps perpetuate disparities in the operation and outcomes of other systems. For example, it is accepted that there is a correlation between hunger and school performance. It is also recognized that hungry students are more inattentive and disruptive in class, leading to repeated disciplinary challenges that land them in special education, detention, or alternative schools. Others are suspended, expelled, or end up dropping out and languish on living room sofas, street corners, and minimum wage jobs. This article is not attempting to establish a causal relationship or even say that there is a definite correlation. Instead, it posits that addressing racial disparities in the Nation’s food system has the potential to positively impact the disparities in the Nation’s other interconnected systems.

What is Role-Driven Race Equity Reform?

The racial disparities that are evident in the food system are a current reality; however, that does not mean they have to be the realities of the future. Correcting these issues will require intentional action aligned with a particular strategy. While there are many ideas on how to attack the problem at hand, for the sake of this article, the tactic of using a role-driven Race Equity Reform approach will be examined.

The Applied Research Center and the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (2009, p. 6) defines race equity as the “proactive reinforcements of policies, practices, attitudes, and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts, and outcomes for all.” Merriam-Webster (2019, p. 980) defines reform as “putting an end to (an evil) by enforcing or introducing a better method or course of action.” Taken together, one can deduce that race equity reform would be “putting an end to (an evil) by enforcing or introducing policies, practices, attitudes, and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts, and outcomes for all.” While the definition gives an idea of what race equity reform is, it is expansive.

There is a common misconception that only those at the top of an organization or society have the power to create change within an organization and system. Both organizations and systems are made up of roles that each have tasks and circumscribed boundaries of authority. A role-driven approach to reform asserts that each person in these various roles has the ability and the authority to make discretionary decisions that combine to impact system outcomes. It is vital that individuals adopt a race equity lens at all times; this is, the practice of looking at a situation while paying disciplined attention to race and ethnicity in analyzing problems, looking for solutions, and defining success (GrantCraft, 2007). With that lens and a dedication to pursuing equitable outcomes, they then have the tools to influence system outcomes to make them more racially equitable.

When contemplating the need and mechanisms for reform, much attention is paid to means of initiating top-down policy changes. In doing so, many overlook individual action as a viable path to reform when contemplating problems that, like the problem with food insecurities in minority households, manifest institutionally and systemically. People at the bottom of an organization are uniquely situated for identifying issues and taking the actions necessary for correcting them (Oshry, 2007). Implementation of any reform initiative requires action at all levels; therefore, individual accountability should be at the heart of every plan to create effective change, regardless of “rank” within an organization. If individuals at various levels of an organization are unaware of both their ability and authority to address problems, then any attempt to create change within that organization will bear little to no fruit. Meaningful race equity reform requires not only this awareness, but also sustained individual accountability for aligning personal and professional actions in the pursuit of that change. Therefore, cultivating individual change agency through education, training, and community engagement is imperative.

People typically think of authority as the power over another person that accompanies a title or position. However, this approach overlooks the authority each of us has in various situations as a result of both autonomous personhood and membership in a community. No matter the role they are performing in an organization, each person has the authority to make judgments as they go about completing tasks (Pillsbury, 2015). That discretion, or authority, which each person possesses is itself the tool anyone can use to create change. The same way a district attorney can decide not to prosecute a minor drug offense; a grocery store owner can elect to take excess food and vegetables into communities with high levels of food insecurity. The same way the police officer that stops a driver can choose whether to write a traffic citation; the person serving food in

the cafeteria can give extra food to the child who is unsure of whether he will have dinner that night.

Each person can make discretionary decisions within the boundaries of his or her role that can address a problem in an organization. It is dangerous for people at the bottom of the organizations to have an exclusively hierarchical conception of change, believing that only those at the top can do anything about the problem. It undervalues and underuses the individual's capacity to solve system problems. It leaves finding solutions to people who are more remote and less likely to be invested in the qualitative impact of those solutions and increases the likelihood that the problems will persist (Oshry, 2007). True change comes when people at various levels and in multiple roles are working together to change. Both Tubman's Underground Railroad and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves. No one can say either was the right way or the wrong way; they just used the means they had available to address the same thing.

