

Antiracist Practices within Nonprofit Organizations Serving African American Clients

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Abstract

This study surveyed (n = 23) individuals representing various nonprofit organizations in the Los Angeles County to explore antiracist practices being implemented among organizations serving the African American community. Utilizing qualitative phenomenological methodology, the aim of this study was to explore the current efforts to implement antiracist practices within the organization; and identify both gaps and best practices in implementing antiracist practices in nonprofit organizations and foundations. The results indicated that while majority of the organizations who participated in this study have made some sort of a concerted effort to address racism; based on the results from this study direct service providers are seeing a need to continue the discussion and conversations to actively engage in antiracist work at the organizational level.

Keywords: *African American, antiracism, nonprofit, organizations*

Introduction

In a racist society it is not enough to be nonracist—you must be antiracist.

-Angela Davis

Since 2020, our country has been forced to take a critical look at racial injustices in America. While this is not the first time in the United States history that the country has had to focus on race—2020 has been the absolute tipping point where America has been thrust into acknowledging the ills of our nation surrounding racial inequities and injustices done to Black bodies in America. The time of reckoning and reconciling as it relates to black racial injustices and inequities in America has come. Dr. Angela Davis once said, “In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist...we must be anti-racist.” Thus, service providers working with African American child, youth, individuals, and families must be anti-racist. Specifically, this is a predicament for those in the nonprofit sector working with African American clients in the community. Now more than ever, there needs to be antiracist practices, policies, and procedures within nonprofits to ensure racial injustices and inequities are not present whereby impacting the constituents, consumers and clients who are of the African/Black diaspora.

Nonprofit organizations are starting to acknowledge the racism within their own organizations as well as other institutions, systems, industries, and settings. However, to successfully bring forth changes, it all depends on if these organizations are willing to adapt to necessary changes and engage individuals who represent them. “Always think about ‘who’ and then about what” is a quote by Jim Colliry, an author who explained how those who build great successful organizations. White organizational elites will continue to affect the increase in racial and ethnic diversity to resume predominance. Warren (2010) explains that scholars argue over the fact Black leaders will need to accept White allies in the struggle of fighting for racial equality. However, studies have shown that many White people in

anti-racist organizations continue to be “colorblind” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; DiAngelo, 2018; Foldy & Buckley, 2014). To achieve greater equality, members of marginalized groups can be empowered throughout organizations with their institutional work.

Literature Review

Predominantly White Nonprofit Organizations

Even though nonprofit organizations are making a way to make change in the world for inclusion and diversity, there are still bumps in the road. It’s being said that nonprofits are failing on making accurate changes that they make their mission for society. Despite people of color and White people having the same mission, they each have different experiences in nonprofit organizations. Especially in predominantly White organizations, people of color can be drawn out. By having leaders of color in predominantly White anti-racist organizations, it can help (a) educate White representatives develop new techniques to prevent White-dominated perspectives, (b) educate White members on racial inequality, and (c) become a more racially diverse organization by recognizing barriers. Externally, leaders of color help their organization by (a) sharing and being vulnerable to their own experiences of living in a White-dominated society and (b) brokering collaborations with organizations led by people of color (Fulton, Oyakawa, and Wood, 2019).

Bonilla-Silva (2003) mentions prior research that has been done to indicate different approaches an anti-racism between Black and White people. White dominant organizations tend to institutionalize approaches that are seen as colorblind (Foldy & Buckley, 2014). Even though these organizations are sending a message of being anti-racist, most are reluctant to be fully hands on (Slocum, 2006). White leaders in organizations bring frustration upon people of color in these organizations because of the superficial views they still contain. Even though people of color are becoming leaders in these White dominated organizations, it doesn’t mean equality will be automatically achieved (Harris, 2012; Hughey, 2010).

Representation vs. Diversity

Despite having a diverse society that is increasing, leadership within anti-racist organizations remain predominantly White. If such organizations want to make an impact or change within society, their adaptive capacity and ability to engage individuals who reflect the diversity of our society need to be dependent (Walker, 2019). Even though diversity comes in many forms, the most challenging diversity to achieve has been race and ethnicity. According to *Race to Lead: Confronting the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap*, “the percentage of people of color in the executive director [chief executive officer] role has remained under 20% for the last 15 years, even as the country becomes more diverse” (Walker, 2019).

