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“We’re going to show up:” examining the work of a white antiracist organization

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ABSTRACT

In responding to the calls of generations of leaders of color, white antiracists have committed to accountably organizing their own communities to dismantle white supremacy. Yet, there has been a dearth of research on white antiracist community organizing, specifically. Thus, this study, based on principles of community-based participatory research, sought to investigate the work of a white antiracist organization over the course of a year, using focus groups, open-ended surveys, and meeting notes. The data were qualitatively analyzed, resulting in 4 categories that describe the organization’s efforts, accomplishments, and growing edges. Limitations and implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS

White antiracism;
community organizing;
white supremacy;
community based
participatory research; social
movements; evaluation

Dating back to European colonization, white supremacy has existed at the very foundation of what is now the United States. From indigenous genocide and land theft to chattel slavery, white people have forcibly extracted wealth, resources, and opportunity from communities and people of color (Zinn, 2015). White supremacy is, indeed, significantly more expansive than the overt racist vitriol of hate groups and self-identified white nationalists. It is a social, economic, and political system, as well as an ideological lens of white superiority (Ansley, 1989). It is so firmly rooted in everything from basic institutions (i.e., education and healthcare) to cultural norms that it has historically withstood efforts to expose and dismantle it. For white supremacy to be effectively taken down, creative, calculated, and powerful interventions are urgently needed (Mann, 2010). Indeed, Patrisse Cullors (2017), co-founder of Black Lives Matter, stated, “We must organize. We must continue to fight against white supremacy, and we must do so with love for one another . . . ” (para 11).

In that vein, one intervention aimed at disrupting white supremacy is white antiracist organizing. Notwithstanding the benefits white people incur due to white supremacy’s prevalence, some white people have been active in the battle to upend the racist status quo (Eichstedt, 2001). However, there has been a dearth of research on the effectiveness of these approaches. In fact,

evaluation of community organizing, in general, has been limited, necessitating purposeful efforts around research and evaluation (Minkler et al., 2008). If the movement for racial justice is to continue to grow to scale, gaining depth and breadth, then it is imperative to better understand the processes and impacts of white antiracist organizing. The purpose of this study is to begin addressing this gap by focusing on the work of one white antiracist community organization; the research question asked here is: What did the organization's work look like and accomplish over the last year in its efforts dismantle racist institutions?

Literature review

White antiracist organizing is complex and nuanced. As such, this literature review will focus on particular ways in which white antiracists strive toward racial justice, specifically the interplay between white antiracists and organizations they belong to; the role of relationships in antiracist organizing; and lastly, strategizing to create social change.

White antiracists in organizations

White antiracist organizing is largely rooted in the late 1960s, when radical leaders of color, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, called on white people to go into white communities and organize there (Carmichael, 1966; Royall, 2018). In their call to white people, the leaders of color specifically emphasized the need for white-led organizations that could be accountable to organizations of color. Notably, existing empirical studies on white antiracists have frequently sampled white activists from a variety of organizations – both named and unnamed (e.g., Collins et al., 2019; Eichstedt, 2001; O'Brien, 2000; Smith & Redington, 2010). For instance, Warren (2010) conducted interviews with white activists in order to learn how they came to care about racial justice and to explore their perspectives on their efforts. Though these studies inform our understanding of white antiracists who operate within organizations, research is also needed among members of the same organization.

The importance of investigating the interplay between a white antiracist organization and its members is indicated by O'Brien's (2000) findings that organizational values and discourse substantively impact their members, particularly how they perceive racism and work to end it. The author found that the People's Institute, a white antiracist organization, rejected colorblind ideology; consequently, the "organizational framing" led members to be "thoughtfully reflective about their own positions of whiteness and their role in racism" (O'Brien, 2000, p. 54). Additionally, Royall (2018) conducted a qualitative analysis comparing the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC; in the 1960s) and Alliance of White Antiracists Everywhere-LA (AWARE-LA;

a current organization). The findings indicated that both organizations consistently referred to their focal ideology – that white people must engage in organizing and mobilizing other white people. In turn, this framework resonated with and was discussed by organizational members during interviews. Overall, though, a greater depth of exploration is needed to build scholarly and practice-based understandings and implications of how an organization (and its ideology and values) intersects with members.

