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Black Women Community Organizers: Reflections on What We Do

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Black Women Community Organizers: Reflections on What We Do

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Table of Contents

Section	Page #
Abstract	4
Introduction	4
Literature Review	6
Genre/Design and Methods of Data Collection	13
Data Analysis and Interpretation	26
Conclusion	39
Acknowledgements	41
Bibliography	44

Abstract

Black women community organizers have always been foundational to movements for transformational justice. However, their voices and perspectives have often been ignored, oppressed, and co-opted. I aim to understand their perspectives on the work of community organizing, where conflicts arise, and exploring how they balance transformational work with urgent needs of communities. Using community based research practices to identify the complex issue of defining and understanding community organizing, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, and lastly, auto ethnographic reflections on my own journey to becoming a Black woman community organizer. Through these methods, I came to understand how Black women organizers define their work in community as being in a supportive role and bringing people together into a collective to work toward change. I came to better understand how these women's racial and gender identities strengthen their community work and that transformational work is highly interconnected with direct service. The goal of this research is to highlight Black women's perspectives and leadership as it is vital to community organizing work for transformational justice.

Intro

Dating back to slavery we can see the impacts that Black women have had on movements for transformational justice. They have always been vital to social change efforts and yet their voices and perspectives have historically been subjugated and the movements they started and built, co-opted by those with more social privilege and capital.

The aim of this research project was to work in collaboration with grassroots organizations and nonprofits that centers their praxis in abolition and transformational justice work around racial and gender inequality. Through initial meetings with community stakeholders, there was expressed to me a need for research into the different perspectives of community organizers on community organizing. My research unpacks the differing opinions of Black women community organizers and the transformation work that they are doing. Additionally, it will seek to explore how community organizers doing transformative work balance day-to-day operational work with larger goals of transformation of systemic issues. It will describe and explain the work that these organizations do now and how it connects to their goals of more broad strokes transformation (Richie, 2012). I focus specifically on Black women community organizers, working from a critical race theory praxis, to uplift their voices as ones that are often marginalized, plagiarized, or erased. I also seek to understand how their racial and gender identities impact the work that they do in community. Additionally, I use auto-ethnographic practices in interweave my own experiences in organizing as a Biracial Black woman because of my person connection to the topic. The overall objective of the project came out of a need to mitigate intra-community conflict that can arise from community organizers having different perspectives on the work that they do and what

work will lead to desired outcomes of community organizing. I did this by exploring and identifying areas of difference and similarity in participants explanations of their unique viewpoints. I aim to illuminate the importance of uplifting Black women's voices and experiences and the importance of personal perspectives collected through qualitative methods that value community knowledge.

Research Questions

What are the different perceptions Black women community organizers have about the work of community organizing for transformations of systemically racist systems and institutions?

Where do Black women community organizers and leaders identify conflicts and causes of conflict within community organizing processes and what ways do they find effective in mitigating conflict?

Literature Review

Setting out to do a research project grounded in aspects of a community-based participatory action research framework, I started by getting in contact with different members of communities involved in organizations working for transformational justice. Through these meetings I settled on my research topic to examine the ways that Black women community organizers and leaders conceptualize what community organizing is and how the day-to-day work of activism and advocacy within these grassroots organizations connects to larger reaching transformational goals.

Community Organizing and Conflict

It was important for me to understand what was being said about community organizing in available literature so that I could contextualize participants' perspectives

within the broader social sphere. There is a long history of social movements and community organizing within the United States around issues relating to race and social justice (Fuentes, 2012). While there is lots of documentation of the movements themselves, the people who lead them, and what the outcomes were, there is much less written about the perspectives of people engaged in the work of community organizing as a framework for creating social progress and change. In a study of parents and community members who were looking to address inequality in achievement of Black students in their city's public school system, Fuentes writes, "At the heart of this type of grassroots community organizing is the notion of relational power (Warren 2005) activated by the collective engagement of key stakeholders within school communities," (Fuentes, 2012). Power is a major aspect in prompting social change. Stakeholders are often members of communities that are working to achieve that power and progress in order to uplift their community. My aim was to understand those stakeholders' perspectives on community organizing and analyze the differences and similarities between each persons understanding. The type of community work that Fuentes looks at involves "grassroots organizing efforts are focused attempts to build community power" (Fuentes, 2012). There are multiple ways that this work gets accomplished but a few "key outcomes of this type of organizing, specifically in regards to building of collective power, are the development of community leaders, the building of relationships, and the raising of critical consciousness," (Fuentes, 2012).

Of course this comes from one example of community organizing and its important to recognize that there are many views of community organizing. One of the reasons that this was brought up to me as a useful topic for community organizers and

community was because those differing perspectives can sometimes lead to conflict. It is not as common for community leaders and organizers to talk about their individual perceptions of community organizing and therefore there can be disagreements about how to go about this work and tackle different issues.

There are other conflicts within community organizing efforts, specifically when it comes to coalition building. April Nishimura, Roshni Sampath, Vu Le Anbar, Mahar Sheikh, and Ananda Valenzuela speak to some of the causes of conflict in coalition building within the nonprofit sector. They looked into inequality of services available and useful to nonprofits lead by people of color that focused on issues around transformational capacity building tools offered to them. They stated that, "the lack of a racial justice analysis in conventional capacity building has resulted in an over-reliance on 'best practices' aggregated from a homogenous collection of white, mainstream organizations that overlook the fundamental need of communities of color to build power for self-determination and to reshape inequitable systems" (Nishimura, A. Sampath, R, Vu Le, Mahar Sheikh, A. & Valenzuela, A., 2020). Though they are speaking on the issue as it relates to the nonprofit sector which functions differently from grassroots organizing efforts, the issue can be seen throughout groups striving for transformative justice and coalition building. Though it is difficult to co-opt transformative justice work there are other issues that come from, "white, anarchist activists erasing the labor of queer women and feemes of color in birthing transformative justice," (Piepzna-Samarasinha, p.VI). It is a common theme that we can see throughout the history of community organizing by Black women specifically. White people have more social

power and therefore they can subvert, steal, or erase the work being done Black women organizers.