Even though the journey to support anti-racism is a long and difficult one, questions need to be put into place on what nonprofits are doing to advocate for the Black community. Diversity and representation are two big important distinctions that is needed within an anti-racist organization. Diversity in organizations speaks to the variety or heterogeneity, in the backgrounds and perspectives among board members or staff, including race/ethnicity, gender, immigration status and economic status (Gazley, Chang & Bingham, 2010). Researchers have developed an idea that increased diversity has led to enhanced organizational performance and innovation (Brown, 2002). If nonprofit leadership increased with diversity within anti-racist organizations, this would help attract donors, volunteers and diversify funding streams.

Representation will be known to help organizations as the leaders can have a level of understanding with clients or constituencies. Multiple dimensions of representation within nonprofit organizations have been identified as symbolic, formal, descriptive, and substantive. Symbolic representation is defined when an organization is represented as a legit representation of community interest. Formal representation makes sure that representation is being supported by internal organizational structures. Descriptive representation means that the composition is reviewed of the communities that are served by leaderships in the organizations. Substantive representation is acting directly on the constituents’ behalf.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment

An online survey link was sent via email to the 300 nonprofit organizations in Los Angeles County. The survey link included a 10-item questionnaire instrument developed by the researcher. Data from the questionnaire allowed the researcher to correlate the specific profile demographic variables with other study variables. The questionnaire was designed to collect the following data: organization locale, gender, ethnicity, position title, years spent in current position; describe efforts to implement antiracist practices within the organization/division/program; describe process toward implementing antiracist practices policies and procedures (i.e., including success, barriers/challenges), and describe what still needs to be done to improve or implement antiracist practices, policies, and procedures.

Research Question

How are Nonprofit Organizations Practicing Anti-Racist Work When Providing Services to African American Clients in the Community?

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis of demographic profile characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, years in position and position title) was conducted. In addition, a thematic analysis was utilized to identify emergent themes from the three exploratory questions utilizing open coding. The following are the results from the study.

Results

Participants representing varying nonprofit organizations (n=23) in the study conducted consisted majority of female (i.e., 69% female: and 26% male). Their ethnic identities were Black/African American (i.e., 43%), Latinx (i.e., 35%), and White/Caucasian (i.e., 4%). The following areas that the participants were located were within the San Fernando Valley, Santa Clarita Valley, Antelope Valley, and Los Angeles city. Most of the participants represented the San Fernando Valley area at 80%. The nonprofit organizations that the participants were associated with were social and human services. A small percentage of participants were at non-social services non-profit organizations (i.e., 8%) and other types (i.e., 4%). Within their non-profit organizations, 52% of participants identified their position as a direct service provider. A small percentage (i.e., 8%) held a position as a supervisor and 17% of participants were program coordinators. 21% of participants identified having their position as "other". However, there was no executive team represented in the sample. Fewer than many participants have worked at their organization for 10-15 years (i.e., 4%), while other participants (i.e., 49%) have worked at their organization for 2-4 years. For less than 1 year, 26% have worked at their organization and 22% have worked at their organization for 5-9 years. The following are emergent themes that have developed from the survey questionnaire.

Emergent Themes

Responses that were produced from the question: ***"Describe efforts to implement antiracist practices within the organization/division/program"*** had themes of no efforts being made, messages of support from administrative leadership, discussions among staff, staff trainings, committees and groups, and direct action.

1) No efforts being made

"We have not made overt efforts in this area."

"I'm not aware of specific efforts to implement antiracist practices."

"Nothing has been specifically addressed regarding implementing anti-racist practices."

"So far there has not been any direct efforts to implement antiracist practices."

2) Message of support from administrative leadership

"The agency I work for sent an all-staff memo to speak out and offer support (i.e., leave of absence, paid time off) to those that were impacted."

"Memos were sent out about how to encourage dialogue within teams and with our families."

"The agency I work for has sent emails with articles related to antiracist practices."

3) Discussions among staff

"The organization has numerous conversations around antiracist practices."

“Working with supervisors and staff to continue discussing the importance of diversity in the workplace and in the field.”

4) Staff trainings

“Cultural sensitivity course, Teaching on Bias and power and privilege.”

“We have had several workshops to speak about CRT.”

“We have yearly County Policy of Equity Trainings. One Department conducts quarterly trainings on implicit bias.”

“Trainings.”

“Enlisted my help in identifying staff trainings to help develop a more aware culture for staff.”

“We had a training by the name of Diversion Inclusion and Equity.”

“Offering trainings/lectures.”

“Had a training on historical trauma.”

“We got invited to 2 trainings, but they were not mandatory... which means we don't get a break from productivity.”

