Addressing Racism in the Organization: The Role of White Racial Affinity Groups in Creating Change

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Abstract

Racial affinity group meetings, or caucuses, can be an effective tool for human service agencies to address cultural responsiveness or shift their organizational paradigm toward antiracism. The development of such caucuses is seldom undertaken, however, often due to concerns about resources and the difficulty of envisioning the concrete benefits. This paper describes the formation, implementation, and functioning of a White antiracism caucus, facilitated by the authors, in a large social service agency. Organizational context, group development, and attempts to address institutional racism are presented. Issues of professional identity development, the reification of White privilege, and internal systems of accountability are described.

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Recognizing systemic racism within an organization is a challenging and often confusing process. Whites and People of Color may work together as colleagues, but deeper equity work requires using this diverse workforce as a resource to identify and rectify hidden and unconscious forms of bias that may go unrecognized by White managers and administrators. To enhance culturally responsive services, staff members from marginalized or socially oppressed groups need to know they are valued by the organization. Value is often demonstrated through processes that allow all members of the organization to compete on a playing field that addresses factors of organizational culture that privilege some groups over others. An organization that overlooks the social and historical impact of race privilege and racism risks perpetuating inequity through practices that highlight the achievements and strengths of White staff members without recognizing the cultural context that supports their success.

This paper describes the formation and development of an antiracist affinity group designed to help White staff members of a social work organization understand institutionalized racism. The group formed as part of a larger antiracism initiative within the agency. While the initiative received support from the executive leaders, there was considerable skepticism among some staff members: many White people did not understand the need, and many People of Color doubted that it could be successful. Lessons from the early stages of group development and the potential benefits of the racial affinity group process are described.

No formal evaluation to document the impact of the process within the organization was performed. Concerns were twofold. Those most closely involved in the work feared that an evaluation might not be adequately sensitive to the nuances of organizational change and could be used by those who opposed the antiracism efforts to pull resources away from the initiative. From a risk management perspective, there were worries that formal documentation of inequity could make the agency vulnerable to lawsuits. The authors were directors of agency programs who had worked for the organization for several years and were closely involved in the antiracism initiative and racial affinity groups from inception. Their motivation to join the initiative came from personal commitments to racial and social justice, informed by hearing clients and staff members talk about frustrations related to issues of inclusion. While both recognized the value of evaluation, they agreed to forgo the process in the interest of moving the initiative forward. Even without data, however, it is valuable to document the process of the racial affinity groups for other organizations who may wish to replicate the process. This paper is drawn from the authors' notes, conversations with various agency members, meeting minutes, public agency documents, and their experiences with the group and larger agency initiative.

Understanding Race

Race is best understood as a social construct that exists within the intersections of multiple aspects of identity, including gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, and ability/disability. Each aspect contributes to an individual's experience of privilege and marginalization, and impacts how she or he experiences racism or race privilege. Consistent with critical race theory, it is important to maintain a holistic view that responds to the meaning of race in the social and institutional context (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). The challenge for an organization is to conceptualize the diversity of its workforce and consumer base as a complex web of intersecting identities. Creating an organizational milieu that addresses the complexities

of social experience demands a meta-cultural competency that takes place on both micro and macro levels (Mallow, 2010). Meta-cultural competency responds to race and ethnicity in the context of the social, political, religious, economic, and individual differences that influence people's lives and impact communities, which is crucial in understanding racism. While true equity must address all aspects of identity, we focus here on race to highlight sensitive issues that are often not talked about openly. Most of what is discussed here, however, could apply to an agency's efforts to address institutionalized homophobia, gender bias, or other aspects of oppression that have become woven into the organizational culture.

Although an essential aspect of social work practice involves assisting communities, groups, families, and individuals to counter inequality and racism, unintentional enactments of privilege and incidents of discrimination often occur within the organizations providing help (Dominelli, Lorez, & Soydan, 2001; Donnelly, Cook, van Ausdale, & Foley, 2005). Organizational change inherently disrupts an agency's culture and some of its practices, and antiracism work may be particularly disruptive as it focuses on sensitive, emotionally charged issues. While the goal is often to enhance productivity, staff morale, and client services, the process may be fraught with tension. As found by Devine (2010), "open two-way communication and clear and regular communication of change processes" (p. 130) are critical to ensuring that employees feel valued and heard as managers move forward with action steps. Racial affinity groups can provide forums for communication and group members can offer insights to agency management and help move the initiative forward.