Black Women Community Organizers and Leaders

This erasure of Black women's voice and work is part of why I decided that I wanted to focus my research on Black women community organizers and leaders specifically. There are countless examples throughout history where Black women's roles in fostering environments for and demanding change have been largely removed from mainstream social consciousness. This has been changing somewhat is recent years as more attention is brought to the ways that Black women's (and Black femme queer folks') identities have lead to intersecting oppression with varied impacts. There are countless examples throughout history and modern day of the deletion of Black women's radical and transformational work and their experiences of oppression that remain unknown or unacknowledged. Though I don't believe I need to justify my reasoning for focusing my research on Black women community organizers, I do think it is relevant to contextualize that decision by providing examples of the erasure I am speaking of.

Example 1: Mainstreaming of the Anti-Violence Movement

The Anti-violence movement started out as grassroots activism wherein those women most impact by male violence "demanded public attention to the cause and consequences of the male violence they were experiencing and institutional accountability for it" (Richie, B., p.67). They started shelters and created community services to try to meet the immediate social, legal, and economic needs of women experiencing male violence. These efforts were spearheaded mainly by women of color,

specifically Black women, because their needs were least met by state institutions and experienced direct violence from the state. As the movement progressed it became important to build broad based coalitions of women to gain more power and voice.

However, around the early 1990s there was a split in the movement that lead to its major shift. One group, of mostly women and queer femmes of color remained focused activists and "radical anti-racist feminists [who] argued that power was at the heart of male violence against women and that only through the liberation of women would the problem of male violence end," (Richie, B., p.76). These women continued to work from the belief that gender inequality was a structural issue that was perpetuated and perpetrated by the state along with individual men. The second group was made up of mostly affluent white women who came to occupy leadership roles within the movement because of their economic and racial social positions. These "liberal feminists took a more moderate approach, arguing for expanding political and civil rights rather than creating structural change," (Richie, B., 76). These women were hoping to gain support for the anti-violence movement within the increasingly conservative national mainstream and believed that male violence against women could be addressed by the state creating more protective measures for women. This divergence within the movement lead to the anti-violence movement becoming accepted more within the mainstream but shifted it so that it no longer looked at the systemic causes of male violence or the ways in which women of color experienced male violence because of their intersectional positionality. This caused a great deal of tension within the movement itself and ultimately lead to the women of color who started the movement becoming sidelined and excluded from it. In many ways this shift has lead to increased

harm and vulnerability to male violence for Black women and other marginalized women and queer people of color.

Example 2: Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter

Black women have also historically been erased from movements for Black liberation lead by Black men. The civil rights movement is one example of gender inequality also leads to the subordination and erasure of Black women's roles, voices, and work. In an article looking at the roles of Black women in social transformation, Roumell and James-Gallaway state, "Part of the editorialized perspective of the Civil Rights Movement was also centered on the presentation of charismatic personalities that appealed to mass media, such as Martin Luther King Jr., which often left Black women's work unrepresented (Robnett, 2000)," (2021). Many of the Black women that were instrumental in obtaining the outcomes from the civil rights movement have been largely forgotten and purposefully edited from our historical awareness. The way that many Black men wrote about or speak about the civil rights era also impacts our perceptions of Black women's roles within the movement. Looking at the legacy of another influential civil rights leader, Malcolm X, and the multiple biographies that have been written about him, the Black women who fostered his activism, knowledge building, and guided him are all but eliminated from the major discussions of his life. "For the most part, the biographies of Malcolm X have either neglected or marginalized--and even plagiarized--the voices of revolutionary women who were formative in the radicalization of Malcolm X and critical in keeping his legacy alive,"(McDuffie, Woodward, 2013). In the same article by McDuffie and Woodward, they examine the "crucial but understudied role black women radicals…played in

shaping the black revolutionary politics and legacy of Malcolm X" (2013). In it they discuss multiple Black women who were very important to Malcolm X becoming the figure that he was. "Women of color radicals such as Vicki Garvin, Queen Mother Moore, and others were central to helping him rethink and develop an even more expansive position on black liberation in the United States and globally,"(McDuffie, Woodward, 2013).

The same phenomenon can be seen in more modern times with the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement was founded by Black women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullers, and Opal Tometi as a way to combat the disproportionate police brutality perpetrated against Black Americans. However, the hashtag #sayhername was created because the Black Lives Matter movement came to focus on the experiences of Black men experiencing violence and ignored and minimized the violence and brutality experienced by Black women.

Critical Race Theory

This research project is working from both a Critical Race Theory and Black feminist thought, centering Black women's perspectives specifically on doing racial justice transformative and organizing work. Part of the way that community organizations, especially those made up of people of color, put critical race theory into practice is by challenging dominant narratives and privileged discourses by providing platforms for marginalized voices (DeCuir and Dixson 2004, p. 27). An important aspect of critical race theory is that it counteracts colorblind racism wherein people ignore race and its history as well as how the history has lead to the conditions of inequality and oppression that exist today. Critical race theory instead identifies racism as structural

and "endemic to daily life" as well as highlighting the voices of people and communities who hold experiential knowledge of racial oppression but are most often excluded from mainstream conversations about race (Yosso 2005). Another reason why critical race theory is a relevant praxis for this project is that, as Solrzano and Yosso state, it is an important aspect of transformational resistance, especially when looking at research methods that have historically worked from a deficit model. Instead CRT focuses on how racial and gendered experiences provide a unique knowledge that is crucial to the study of racialize and gender inequality and how to counter oppressive systems. Critical race theory uplifts the ability and necessity of communities's to lead movements for social change, progress, and resistance against the oppression they face.