5) Committees and groups

“Started a group of staff and administrators to discuss diversity and inclusion.”

“They have created a group to focus on the Black Lives Matter movement and the ways the organization can fight against oppressive systems that effect our client population.”

“We recently implemented a diversity and equity team.”

6) Direct action

“Redesigning intake paperwork to reflect anti-racist practices; demanding management pays for antiracist trainings from BIPOC trainers.”

“In an open letter to employees from the CEO shared about a zero-tolerance approach to racism of any kind... They also mentioned building antiracism programs and holding themselves accountable by measuring their ability to increase hiring, promotion, and retention of diverse colleagues.”

“I have volunteered to talk to other colleagues about how to have antiracist conversations with clients and their families. I have utilized teaching about intersectionality in my therapy groups with children aged 9-10.”

Responses that were produced from the question: **“Describe process toward implementing antiracist practices policies and procedures (i.e., including success, barriers/challenges)”** had themes of, lack of implementation, discussions among staff, staff trainings, committees, direct action, and challenges.

1) Lack of implementation

“We have not tackled how to approach direct antiracist work.”

“None.”

“I haven't seen any.”

“The head person of my org. Sent out a letter saying we aligned with Black Lives Matter and their work which I thought was cool but there was very minimal talk about how this would look for direct service providers.”

2) Discussions among staff

“There was a 15-minute discussion about bringing up talks about racism with clients and families during a clinical meeting.”

“It has only been mentioned in small groups or not at all.”

3) Staff trainings

“During onboarding there are several modules that one must complete around this topic; one for education and who to emphasize how the organization is nondiscriminatory.”

“We would like trainings on how to do this but they're costly.”

“Trainings.”

“I take annual trainings regarding cultural competency.”

4) Committees

“The agency I work for launched the first meeting of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Advisory Committee which have two primary purposes 1. Identifying areas and places within the organization that need to be improved to promote diversity. 2. Establish a specific policy platform focused on systemic inequalities.”

“We recently implemented a diversity and equity team.”

5) Direct Action

“The agency has practices and procedures in place including reporting incidents to CPOE.”

"Making sure that staff represents the same amount of diversity that the clientele represents is a big step in the process of implementing anti-racist policies. Having staff representation mirror client representation/need."

6) Challenges

"Lack of comprehension/difficulty accepting among Executive staff of the scope of their lack of knowledge and as such push back on types of anti-racist trainings."

"Challenges that some staff are very privilege and don't see an issue with being racist or their comments."

"Antiracism as a whole is not something that is mentioned amongst the general leadership of our organization."

"Group was not successful as administrators became very defensive and not open to feedback or change. Historical trauma training was more successful, but some administrators forced to attend openly showed their disdain by working on other work during the training."

"I have experienced barriers with my supervisor not acknowledging her power and privilege in the supervision space."

"I don't feel like I have time to focus on implementing antiracist practices because I'm so busy with my case load."

Responses that were produced from the question: **"Describe what still needs to be done to improve or implement antiracist practices, policies and procedures"** had themes of, discussion and acknowledgement, training, funding, antiracism amongst staff, direct action.

7) Discussion and acknowledgement

"It needs to become an open topic of discussion at all levels of the organization."

"More discussion, communication needs to be done to improve or implement more antiracist practices."

"Major introspective period for founder and executive staff to help them top recognize their own blind biases and lack of understanding."

"The agency needs to continue having conversations with the staff and consumers to make more intentional efforts to create safe places to share as appropriate."

"A discussion about the needs of the agency and a plan to practice and emphasize antiracist practice policies."

"Acknowledging the racism that permeates our agency is the first step. Then having honest conversations about what anti-racism looks like and would look like in our space."

"A lot needs to be done, first is to recognize the racist policies and procedures within the organization, and practices among staff."

"They need to have better protocol for giving supervises a chance to voice their experiences and concerns (more often than 2x a year)."

"I think race and antiracism should be discussed more in group supervision."

8) Training

"I think it should be addressed in trainings."

"Trainings."

"My organization needs to have an antiracist training for their supervisors... We need to have special trainers for new clinicians to practice bringing up racism with families."

"I think organizations need to incorporate time that will be considered training for staff to participate in to learn antiracist practices that will not be an option but mandatory for all staff."

9) Funding

"Have funding to ask people to take this on."

"Advocate to contractors and funders."

10) Anti-racism amongst staff

"Usually, these conversations arise as a strategy how to better serve our clients; however, perhaps it would be beneficial to spend some time on how antiracist practices can be utilized amongst staff."