Racial Affinity Groups

Racial affinity groups, or race-based caucuses, are processes where people of the same racial group meet on a regular basis to discuss dynamics of institutional racism, oppression, and privilege within their organization. Ideally, there are at least two groups, one of Whites and one of People of Color, who meet separately and together to identify and advance their organization's racial equity goals. Race-based caucusing can be an effective method for social service agencies to highlight race as they address cultural responsiveness. Caucusing can function to promote antiracist practice, advance organizational change, and support the personal and professional growth of the group members. It can also be valuable in fostering accountability and validating perceptions of institutional racism within the organization, further supporting the organization's members.

Despite the potential benefits, there is no evidence that race-based caucusing is regularly undertaken by agencies. In discussions with agency leaders, the authors learned that there are concerns about competing resources, difficulty envisioning concrete benefits, and lack of clarity on how to begin and manage the process over time. Antiracism literature often focuses on the harm of racism, illuminating the responsibility of White people to work for change without giving clear direction for action. Authors typically note that antiracist work needs special attention because the nature of institutional racism is to downplay the role of White culture and privilege, pull towards a supposed ideal of colorblind fairness, and discourage talk about White racial identity. These practices tend to reinforce hidden privilege and maintain, rather than eliminate, inequity (see Ancis & Szymanski, 2001; D'Andrea, M. 2005; Perry & Shotwell, 2009; Spanierman, Poteat, Beer, & Armstrong, 2006). Processes that highlight White culture and

define privilege, value cultural differences as sources of organizational strength, and openly talk about racial identity are better positioned to effectively address bias and move toward equity. Specific guidance for the individual or group working for change in an organizational context is often found outside of mainstream professional journals. For example, in *The Whiteness Papers*, Katz (1999) identifies specific actions White people can take to eliminate racism. These include developing their own identity as White people, dealing with internalized privilege, examining both the intent and consequence of their actions, and creating partnerships to help support their development as antiracists. Guidance also comes from organizations that have made their process of change public. This includes the work of Crossroads Ministry (2008, which offers overviews and guidelines on the purpose, structure and benefits of race-based caucusing, and Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (SPAN; 2007), which has put extensive effort into opposing institutional racism.

Cultural Competency and Antiracism

Mental health and social service agencies can assess their organization along a continuum beginning with diversity, moving to cultural competency, and ultimately to antiracism (D'Andrea et al., 2001; Kohl, 2004; Sue et al., 1998). Cultural responsiveness within an organization can be seen as a developmental process with stages of growth and conflict emerging as that organization becomes increasingly inclusive (Constantine & Sue, 2005). Large organizations often have multiple perspectives operating simultaneously, and individuals within an organization are inevitably at different stages of personal development. Thus, it is valuable to have a model that informs organizational assessment.

Race-based Organizational Model

Carter (2000) discusses four perspectives and concomitant assumptions that frame a continuum of organizational responses to racial equity: *universal*, *ubiquitous*, *traditional*, and *race-based*. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive statuses, as they often shift and overlap, but the model offers an approach to organizational assessment that can highlight basic assumptions about agency culture.

Universal

The universal perspective emphasizes human similarities while deemphasizing group differences. While the universal perspective stresses human commonality, it ignores historically based intergroup relationships and important cultural differences. The organization may replicate social inequities, not examining the ways in which policies and practices reflect Western European-American cultural standards.

Ubiquitous

The ubiquitous approach values the contributions of diverse social groups within a dominant culture. The overall influence of the dominant culture is deemphasized, which often results in

limited inclusiveness on all levels of the organization, and an overrepresentation of women or People of Color in positions that do not hold power.

Traditional

The traditional perspective tethers culture to employees' countries of origin, and emphasizes language, food, and customs, with attention to differences in worldview and cultural assumptions. Without an analysis of the organization's internal power dynamics, however, there may be inconsistency in how ethical issues are resolved within the organization.

Race-based

A race-based perspective moves an organization toward multicultural inclusiveness by stressing how racism and racial identity development shape the structure and performance of organizations (Carter, 2000). Cultural and historical differences are recognized, and efforts are made to address continued inequities between races in organizational life. Organizational focus is on the strong influence of dominant cultural patterns and unintentional enactments of bias. Social service agencies are encouraged to focus on how sociopolitical and historical dynamics of racism are reflected in service delivery systems. Employees are challenged to examine their racial socialization and understand the implications in the workplace.