This project aims to center the voices and perspectives of Black women community organizers and leaders throughout the research processes. Working from a foundation of critical race theory and community-based research with the goal of understanding transformational work being done by Black women for black communities and other communities of color. Additionally, critical race theory informs how I understand and analyze the data I collect by allowing me to recognize how structural racism impacts people's perceptions of community organizing and is likely to be replicated within these organizations unless specifically addressed by community leaders.

Genre/Design and Methods of Data Collection

It was with a mindset toward strong objectivity and a critical paradigm centering collaboration that I decided to aim for a community-based participatory research project.

"Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) is a collaborative approach to research dedicated to social change, often entailing research insights geared toward confronting issues of social justice" (Vivona, B., & Wolfgram, M., p. 512). The goal of community-based research is to work with community members or stakeholders as partners throughout the research process. I was not able to find people in the community who had enough time to become co-researchers in this project, in part because of my own time constraints, but I still chose to work from a perspective that emphasized the value of community knowledge. CBPAR also challenges researchers to question and decolonize research by examining the power dynamics at play. Traditional research tends to view academic researchers as the creators of knowledge, whereas CBPAR, "asks, who is allowed to produce this knowledge and for what purposes is the knowledge produced?"(Vivona, B., & Wolfgram, M., p.513). It requires that we examine whether the knowledge produced in useful or will create harm and acknowledges the agency of communities and community members to be at the forefront of answering those questions (Vivona, B., & Wolfgram, M., p.514).

When it came to conducting CBPAR, it was important to get community perspectives from the beginning of the research process. "The first challenge is to ensure that the topic being studied is truly one that the community wants investigated. Building relationships and exchanging information with the community at this early stage to make sure that the research investigation meets the concerns of the community can be done by seeking a person from the community who can help in networking with the community," (Maiter, S., Simich, L., Jacobson, N., & Wise, J. p.311) To do this worked to make connections with community organizers working in a variety of organizations that

are doing transformative work to challenge dominant oppressive structures, specifically the prison industrial complex. As I met with different people I was able to present my own ideas and get feedback on them. I shared ideas around what the research could look like, what topics I am interested in that I thought may be useful to communities and why. Additionally, I heard from people within the communities about what work they believed would be useful. An idea that came out of collaboration with a community stakeholder, was that I speak with different community organizers on what community organizing is to them and what does it mean to do transformative work while also helping people who are trying to survive right now. The community stakeholder spoke about how conflict can often arise in organizing because people have different conceptions of what community organizing is and those different perspectives are not always shared or talked about. Out of this I decided to create a project that explores Black women's perspectives in order to provide some clarity and pinpoint commonalities and differences and potentially mitigate potential conflicts before they arise. It was important to have these conversations from the beginning to ensure that the topic chosen is one that will lead to social action to help the communities participating and prevent accidentally causing harm as the researcher.

Conducting CBPAR is an ongoing processes of collaboration and reflection to ensure that the ethical principles that guide this type of research are continuously being upheld. Community participants in research should be an involved as possible in every step of the research process from design, implementation, interpretation, and dissemination (Maiter, S., Simich, L., Jacobson, N., & Wise, J. p.310) to ensure that the research remains useful and beneficial to the community(s). However, given the limited

scope and resources I have for this project I was not able to have the collaboration take place at each step of the research process. Given that I did not have much to offer the communities in terms of financial compensation for their time it was vital that I do my best to create reciprocity throughout my project. Reciprocity is an extremely important part of CBPAR, and should be in all research. "reciprocity — defined as an ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties — can provide a guide to the ethical practice of CBPAR" (Maiter, S., Simich, L., Jacobson, N., & Wise, J. p.305). Community was only really involved in picking the research topic and creating a research question and therefore my hope is that as I continue this work I will be able to work with community in finding a useful way to disseminate the information that I have collected. I plan to send out my thesis and reconnect both with those I spoke with during the preliminary conversations and my interviewees. I plan to work with community to distill the information into a format that is more useful for and specific to organizations and disseminate as needed.

Part of that partnership and CBPAR is the important aspect of building foundational relationships with the communities I am going to be working with. I am lucky enough to have relationships with people at Seattle University who have trusting relationships with both me and community stakeholders so that was helpful to increasing my credibility and trust before I even met with members of the communities. Additionally, I attempted to make clear to everyone that I met with that my intentions for this project were to engage in work that is useful to the community and that I am committed to that goal beyond the time constraints of this honors project. Of course I still acknowledge my position as a student at a university that contributes to the harm of

these communities and that is part of why I want to do work that takes me out of the academic environment in some ways. Combining the knowledge I have gained throughout my studies and my own experiences with the experiences of people who are actually doing the work, with their own expertise, academic or not.

There are many tools that can be used for community-based participatory action research related other forms of research. For this project I used qualitative research methods like semi-structured interviews and descriptive participant observation. As I was moving through this process I started to realize that the time frame I was given of under a year, was going to be too short to do a full CBRP. It was an important lesson for me as a researcher to understand that taking on a project with a framework that requires creating meaningful and trusting relationships, needed much more time than what I had to offer as a senior engaged in a short term program. However, I am still grateful that I took the time to understand CBRP and to go into this project with that framework in mind. The foundation of my project was based in these methods. Before I even picked a research question or design I met with multiple community stakeholders for very informal conversations about their perspectives on what work would be useful to community organizers. I went into this project knowing that I wanted the findings to be useful to the community rather than just beneficial to my learning process as a new researcher. The value of reciprocity in research informed many of the decisions I made about how I wanted to conduct research. Even still, I was the one to make most decisions, not community members/participants and therefore this project ended up being much more qualitative methods based instead of a true community based research project.

