
INTRODUCTION

Even single-interest advocacy groups are not monolithic. Although everyone in the women’s movement ostensibly cares about women’s rights, the policy changes that benefit some women do not benefit all women equally. The priorities for a working mother who is African American may not be the same priorities as those of white college students with no children—although both may consider themselves part of “the women’s movement.”

The Price of Progressive Politics, by Rose Ernst, examines how activists decide which policy goals to support and what impact those choices have on whose voice is heard. Her research suggests that even progressive activists—like those in the welfare rights movement—are not always inclusive. Ernst suggests changes activists can make that lead toward more racially inclusive policy agendas.

As Ernst explains, welfare rights organizations, like all advocacy groups, tend to see and hear their most privileged members (p. 2). Privileged members have a leading voice in conversations that shape organizational agendas at the expense of less privileged members. If the interests and experiences of those privileged members perfectly aligned with less privileged members, there would be no need for concern. But the interests of members within any social advocacy group, including welfare advocacy organizations, are diverse (p. 3). Treating the diverging interests of members in a single advocacy organization as one policy agenda implicitly benefits the singular narrative that rises to the top. Putting forward one narrative also silences the many other potential narratives within these groups (p. 3). Often, an activist’s level of privilege determines her ability to get her narrative heard and this privilege directly relates to race (p. 23).

The way an individual thinks about race is that individual’s “frame.” A “frame” is the “lens or filter through which dominant racial ideologies and challenges to those ideologies operate.” (p. 23) Ernst identifies the frame of “cosmetic colorblindness” as the modern mechanism through which the voices of racial minorities are systematically silenced. She finds cosmetic colorblindness at work in several grassroots welfare rights organizations and then offers recommendations as to how advocates can implement a more
inclusive political agenda (p. 143). Ernst offers concrete solutions to move activists away from cosmetic colorblindness towards a framework that includes more narratives, which she calls a “consciousness” framework (p. 146). The consciousness framework accounts for the disparities in political capital among members of social organizations (pp. 146-150). While identifying the dangers of a cosmetic colorblind approach to welfare rights is a significant contribution to this field, *The Price of Progressive Politics* is unlikely to be accessible to grassroots welfare rights activists. Ironically, this decidedly academic book ultimately concludes that including fewer academics and far more grassroots volunteers in the welfare rights movement can bring about positive change. The book, designed to help activists identify racial privilege within their own organizations, is blind to the privilege that accompanies higher education.

Ernst develops her theories regarding colorblind racism through one-on-one interviews with welfare rights activists across the country. Of the eighteen welfare rights organizations currently in existence, Ernst chose a sample of eight organizations—a sample that represents a diverse range of geography and internal organizational structure (pp. 11-12). She did not speak with any national welfare rights organizations because there are no well-developed welfare organizations operating on a national level (p. 11). In these interviews, Ernst asked activists to talk about the role race plays within their organization (see Appendix A). From their answers to her questions, Ernst determined which frame each activist uses and interpreted the role of race within that organization (p. 13).

Based on her research, Ernst makes a value judgment that the minority frame—consciousness—is more inclusive than the majority frame, colorblindness. Consciousness incorporates the needs of individuals facing multiple axes of oppression much more fully than colorblindness (p. 95). In fact, Ernst argues the consciousness frame is the most critical building block for inclusive progress in the welfare rights movement at the grassroots and national levels (p. 105). Ernst critiques the dominant colorblind frame because it fails to account for the needs of the advocacy groups’ minority members (p. 59). Within a colorblind frame, when a marginalized group—like the welfare rights movement—faces a choice that cuts across more than one axis of oppression, the group will likely make a choice that “disproportionately and directly affect[s]” those members who are marginalized across multiple axes (p. 8). This decision-making process incorporates an imbalance of power and privilege that is fundamentally unfair. Ernst contrasts the disadvantages of employing a colorblind frame to the advantages of a consciousness frame that directly acknowledges and confronts the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (see generally Chapter 5). The consciousness frame allows for many more

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1. Ernst lays out the full protocol for the one-on-one interviews in Appendix A (p. 153). The protocol includes a set of demographic data regarding “(1) position in the organization, (2) gender, (3) race, (4) level of formal education, (5) income, and (6) age” and then 15-17 questions regarding the organization itself (p. 153).
narratives to rise to the surface of a group’s advocacy efforts.