The authority given to a role has boundaries. Those boundaries are commonly seen as restrictive; however, boundaries only outline areas where one can freely move about (Green and Molenkamp, 2005). Therefore, a change agent, or in this case, a race equity reformer, should look at boundaries as indicators of the spaces where he or she can freely exercise all of the authority assigned to his or her role. The misconception that people at the bottom of an organization do not have the power to catalyze or lead change is a direct result of individual timidity as to when to exercise the role authority and failure to push the boundaries of their roles. The role-driven race equity reform contemplated here hypothesizes that individual actors would feel empowered to utilize all of their authority if boundaries were viewed as being more permissive than restrictive, and the myth that one cannot address problems until they reach the top would be debunked.

Along with being aware of that ability and authority to create change, a person's actions must also be aligned with accomplishing the goal they seek to achieve (Pillsbury, 2015). Simple awareness is not the key to creating effective race equity reform; that awareness is only the precursor to action. Still, too often, people claiming to want to change things, either do not do much in pursuit of change or the things they are doing are not consistent with the goals they claimed to have. Those people fall short of their goals by either lacking in their actions or their alignment. Others are very high action and are always doing something, but those actions are not getting them any closer to their goals. These people are often under the impression that they are doing everything they can do, but if they evaluate what they are doing, then they would realize that effort alone is not the answer if that effort does not align with their goals. Conversely, people who are very aligned, but do not do much to create change still fall short. It is the people who manage to be both high action and highly aligned that are most successful in creating change (Pillsbury, 2015).

Role-driven race-equity reform is ultimately a strategy dependent on two personal commitments. First, a commitment to take actions that exercise full scope of authority within the boundaries of a role. Second, a commitment to use a race-equity lens to align those actions to the goal of reform. When operating in tandem, these commitments can enable a reform-minded individual to combat systemic issues like the racial disparities in food security.

Using a Role-Driven Race Equity Reform Approach to Address Inequalities in the Food System

It is easy to look at the battle with food insecurity as a food or an agricultural problem, but it may be productive to also look at this like any other race equity issue. Food insecurity is an issue that both creates and is created by a racially inequitable society. Recalling the INFAS' criticism of the APLU's (2017) report. That said, "racial equity is both a current egregious fault and a future necessity for the sustainability of U.S. and global food systems." The current struggle with food insecurity is one of the many drivers behind the continuing racial disparities in the U.S. today. The World Hunger Education Service (2018) asserted that poverty and hunger exist in a cyclical relationship in that hunger causes poor health and mental function, which in turn, decreases the ability to learn and work which causes poverty. Poverty is a cause of hunger, and hunger is a cause of poverty. The cycle caused by the disparities exasperates the various, smaller systems that combined to create those disparities in the first place. It is the self-perpetuating nature of this problem that makes it the most dangerous. Thus, the racially equitable food systems INFAS seeks is also a necessity for creating a racially equitable society at large.

It may seem like there is no relief in the midst of this "perfect storm" of racial inequity, but because of its interdependent aspects, racial inequity as a whole can be attacked by attacking any one of its drivers. For the sake of this article, let food insecurity be the stone at the center of the proverbial snowball. Addressing and removing that "stone" will eventually cause the entire snowball to collapse under its own weight. Arguably, neither the construction or the collapse is unintentional. Effective change in this area requires a deliberate course of action informed by a race equity lens. Taking intentional race equity focused action is a race equity reform approach to problem-solving. Admittedly, the use of this race equity reform approach is easier to conceptualize when looking to apply it to the disparities found in something like the criminal justice system, but, in reality, the approach is as applicable in the food systems and security as in any other. The only differences are the major players and stakeholders. Instead of the Department of Justice, prosecutors, judges, policeman, and parole officers of the criminal justice system, there is the Department of Agriculture, food banks, grocery store owners, farmers, and loan agents.

These stakeholders joined other supply-side stakeholders, e.g., food buyers, growers, farmworker unions, farmworker advocacy groups, pest management scientists, and experts in workforce development, and formed the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) in the late 1990s. Through the EFI they have joined in the work of answering a single question: "How can [they] as stakeholders in agriculture, assure that all elements of an emerging global fresh produce supply chain benefit from safe and just treatment of the workforce, provide safer produce to customers, and ensure the viability of the land necessary for sustainable production and environmental protection?" (Scully-Russ and Boyle, 2018). Role-driven race equity reform is an intersectional strategy that can begin answering this question. It is also a strategy these same stakeholders can embrace to assure those same benefits throughout all elements of the domestic food supply chain. Equally important, role-driven race equity reform can help ensure race does not determine the level of food security for any American.