I conducted two semi-structured interviews, each with a Black woman community organizer/leader. Both of the interviews took place virtually, in my personal zoom space and were shorter than 35 minutes. A mixture of convenience and snowball sampling was used to find participants, both for the preliminary conversations and the interviews themselves. Through my connections in the sociology department here at SU I was able to get connected with community organizers. One of the people I spoke with in the preliminary conversations, ended up also being one of the interviewees and she also helped me to get connected with the other interviewee. Both interview participants consented to having their name, race, gender, and organizations they work for shared within this project prior to the interviews. One of my participants Jackie Vaughn, is the co-executive director for SURGE Reproductive Justice, an organization that aims to end reproductive oppression for all people (SURGE). It centers Black women, women of color, and queer and trans people of color. The other interviewee was Uchenna (Uche) Esomonu who works for Alliance for Girls, the largest network of girl serving organizations.

Through one of my interviews and my mentor for this project, I learned of an event that was being put on by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond Northwest "a national, multiracial, anti-racist collective of organizers and educators, [that] is dedicated to building a movement for social transformation. Our aim is to undo racism and other forms of oppression" (People's Institute for Survival and Beyond). The event was a weekend long retreat for community organizers and activists, though I could only attend for one of the events. It was a Black woman listening circle focused on sisterhood and the connections between Black women. It focused on creating

community as a practice of healing for activists and community organizers. It was not exclusive to Black women but of the 25-30 women there, of varying ages, only one identified as non-Black.

I began this project knowing that I had great personal connection to the topic. I am a Black woman and I am interested in doing community organizing work; in some ways I already have. I identified the interconnectivity between me, as the researcher, and my topic/project and decided I wanted to include auto-ethnographic methods to my research. Auto-Ethnography is a form of qualitative research where the author uses self-reflection, often in the form of writing, to explore personal experiences as situated within a broader social context (American Psychological Association). Therefore, I took notes throughout the year, particularly during the winter (Janurary-March) on different experiences I was having doing organizing work on campus in connection to the merging of the Anthropology and Sociology departments at Seattle University. This merger was being talked about and proposed by faculty without student involvement and when it was announced that the two programs would be merged into one, we as students were confused as to why we had been left out of the process completely. Myself and another student of color pushed to have student voices and knowledge included within the future decision making processes. I took notes on my experiences and changing perspectives as I learned more about institutions and conflicts in organizing. I also reflected on my own positionality and feelings that came up about whether or not I viewed myself as an organizer and what kind of commitment that took.

Sampling, Participants, and Setting

The interviews I conducted with the Black women community organizers all took place over zoom. As I spoke with the first organizer, Jackie, I started to find opportunities to connect with other women and ultimately to attend an in person event put on by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond which took place in a hotel near the Seattle/Tacoma International Airport. All of the meetings from my own organizing with the Anthropology and Sociology merger at Seattle University took place on zoom as well and I would take notes throughout and also after meetings. The two women I worked with were self-identified as Black women and community organizers but no other demographic information was requested. Both women were in positions of leadership within their respective organizations and both organizations (SURGE Reproductive Justice and Alliance for Girls) are doing transformational justice work that is focused on long term change but is connected to organizations that do direct service to meet the most pressing needs of women of color. The sampling process was convenience and snowballing. With my connections here of campus and else where getting me in contact or providing names of people to speak with and then getting names and contacts from those people as well.

Here I am defining transformative work as that which is seeking to drastically alter systems operating within this country. Specifically those systems where oppression of minorities (especially Black people) was foundational in their creation and operation perviously and/or continuously to today. Also looking at organizations with the goals or working from an abolitionist praxis, to dismantle systems and structures connected to capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and colonization. In an article on abolition and the histories or transformative justice and resistance: "We organizers and freedom fighters

believe that an abolitionist framework and strategy is necessary to challenge the conditions faced by Black communities in this country, and that only through an abolitionist struggle will we repair our communities and undermine the systems of oppression we know have facilitated devastation, from the transatlantic slave trade through the prison industrial complex," (Cullors, P.). This is a broad overview of what transformative justice is and what I looked for in organizations to determine if they were engaged in transformational work. However, I was open to organizations and communities that identify themselves with transformative work as part of the work was to understand how community members define transformative work even if it diverged from my own definition. How they see their work as transformative and how they understand and conceptualize the importance of this kind of social justice work. Other organizations I was interested in working with (all of which were either recommend to me by people I have talked to during the initial research design process or that I have found through my literature review) and may be good for future research in this area include: No New Youth Jail (Seattle), No New SF Jail, Young Youth Freedom Center, Young Women's Freedom Center, Essie Justice, Anti Police Terror Project, Critical Resistance, the Vera Institute, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, CARA(Communities Against Rape and Abuse), SERG, Safe Outside the Systems Collective, and many more. I offer these to give an idea of the type of organizations I was looking into working with because of their goals being around transformative and restorative justice and change. I want to make clear that the organizing work that I was doing at Seattle University would not have been considered transformative under my own initial definition offered above. I chose to include it because of how it connected to

the ways that the two women spoke about transformational work, which was much broader and encompassing of organizing work that is connected to a long term transformational goal. In the case of the SU ANSO merger the long term goal was to drastically alter the way that faculty engage with students and to change the culture of the program itself as Anthropology and Sociology become one.

Limitations

I would identify one of the main limitations of this project as time. We were given less than a year to conduct this research for our department honors at Seattle University. What I quickly realized was that my passion and drive to do a community-based research project was not enough to actually conduct the whole project using this methodology. I started out by consulting with community members on what they identified as needed areas of study because I wanted to work to be beneficial to the community I was interested in working with rather than just benefiting my academic career. Many of the initial aspects remained connected to CBRP but as time went on I ended up moving more towards a qualitative approach. The data collection and analysis processes were done entirely by me rather than being in collaboration with community stakeholders. This is frustrating as the goal was to highlight their perspectives and voices and yet because of time and not wanted to expect too much labor from participants, these sections ended up being largely determined and controlled by myself. Additionally, building trusting relationships and engrossing myself into community is foundational to CBRPs but was something I didn't do to the extent I would have hoped for.