Ernst argues that welfare rights organizations should adopt consciousness frames, and she provides recommendations for how to actualize that shift (p. 122). Ernst reviewed demographic data from each organization, including budget, staff, size, leadership composition, and membership composition. She found that most women of color who are activists already use the consciousness framework and that the majority of white activists use the colorblind framework (pp. 159, 92). The white activists who did employ a consciousness framework tend to work with multiracial volunteer-only organizations staffed by welfare recipients rather than paid staff (p. 92). Ernst concludes that decreasing the emphasis on paid staff with graduate degrees and increasing the emphasis on volunteer members will help transition organizations from a colorblind to consciousness frame (pp. 135-137).

Ernst’s recommendation on how activists can shift from a colorblind frame to a consciousness frame contributes to sociology and women’s studies. Ultimately, Ernst provides an important component to a full understanding of the challenges that the modern welfare rights movement faces. However, the academic nature of her language and technical nature of her data analysis may limit the book’s audience. Grassroots activists may not find this text to be accessible or an efficient guide.

**WELFARE RIGHTS VS. WOMEN’S RIGHTS: A CASE STUDY**

Many of Ernst’s claims in *The Price of Progressive Politics* rely on the assumption that all members of an advocacy group do not share the same goals. She supports this assertion through a case study of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) (p. 21). Founded on the same day in 1966, the organizations have necessarily interacted in the same political space (pp. 20, 22). The successes and failures of NOW or NWRO impact the political reality in which the other group advocates. *The Price of Progressive Politics* reviews how the women’s movement limited the welfare rights movement’s ability to “construct their own . . . frames around issues of women and work” in the mid-twentieth century (p. 21). Ernst looks to data from the 1970s and compares these two groups, which represented many of the same constituents and “ostensibly encouraged alliances” at the national level. However, in practice, there was very little collaboration between NOW and NWRO, “largely because of their divergent views about work, family, and independence.” (p. 21) Because of these divergent views, NOW’s success in putting forward a single “women’s narrative” that was under-inclusive of racial diversity limited the rhetorical framework available to women in NWRO (p. 23).

Based on her review of NOW newsletters from 1968 to 1977, Ernst determined that NOW portrayed equal access to wage employment as the best path for all women’s liberation (pp. 23, 27). “[W]elfare, poverty and race were relatively low-salience issues for NOW” during those years (p. 26). Welfare
appeared in less than five percent of the sentences in NOW newsletters, while employment—the highest-ranking category—appeared in more than thirty percent (p. 27). Only three percent of the sentences referenced race (pp. 28-29).

NOW’s position on “work, family, and independence,” diverged strongly from NWRO’s stance (p. 20). NOW’s focus on employment discrimination came at the expense of the issues most important to NWRO, like child support and welfare (p. 20). The relative importance of these issues in NOW’s agenda has critical poverty and racial implications (p. 20). Not all women have the education and social support to immediately enter the workforce and find a job that would support them and their dependents. As a result of NOW’s choice to focus on employment discrimination, it did not fully grapple with how welfare, poverty, and race impact women (p. 20). Voices that did not support workplace employment were silenced.

Ernst posits that NOW’s focus on workplace employment was due, at least in part, to its demographics. During the time of Ernst’s study, 1968-1977, NOW members were generally white (ninety percent), heterosexual (eighty-one percent), and married (fifty percent), and thirty-six percent had at least a college degree (p. 29). When NOW placed emphasis on labor and the workplace as the primary site of women’s liberation, it “unintentionally restricted the strategic choices available to welfare rights activists in the 1990s debate on welfare reform.” (p. 19) This emphasis was “incompatible with the experiences of many African American women in the welfare rights movement.” (p. 20)

Unlike NOW, NWRO did not have the luxury of avoiding race in its advocacy. As Ernst notes, African Americans make up eleven percent of the population of Texas but thirty percent of its TANF recipients and American Indians make up just over five percent of the total population of Montana but almost fifty percent of its TANF recipients, (pp. 60-61). Because NOW concentrated its energy on workplace equality, NWRO was left to confront issues of race and class alone (p. 23). In addition, NWRO had to operate against NOW’s narrative. NWRO not only had to create its own narrative, but counter the narrative that the primary path to women’s equality was through workplace employment (p. 33).