Role of relationships

Moreover, recent literature indicates the importance of relationships for white antiracists. Nurturing relationships has been identified as vital to navigating inevitable challenges and pushback that white antiracists will run up against in the fight against white supremacy (Malott et al., 2019). In Malott et al.'s (2019) study, a participant stated: “You have to find allies, you have to build networks, both of people of color and White people, because otherwise you just get marginalized and isolated and burnt out” (p. 92). In another study among white antiracists, Smith and Redington (2010) also found that these activists felt supported through their connection to organizations and the relationships therein. Consequently, these relationships are vital to building an organization's power through an ever-growing base. In fact, Mann (2011) identified the base as “the indisputable measurement of power and success in the field” (p. 85). However, in studies of white antiracist community organizers, specifically, there's little information on the specific processes and practices used to promote and grow relationships. In Royall's (2018) study of SSOC and AWARE-LA, relationships were identified as an important component of the organization's involvement in a multiracial movement for justice. Yet, there is a gap in understanding the specific ways in which said relationships are formed and fostered.

Strategizing for social change

White antiracist organizers aim to challenge and dismantle white supremacy as part of a multiracial movement. In this long-haul movement effort, they can employ a variety of organizing strategies, including media attention, direct action, lobbying decision-makers, phone banking, canvassing, one-on-one conversations, political and popular education, and skill-building (Minieri & Getsos, 2007). In a study of antiracist activists (white and People of Color), Collins et al. (2019) found that their actions to further racial justice varied greatly, but included education, developing organizations, and creating change from within organizations. Notably, the author highlighted that taking such actions both requires and involves the development of pertinent skills and new learnings. In Malott et al.'s (2019) investigation of white antiracists,

participants identified education as the most common strategy of choice, including “workshops, support groups, book clubs, blogging, courses, and books and articles” (p. 90). Still, white antiracists in a different study acknowledged the limits of self-awareness and pointed to the importance of action, though little detail was provided on what said actions might look like (Smith & Redington, 2010).

Outside of white antiracist literature, there is additional empirical evidence pointing to practices and strategies for creating social change. Though comprehensive coverage is outside the scope of this review, some interesting examples include Sommerfeldt (2013), who highlighted the importance of garnering resources for an organization to take collective action. In their study of web-based features used by activists, they found that “symbolic activities like boycotts or protests” were buoyed by the use of e-mail action alerts and social media (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 351). In addition, activist groups were likely to use a litigious strategy (i.e., influencing laws and legislation) if they employed tools like e-mail action alerts and opportunities to contact government representatives. Collura and Christens (2015) identified four models of organizing that influenced actions and strategies; for instance, an action/issue-centric organization is likely to utilize protests, rallies, canvassing, and getting in touch with public officials. Though not a specific tactic for social change, leadership roles are crucial when it comes to organizational capacity to create change. Indeed, Hearld and Alexander (2014) found that organizational participation in a healthcare alliance was more likely to lead to change when the alliance leadership was seen as trustworthy and transparent.

In all, there are undoubtedly various ways in which white antiracists – and other social change agents – seek to cultivate structural and systemic change in society. Still, there is a gap in, first and foremost, understanding more about the specific strategies used by white antiracist organizers, which could then be compared with strategies presented in the literature. Additionally, deepening our knowledge regarding which strategies appear to influence outcomes can help to further strengthen the movement for racial justice. In all, the current study is a beginning step in examining white antiracist organizational efforts so as to buoy and propel the work of dismantling white supremacy.

Methods

Research design and research question

This qualitative study was based on the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR), involving members of a mid-Atlantic chapter of a white antiracist organization. CBPR is “a collaborative process that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings” (Community Health Scholars Program, 2002, as cited in Minkler, 2004).

As such, members of the organization were involved in the study's design, implementation, and analysis. Moreover, CBPR was chosen because it is particularly salient to research on community organizing (Stoecker, 2012).

At the time of the study, this chapter had over 1,000 members on its e-mail listserv, though according to organizational leaders, significantly less individuals regularly attended events and meetings. The organization is entirely volunteer-driven, with multiple teams that lead the chapter's work, including leadership, fundraising, and campaign teams. In 2019, 25 people were on a team as an organizational leader. Notably, the organization is majority white, with a stated mission to organize white people across class lines to undermine racist institutions through collective action in accountability to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color led organizations. They have an accountability relationship with a local Black led antiracist organization, and the two organizations regularly check-in and coordinate their efforts. The organization has monthly meetings, as well as yearly campaigns. In 2019, the organization's campaign was focused on cutting the County Sheriff's budget. The campaign team members and I landed on the research question: What did the organization's work look like and accomplish over the last year in its efforts dismantle racist institutions? The study was approved by the IRB.