Scope is another limitation that is connected to time. I would have liked to get more interviews and attend more event but given my limited experience and skill set in conducting research, the time limit of this project, and being a full time student with multiple jobs, the scope needed to be quite small in order to be achievable. My hope is to continue this research and to later conduct each step of the process grounded in CBR methods. I decided to leave in a lot of the research and writing I did on community-based research because the practices did still inform many of my values going into and working through this process. Another limitation is that my IRB exemption wasn't submitted or approved before the initial conversations with community about what research would be beneficial. Therefore, specifics of those conversations could not be included. I also would have liked to conduct multiple interviews with participants as the writing process brought up more questions and areas of potential expansion that could've deepened the research.

Reflexivity

I by no means wish to assert or convince you, the reader, that this project is objective. At every stage of the process my values and perspectives were not only influential, but purposefully interconnected with the voices and perspectives of the Black women I worked with. Throughout the process I realized the best way to do this was to use methodologies of auto ethnography. Auto-ethnography is

> an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or
> interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to
> self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions,

premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social,

cultural, and political issues, (American Psychological Association).

I did this mostly by keeping a journal and reflecting on my own experiences and

perspectives while conducting this research and also engaging in organizing at Seattle

U. I would go back through and read and further reflect as situations and my own

perspectives changed and grew and they would continue to inform the choices I made

and the directions I went.

For as long as I can remember I have been interested in race and gender

studies. Throughout my early education I would often choose to do research projects

within these areas of study and that carried over into college. Summer of 2020 I did a

research paper on how the messaging of "Defund the Police" simplified the

conversation that had been happening in activist and academic circles, especially by

Black women, around abolition and transformation of systems like the prison industrial

complex. I am always interested in unpacking the way that language shaped our

interactions, behaviors, and perspectives. Initially when coming to this project I did a lot

of reading about violence against Black women, and other (multi) marginalized groups,

both within and outside of organizing spaces. I was interested in combating the

response I kept getting when talking about abolition of police and prison: "what will we

do to protect women against violence from men?" I read a lot about the ways that Black

women have not been protected by the movements to end male violence against (white)

women even as many of those movements were originally started by Black women and

other women of color. I started to think more about how these movements have been

co-opted and decided that before diving deeper into work around violence, I needed to first understand Black women's perspectives on organizing.

This project is deeply interconnected and entrenched in my own belief systems as a biracial Black women, interested in community organizing work. It is values based, rather than attempting to be values neutral and has the clear goal of being beneficial to community organizing efforts by pushing for the expansion of Black women leadership and the spotlighting of their standpoints. I was inspired to work from Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory to understand this conversation within a socio-historical context of Black women's crucial involvement in community organizing dating back to the enslavement of Black bodies in the Americas to now.

Philosophical statement

I unequivocally believe in practicing strong objectivity. Pure objectivity is impossible and often hindering to the research process being that social change requires our values to be a part of the work (Leavy, 38). Also, all researchers have values systems that impact their research and those "values we bring to the research experience shape every decision we make; they shape what we think and therefore how we act" (Leavy, 25). Simply ignoring or claiming neutrality only obscures the reality of how the research is impacted by the researcher's biases. I believe very strongly that we as researchers need to acknowledge and be transparent about our values and biases so that the audiences of our work can judge for themselves the ways we may show up in our research. We can also try to be self-aware and attempt to mitigate the impacts of our bias. We should also be open and honest about the ways that we try to do that. It is my belief that this should be an integral part of research projects and papers, included

as its own section or within another section of the work when reaching out to participants and also when disseminating your work. My passion for and beliefs about the topics I choose to study and how I choose to study them is fundamental at all stages of the research process and in my opinion strengthens the research rather than detracting from it.

I worked from an interpretive or constructionist framework because it emphasizes people's subjective experiences as they are grounded in a socio-historical context. History is such an important part of my research topic and a major section of my literature review. A critical paradigm was also useful because it focuses on interdisciplinary studies, with an emphasis on power-rich contexts, dominant discourses, and social justice issues as stated in the reading. It is also highly collaborative and usually draws from theories like feminist, critical race, queer, indigenous, postmodernist, and poststructuralist, many of which I wanted my research to be connected to and informed by. Additionally, looking at a transformative paradigm, the intention of my work was to be collaborative with and emphasizing of community perspectives on transformation. I aimed for my work to become a part of that transformative work, even in the way that we view doing research.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Defining Community Organizer/Leader

Through the preliminary conversations I had with community stakeholders, the issue of conflict in community organizing came up. I discovered through these conversations that a shared definition or language for defining what community organizing is was missing from a lot of these spaces. Conflict then came from the lack

of communication and sharing of different perspectives and backgrounds of community organizers and activist on defining the work that they do. I was interested specifically in Black women community organizers perspectives as an identity group that's voice and perspectives have been historically, and continue to be, ignored, oppressed, or co-opted by those with more social power.