According to Ernst, NWRO’s battle against NOW’s singular narrative of women’s equality faced additional barriers because NOW’s narrative was not only counter to NWRO’s narrative, it was openly hostile (p. 30). For example, NOW’s newsletters used the NRWO slogan “every woman is one man away from welfare,” not as a way to unite all women in the struggle for welfare

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2. Since the early 1970s, Gloria Steinem, the founder of NOW, has publicly disavowed any notion of a feminist cause that does not recognize the value of child and elder care. See, e.g., Gloria Steinelem, Keynote Address at Stanford University: Ms. @ 40 and the Future of Feminism (Jan. 27, 2012), available at http://gender.stanford.edu/msat40. In the same speech, Steinem said of caregiving, “Since it’s viewed as a women’s job, it’s not paid at all . . . It’s semantic slavery. A third of the nation’s work is caregiving.” Id. She went on to propose policy changes to provide public compensation to caregivers. Id.
reform, but as a reason to advocate for equal pay in the workplace (pp. 33-34). This language of “economic independence” assumes that all women have the opportunity to become financially independent, which is not consistent with the experiences of many women (p. 33).

Ernst’s critical analysis of NOW is not new. Many third-wave feminists have critiqued NOW’s strategies for ignoring the intersectional burdens affecting some women. Ernst’s analysis is unique because it extends this argument to show a current trend in the welfare rights movement.

THE SHIFT FROM TRADITIONAL TO COSMETIC COLORBLINDNESS

After examining how other movements shaped the political landscape in which the modern welfare rights movement must work, Ernst goes on to describe the frame at play within the modern welfare rights movement: colorblindness (p. 38). Colorblind frames avoid directly addressing race (p. 39). They developed as a response to the “overtly racialized discourse of welfare politics” in the 1960s (p. 38). Colorblindness “presupposes humanity (translated as normalized Whiteness) as a category that transcends the boundaries of race . . . .” (p. 38) The result of this perspective is a discourse where Whiteness silently dominates all other perspectives. Colorblindness normalizes white privilege and institutionalizes racism using “seemingly non racial language.” (p. 38) The concept of colorblindness is not new, but Ernst identifies a second category of colorblindness that seems superficially different from the older model, but produces the same negative results. She calls the older version of colorblindness “traditional colorblindness” and refers to the modern version as “cosmetic colorblindness.” (p. 53) According to Ernst,

On the surface, these two frames appear quite different: traditional colorblindness avoids discussion of race (and more important, racism), while cosmetic colorblindness engages directly with a description of racial demographics. Ultimately, however, these two categories share the same underlying evolution of power dynamics inherent in any discussion of race, whether it is external or internal to the welfare rights organization. (p. 15)

Traditional colorblindness rejects notions of White privilege and diminishes the importance of racism as a political action item (pp. 42-43). Activists who employ this frame see racism as an aberration and “not a systemic, pervasive problem.” (p. 43) They may emphasize the common struggle all women face against men while not recognizing the power struggles at play between women in the welfare rights movement based on race and class affiliations (p. 43). These activists may answer questions about race by asserting “we are all women.” Instead of focusing on the realities of race within the

welfare rights movement, they focus on the welfare rights movement as a whole against the status quo (p. 53). Although traditional colorblindness was popular in the latter half of the last century, Ernst posits that it is rapidly being supplanted by a different but equally problematic frame—cosmetic colorblindness (p. 53).

Discussions with an activist who employs cosmetic colorblindness include race but lack any critical analysis of power (p. 54). This frame superficially acknowledges race without interrogating its implications (p. 55). Race is viewed as a color, not a trait with links to historical oppression (p. 53). Such a model may talk about the racial composition of a group’s membership, but fail to interrogate how those racial differences impact the members’ experiences with government benefits offices (p. 55). Ernst posits that cosmetic colorblindness is gaining attention because many welfare rights organizations realize that they must pay some attention to racial demographics to be successful in securing funding for their groups (p. 60).

