



White Supremacy and White Antiracism: Practice Implications for Community Practitioners

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Abstract

In the 21st century, though there is no longer legalized chattel slavery or codified segregation, white supremacy is alive and well in the United States, and it shapes the conditions, organizations, and structures that community practitioners work within. For white community workers committed to being antiracist agents of change, the intersection between white supremacy and antiracism highlights important practice implications. For instance, white antiracist practitioners need to contend with white guilt and create opportunities for popular and political education. Moreover, they must center relationship building, accountability to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, discovering mutual interest, and building collective power. White community practitioners have the opportunity to use their position to be an antiracist force, and drawing on lessons from current literature on antiracism can make these efforts all the more effective and grounded.

In the 21st century, there is no longer legalized chattel slavery or codified segregation of public facilities. It is, by and large, not socially appropriate to use explicitly racist terminology or language (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Yet, despite a narrative to the contrary, white supremacy is alive and well in the United States. It persists as a perverse, damaging, and dehumanizing belief and structural system that has consistently perched white people as superior to people of color. It has endured at the core of institutions, cultural norms, and beliefs in this country. Throughout history to today, white people have been responsible for white supremacy's enduring, deleterious nature. In turn, then, it is necessary for those of us who are white to be part of actively engaging in its defeat. White community practitioners, in particular, have the opportunity to be such agents of change.

Community practitioners (or workers) is used broadly in this paper to refer to people engaging in community-based work to further social change, development, and action, including community psychologists and social workers doing community practice

(Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2004; Prilleltensky, 2001). For white community workers committed to antiracism, the intersection between white supremacy and white antiracism highlights important practice implications, including the need to engage in political and personal education, interrogate feelings and values that do not serve antiracist aims, build relationships, cultivate multiracial alliances, and join in the wider movement for collective liberation. In this paper, I will first provide background on the expressions of white supremacy and how it shapes and impacts community practice. Then, drawing from scholarly and practice-based literature on white antiracism, I highlight a series of practice implications for white community practitioners' antiracist efforts. The paper ends with a brief summary of the main points and acknowledgment of limitations.

Background

A comprehensive definition of white supremacy cannot be limited to interpersonal racial prejudice and discrimination or the acts of virulent hate groups. Rather, white

supremacy is comprised of both ideological and structural components. Ansley (1989) defined it as a “political, economic, and cultural system” (p.1024). In effect, white supremacy is intricately constitutive of structures and institutions, including education, healthcare, housing, criminal justice, and employment, that disparately oppress, exploit, and dehumanize people of color (Feagin, 2014). Moreover, it’s also a cultural and ideological belief in white superiority – that white people are, put simply, better and more worthy than people of color. Despite apparent advances, it continues to infiltrate day-to-day interactions, norms, values, beliefs, and systems in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Consequently, white supremacy intersects with various aspects of community practitioners’ work, including but not limited to the institutions they work in, interactions with community members and co-workers, and the frameworks that influence interventions and analysis. That is, community workers will need to navigate the insidious ways that white supremacy persists on interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels.

Interpersonal Explanations

Perhaps the most malicious way that white supremacy persists, on an interpersonal level, is in regard to hate groups and hate crimes. In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) identified 1,020 total hate groups in the United States, which was a 7% increase from the previous year (Beirich, 2019). Hate crimes – fatal and non-fatal – have also seen an intensification in recent years. Notably, in the immediate wake of the 2016 Presidential election, there was a sudden, alarming uptick in hate crimes, particularly in schools, colleges, and public spaces, which were largely attributed to the racist rhetoric and policy priorities of Donald Trump (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). The optics and persistence of white supremacy were on full

display when emboldened white nationalists gathered, in 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia for the Unite the Right rally, expressing unequivocally white supremacist beliefs and sentiments (Heim, 2017). Hate groups and hate crimes have devastating impacts on community well-being, and so, white community practitioners may be faced with their repercussions when engaging with affected communities.

Still, white supremacy is not just expressed by self-identified white supremacists. Even white people who are well-meaning can perpetuate white supremacy through behaviors and beliefs. For instance, “slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors,” referred to as microaggressions, are often experienced by people of color when engaging with white people on a daily basis (Sue et al., 2019, p. 129). Microaggressions can occur within community practice, too, particularly for white practitioners working with communities of color. Moreover, well-meaning white people, including community workers, may unintentionally perpetuate racist biases and prejudices. For example, it has been shown that white people frequently misjudge the percentage of crime committed by people of color, identifying it as higher than it actually is (Ghandnoosh, 2014). Such skewed perceptions could impede white community practitioners’ ability to work with communities that have been disparately impacted by the criminal legal system.

