

From a Critical Theory to a Complex Adaptive Systems Perspective on Environmental Justice

When managers target vulnerable communities for polluting and destructive projects, they are engaging in environmental racism. This is not uncommon in America, where communities of color and low-income communities are disproportionately chosen as sites for power plants, chemical factories, landfills, and more. This injustice has not gone ignored. Since the 1960s, advocates for environmental justice (EJ) have worked to heighten public and political awareness of environmental racism. Joe Biden, in his campaign for the presidency, promised Americans he would do more to aid *people of color* in the face of environmental racism, and yet, his new Justice40 plan commits to help *all Americans* on pollution exposure. While some individuals argue that racial considerations can and should be made in every EJ campaign, others hold the opposite view, arguing that race is not a uniquely defining factor of environmental harm and therefore not imperative to EJ definitions. They point to social class, for example, as a suitable proxy for race. And yet, despite EJ's long history, it is not clearly understood why and when activists, politicians, and managers frame EJ as a racial issue, a class issue, or a mix of both (i.e., an intersectional issue). To understand the issue's varied frames, scholars should employ a critical theory approach.

This work aimed to do just that, bringing cutting-edge quantitative approaches to study the phenomena of centering, and viewing the centering of, people with low social status in EJ. I applied a critical theory lens to EJ campaigns, examining the way people in power defined EJ via race-conscious and/or class-conscious rhetoric to fulfill their own motivations and goals. Following research on intersectionality, I investigated how race and class interact in EJ. Specifically, I used a text-analysis method using code I wrote in R to assess race-based versus

class-based language in crowd-sourced EJ campaigns. From this frequency-based approach, I then ran correlations and predictive models to understand the contexts of the sampled campaigns and theorized on how individuals were interpreting various EJ frames.

My results suggested that environmental racism is not singularly a racial problem, a socioeconomic problem, or even an intersectional one, but rather that it may be a hierarchical problem in which social class outweighs race. Surprisingly, only 60% (N=82) of the campaigns sampled were race-conscious, but those that were race-conscious could be organized into two main categories: one that paired racial diversity and intersectionality, and one that veered away from both racial diversity and class issues (“neutrality”). The former campaigns tended to represent Asian, Black, LatinX, and low SES individuals, while the latter, more neutral, campaigns were more often about Indigenous individuals. Individuals judged intersectional and neutral campaigns as more successful compared to campaigns that focused on *only* people of color or *only* people from lower SES backgrounds. I interpreted this finding as a nesting ordered effect, in which social class outweighs race in EJ campaigns. Race-specific issues may only be of import when they are nested within lower SES issues. Because of this, rather than critical theory, a complex systems approach may be more useful for future EJ scholars to use.

This study contributes to diversity, equity, and inclusion research by suggesting that social class framing may, paradoxically, contribute to social inequalities. Individuals rely quite heavily on stereotypes while engaging with EJ. EJ campaigns that represented people from lower SES backgrounds tended to be the most racially diverse, which may reinforce stereotypes that people of color are poor and therefore lazy and untrustworthy. Moreover, EJ campaigns that were class-neutral also tended to avoid negative race-based stereotypes, a strategy that may be used in instances of gentrification that disproportionately harm people of color