Examining how institutional racism manifests can be particularly complex because each individual may define and experience racism uniquely. Some members of the organization may focus on the history of slavery, genocide, and colonization, others may refer only to individual acts of prejudice or bigotry, and others may hold colorblindness as an ideal. An organization moving toward the race-based perspective may therefore need to develop internal systems that support the staff members' education and develop a common language and way of understanding structural racism and other forms of systemic inequities.

Continuum of Organizational Change

The Crossroads Ministry (2008) describes a process of moving through stages on a continuum from monocultural to antiracist multicultural. In this model, an organization that is racially segregated, or functions with passive tolerance of difference, is at the earliest stages of potential change. The middle stages may show symbolic change, where diversity is encouraged, but the dominant culture of the organization is unaffected. According to the model, if the organization makes structural changes that move it toward antiracist multiculturalism it improves its service to clients. The antiracist multicultural organization hires practitioners who reflect the social identity groups of the community served, provides culturally responsive best practices to clients, and continuously addresses internal dynamics of systemic oppression and privilege.

The Race-based Antiracist Multicultural Organization

The race-based perspective discussed by Carter (2000) and the antiracist multicultural model proposed by the Crossroads Ministry (2008) complement one another. Both emphasize the need to examine policies, practices, and organizational culture to understand how the agency may

privilege White people and/or subordinate People of Color. Once this dynamic is identified and accepted as institutional racism, a plan can be developed to move through the process of becoming antiracist. Since White people are often in key decision-making roles within organizations, they must be central to the re-organization process. SPAN (2007) has highlighted several actions that can be taken by "antiracist allies," White people who, as a function of White privilege, benefit from institutional racism but choose to actively confront racism. SPAN's recommendations include: do something daily to earn the title of ally; identify and name racism directly; take responsibility for self-education without relying on People of Color; confront racism because it is personally offensive; and interrupt racist statements or behaviors, regardless of whether a Person of Color is present.

Antiracism Work in the Agency

The authors worked together on an antiracism initiative in a large mental health and social service agency for four years. They used the framework provided by Carter (2000) to assess the agency, and determined that prior to the antiracism initiative the overall culture of the organization was generally ubiquitous. Diversity was valued, but the dominant organizational culture remained unchanged. The agency's considerable efforts at diversity had been traditional, with emphasis placed on the unique perspectives of individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Examination of the dynamics of power and privilege had not been emphasized. The agency made symbolic change, with some movement toward multiculturalism, but with no significant transformation in the organizational culture. The agency, however, was working toward instituting structural, race-based changes which promoted antiracist practice, and had a strategic plan to guide this process. The overall antiracism plan of this agency was complex and multifaceted, and race-based caucusing was one aspect of the overall initiative.

Organizational Context

The agency was a very large, private nonprofit organization located in a large, diverse metropolitan area with over 100 different programs and an annual budget of over $100 million. The staff of over 1,500 provided services to children and adults through a variety of programs, including: community based individual, family, and group counseling; intensive case management; outreach services; and residential treatment facilities. The agency was decentralized, and its various programs were spread out over a large geographic area. Executive managers worked out of an office that was rarely visited by most front line staff, while middle managers had regular contact with the main office and the senior management staff who work there. The neighborhoods where the programs were located varied considerably. Most programs were located in low-to-middle income working class communities that were racially and culturally diverse. Some programs, however, were located in segregated communities of color with extreme poverty, high unemployment, and serious problems with crime, substance abuse, and poor educational facilities. Other programs were located in communities with a high proportion of immigrants and had services specifically designed to meet their needs.

Over the many decades of the agency's existence, its services expanded, its clients became more racially and culturally diverse, and its commitment to culturally competent practice and staff diversification was established. When the caucuses were formed, approximately 65% of the

clients were People of Color, but this varied tremendously throughout the agency. Depending on location and type of service, over 90% of the clients in some programs were People of Color, whereas in other programs, the clear majority of clients were White.

Approximately 75% to 80% of the middle managers, including supervisors, program directors, and department heads, were White. People in these positions, almost all of whom held master's degrees and professional licenses, were responsible for hiring, firing, and promoting staff. They had direct influence over the culture of their programs and had a voice in the overall agency administration. The senior and executive managers were almost exclusively White. This group had the most powerful influence in overall agency direction, but less direct influence on the day to day culture in programs.