Cultural and Ideological Explanations

Dominant cultural norms and beliefs are central to sustaining white supremacy. Smith (2016) highlighted three “logics” of white supremacy: slavery/capitalism, genocide/colonialism, and orientalism/ war (p.67). Although each of these represents past and present structures, policies, and practices of the United States, the ideas underlying the logics have become fixed in

societal norms, frameworks, and values. In other words, genocide, slavery, and war have become rooted in dominant culture, constructing society in such a way as to justify white superiority and the devaluation of anyone unable to be classified as white. Given their ubiquity in dominant culture, then, these logics will influence the perspective and frameworks of white community practitioners, including their use of particular interventions. Even seemingly innocuous cultural norms stimulate “white supremacy thinking,” as has been emphasized by Okun (n.d.). For example, perfectionism and individualism – two of Okun’s (n.d.) characteristics of white supremacy culture – uphold competition, performance, productivity, and viewing people as synonymous with their errors. Such values can show up in organizations, including those that community practitioners work within, and function to uphold frameworks that have historically defended white domination.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, there emerged a narrative of a post-racial society, wherein racism was no longer determinant of access or opportunity (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Referred to as colorblindness, this ideology reveals the flexibility of white supremacy to persist culturally, even in light of ostensible social, economic, and political changes. Moreover, white people often remain unaware of the continued privileges of whiteness; Gibbons (2018) referred to this as white ignorance that must be sustained by denying people of color’s humanity and voice, in addition to turning a blind eye to the violent history of oppression that still manifests today. Even if committed to antiracism, white community workers will have to constantly navigate dominant norms of colorblindness and ignorance, in addition to working with other white people who are also shaped by these expressions of cultural racism.

Structural and Systemic Explanations

The foundational systems and institutions of the United States were predicated on white supremacy, and despite supposed reforms, they continue to operate in a similar fashion today. Housing, employment, criminal justice, education, media, and politics are some of the systems that sustain advantages and privileges for white people while oppressing and dominating people of color (Feagin, 2014; Wilson, 2018). For instance, Black students are more likely to be kicked out of school as compared to their white counterparts (Gillborn, 2005). In a similar vein, Black men are disproportionately more likely to be incarcerated than white men (Alexander, 2012). A key component of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was struck down in 2013 in a Supreme Court decision, thereby opening up the ability of states (particularly in the South) to make policy changes that effectively disenfranchise people of color (Wilson, 2018). There are innumerable ways in which current structures and institutions discriminate against and dehumanize people of color, and as such, shape the conditions in which community workers engage. That is, white community practitioners are bound to find themselves pushing for social change and community development in order to mitigate and transform the destructive impacts of institutional racism.

Intersection of Race and Class

No discussion of white supremacy is complete without taking class into account. The intersection of race and class manifests in the divide and conquer tactics that have been used by the wealthy and elite throughout U.S. history to stymie class-based, multiracial unity. For instance, in the 17th century, the distinction of whiteness was linked to dividing people of common class interests. Poor Black and white folks came together in several uprisings, including Bacon’s Rebellion, to challenge the existing social,

economic, and political systems that were exclusionary and kept the majority of wealth in the hands of the few (Battalora, 2013). Such multiracial alliances were a danger to the budding capitalist economy, and so, the landowning elite used race to drive a wedge between poor Black and white folks. Today, decision makers and people with power continue to use race to keep people divided, protecting social, economic, and political systems that harm vulnerable communities. In turn, the divide-and-conquer strategy of racism shapes the environments and situations that community practitioners work within, as well as the strategies they need to employ.

Practice Implications for White Antiracist Community Practitioners

Despite its persistence over time, there has always been resistance to white supremacy. From indigenous people fighting for their land to Black Lives Matter, people have joined together to oppose and overturn this racist ideology and structure at the bedrock of the nation (Mann, 2010; Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Antiracism involves individuals, groups, and communities who are resolved to undermining and undoing racism; it's a broad category and can include activities such as: education, organizing, advocacy, demonstrations, and policy work, among others (Malott et al., 2019; Smith & Redington, 2010). Antiracist tactics are targeted at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels of racism.