Like traditional colorblindness, cosmetic colorblindness treats Whiteness as an unstated norm (p. 57). In doing so, it renders invisible the struggles women face based on race and class. However, unlike traditional colorblindness, cosmetic colorblindness explicitly discusses race, but does not draw out the implications race has on political, social, or economic power (p. 58). “[I]nclusion of people of color becomes a means to an end, a fulfillment of a requirement of diversity rather than as a genuine commitment to racial justice.” (p. 39) This frame does not focus on the experiences of welfare recipients who are racial minorities, from a lower social status, or disabled, for example.

Activists implementing a cosmetic colorblindness frame respond to questions about race with answers like, “We’ve been trying to reach out to different ethnic communities,” as one organization did to explain the lack of diversity in its advisory board (p. 56). These activists recognize that diversity is important, but do not then take the necessary steps to increase diversity (p. 57). Additionally, activists using the cosmetic colorblindness frame superficially acknowledge the role of race by saying things like, “issues of race impact us all the time,” but deny that race has any role within the particular organization, “I can’t think of [any way] . . . that we’ve been internally affected by race.” (p. 56) Ernst explains that these frameworks rob marginalized groups of their power to direct welfare rights organizations. “Racial demographics are useful in examining the dynamics of racism only if the underlying power relationships are interrogated with equal rigor.” (p. 61) Cosmetic colorblindness provides demographic data without the corresponding interrogation.

Based on Ernst’s one-on-one interviews, white activists overwhelmingly employ colorblind frames (p. 15). However, Ernst discovered that the greatest predictor of whether or not a white woman activist would use traditional or cosmetic colorblindness, as opposed to an alternative frame, is her own experience with state-supported welfare (p. 40). All the white women who had received state-supported welfare used the colorblind frame and an additional half of the white women who had never received state-supported welfare also used
the colorblind frame (p. 40).

The naming of cosmetic colorblindness as a distinct frame is a major contribution of this book. By providing a way to identify cosmetic colorblindness, Ernst gives scholars and activists a way to separate this type of rhetoric from race- and class-conscious frames (discussed in the next section). Identifying when activists use cosmetic colorblindness could be the first step in helping an organization change its policies and encourage a shift to consciousness frames. This type of critical analysis overlaps with any number of social movements. It is a tool that can be used across disciplines to name and investigate modern manifestations of racial privilege.

The ability to distinguish between cosmetic colorblindness and consciousness frames is important because these two frames provide drastically different opportunities for minority narratives to be heard and recognized. Ernst describes cosmetic colorblindness as pernicious because it invites activists to “rank forms of oppression without expressing the way those identities and forms of marginalization interact with one another.” (p. 66) Gender and class become “trump” cards that are more important than race (p. 66). The result is a political agenda that plays on white privilege and ignores the voices of women of color (p. 66). Ernst explores both gendered colorblindness and class colorblindness (p. 67). These frames describe ways in which either gender or class inequities discourage any attention to race and racism. As Ernst notes, “welfare is without a doubt a women’s ‘problem.’” (p. 66) Ninety percent of TANF recipients are female (p. 67). Almost every activist who employed a gender colorblind frame was white. This frame treats all women as equal in their struggle against a patriarchal society (p. 68). “Rather than constructing race and gender identities as mutually constitutive, they are viewed as separate, discrete entities.” (p. 68) Gendered colorblindness either explicitly or implicitly ranks gender as more important than race (p. 71). Solidarity is perverted into oppression because such a narrative necessarily privileges white women and silences the experiences of women of color (p. 67).

A welfare rights activist’s frame has “real consequences for movement mobilization and strategy.” (p. 67) Just like NOW missed the opportunity to include the perspectives of NWRO members in the focus of its advocacy, modern welfare rights organizations that employ a colorblind frame ignore the experiences of their marginalized members. When operating under a traditional colorblind frame, the organization refuses to acknowledge the differences in lived experiences among welfare rights advocates based on an individual’s race by refusing to talk about race at all (p. 40). A cosmetic colorblind frame is no better because, although advocates may be willing to make reference to oblique racial statistics, there is still no critical inquiry into how race impacts a person’s needs (p. 53).