Managers sincerely wanted to promote equity for all staff and provide culturally competent services to clients. Discussions about cultural competency, however, revealed concerns about the retention and promotion of staff of color and raised the question of whether the organizational culture was responsive to diversity. The belief was that culturally responsive programs would more easily retain staff of color, which would in turn increase the cultural responsiveness of the program to the community it served. It was widely acknowledged that People of Color were not represented among the clinical, supervisory, and middle management levels of the agency in proportion to the clients being served. This led to questions about the cultural responsiveness of the organizational culture, both for staff and for clients. The leaders struggled, however, with the notion that racism had unwittingly been institutionalized, and that a race-based perspective was the most direct and effective paradigm to promote the equity they desired.

At the lower levels of organizational hierarchy, in the jobs that paid the least and had the least amount of decision making authority, the staff of the agency was largely comprised of men and women of color. Many of these positions did not require a college degree and many of the staff had little formal education beyond high school. Often, the direct care staff closely matched the racial, cultural, and socio-economic status of the clients served by the program. The clinical staff of the agency, including licensed social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, was about 70% White. Tensions between the direct care and clinical staff were common, with each group claiming that their work was neither understood nor valued by the other. Some programs put considerable effort into problem solving around various service issues that contributed to the tension. Prior to the agency's antiracism work, however, racial and cultural differences had not been consistently addressed.

Moving Along the Continuum

The agency had goals to increase its ability to hire, retain, and promote staff of color and formed a diversity task force that met regularly for many years. Over time, some progress toward the diversity goals was achieved. As more People of Color began to have a voice in program functioning, however, it became clear that the diversity and cultural competency initiatives were not meeting the evolving needs and demands of the workforce and consumers. Cultural competency alone can support a ubiquitous perspective by asking those in power to develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to respect the beliefs, values, and experiences of others, without a requiring a concomitant self-evaluation (see Sue et al., 1998). Those in power

in the agency were not challenged to focus on their social privilege, nor were they asked to recognize how organizational culture may perpetuate oppression. To promote further success in racial equity efforts, the overall culture of the agency needed to be addressed, including an analysis of the distribution of gate-keeping and decision making power within the organization.

Steps Toward Antiracism

In 2003, a group of senior and middle managers who had been working in the diversity task force attended an Undoing Racism™ workshop, given by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB; Chisom & Washington, 1997). The PISAB workshop challenged the participants to understand race as a social construct, rooted in American social and institutional history, which was designed to privilege White people. Accepting the idea that American culture is imbedded with racist assumptions and that fundamental social institutions were created in this context inspired the need to understand exactly how this played out within the organization. Ultimately, the leaders of the diversity task force came to realize that unless the organization became intentionally antiracist, White people would continue to benefit disproportionately within the agency culture, even as the workforce became more diverse. This group of managers approached the executive leadership of the agency and began discussions that ultimately led to a strategic plan to address institutional racism. Key to this process was the consistent support and active involvement of the agency's chief executive officer, along with other executives. Since the movement toward antiracist functioning required fundamental shifts in organizational culture, the consistent support received from top agency leaders was crucial.

Addressing Racism in the Organization

The agency's motivation for understanding and responding to structural racism was based on a desire to provide the best possible services to clients. The organization was taking a philosophical stance, grounded in research on multicultural clinical competency, that institutional factors that unintentionally inhibited inclusion among staff or hindered honest dialogue about race resulted in lower cultural competency in client services. For example, Harrell (2000) describes the concept of racism related stress, emphasizing the importance of the counselor responding to nuances of racial insults. Neville, Spanierman, and Doan (2006) have shown that counselors who maintain colorblind ideology have lower abilities in multicultural case conceptualization. Burkhardt, Knox, Groen, Perez, and Hess (2006) showed that White therapists who are able to acknowledge the role of racism and oppression in their clients' lives and acknowledge their own racist or oppressive attitudes are able to improve the counseling relationship. It was accepted that to provide this type of culturally responsive service, the organizational culture needed to be congruent with the goals of clinical practice so staff would experience the same level of responsiveness they were expected to provide their clients.

A number of internal structures were implemented that reflected the agency's growing commitment to antiracism. None of these activities took direct resources from client services, but they did involve staff time. The agency already had existing structures and resources, including a budget for professional development of staff, and the antiracism activities were incorporated into this framework. With the exception of a relatively small number of people who were in leadership positions in the antiracism work, the antiracism initiative did not add responsibilities

or take staff time away from programs. The antiracism work was intended to enhance program services, thus care was taken to not burden program staff, supervisors, or directors with additional duties, or disrupt services to clients.