People of color have been consistently at the forefront of the fight for racial justice. Still, although white people are clearly advantaged and resourced by the existence and maintenance of white supremacy, they, too, have been part of the antiracist struggle for change. Unfortunately, the history of white antiracism is often unknown to white people. For instance, in the early 1960s, white people were active members of racial justice

organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC; Zinn, 2013). Then, in 1966, SNCC made the decision to become an entirely Black and brown organization, asking their white comrades to leave SNCC and enter their own communities to organize there (Middlebrook, 2010). Indeed, several leaders of color, including Stokely Carmichael (1966), illuminated the need for white antiracists to form their own organizations and work collaboratively, but separately, from organizations of color. White supremacy has proven to be both stable and multifaceted over time, shaping the conditions that community practitioners encounter and the frameworks, values, and interventions they utilize. Thus, engaging in white antiracism, as a community worker, must be intentional and informed, and it is bound to include a variety of challenges, complexities, and roadblocks. By harnessing extant scholarly and practice literature on white antiracism, it is possible to draw out important practice implications for community practitioners, particularly those committed to integrating an antiracist lens into their work.

Antiracist Education

As has been discussed, white supremacy is acutely rooted in – and perpetuated by – systems, structures, culture, attitudes, and behaviors. Yet, white people are frequently unaware of the extent of their privileges and advantages – from the individual to systemic levels (Case, 2012). As such, white antiracists harness educational tactics to develop their own awareness and learning, as well as that of other white people. Indeed, white people have been called on by leaders of color to purposefully confront white supremacy and to be active participants in the work for racial justice. The aim of antiracist education, then, is recognizing, challenging, and changing the racist actions and beliefs (and complicity) of white people in a white supremacist society (Mott, 2017).

In a qualitative study of white antiracist activists, Malott et al. (2019) found that education was the most common strategy utilized by participants, particularly through “venues such as workshops, support groups, books clubs, blogging, courses, and books and articles” (p. 90). Education is not only used to change ideas and frameworks (such as the notion that we live in a post-racial society), but it is also used to impart needed skills in the practice of antiracism. Community practitioners seeking to deepen their commitment to antiracism can engage in educational efforts among themselves and their colleagues. Learning opportunities can give these white antiracist practitioners the chance to more deeply understand how white supremacy has shaped the political, social, and economic contexts in which they work, thereby also influencing their understanding of effective actions to be taken in response. Still, given the pervasiveness of white supremacy, people (and systems) will likely be slow to change. Thus, antiracist education requires patience, flexibility, and persistence. Community workers should not expect to “arrive” at a complete understanding, or as is explained later, wait to take action until developing a fully formed understanding of systemic racism.

Interpersonal Conflict

Considering the obstinacy of colorblindness and the invisibility of whiteness – it is not overly surprising that white antiracists will encounter conflict in their efforts to dismantle white supremacy. Smith and Redington (2010) found that white antiracists faced pushback from a variety of people in their lives, from colleagues to family and friends. One participant poignantly stated: “People will avoid you at a cocktail party” (Smith & Redington, 2010, p.545). Attempting to disrupt white complicity in white supremacy may, in short, not be readily or heartily received. Being outspokenly

antiracist can strain relationships, particularly when white antiracists are connected to people whose perspectives and priorities are widely divergent and seemingly inflexible (Malott et al., 2019). As white community practitioners integrate antiracism into their work, they too can expect to face conflict and disagreements, such as with members of the community, colleagues, and supervisors. Thus, managing and responding to such conflict requires white antiracist community workers to try out various tactics and tools. For example, the participants in Malott et al.’s (2019) study identified confrontational strategies as being largely fruitless and ineffective. Rather, being supportive, open-minded, and relationship-focused assisted in navigating potential backlash and pushback. Indeed, given the dearth of empirical evidence on antiracist strategies, it can be challenging for antiracists to identify the most effectual means for challenging racism in their day-to-day lives. Still, it’s clear that being able to tolerate faults and errors (their own and others’) can be a useful way for white antiracist community workers to deal with the probable conflict that will spawn from their work.