Within the Food System

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the first place that people look when talking about solutions for the battle against food insecurity. While the USDA does have programs in place to attack hunger on a national scale, there is room for more programs and initiatives that - establish more programs to help farmers keep food prices down, create more programs that get fresh food into minority communities. The USDA has the ability to pressure the rest of government to treat the issue with food security as a human rights issue that will inevitably affect the realization of other rights and ultimately reduce racial and structural inequalities in the U.S. That would allow the federal government to attack the problem more effectively (Elsheikh and Barhoum, 2013).

Food banks also serve a vital role in the current fight to end hunger in the country (Bazerghi et al., 2016) still changing their approach would allow them to also play an active role in addressing the racial disparities present in the food system. Individual organizers or managers can decide to set up not only in areas that benefit from other support efforts but also in communities of color that are more marginalized. This slight change in operations would alleviate some of the problems with food insecurity that these communities face, as well as increase the quality of food consumed.

Grocery store owners are another very obvious stakeholders in the fight against food insecurity. In the U.S., roughly 43 billion pounds of food is thrown away by grocery stores alone. Some of this food is thrown away before it even hits the shelves for reasons like being deemed too “ugly” (Vogliano and Brown, 2016). No matter the reason, 50% of the food thrown away is still actually edible. That means grocery stores throw away roughly 21 billion pounds of viable food a year. To be fair, grocery stores also donate to food banks and soup kitchens, however, if those food banks and soup kitchens do not make an effort to serve minority communities, then the disparities continue. Grocery store owners can understand this problem, and after they donate food to the charitable organizations, they can take the remaining 21 billion pounds of edible food left and, instead of throwing it away, establish ways to streamline that food into communities of color that do not benefit from the existing food banks.

Like any other industry, agriculture has a system in place to lower the entry cost. The systematic denial of loans to African Americans and other minorities has still undermined their attempts to enter the agricultural industry historically. This problem is no different than the one minorities face when trying to get loans for homes or businesses. Many of the criteria on which loan applications are assessed lead to en masse minority denials (Hinson and Robinson, 2008). Other racial disparities, like the wealth or achievement gaps, account for minorities being “unqualified” for the financial support needed to get started in the industry. These discrepancies created a steep decline in the number of minority farmers. In 1920, roughly 14% of farmers were Black, and they owned over 16 million acres of land (Gilbert et al., 2002). In 1997, African Americans made up just 1% of farmers and owned only 2 million acres of land. However, if individual loan officers are more aware of the big picture issues that undermine the qualification of minority applicants and can see how a criterion may be less fair in practice than they appear in theory; they may be more inclined to exercise their discretion in order to fund the minority farmers that come before them. Agricultural insurance agents are no different; if individual insurance agents were abreast of current realities influencing the factors that qualify or disqualify applicants, those realities could be considered when determining rates. This race equity reform approach would also undermine the process of redlining, and if insurance agents committed themselves to address the disparate

effects of food insecurity, they would not be so quick to decline people who are seeking to establish farms or other sources of food near minority communities.

Lastly, farmers have an opportunity to also play a significant role in addressing the problem with food insecurity in minority communities. There are nearly two million farms in the U.S. About 80% of those are small farms, with family farms making up a significant percentage (Local Harvest, 2016). Increasingly, these farmers are now selling their products directly to the public. They do this through Farmers' Markets, Food Coops, u-picks, farm stands, and other direct marketing channels (Local Harvest, 2016). The easiest way these individual farmers could mitigate food insecurity is to make a conscious effort to serve disparately impacted communities. Generally, things like farm stands are portable, and farmers can set up shop just about anywhere they decide. This ability to deliberately choose the community that one serves is powerful. Much of the disparities are a result of a simple lack of access to nutritious foods. While the construction of grocery stores in these communities is an ideal solution, this option is not an immediate remedy to the situation. However, an individual farmer could decide to either exclusively serve these underserved communities, or to at least, alternate between setting up in areas with high minority populations and high levels of food insecurity and the areas they currently serve.

Farmers can also give excess food away. There are times that farmers leave food unharvested due to lower market prices or cosmetic imperfections that they believe would stop otherwise perfect produce from being sold. While the tomatoes may not be perfectly round and the carrots may not be straight as arrows, the food currently being discarded would undoubtedly be more nutritious than the cheeseburger from the chain fast food restaurant or the flash frozen “dinners” that have become dietary staples for children living in these food deserts. Minority communities face the dual threat of malnutrition in that the quality of food accessible create environments where undernutrition and obesity coexist (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2018). Unharvested food, therefore, is an opportunity for role-driven race equity reform. For example, farmers could donate the food that they have already written off to struggling communities. Alternatively, they could sell it to those communities at below market prices. Individual farmers arguably have significant flexibility in the systems that determine both access to food and how food is distributed. Individual farmers, therefore, have substantial discretionary authority with which to address disparities in food security.