The antiracism activities included implementing a training series for program managers; overseeing the dissemination of antiracism information; sustaining an antiracism training project for social work interns; and benchmarking and tracking staff and client demographics within various service delivery systems. The diversity task force was disbanded and an Antiracism Task Force was formed, tasked with identifying, prioritizing, and developing measurable recommendations related to race in the areas of best practices to clients, training, staff relations, and research. Consultants were hired to provide leadership in the education of the clinical, supervisory, and direct care staff regarding the role of race and racism in mental health and social service practice. Additional consultation was obtained for senior and executive management regarding organizational culture and institutional racism, and an antiracist strategic plan was developed by the senior managers. Finally, the executive management called for the development of race-based caucuses to focus on how racism is experienced within the organization and develop recommendations for change. In this large and decentralized organization, the caucuses provided an opportunity for people who did not work together to meet and talk. Through this process, bonds were formed that crossed program lines and hierarchical boundaries and helped identify aspects of organizational culture that went beyond specific program or department norms. In this sense, the race-based caucuses were an essential component of the organizational change plan.

Beginning Race-based Caucuses

The Antiracism Task Force facilitated the development of three separate race-based caucuses: Men of Color, Women of Color, and White Allies. It was clear to many that gender also played a role for People of Color within the organization related to their hierarchical positions and career paths. For example, Women of Color tended to cluster toward the lower-middle of the hierarchy, as office managers and social workers, whereas the Men of Color were often at the extremes, as janitors and program directors. White men and women, on the other hand, were represented throughout the agency on all levels of the hierarchy. From inception, it was planned that although the three groups would meet separately, and the three groups would meet collectively on a regular basis. Regular meetings among the groups were important in establishing accountability for the White caucus and to reinforce the collective and unifying nature of the work. Leaders for the three groups were identified by a senior manager who had been asked to coordinate the initiative. The caucus leaders had each been with the agency for several years, held supervisory or middle management positions, and were respected by their peers and by executives in the agency.

An agency-wide memo from management announced the formation of the race-based caucuses, encouraged attendance, and provided guidelines to directors on releasing employees to attend. The first meeting of the White antiracism caucus was of 12 people, both men and women, who had attended the PISAB workshop. Combining genders in the White caucus was intentional, with the expectation that gender differences would provide the group with an internal point of reference for recognizing unearned privilege and marginalization. Choosing only those who had

attended the Undoing Racism™ workshop was designed to form a strong base of people who shared a socio-political and organizational analysis of race and racism, rather than only understanding racism as individual prejudice or bigotry. This shared understanding of the institutional aspects of racism was important to support the group's ability to look at systems and structural issues.

By inviting White people who already understood that the antiracism work was more complex than simple cultural competency or 'colorblind' fairness, it was hoped that the role of White people in analyzing and confronting racism within the organization would be clarified. Those invited to the first White antiracism caucus meetings where all from the middle and senior management tiers of the organization. About a year into the process, the agency executives mandated and sponsored all managers and executives to attend the PISAB workshop. At that point, the list of potential White caucus participants grew to over 70, most of whom attended at least one meeting. Eventually, there was a core group of about 25 White people who consistently attended meetings that were scheduled approximately monthly. Toward the end of the authors' involvement with the agency, there was movement toward the establishment of multiple racial affinity groups located regionally so that staff members from all levels of hierarchy could participate with minimal interruptions in their work day.

Central Concerns of the White Antiracist Caucus

Concerns surfaced at the first meeting of the White Antiracist Caucus and reemerged throughout the first years of the caucusing process. Caucus members struggled with reactions to the antiracism caucusing work from colleagues, as well as with basics such as finding a name for the group. In addition, the group worked to clarify more persistent core issues such as group purpose and making room for other social identities in addition to race. Members also expressed concerns about enacting White privilege in the attempts to confront institutional racism. They discussed the delicate balance between using their institutionally sanctioned power responsibly to address equity issues, and imposing their own ideas and beliefs about what equity should look like, thereby reifying the very privilege they were attempting to disavow.

Reactions of Other Agency Staff and Naming the Group

Despite strong support from senior management, many middle managers and staff members in the agency were ambivalent about the White antiracism caucus. People of Color were curious, and sometimes cynical, about the involvement of White people in the antiracist work. The reactions of White people, many of whom held positions of authority over some caucus members, often caused anxiety and frustration for the members. Learning to understand and respond constructively to these reactions became an important aspect of the work.