Guilt

Interpersonal conflict is not the only barrier to white antiracism. Digging more deeply into whiteness and white supremacy can elicit a sense of guilt in white people. Indeed, Aal (2001) noted that “a paralysis of guilt and defensiveness” (p.305) is a significant obstacle for white people in the work of disrupting white supremacy. As white people deepen their understanding of the unearned privileges they carry – and the legacy of violence that has sustained said advantages – they may be overwhelmed by the enormity of their complicity and role in this virulent system. Such guilt and sense of being at fault can become a roadblock to moving antiracist action forward. Okun’s (2006) ladder of empowerment identifies stages white people

may experience as they become more aware of their connection to racism; one of these stages is “guilt, shame, and blame” (p.10). Staying in this place of guilt and shame is harmful as it can fuel bitterness, fear, distress, and denial – rather than moving white people farther up the ladder towards active antiracism. White community practitioners may also move through a place of guilt, shame, and blame in their commitment to and active support of antiracism. This can, in turn, effectively halt their antiracist activity and keep white supremacy firmly in place (Mott, 2017). Thus, it is vital for white antiracist community workers to recognize and navigate their own feelings of guilt (as well as other white people’s paralysis) so as not to be prevented from their efforts to disrupt racist ideology and systems.

Relationship-Building and Capacity to Change

For white people, like community practitioners taking responsibility to challenge racism in all its manifestations, it is imperative to work in relationship to others, including other white people. However, reluctance, distrust, and underlying doubt in white people’s capacity to change can present obstinate roadblocks to building relationships. Anne Braden, a white antiracist Southerner who began organizing in the 1950s, was highly cognizant of this issue; she believed it was imperative to organize poor whites in the South and to disrupt the false narrative that they were unable to change and were inherently racist (Braden, 1966). She stated powerfully: “I think we need to stop feeling, even unconsciously, that we are something special – that we could change but others somehow don’t quite have the intelligence or flexibility to do so” (Braden, 1966, p.20). If white antiracism is about taking responsibility for bringing other white people into the work, then doubting that they are able to change presents a troublesome barrier to doing so. Moreover, distrusting other white people is,

in effect, avoiding the full weight of white America’s vitriolic and inhumane past (Aal, 2001). In order to do the slow and vital work of relationship building to further antiracist efforts, white antiracist community workers need to grapple with and navigate feelings of distrust or doubt in other white people.

Mutual Interest

The recognition that white people have a stake in dismantling white supremacy is an antidote to the divide and control strategy of racism. Instead of the patronizing notion of ‘helping the other,’ fighting racism is about collective liberation – that white people’s liberation is bound to people of color’s liberation (Crass, 2013). Showing Up for Racial Justice (n.d.), a national network of white antiracists, highlights this as one of their organizational values: mutual interest. White supremacy has, undoubtedly, wrought unfathomable harm on communities of color, and it has also been harmful and destructive for white people, though in other ways (SURJ, n.d.). Thus, white antiracists are not fighting for racial justice to simply assist communities of color, but also from the recognition that white people have a clear stake in the fight.

Mutual interest could be a significant shift in framework for community practitioners, particularly if motivated by an understanding of ‘helping others.’ To avoid incidentally recreating division and other racist norms in their antiracist efforts, white antiracist community practitioners can identify how their stake is bound up with Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Specifically, community practitioners can deepen their analysis of white people’s legacy of violence, dehumanization, and destruction, as these brutal perpetrations get in the way of white people connecting to their shared humanity (Battalora, 2013). Additionally, white supremacy has served to separate white people from traditions, cultures, and languages in order to be considered ‘white’

and have access to the benefits of whiteness (Aal, 2001; SURJ, n.d.). Understanding such costs can lay the ground for white community practitioners to understand their stake, or “what we have to gain,” in the battle against racism in order to stick with the work sustainably and long-term (SURJ, n.d.).

Accountability and Multiracial Movements

White activists have a history of taking over movements and disregarding the voice of those most directly impacted by social injustice (Mott, 2017). White supremacy cannot be disrupted when white antiracists re-center whiteness in the work and operate with blinders on to the needs and demands of communities of color. Instead, they must be in relationship with and take direction from people of color who are also engaged in this movement work (SURJ, n.d.). In effect, then, white antiracists need to form accountability relationships with antiracists of color. These relationships require tremendous effort, openness, and trust-building, but only accountable, multiracial movements can push forward the powerful struggle to undermine white supremacy and effect fundamental change (Crass, 2013). Accountability has roots in the Civil Rights movement, when leaders of color called on white antiracists to organize in their own communities. In his Black Power speech, Carmichael (1966) specifically called on white people to “start building those institutions inside the white community” necessary to have a coalition between white and Black antiracists. Without organizational or institutional infrastructure, white antiracists lack the operating base needed to be accountable to people of color and an active part of the multiracial movement for justice. Thus, for authentic accountability, white antiracist community workers need to create and implement policies, practices, and structures that center relationship- and alliance-building with people most impacted by racist systems.

