

Ties That Bind: How do U.S. Universities Manage Past Slavery Entanglements?

Organizations are increasingly challenged about their legacies of irresponsibility, or the decisions and actions taken by past generations of managers deemed unethical, immoral, and with enduring negative social and environmental consequences. However, we have limited knowledge of how organizations respond when stakeholders question the integrity of the organization based on past behaviour. Our research analyzes how Antebellum universities in the U.S. have been dealing with the problematization of their involvement in the slave trade and contribution to structural racism. We use fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to better understand the different paths taken by 40 U.S. higher education institutions that responded when challenged about their past legacies. We then draw from the literature on transitional justice, an approach developed to assist nations undergoing political transition in the aftermath of widespread violence and repressive regimes, to offer some direction on how organizations can handle their legacies of irresponsibility.