In defining the work of community organizers, the first interviewee, Jackie Vaughn who currently works at SURGE Reproductive Justice as a co-executive director, spoke from her own experience about the organizing work that she does. She states, "the type of organizing work that I do is working to demystify the policy making process with our community" (Vaughn). She goes on to say that, "we know that policies impact our communities lives everyday and we also know that the people who are making the policy and working within these systems, that institutions don't reflect our communities and they're definitely not meant to build power or shift power or share power with our communities." She identifies this type of legislative and policy change work as "one step, or one part of the work of liberation." Community organizing is work that can be done on the systemic and also the interpersonal level. There are many different ways to do community organizing work but Jackie identifies one of the central pieces as figuring out "how is it that we build collective power with our community." Organizing people into something that is larger and more powerful than individuals fighting for justice on their own. On how she shows up in her role as a community organizer, Jackie says that it's about supporting and "being able to share the information that I know with the community that I'm a part of so that together we can figure it out, you know, making solutions and plans and strategies together." From this explanation I took away two

important aspects of Jackie's definition of community organizer based on her experience in that role. One is that community organizers be connected to or a part of the community they are organizing with. Having someone from the community and who is impacted by the issues a collective is organizing around, be in positions of leadership in organizing is very important. The second thing is that community organizing is a collaborative process; bringing people together is part of that but organizing also includes how groups work together to strategize for transformational justice.

I was also interesting in understanding the differences in defining community organizer and community leader. Jackie defined them separately, stating that when thinking of a community leader she thinks "about those who have…a responsibility to the community because of the platform or access that they have." She goes on to say that it is important for community leaders to be "cognizant or your role as a gatekeeper and speaking on behalf of your community versus how are you a part of a process and the strategy." There are clear connection between community organizer and community leader based on Jackie's discussion of each role. Both involve supporting movements and collective in the work that they do, building networks and organizing people while also being a part of the strategic work. It seems that the differences come in terms of scope, as community leaders have access to platforms that maybe community organizers do not. During our conversation I reflected on my own definition of leadership and agreeing that there is a balance between actively leading people and also knowing how to step back and support/encourage the leadership of others and of the collective. Jackie talks about this as moving "away from that like spotlight attention type of

leadership" adding that her organizing goal is in part inspired by Ella Baker's organizing and community leader model in that she believes, "everyone can be a leader."

With the second interviewee, Uchenna (Uche) Esomonu, I ended up only asking her to define what being a community organizer is, in contrast of me asking Jackie about both community organizer and community leader. Interestingly, Uche on her own immediately identified community organizing as connected to community leadership stating, "I always like talk about what it means to be a community leader but then I guess being a community leader is being a community organizer," (Esomonu). Uchenna talks about her understanding of leadership through her work with Alliance for Girls, the "largest regional alliance of girl-serving organizations and leaders in the United States" (Alliance for Girls). She speaks specifically about the founders of the alliance as being leaders that "don't occupy this massive space where they are all leaders, they are still very much a part of the community that they are leading" (Esonmonu). This connects to Jackie's acknowledgement of herself as a community organizer relaying information to the community that she is a part of, again reinforcing the idea that part of being a community organizer and/or leader is being a stakeholder within that community.

Uchenna goes on to talk more specifically about being a community organizer as "someone who is aware of a problem in the community and…galvanizing people to like a shared cause or a collective cause and it's just being that link that brings people together to work for a specific case and become collective" (Esonmonu). Again there is an emphasis on collectivizing and linking people together. Like Jackie, Uchenna also talked about moving away from that, "traditional" leadership, focused on being in the

spotlight. Instead, defining it as being "the link, the connection, the glue that gets all of them involved" (Esonmonu). This is something that I have felt very passionate about and wrote about in many of my notes throughout the year. In one section back in March, I wrote, "being in a leadership role, it is important to know when to step up and when to step back. When to use your voice and when to shut up." Being a community organizer and leader is about facilitating connection and collective effort toward justice for a cause that impacts the community you are a part of or connected to in some way. I think the last piece is key in the perspectives of Black women organizers, that the role be fulfilled by people from within that community in part because of the long history of oppressed groups not being allowed to speak for themselves or their grassroots movements being overtaken and co-opted by people with more social privilege and power who are not a part of the community collective.

Impacts of Racial and Gender Identities

As a Black Biracial woman who is interested in community organizing myself, I wanted to understand how the racial and gender identities of Black women, and the intersectional oppression we face, impacts how they showed up as community organizers and how they were treated by others within organizing spaces. In my own reflections over the past year while being heavily involved with the student organizing work with the sociology and anthropology department merger at Seattle University, I found that I was treated very differently by white faculty, especially those within the anthropology department, than by the one Black member of the ANSO staff. In my notes I reflected on the distrust that I developed as a result of the disrespect I felt directed towards me and another male student of color. I also believe that my identity as a

biracial Black woman is something that empowers me to call out injustice in the various forms I see and experience it. It also means that I have to be very careful and very prepared at all times. From my notes I noticed, "I feel a lot of pressure to prove myself or impress people who hold authority over me in some way. I'm starting to let go of trying to earn the respect of people who chose not to show respect towards me or acknowledge the ways their actions uphold white supremacy" (My notes). This was an important lesson for me to learn. While in one of my classes during winter quarter, I spoke about how fed up I was. I later reflected in my journal that what I was experiencing was an epiphany about finally letting go of this desire to prove myself to white authority figures in my life, especially throughout my educational journey. This was something that I had been trying to do for years once I realized how much I had been socialized to edit myself on behalf of trying to ascertain respect by convincing people of my intelligence and therefore my worthiness. My identity as a Black woman is part of what strengthens my organizing and my voice. It's not something I should earn respect in spite of but is the reason why I have always had such an unwavering passion and determination to work for social and transformational justice.