Similar to race colorblindness, class colorblindness is also destructive to
the welfare rights movement. Welfare is a problem of poverty, not class (p. 83). When activists view class as the uniting factor for those invested in welfare rights, they gloss over some of the real differences among welfare recipients. Some women use TANF as a temporary support system in case of an emergency, like pregnancy, domestic violence, or temporary unemployment (p. 83). These women are likely to support NOW’s platform of employment equality because they see TANF as a temporary stop-gap measure between jobs in the workforce (p. 84). Some women rely on TANF as their only support system (pp. 83-84). They are not likely to advocate for workplace employment because state funding provides a level of support that they would not be able to access in the workforce employment model (p. 84).

Colorblind frames suggest that progress for white women necessarily translates to progress for all women, which, as previously discussed, did not result from interactions between NOW and NWRO (p. 110). Additionally, the colorblind frame ignores how progress for one subgroup of the welfare community could actually create additional burdens for other groups (p. 110). Class colorblindness is just another illustration of how viewing a group as a monolith continues to provide power to the privileged within the group while rendering invisible those who face multiple axes of oppression. Fortunately, Ernst’s interviews reveal that colorblind frames are not the only frames at play in the welfare rights movement.

**Consciousness Frames**

Ernst also investigates alternative frames that, in contrast to the colorblind frames, acknowledge the impact of race and intersectional oppression within the welfare rights movement. Ernst’s research reveals that activists of color favor these frames and white activists almost universally reject them (pp. 92, 111). A consciousness frame challenges the colorblindness frame and investigates how racial oppression links to other forms of marginalization. However, this frame does not hierarchically rank some forms of oppression as “worse” or “more serious” than others (p. 91). Consciousness frames see different axes of oppression as mutually reinforcing (p. 106). Such a holistic approach inevitably situates the welfare rights movement within a larger “racial/social justice project.” (p. 95)

Unlike colorblindness, a consciousness frame allows welfare rights organizers to acknowledge the multiple identities of their constituents (p. 101). “Any attempt to discuss [welfare] solely in terms of race or gender or class fails

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4. Poverty is an economic condition whereas class is a more stable social community (p. 83). For example, an otherwise wealthy stay-at-home mom going through a divorce may temporarily have a lower income that, based on that criterion alone, would seem to make her situation similar to that of a single mother who has been working a minimum wage job for the past five years. While these women have the same income, they do not belong to the same social class. An analysis of the welfare rights movement that focuses exclusively on income would miss this difference (pp. 83-84).
to capture the intersectional nature of [its opposition].” (p. 101) The consciousness frame creates the potential for welfare rights organizations to build meaningful connections because it emphasizes the realities of racism and classicism (p. 106).

Ernst is correct to suggest that an intersectional approach to the welfare rights movement will yield policy goals that are more authentic and respond to a diverse constituency. She also points out that although cosmetic colorblindness seems to take a step toward inclusivity as it moves away from traditional colorblindness, merely mentioning racial demographics is a meaningless addition without a critical analysis of how those racial differences play out in an individual’s experience. Race is more than a skin color. It is a difference in experience. Ernst focuses her argument on adding the intersection of race to a discussion about gender in the welfare rights movement. That discussion is better than one that ignores race, but it is only the beginning of shaping a truly inclusive discourse. Building on a consciousness frame, activists ought to critically consider how race, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, geography, and immigration status can impact an individual’s experience with the welfare rights movement. Ignoring these interlocking axes of oppression and focusing exclusively on race would go against the spirit of a consciousness frame.

IMPLEMENTING A CONSCIOUSNESS FRAME

White activists overwhelmingly favor both gender and class colorblindness (p. 92). This strategy makes their activism less accessible to those who need it most and creates tension between organizations that use colorblindness and those that use consciousness frames (p. 128). Gendered colorblindness parallels the tension between NOW and NWRO. “Simply claiming that an organization represents the interests of all women does not make it a reality.” (p. 82)

Ernst posits that one reason white activists are unwilling to adopt the consciousness frame is that the process of applying for government benefits is a difficult and dehumanizing endeavor for all its applicants, regardless of race or class (p. 110). This makes it difficult for white welfare recipients “to comprehend worse treatment on the basis of race (or class) status.” (p. 110) However, among the white activists who do implement a consciousness frame, it cuts across class and educational background (p. 114). The uniting factor among white women who use the consciousness frame is that they are part of a welfare rights organization led by both women of color and white women (p. 16). For privileged activists, having direct contact with women who come from different class and race backgrounds helps affirm that although welfare offices feel dehumanizing, they can be dehumanizing in different ways and to varying degrees for different women.