This article addresses only a few roles in the agricultural industry that have both the opportunity and the ability to create change and to contribute to alleviating food insecurity in America. There are many more roles with the opportunity and ability to do the same. In fact, people in all of the roles within the agricultural system can fight food insecurity and the other racial disparities in the food system. It is merely up to the individuals in those roles to take hold themselves accountable for using their authority.

Outside of the Food System

Higher education is a natural conduit for this race equity reform strategy. Higher education institutions have historically been at the forefront of change. Research, teaching, and community engagement put them at the forefront of identifying, understanding, and shaping responses to technological and sociological change. Academic freedom and the tradition of peer review allows disciplines to create new knowledge. The academic freedom inherent in the role authorizes

individual professors to deliver content in ways that seed the mindset and tools of change agency. Every semester that professor trains rooms full of students to take up role-driven race equity reform and make individual, discretionary workplace decisions with reform in mind. Professors who champion role-driven race equity reform are themselves examples of the strategy at work. Thus, higher education has the potential to advance race equity reform in any industry through research, teaching, and community engagement. The multi-level nature of this approach is compelling.

In the context of the food system, the prominent role of institutions of higher education is unchanged. The APLU said that public universities have a role “as the discoverer, analyzers, and curators of food systems...and have the unique leadership role in creating knowledge that will ensure equitable access to sufficient food and nutrition security for all people.” While it is true that, documenting the “benefits and burdens of the food system” is necessary, documenting alone is insufficient to truly ensure an equitable food system (Ammons et al., 2018). It is only when these institutions go further than merely serving as experts, and begin acting on their findings that they will truly be serving in their full capacity as leaders in the fight against food insecurity.

The most prolific platform institutions of higher education have, is the opportunity to train aspiring professionals before they adopt harmful practices of the organizations they join. Entry-level employees can only combat organizational socialization, or the tendency to continue the current practices of an organization. If their coursework prepares them to employ a race equity lens, adopt a reform orientation and utilize both when performing workplace tasks, it will facilitate the role-driven race equity reform process. Thus, collegiate and graduate faculty have a unique opportunity to harness the power of higher education to advance systemic race equity reform. They can purposefully integrate race equity and reform content, data, and skills building into the delivery and assessment of existing course content. Professors who take up this challenge will ensure students’ awareness of role-driven race equity reform strategy. Equally important, they will cultivate the self-efficacy and resilience necessary to persist in careers where they can apply their knowledge and critical thinking skills to resolving the complex issues and increasing the equity of system outcomes.

Conclusion

Change agents employing a role-driven race equity reform strategy must hold themselves personally accountable to use their role within a system to increase racially equitable systemic outcomes. While individual accountability is necessary to the success of this strategy, the adoption of both a race equity reform lens and the skills needed to operationalize both are required. A single person can neither dictate nor make significant institutional or systemic change acting alone. However, role-driven race equity reform contends that because individual action is the common denominator in change at any level, meaningful race equity reform will occur when a critical mass of people at multiple levels of an organization use specific skills to align their actions with the pursuit of equitable results.

Further, while the actions of a single individual may not have an immediate systemic impact, those actions do have an immediate impact on the lives of a few real people directly served. Moreover, one sure way to have a significant impact is to combine small ones just as one sure way to have \$1 is to collect 100 pennies. Every exercise of role-level authority that purposefully aligns to the goal of race equity reform is a “penny” in the coffers of systemic change. Accordingly, actors both

within and without the food system should dedicate themselves to addressing the food security issues facing the U.S. That includes family farmers and collegiate professors alike. The racial disparity evident in the food system is inextricable tied to the racial inequality in all of the other systems in this country.

For this reason, similar strategies can address all manifestations of the individual, institutional, and systemic racism. Role-driven race equity reform is an intersectional approach to operationalizing a race-equity lens. It is both an independent strategy for advancing race equity and a tool for implementing other strategies. As food insecurity continues and food deserts expand, adopting a plan to address the issues raised here, and others, is imperative. This paper examined the nature and potential application of just one of those strategies. A role-driven race equity reform mindset should be adopted by all individuals who are committed to dismantling and correcting the vestiges of America's long history of racism and the subsequent racial inequality in the food system.

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