Uchenna expressed a similar sentiment that being a Black woman strengthens her identity as a community organizer. She says, "I would say that's what brought me to come into organizing, and I feel like if I was not a Black woman I probably might be more insulated to a bunch of the problems I've spotted in my community." It is important for community organizers to understand the issues and often times that comes from experiencing them first hand. She goes on to say, " it's [being a Black woman] definitely made me more aware of problems because Black women are most likely the first

people to experience any form of oppression." People who hold privilege are protected from certain realities of inequality and oppression whereas Black women don't often have the luxury of not knowing what it is to experience many of the issues community organizers are fighting against. Jackie speaks on a similar idea saying, "with the work of SURGE we are really focused on how we're building with other queer, trans, women, femme, and BIPOC organizations…We know that our identities, our life experiences are absolutely critical to the work that we do with our community." (Vaughn). This goes back to why I wanted to focus this research on the perspectives of Black women, as their voices should be centered in movement. Black women have always played a vital role in community organizing and therefore we should look to them to understand and unpack these complex concepts and conflicts. Jackie also talks to the historical reality of the treatment of Black women in this country. "looking particularly at the historical or the history of Black women and femmes in this country and how the US systems of like control and oppression, how really dependent on the access and oppression of Black bodies and particularly Black women and femme bodies." The long history of silencing Black women's voices and co-opting movements they've created cannot be overlooked when we think about who's voices to uplift now. "with the reproductive justice analysis it really asks us to center those in our movements who are most impacted and directly impacted. Those who are directly experiencing it should lead." (Vaughn).

The representation in leadership is also a vital part of Black women's leadership. Uchenna talks about organizations that she has heard of that, "talk this very progressive missions, ambitions, but their leadership makeup…doesn't tell the same story." Something she highlights about Alliance for girls is that there are leaders who represent

the communities of girls they aim to serve: "an organization that claims to work for girls and for girls that are from minority groups and their leadership makeup actually reflects that, it's not just like a bunch of White women saying they're here to help Black girls, it's actually Black women," (Esomonu). Black women have always played a critical role in organizing and activism and it's vital to our movements that they hold positions of leadership in community. There is a long history of White women speaking over and for Black women or co-opting their movements using their social power and control. Often times this has resulted in the de-radicalization of effort that were originally advocating and pushing for transformational change and uprooting of interconnected oppressive systems (Richie, B., 76). Jackie identifies this as another important aspect to how her identity as a Black woman serves her work. A lesson she learned from a college professor she had, Dr. Elisia Facil who "played an instrumental role in the Chicana feminist movement" is to "challenge our community to think about racism at the intersection of gender based violence" (Vaughn).   Black women experience a unique intersection of oppression that lends them to think and organize in nuanced ways that attend to the complexities of interwoven forms of oppression.

Balancing Transformation with Urgency

Goals rooted in the transformation, abolition, or restructuring of systems of oppression (racism, patriarchy, colonialism, class inequality, etc) or dismantling of societal institutions and structures built on these social hierarchies (prison industrial complex, healthcare industrial complex, education, etc), often take a lot of work and time to achieve. However, the needs of the communities facing the impacts of this

oppression often require urgent action. In this section we explore how organizers find a balance between long term goals and immediate action.

It is pertinent to note that both of the women that I spoke with work for organizations that do not do direct service to community but instead their organizations (SURGE Reproductive Justice and Alliance for Girls) facilitated connections and engage with organizations doing direct service and working towards policy and legislative change. This is a crucial part of creating balance as Jackie talks about, "being in a relationship with them [organizations doing direct service work] that's one, an organizing relationship that's rooted in a long term strategy but also allows us to be able to connect folks in our community with those who we know are doing direct service work" (Vaughn). Having different organizations focuses on various issues and methods for social change while still be connected to one another and a long term strategy allows people to do transformative work without constantly needing to find solutions to immediate community needs. Uchenna makes the point that though the types of work conflict at times because "you want to help them now but you also want to dedicate your time and your efforts into like creating the actual larger change," that she also sees the work as being highly connected. She says, "I feel there is a misconception that the two things are separate…I've found that it's mostly to get to the actual transformational change it's just it's building up the small things" (Esomonu). Jackie makes a similar point when speaking to what transformational work looks like on the day-to-day level; "everyday work is…how are your actions and decisions connected to a long term strategy because…everything that you do could be considered organizing," (Vaughn). She goes on to say that she thinks about her actions as a parent and raising a daughter who will

grow up already connected to and ready to impact her community. If we have an organizing principle that we can come back to, we are able to make choices in our lives that connect to long term goals. Jackie sums up this point nicely saying, "that intentionality in your daily action and your personal life I think directly corresponds to organizing" (Vaughn). Organizing can take many forms and it is relevant to highlight the importance role Black women organizers have long played in efforts for social change and transformational justice. Movements, especially those focused on long term transformative efforts, require the voice of Black women and the work that they do. Work that often goes unnoticed and under appreciated as not being connected, when in reality it is part of what has kept these movement going.

Conflict in Organizing and Coalition Building

Over the past few years of my journey in sociology, I've spent a lot of time learning about and trying to understand coalition building and community organizing, particularly how we gather people to work together for a common goal. It feels as though people engaging in the work have a shared understanding of what the problem is (racism, patriarchy, colonization, etc) but less of a shared understanding of what we're fighting for and how we get there. I was interested to understand Black women's perspectives on where conflict arises and what solutions there are to deal with it. From my own notes I reflected on conflict being a biracial Black women and a student trying to organize in a space dominated by White faculty. There was a clear power differential that I felt at all times when in zoom spaces with the group of Anthropology and Sociology faculty and students. One of the first meetings, another student of color and I were pointing out how the process of merging the two majors was made highly

exclusive of student voices and was also not a transparent process. The reaction from the White faculty in this initial meeting was a reminder to me that my intelligence and ability is valued in so far that I am agreeable and palatable. During the first meeting I attended a White male faculty member suggested that another student and my perspectives should not be valued in the same way as the professors. Questioning our commitment to the program and our right to be outraged that the decision to merge the programs excluded student voices. It was an incredibly valuable experience for me to have in my final year of undergrad, to recognize that trust is continually earned and that conflict is an inevitable part of organizing work. How we deal with that conflict as it arises, I think determines how well coalitions and communities will be able to continually work in collaboration.