One example of a multiracial alliance is the relationship between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) during the Civil Rights movement. SSOC focused on organizing white people in the South, whereas SNCC organized Black and brown folks; the two groups communicated, shared leadership, and generally stayed connected in their efforts (Royall, 2018). Years later, another multiracial coalition formed in Chicago between the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, and the Young Patriots: the Rainbow Coalition of Revolutionary Solidarity (Middlebrook, 2019). Each organization focused on organizing in and meeting the basic human needs of their own communities, but were united in demanding, and working toward, radical social change. Regardless of the focus of their work, community practitioners can use the example of SNCC and SSOC and the Rainbow Coalition as models for how to build and nurture cross-sector, multiracial alliances in the work of changing material conditions and moving social change.

Today, white antiracists continue to form and manage the complexities of accountability relationships. In their discussion of transformative alliance building, Tochluk and Levin (2010) emphasized that accountability cannot be unidirectional or one-sided (that is, only white people waiting to get direction from people of color). Rather, they pointed to the need for both white antiracists and antiracists of color to genuinely and openly enter into relationship, one based on mutuality, trust, respect, and sincere, reciprocal investment. Tochluk and Levin’s (2010) emphasis on two-sided, mutual relationships of accountability is crucial to community practitioners committed to antiracist practice. That is, nurturing accountability relationships requires time and capacity. Arguably, building transformative alliances cannot just be an add-on for community workers, but

integrated into their overall work and practices.

Collective Power

Building power is needed to truly effect change and challenge a system as engrained as white supremacy. Thus, white antiracists, including white community workers, cannot settle for just personal reflection and learning – they need to organize and join with a mass movement needed to make tangible impact (Malott et al., 2019; SURJ, n.d.). Moreover, history has shown the reality of state repression brought down on people fighting white supremacy. For instance, Anne Braden and her husband, Carl, were arrested and charged with sedition for buying a house for a Black family in a white neighborhood (Fosl, 1999). Although this type of repression may not happen in quite the same, overt manner today, community practitioners can expect forms of repression or pushback that have the potential to weaken their antiracist aims. As such, it is essential for white community workers to join together and connect with larger movements fighting for racial justice. Large, powerful movements are more able to withstand repression and present a commanding force against the ubiquity of white supremacy. The problem of white supremacy is enormous – and so individual white community practitioners cannot settle for individualized efforts, but need to be connected to the wider movement for liberation.

Conclusion

White supremacy is profoundly rooted in the United States, from colonization to the present day. It remains foundational to institutions, systems, and cultural norms. It is pervasive and durable, taking on new forms that continue to oppress people of color and advantage white people. By nature of their work, community practitioners will encounter conditions, structures, values, and

practices that are grounded in and perpetrated by white supremacy. White people have an undeniable role in this persistence of racism, but they, too, have a role in undermining it, and community practitioners can use their positioning to effect social change toward racial justice. Thus, white antiracist community workers need to contend with guilt, pushback, and conflict, while striving to re-educate themselves and others. To practice accountable white antiracism, they too must cultivate relationships and multiracial alliances, and join the wider movement toward transformative social change.

The intersection of white supremacy and white antiracism has important and informative practice implications for community practitioners. Still, this conceptual framework ought to be examined through empirical research. That is, studies can be conducted with groups of white community practitioners to determine their use or perceived value of the practice implications discussed in this paper. Moreover, the application of literature on white antiracism *broadly* to white antiracist community practitioners *specifically* is limited, as community workers may be engaged in a variety of strategies and interventions beyond those explicitly labeled as antiracist or advancing racial justice. Again, further empirical investigations can explore the potential tensions that may exist for community workers who are situated within an organizational context and committed to challenging racism even if/when it is not an explicit aspect of their responsibilities. When all is said and done, there is an intense need to continue to lean into the complexity of dismantling white supremacy, especially among white people. Creative, powerful movements for racial justice require the dedication of people in a variety of positions and places in order to persist and achieve truly liberatory change.

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