White people in the agency reacted powerfully to the name of the caucus. The group had initially chosen the name White Allies Caucus, which reflected the understanding that White people are allies in the work to eliminate the institutional racism (see Ayvazian, 2001; Goodman, 2001). "Allies" is a term commonly used in many aspects of anti-oppression advocacy, where, for example, men can be allies opposing patriarchy, or straight people work as allies opposing homophobia. Some staff in the agency, however, felt strongly that the term 'allies' denoted conflict or war, signifying that agency staff members were expected to take sides. Others, mostly

White people, objected to the term 'White', stating that it was indistinguishable from 'white supremacy' in their minds.

The leaders of the three caucuses discussed the matter and agreed that the term "allies" was negotiable, but "White" must remain in the name. Removing "White" from the group name risked a return to ubiquitous functioning, whereas progress toward antiracist functioning required clear statements about racial identity. The name needed to describe the caucus and its work, and members needed to find the strength and skill to use their colleagues' reactions as opportunities to educate. The caucus members considered many alternatives before eventually settling on White Antiracist Caucus.

Determining Group Purpose

The question of group purpose remained a quandary through the beginning phases of development, as predicted by the PISAB consultants hired to support the work. Members debated whether the task of the White Antiracist Caucus was to focus on personal or professional development, or if the group should be devoted to developing specific recommendations for the agency. Some felt strongly that the initiative should focus exclusively on developing measurable outcomes related to cross-cultural and cross-racial best practices. Exploration of White privilege on a personal level, some believed, was not appropriate for the workplace, and equity would be best achieved through fair practices evaluated through quantifiable means. Others argued that unless the members of the caucus, collectively as well as individually, engaged in a sincere process of self-exploration, the group would risk reifying privilege by unconsciously imposing their views, which were grounded in Eurocentric thought and habit. This debate reflected differences of opinion throughout the agency, and contributed to the sometimes negative reaction toward the caucus by other agency staff.

The discussions about the caucus' purpose had a significant impact on the group dynamic, bringing out unconscious competition as well as deeply felt philosophical differences. There arose a persistent confusion not only about the caucus, but about antiracism work in general. All members of the caucus agreed they felt proud to be associated with the agency, but many expressed pain and confusion about their role within the organization as they came to better understand the more subtle aspects of privilege from which they benefited.

Understanding Privilege

Questions about unconscious enactments of privilege became central to the group. Caucus members learned to listen to stories from People of Color that highlighted pain and resiliency, and to talk about the experience of being White in a racially structured society. As a result, the group worked to understand appropriate uses of power and authority, struggling with the knowledge that the power was granted through unearned advantage. These discussions also included exploration of the meaning of power and privilege between client and program staff, and the role of oppression and cultural bias in the mental health and social service delivery system as a whole, beyond the agency construct.

In the early stages, the strong desire not to enact privilege resulted in a temporary paralysis of action toward antiracism. Having knowledgeable and experienced White consultants to help guide the group was essential. The caucus members did not want to depend on People of Color to define the antiracism work, nor did they want to defer to them as authorities on race issues. The caucus members needed White people who were thoroughly knowledgeable about antiracist work, and these experts needed to be brought in from outside the agency.

Throughout this process, the White Antiracist Caucus leaders also held conflicting views, and struggled with confusion and stagnation. They relied upon supervision from the PISAB consultants, and received counsel from the leaders of the Men of Color and Women of Color caucuses. This guidance clarified that the caucus work was best understood as a both/and proposition, not either/or, and that the persistent confusion was in itself an enactment of privilege. People in privileged positions have the luxury to explore and debate. People who suffer the brutality of racism, however, must learn to work toward change even as they sort through their own confusion about how this is to be done. The White Antiracist Caucus leaders and members learned from this and moved forward.

Approaching the Intersections

Making room for other social group identities carried by White antiracism caucus members was essential to the work. Antiracism work requires that the perspectives, values, and experiences of all those who belong to or participate in the organization be integrated and respected. Initially, some in the caucus felt strongly that any discussion of social identity or oppression other than racism would detract from the discussion about race and privilege. As caucus members addressed intersections of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and other aspects of identity, they learned that this could actually enhance their understanding of race and racism. Validating the unique identities and experiences of individuals became an important component of building trust. Understanding the social hierarchies that emerged within the group became vital to the groups' learning about hidden and unearned privilege, and subtle enactments of bias.