"Culture needs to be changed."

"A community to work together with in organizations and services."

11) Direct action

"It should be part of supervision, and admin/supervisors should work around having us implementing interventions that promote anti-racist discussions between staff and clients."

"To have a clear and concise written policy that addresses specific racial concerns."

"Making it part of the policy of the non-profit and actual training and reinforcing it."

"We need more therapists of color serving our underserved communities."

"Policies need to be put in place."

“Offer more resources in communities of color and seek to recruit workers from schools in communities of color or that have high minority enrollment percentages.”

Responses that were produced from the question: **“Any additional thoughts regarding this subject matter that you would like to share”** had themes of, activism, misconceptions about antiracism, challenges implementing antiracist practices, and suggestions for implementing antiracist practices.

12) Activism

“Our agency also appears to be more conscientious and aware during times of social/civil issues/activism in the community/media.”

“I think since the Black Lives Matter movement has become more relevant organizations feel the need to highlight these antiracist systems but has not made it a priority for staff to be trained on anti-racist implementations.”

13) Misconceptions about antiracism

“There's is some problem with the current prevailing messaging on this subject, by which people are made to experience themselves as somehow “bad” for being blind to their privilege’s.”

“In many instances, racism, implicit bias and caste are seen as things that exist but are too often externalized. The externalization in my experience seems to make the dominant caste feel that the problem is too big to tackle and is amorphous, so they would not know where to begin.”

“People need to get over the fear of if I care about something I have to care about everything.”

14) Challenges implementing antiracist practices

“These kinds of efforts are seen as “additional work” and often people don’t volunteer to support these efforts since they’re tacked onto existing workload. It’s hard to get people to commit and usually difficult to allot funding specifically for these efforts.”

“I feel sad and tired.”

“Someone needs to teach white supervisors to stop telling clinicians of color about how they’ve never been racist, or they never realized race was such a big deal because they were never racist themselves.”

15) Suggestions for implementing antiracist practices

“I think teaching about microaggressions, and other forms of racism is essential.”

“I think being able to go into elementary, middle schools and high schools to inform students about mental health services could be vital.”

“It would be really helpful to have a resource for social service leaders on what best practices are in terms of being an anti-racist organization and what an anti-racist organization should look like.”

Discussion

While majority of the organizations who participated in this study have made some sort of a concerted effort to address racism; based on the results from this study direct service providers are seeing a need to continue the discussion and conversations to actively engage in antiracist work at the organizations. In addition, majority of the organizations stated wanting additional trainings on this very topic. The authors believe that 2020 ignited the interest in antiracism but organizations are lacking in sustaining antiracist practices. It is vital that organizations truly know what antiracism is and is not—for antiracism work focuses on directly opposing racism, discrimination, and prejudice. In addition, antiracism work is something that must be attended to in an ongoing intentional and purposeful way. On the other hand, antiracism is about action. It is understanding that there are problems of racial injustice and inequities in various systems (i.e., child welfare, education, health, criminal justice, etc.) and must actively work to create a more equitable and inclusive space. It includes taking an unapologetic stance and utilizing interventions that directly call out and in racist and discriminatory practices, policies and behaviors through advocacy, activism and allyship.

Conclusion

It is expected that findings will inform nonprofit organizational leadership on ways to address and implement antiracist practices within the organization that are sustainable. The results from the study should be used to create and enhance trainings and conversations on antiracist practices within nonprofit organizations to improve awareness and understanding as to how to begin thinking and structuring (or restructuring) their organization to be antiracist in an accountable way. The road to justice, diversity, inclusion, and equity will forever be an initiative that will be an ongoing effort, mission, and commitment. Organizations need to make sure they have the required resources to advance their mission in an antiracist way. Leaders of color who are being empowered within their organization are

known to use their position, intersectionality, and critical standpoint to make a change during these crucial times. However, leaders of color tend to do over and beyond the job of educating White people on racial dynamics to bettering their antiracism organization. This needs to be an action made by everyone within the organization not just leaders of color. Tasking leaders of color to be the “educator” of all things that are antiracist is not acceptable, appropriate, nor sustainable. A question develops concerning what White peoples’ intentions in their leadership role are in an antiracist organization—in essence, their intentions must be clearly identified, articulated, and practiced daily. Instead of just simply bringing diversity within an organization to promote racial equality, more research is needed to establish the reduction of inequities within any given organization to truly be antiracist.

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