The research team (the 5 leaders and researcher) decided to hold an event for leaders and members to discuss the year in a focus group format. I prepared possible questions to use, which were designed to cultivate discussion among participants about their views on the organization's work and impacts. The research team reviewed the questions and suggested prioritizing particular questions about people's perspectives, including: What worked well about the organization's efforts this year?; What would you change about the work this year?; What are your take-aways and learnings from the year? Additionally, we decided that the 5 members of the research team would fill out an open-ended survey to reflect on questions similar to the focus group guide, in a format where they could offer their unique expertise. Lastly, to further triangulate data and buoy trustworthiness, we decided that this study would also draw from team meeting agendas and notes throughout the year (Shenton, 2004).

Sample and data collection

Recruitment for the focus groups was done via the chapter's e-mail listserv and social media accounts. They were held at a location that was secure and accessible only to those connected to the organization. The purpose of the focus groups was explained to everyone present, as the chapter had never gone through a formalized research study prior to this. As per the IRB approval, verbal consent was obtained from participants, and consent forms were available for all participants, though signatures were not required.

Based on the number of participants, two focus groups were held. One focus group included 10 participants and the other included 12 participants. Demographic information was not formally obtained from participants though organizational leaders shared that the membership is majority white, middle class, and female. The focus groups included eight possible questions, were facilitated by a member of the research team, and each lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. Afterward, the audio recordings were saved onto a secure server. The open-ended survey for the research team was administered to the five individuals via e-mail; it included 10 questions and was completed by four individuals. The responses were saved onto an Excel spreadsheet and placed on a secure server for analysis, as were the team meeting minutes and agendas.

Data analysis

I transcribed the focus groups to prepare them for analysis. As stated, the organization had not participated in a formal research process before, and so, had little to no experience with data analysis. As such, I took the lead in doing an initial analysis of the transcriptions using qualitative description (MacDonald, 2012; Sandelowski, 2000). I went through the transcripts line-by-line, using descriptive codes to reflect what participants were sharing about their experiences, thoughts, and reflections (Saldaña, 2016). Similarly, I reviewed the open-ended surveys and meeting notes, descriptively coding the responses and documents. After coding the transcripts, surveys, and meeting notes, I engaged in a second level of pattern coding, identifying themes that encapsulated several codes into larger categories (Saldaña, 2016). At this point, to strengthen the study's trustworthiness, I sent the findings to 20 active members for member-checking and received feedback from 10 members (Shenton, 2004). Based on their input, the overall categories remained the same, as members affirmed that they were representative of the data, and respondents provided additional thoughts and reflections regarding the categories.

Findings

Eight categories were identified based on the analysis, and four will be described here as most pertinent to the research question: strategy; growth and learning; developing relationships and connection; leadership and organizational planning.

Strategy

Strategy refers to the "way or ways that a community power-building organization uses its power to win a demand" (Minieri & Getsos, 2007, p. 184). Minieri and Getsos (2007) identify key strategies as base-building, direct

action, disruption, legislative, advocacy, alliance-building, media and public education, and legal strategies. In the focus groups, the campaign team's strategies to cut the County Sheriff's budget were mentioned several times. One of their strategies seen as particularly effective was a mix of disruption and legislative; the team turned out organizational members to the legislature's public hearing on the budget and prepped members to provide public comment. One moment that stood out to people was when a member, during their public comment, asked people to stand up to show their concern for people in County jails and desire to see change: "Yeah, when she asked for everybody in the room to stand up. There was our group there but I remember there was like a journalist sitting next to me and she stood up too. There were people who were not part of our group . . . And like the whole room stood up. And the legislators looked and were like 'oh', you know, and that was a really special moment" (Participant 012). This moment was a strategic disruption to the flow of the hearing and was identified as particularly powerful. In addition to the public hearing, the campaign team also researched the budget and legislators, held a rally about the budget demands, and met one-on-one with legislators. Ultimately, the legislature did cut the Sheriff's budget.