Accountability

Accountability in antiracism work refers to an explicit agreement that White people will answer to People of Color in an effort to better understand subtle enactments of privilege and bias. The insidiousness of race privilege often leads to inevitable blind spots for White people in antiracism work. Thus, the opinions and ideas from the leaders of the Men of Color and Women of Color groups were weighed equally with the White caucus leaders in all decisions about the White Antiracist Caucus. The leaders of the three racial affinity caucuses met regularly and frequently dialogued informally. The leaders of the Men of Color and Women of Color caucuses agreed that they would draw attention to any enactments of privilege they witnessed or suspected as the work went along. Establishing other formal systems of accountability to People of Color employed or served by the agency was identified as a goal for the caucus.

As caucus members learned about White culture and White racial identity, they came to take on the fight against racism for personal reasons. Living within a society that supports oppression of

any group ultimately oppresses all members of that society (see Bowser & Hunt, 1996). White Antiracist Caucus members began to recognize the costs of privilege: understanding privilege as bait that lures one into supporting the oppression of others. As this perspective became integrated, antiracism work was no longer only about helping others; racism became personally offensive and members found that they worked for equity for themselves and others. Eventually, caucus members became increasingly adept at holding themselves and each other accountable, in addition to maintaining accountability to People of Color.

Benefits of Antiracism Caucusing

Three direct benefits of White antiracism caucusing within the agency were identified by the caucus members. First, members increased their understanding of hidden and unconscious organizational racism and privilege and learned to use this understanding to inform their practice and managerial skills. White antiracism caucusing provided the opportunity for managers and practitioners to explore the complexities of race and racism and begin to work toward solutions. Many caucus participants experienced important changes in their worldview, including developing a more nuanced understanding of organizational power dynamics. Traditional philosophies and styles of management were discussed to uncover potential dynamics of racism or privilege. Managers were able to integrate analyses of power and privilege to enhance their cultural responsiveness toward staff members and clients.

Second, a list of observable behaviors and practices illustrating White privilege within the agency was developed separately by each of the three caucuses. These lists were compared in a joint caucus meeting and showed significant similarities (see Table 1). The development of these lists strengthened the camaraderie and sense of purpose among those involved in the antiracism initiative, and clarified the purpose and focus of the work. The list was offered to executive management to inform policies and practices regarding racial equity.
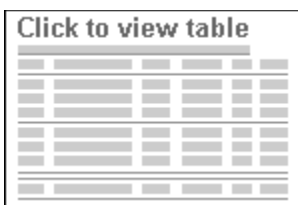
Table 1 *List of Potential White Privileges in the Organization* [*]

View all notes

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Table 1 *List of Potential White Privileges in the Organization* *

Description of Organizational dynamic

• White people may be more likely to get jobs or to get promoted because of shared language and background with the supervisor. People in decision making positions, like people in general, tend to gravitate to those who are familiar to them and trust people whose thought processes are similar to their own. Racial and/or cultural differences can inhibit trust-building and then be reflected in decisions related to job promotion.

• Job definitions and job evaluation criteria have been created by White people, and might be different if developed by People of Color.

• White directors who take it upon themselves to confront tradition and authority to do things

Table 1 *List of Potential White Privileges in the Organization* *

Description of Organizational dynamic

new ways may be called innovative. Directors of color who try similar innovation may be more likely to be seen as oppositional.

• White people may be more comfortable making autonomous decisions about when to bend a rule in service of the greater good. This can go wrong, but it can also be seen as 'taking initiative' and rewarded. A Person of Color, on the other hand, may feel more threatened by the idea of acting outside the box in the workplace. Therefore, while the Person of Color may be valued and respected as dependable, responsible, and loyal to the agency, s/he may not be noticed as a potential leader.

• White people may feel more comfortable acknowledging a personal problem, family difficulty, or asking for a favor because they expect others to understand that periods of hardship are normal and asking for help and support is healthy in those circumstances. People of Color, however, may feel pressure to hide personal difficulties due to negative stereotypes about people in their racial or cultural group, creating more stress in the workplace.

• White people expect that their White supervisors will understand and validate their past and present experiences. People of Color do not necessarily have the same expectation.