“The welfare rights movement is a multiracial movement in which the failure to communicate about race and class threatens the life of any viable national movement for low-income people.” (p. 133) With this in mind, Ernst
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examines how organizations can encourage members to employ a consciousness frame (p. 114). In support of her recommendations, Ernst examines what factors are present in the few organizations where the white organizers did use consciousness frames (p. 122). With only one exception, every white woman Ernst interviewed who used the consciousness frame belonged to a single multiracial, low-budget organization (p. 118). She then investigated what aspects of this organization made it so successful in moving its activists from a colorblind frame into a consciousness frame and discovered that this organization utilized volunteers rather than paid staff (p. 122). In this volunteer-heavy structure, titles meant very little with respect to the power and control that one individual wielded over the organization’s action agenda (p. 124). In employing such a structure, the organization diverged from the dominant structure of non-profits, which typically includes paid full-time staff, and created an alternate power structure that more fully supported a consciousness framework (p. 122). “These activists felt that professional, paid organizers, regardless of intention or background, sapped the potential of low-income activists and directed the organization based on their own perspectives rather than those of the members.” (p. 124) From this, Ernst concludes that “[s]hared multiracial decision-making power, combined with an organizational structure that eschews the common nonprofit [structure], appear[] to be necessary—though not sufficient—factors in [the use of consciousness frames].” (p. 139) These insights can help to change the dynamics within an organization.

Ernst also explores how state-level organizations can work together to create a national policy agenda for the welfare rights movement (p. 148). Just as colorblindness can discredit voices within an organization, it can also prevent fruitful collaboration between organizations that use a colorblind frame and those that use a consciousness frame. Activists using colorblind frames rely on their privilege (either from race or class) to set policy goals and silence consciousness activists (pp. 145, 150). Looking at the goals of the national welfare rights movement, Ernst sees a great urgency in bringing all organizations into consciousness frames (p. 150). Since there is no single nationwide welfare rights organization to effect national change, grassroots groups must work together. Just as NOW’s agenda limited NWRO’s organizing choices, the decisions of welfare rights organizations using a colorblind frame limit the choices of other grassroots organizations to effectively advocate using a consciousness frame.

CONCLUSION

The Price of Progressive Politics looks in depth at the modern welfare rights movement. Ernst’s extensive interviews and data analysis are significant contributions to the field of social activism. Although she focuses on a single movement, her methods and the frames she identifies cut across a variety of movements. The structure of her research applies to the disability rights
movement, queer advocacy, and immigrant justice. Treating single-interest groups as a monolith reinforces privilege and disenfranchises members that face oppression along multiple axes of their identity. In this light, the research methods Ernst develops in *The Price of Progressive Politics*, along with the language she develops for identifying and naming different frames, should be applied to other social movements in addition to welfare rights.

The most important shift is moving from a colorblind frame to a consciousness frame within organizations that operate at a local level. Ernst argues that one possible way to propel this shift is to empower decision makers in advocacy groups with varying levels of privilege and to place an emphasis on volunteers who are personally invested in the welfare rights movement rather than having a full-time paid staff. Ernst theorizes that these changes will impact inter-organization policy agendas as well. However, for change to occur at the national level there must be a critical mass of organizations using a consciousness frame to ensure that privileged voices do not drown out minority views.

Unfortunately, this book suffers from an overly academic tone. It is a cruel bit of irony that a book that advocates for transferring power into the hands of those who are currently marginalized would take such an academic form. The very notion of frames as a way to talk about how people see the world is not common sense language. The next step for *The Price of Progressive Politics* is to package the ideas Ernst develops here in a form that is likely to be accessible to organizers and activists who may not have the time to sit down with an academic text.

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