Several people also emphasized the small and tedious work that is essential to strategy: "We are taking the time to do the maybe more tedious and boring tasks that do lead to tangible changes and hopefully, eventually, cut off the racist politicians and police at the knees" (Participant 024). Engaging in research on the budget and legislators, as well as meeting with decision-makers, were certainly less visible than, for instance, the rally and public hearing, but none-the-less essential to using the organization's power to create change.

In addition to the literal strategies used, members highlighted the importance and power of adjusting and adapting those strategies to changing circumstances: "There's so much beyond, way beyond [our] control and then, you know, we peel back some things and we find something that's more pressing – we got to be able to shift" (Participant 004). The organization was flexible and able to pivot strategically – a strength that allowed them to be nimble and responsive. For instance, in reflecting on changes in the course of the campaign, a member reflected: "So, um, I mean we were able to pivot . . . and were able to accomplish a lot . . ." (Participant 021).

Growth and learning

The second category, growth and learning, included opportunities and experiences to deepen political analysis, learn new skills, and build confidence (Han, 2014; Malott et al., 2019). For instance, participants discussed learning by literally doing the work, such as planning events and talking with decision makers: "It was really interesting for me to realize that just because you have

the title legislator in front of your name – doesn't mean that you're any more or less entitled to your opinion" (Participant 021). That participant went on to reflect on her exchange with a decision-maker by saying: "... they're just people, you know. They're just people, too" (Participant 021). Members built an analysis of the political structure and learned that they could speak to people in places of authority.

Other participants mentioned how much they had learned even as initial goals changed. For example, when speaking to what was learned by the year's fundraising efforts, a participant stated "... we learned a ton. You know, we started this, sort of, from scratch, essentially ... seeing who we had was a part of what we learned – and so, sort of finding people who can continue to be resources" (Participant 010). In addition, participants emphasized the growth opportunities at the organization's general meetings: "I like the way that ... meetings have been set up. Every meeting I went to ... I felt like I took something away from it personally" (Participant 019). In fact, one of the general meetings was specifically dedicated to political education on the Sheriff's budget and County legislature. Moreover, there were multiple concrete skills participants learned during the year, such as how to plan a rally and submit a Freedom of Information Act request. Even so, participants also highlighted the need to strengthen training on organizing basics, particularly for people new to organizing: "... kind of having a little bit of education around, this is what organizing looks like. This is our plan and why these steps matter" (Participant 012).

Developing relationships and connection

The category, developing relationships and connection, is characterized by the ways in which participants felt connected to and sustained by other members of the organization (Smith & Redington, 2010). During the focus groups, relationships were generally identified as essential to organizing:

"... something I'm taking away with renewed vigor is just how central relationships are in this organization. I mean, it's not just a façade – like we really care about forming relationships and caring for people and just being willing to lean into vulnerability and difficulty and supporting one another. And that's really special – I feel, like a thing I haven't experienced in other organizations I've been part of" (Participant 022).

Moreover, one participant referred to the organization as "relationship-based" (Participant 019), while another indicated that, "a group of people who have very different lives can come together and support each other for a common goal" (Participant 023). In all, the formation and developing of relationships was key to the organization's efforts and consistently prioritized. The campaign team, for instance, spent time sharing meals, telling stories, and checking-in to promote connection at each of their meetings, alongside strategizing.

The organization also had a monthly phone bank, which involved volunteers (in the organization) calling members to personally invite them to that month's general body meeting. In that vein, the phone bank was identified as a tool for helping people to feel connected: "... that phone bank – I think [our organization] has had the strongest phone bank ... there's real commitment" (Participant 018). For people making calls – and folks receiving them – a sense of being an important part of the organization was fostered. As another participant stated, "I've been really busy this year ... And I'll get this message And I'm thinking, 'Oh, yes, of course, I'm still connected'" (Participant 016). Still, cultivating relationships and connections was also seen as a growing edge in terms of reaching outside current membership. For instance, a participant suggested that the organization engage people "in more artistic and creative spaces ... even just to reach out to people in a different way" (Participant 013).