• Speaking English with an accent or ethnic dialect can be considered less professional, or the person may be perceived as less educated. People of Color can feel pressure to "talk white" to be considered for promotion or to be taken seriously in conferences and meetings.

• As a result of accrued White privilege, White people have an easier time accessing informal systems in the workplace. They may be more likely to know somebody, or know somebody who knows somebody, who is in a position of power in the community or have other informal ways of networking to advance their career.

*This list was developed in the context of one particular organization. While some aspects may apply universally, any agency working to understand how race privilege operates within its organization would need to develop a similar list focusing on its own culture.

Third, cross-racial relationships within the organization were reinforced, impacting workplace culture in a way that supported the goals of increased hiring, retention, and promotion of People of Color. Many of the caucus members were examining their position in the agency through an antiracism lens, developing consciousness about how they have benefited, and continue to benefit, from unearned privilege. As this consciousness began to move beyond the confines of the caucus meetings and impact other aspects of agency culture, People of Color began to express that their perspectives were increasingly accepted and validated. Eventually, the agency began to develop a strong reputation in the social service community regarding its antiracism work, and this enhanced the agency's ability to recruit and hire People of Color at all levels of hierarchy. Since the organizational culture was more genuinely welcoming, those hired were often better able to demonstrate their strengths and, therefore, were more likely to be promoted into positions of increasing authority.

The total cost of the project is not known, and would not necessarily be applicable to other organizations. This agency is significantly larger and more diverse in services than other human service organizations, and at that time had financial resources that supported the project that would not be required for successful replication. For example, the agency funded a part time position of Director of Multicultural and Antiracist practice, hired multiple consultants, paid for all management staff to attend the PISAB training, and brought in expert trainers for all levels of agency staff. Although the initiative benefitted tremendously from these resources; none of these steps is absolutely necessary. Factors that are necessary include executive level support; a commitment to continuing education, transparency, and accountability; and a willingness to ride through the inevitable organizational instability that comes with culture change.

Recommendations for White Antiracist Caucus Work

Table 2 describes principles that can be helpful in guiding the process of antiracist caucus work. White antiracist caucusing must occur in concert with an organization's mission, culture and professional priorities. It is vital to secure top leadership's commitment to move beyond cultural competency and evaluate institutional racism and White privilege. There need not be a corresponding People of Color caucus before a White antiracist caucus group begins, but accountability to People of Color must be established for the process to be successful. In a predominantly White organization, accountability may need to be secured through community partnerships and/or paid consultants. When a healthy racial dialogue is taking place within the agency, all staff members and organization leaders can become more adept at working within a multicultural antiracist paradigm and enhance cultural responsiveness.
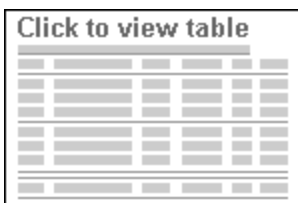

Table 2 *Principles to Guide the Race-based Caucus Process*

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• Clarify systems of accountability between the White antiracism caucus, People of Color, the institution's executive management group, consumers or community members, and other constituents.

• Work in harmony with, and contribute to, other organizational initiatives designed to address institutional and cultural bias, such as making the workplace LGBTQ friendly, increasing access for people with disabilities, and supporting religious inclusiveness.

• The executive managers should operate with transparency and discussion should remain open between all individuals and sub-groups involved in the antiracism endeavor.

• White people involved in the caucusing process must be available for evaluative dialogue with People of Color and others.

• Real avenues for critical feedback to reach the senior levels of management must be established.

• Develop a shared mission or values statement between the White antiracist caucus and People of Color caucus that clarifies the intent and goals of all the racial affinity caucuses.

• Clearly state the expectation that all White people within the organization will take an active role in confronting institutional racism as a function of their job, and offer the caucus as a means of support, education, and collaboration.

• Create forums, separate from caucuses, where employees who are uncertain that issues of race and racism are appropriate for the professional setting can discuss their concerns.

• When choosing members for caucuses consider selecting participants from all levels of the agency's hierarchy.

• Develop and maintain regular dialogue about race and racism with key people within the organization and with outside consultants to stimulate continued personal and professional growth and enhance creative problem solving.

• Regularly disseminate relevant literature on institutional racism, White racial identity and culture, White privilege, and antiracist practices to all members of the organization.

• Look for ways to weave an analysis of power and race into other discussions of marginalization and bias, and develop partnerships that enhance the organization's evolution toward genuine fairness, equity, and inclusion.

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