Jackie identified that challenges in coalition building that she has come across are "people not having a shared language or an agreed upon analysis about how they're going to go about the work," (Vaughn). Jackie brought up the importance of having an organizing principle and strategy that is created in collaboration early on in building community, something to return to when conflict happens. She says,

> "how do we have something that we can come back to that we've already agreed upon, that we…all had developed together with a shared understanding before we even ran into challenges. So that common and shared and agreed upon language and framework is very important and I don't think enough collectives or coalition take the time to do that in the beginning," (Vaughn).

She mentions specifically about using the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond's anti-racist organizing principles and I was curious to find out more about them. I

attended an event put on by them and the invitation of my advisor for this project who works with the organization. They were holding a weekend retreat for organizers and I could only make it to one event that was happening that Friday evening. They were putting on healing circles for different groups of people and I decided to attend the one geared towards Black women. It was really focused on the aspect of sisterhood and Black women's connections to one another. I had never attended anything like this before, and being apart of organizing work specifically focused on our own storytelling and healing in community with other Black women was incredibly powerful. I wrote in my notes,

> I felt myself overflowing with emotion as I listened to these women speak about their lives and their struggles with sisterhood and saw that the reaction to this vulnerability was an outpouring of support, love, and acceptance (My notes).

This healing work is vital to organizing, not only because it can be an exhausting process, but because it is how we cultivate trust and shared understanding which are foundational to a community that is united. Jackie also reconnected back to the idea that everything that happens at the micro impacts what happens at the macro level. Foundational trust and connection among the small groups that start community is the first step before we think about broadening coalitions. She says, "a big thing is just being okay with taking the time to build those relationships and…being okay with focusing on who you have with you right then and there. How are ya'll able to move together before you start you know thinking about thousands and thousands of people," (Vaughn). She talks about how it doesn't really matter if you have this huge base of people if even a small group can't come together to make difficult decisions

(Vaughn). Many people's instinct is to just start building and recruiting people to be a part of the movement but it takes time to learn to work together and to build strong foundational relationships. Again we go back to the idea of strategy and having a shared language and understanding of the values that are shared. Conflict is part of relationship and community and so we need to be prepared to address it in productive ways while staying connected as a community.

Uchenna had a different perspective on conflict as someone who does less work in building coalitions. She acknowledges that her organization (Alliance for Girls) has had less issue with conflict because they have such a strong united front. She says, "I feel like for our organization it's kind of different because if you're joining…you kind of already know what you're signing up for" (Esomonu). She says that people who don't align with the organizations values will most likely not become members. Interestingly the connection between her and Jackie's perspectives becomes clear. Uchenna witnesses less conflict in values because the organization makes it's guiding principles transparent and comprehensible. People know before joining what the work is going to be and what the values of the organization are, and can decided if they align or not. If (or more likely when) conflict does arise, those principles exist as something to go back to and a guide through it. Part of the work that Alliance for Girls does is expanding the network of organizations and connecting different ones to work together. She says, "before we ever like connect tow organizations together we look at their way of doing things, we always try to personally…look at the work they've done in the past and see if it's a similar approach," (Esomonu). By doing it this way, the network of organizations is created knowing that there are similar and shared goals. Taking the time to actually look

at the organizations pervious work, not just what they've done but how they've done it, means that conflict comes up less. We can see how the way that Uchenna speaks about the strategy of Alliance for Girls building community has put into practice much of what Jackie identifies as solutions for when conflict arises. This project is another attempt at trying to create more shared language and understanding so as to better build coalitions and mitigate conflict before it happens and have a strategy for when it does.

Uchenna identifies seeing conflict more moving out of the nonprofit sector and towards policy implementation; "conflict usually just comes from…trying to translate the work that we're doing into policy because that's when you're trying to convince people… to actually prioritize the work you're doing" (Esomonu). She goes on to talk about how those in positions of power to effect policy change think that what organizers are asking for is dreaming too big, when in reality they are asking for the most realistic things and their work is then cut down to the bare minimum (Esomunu). This stresses the importance of strong coalitions with shared goals and messages, because challenges are waiting beyond the point of organizers agreeing with each other. Being united when up against those who are in positions to change laws and policy, those larger steps for transformational justice.

Conclusion

Part of my journey to this project was wanting understand how community organizers approach doing transformational work, how that balances with day-to-day work, and how conflict comes to play in that work. I specifically wanted to highlight the

voices and perspectives of Black women because there is a long history of Black women's organizing being undervalued, their movements co-opted, and their standpoints being sidelined or ignored. However, there is also a long history, that we are starting to recognize more, of Black women's organizing being foundational to movements and fights for transformative justice.

Engaging in the process of this project has reinforced for me the importance of community based research practices. These practices, which center community perspectives and experiences, are changing the way research is done for the better. The long history of researchers taking from community or pushing onto community their own agendas while simultaneously devaluing the experiential knowledge that community members hold is challenged by CBR guiding philosophies. I found limitations in doing community based research, restricted by time and resources to build more trust with community due to the length of this project and my other responsibilities as a student. However, starting from a place of collaboration with community allowed for the topic of my research to be situated within needs identified by community members.

My own identity as a biracial Black women was what inspired me to focus on and uplift Black women's voices and perspectives. The two women whom I spoke with also shared similar sentiments that their work as community organizers/leaders is strengthened by being Black women. It has allowed them to understand issues of oppression from a different viewpoint because they experience intersections of gender and racial inequality.

For a long time I have seen work for transformational justice as in constant conflict with the work required to meet urgent community needs. Though there is a

certain amount of balancing that needs to be done, I learned from speaking with these women that the work is actually highly interconnected. Transformational change can be brought about through the build up of smaller or more immediate efforts to reach and support community. Additionally, being intentional in our daily lives and connecting our actions back to a long term strategy, we can do transformational work on a daily basis. When that strategy is created collaboratively, with organizations that take the time to build trusting relationships, it can mitigate conflicts that arise because you can always return back to the shared guiding principles of the work.

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