Leadership and organizational planning

In community organizing, leaders are people with the skills and knowledge to be able to anchor campaigns, long-term planning, and other organizational logistics (Minieri & Getsos, 2007). Thus, in this category, participants brought up how the organization's work was consistently well organized and planned out, which was attributed to behind-the-scenes efforts and strong leadership. For instance, a participant had this to say about an event (planned by organizational leaders) they participated in: "I felt like it was such a good example of the level of organization and dedication and work that happens before you show up. Because I just showed up and was like 'wow, this is very organized.' There was a plan for everything. So you could have walked in off the street and been involved in it and had a very positive experience ..." (Participant 013). Another member spoke of the behind the scenes work that characterizes the chapter's efforts: "... there's strong community organizing happening here. Principles are maintained. But there's a lot of work, that pre-work, there's a lot of commitment by the leaders ..." (Participant 018). One of the participants saw the organization's presence at the public hearing and the subsequent reduction in the Sheriff's budget as "an indication that [the organization's] well led" and is consistent: "... we're going to partner, we're going to support, we're going to show up" (Participant 017). Meeting notes from the year, too, reveal the leadership and planning of the campaign team; for instance, each team member took responsibility for conducting a particular area of research or planning a component of an event.

Discussion

Given the dearth of empirical literature on white antiracist organizing, this qualitative examination is a first step in addressing significant gaps in knowledge. Unlike many previous studies on white antiracists (e.g., Collins et al.,

2019; Eichstedt, 2001; O'Brien, 2000; Smith & Redington, 2010; Warren, 2010), this study focused on people who were all part of a single chapter of an organization; this focus is important given the implications of an organization's values and framing on members. Indeed, O'Brien (2000) found that organizational framing impacts white antiracist activists' orientation to color-blind ideology; expanding on this, the current study suggests more ways in which an organization's mission and structure impacts members' experiences. Like Royall's (2018) study of SSOC and AWARE-LA, participants resonated with the core values and ideologies of the organization; in addition, it was clear that participants deeply, at times emotively, identified with the organization, seeing themselves in its overall efforts and describing it as "really special."

Participants spoke to various strategies that had been utilized during the year, as well as the perceived impact of said strategies. Though a causal relationship cannot be made, it was clear that participants found the campaign team's efforts to have had an impact on the legislature's decision to cut the Sheriff's budget. Much of the existing research on white antiracism speaks to various types of strategies, though not necessarily the results they are connected to (Collins et al., 2019; Malott et al., 2019); this study points in the direction of this potentially successful tactic that can be further researched in the future. Indeed, strategies mentioned by participants, such as connecting with government officials and holding rallies, are supported in literature as ways of creating social change (Collura & Christens, 2015; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Still, a highly notable element in the findings was not just the strategy chosen so much as *how* the strategy was implemented and used. That is, the need and willingness to pivot and shift was just as central as the types of strategies that the white antiracist organizers harnessed.

Malott et al. (2019) and Smith and Redington (2010) emphasized that relationships are highly beneficial in terms of white antiracists sticking with the work despite unavoidable pushback and barriers. Overall, the current study reinforces the importance of relationships, which were highlighted as core to people's experience and perspective. Still, the findings also suggest a particular approach to cultivating relationships – an approach with great salience to a milieu in which a global pandemic has limited physical gatherings. Participants identified the organization's phone bank as a tool that made them feel connected; while phone banks are often used as a campaign tactic (Minieri & Getsos, 2007), the study pointed to the possibility of using it to foster relationships. Additionally, extant literature indicates that leadership is key to organizational and social change (Collura & Christens, 2015; Hearld & Alexander, 2014), though not much is known about members' perspectives of white antiracist organizational leaders. The findings suggest that people felt their efforts were all the more effective because of the organization's leaders – specifically, the intentional planning and behind-the-scenes work that laid the foundation for actions.

Limitations

Though components of CBPR were utilized, this study does not reflect a fully participatory project (Minkler, 2004; Stoecker, 2012). Because the chapter had not previously participated in a formal research process, I provided an initial set of questions for consideration and did initial data analysis. To deepen the participatory nature in the future, this type of study can be done with the group playing a larger role in decisions and analysis from the onset. Notably, demographic data was not collected among participants and the sample was rather small, both of which are substantive limitations that ought to be addressed in future studies. Moreover, community organizing, in general, can be very unique to geographic region, and this study focused on a single chapter of a single organization. Thus, all of the findings might not be reflective of other white antiracist organizations in different regions.

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