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Race, Power and Social Action in Neighborhood Community Organizing: Reproducing and Resisting the Social Construction of the Other

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Scholars argue in favor of social action in community organizing to address the oppression experienced by racialized groups. This study examines how community organizing practice in one diverse neighborhood constructed race to understand the potential for social action. Using interview and observational data with 16 community organizers working in 1 diverse, low-income neighborhood in Québec, Canada, I examine the social construction of race through the lens of postcolonial theory and the writings of Michel Foucault. I argue that a discourse of neutrality existed among community organizers, which was tied to state policy and a colonial discourse embedded therein. The resulting disconnect between race and power in community organizing practice not only forecloses on social change efforts, it also extends a state-driven nation-building agenda into community. As the basis for an anticolonial approach to neighborhood community organizing, I juxtapose the discourse of neutrality in community organizing with strategies that recoupled race and power by drawing attention to efforts among community organizers that were antagonistic to the discourse.

KEYWORDS *race, community organizing, social action, neighborhood, Foucault, postcolonial theory, anti-colonial, Québec*

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Scholars argue in favor of social action in community organizing to address the oppression experienced by racialized groups (Bankhead & Erlich, 2005; Delgado, 1997; Gutiérrez, Alvarez, Nemon, & Lewis, 1996; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 2005; Rivera & Erlich, 1997). Social action in community organizing “focuses on power, pursues conflict strategies, and challenges the structures that oppress and disempower constituents” (Fisher, 2005, p. 51). Research in the United States has identified several constraints on social action against racism. Community organizers have reported that their efforts to organize on issues of race and racism were curtailed by the state in its role as employer and funder (Naples, 1998; Stone & Butler, 2000). One study of a feminist organization revealed that state funding schemes structured community organizing by favoring actions that reproduced dominant understandings of racialized groups, such as the view of women of color as “unorganized” and in need of help to become organized (Grahame, 1998). Lawrence (2001) noted that contemporary state policy shift in the United States emphasizes volunteerism, local responsibility, and local capacity-building fixed efforts on local concerns and limited the potential of neighborhood groups to act on issues of race at the systemic level.

Canadian scholars have warned of similar concerns, noting that a similar contemporary social policy has shifted the focus of community organizing toward the interests of the state and away from social action approaches (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2009; Gupta, 2007). Community organizing research has demonstrated this (Craig, 2007; Dolhinow, 2005; Vromen, 2003), including some studies of Québec that have demonstrated that social action in community economic development (Fontan, Hamel, Morin, & Shragge, 2003; Shragge, 1990) and in neighborhood organizations (Orsini, 2005) is curtailed by the role of state funding.

Some studies suggest that social action is unlikely in neighborhood community organizing, given a narrow concern with individual forms of discrimination (i.e. individual attitudes and behaviors) to the exclusion of a systemic analysis and social change (Goode, 2001; Hill & Moore, 2000; Potapchuk, 2007; Su, 2007). This point is best demonstrated by Su’s study of neighborhood community organizing. Using interviews, observations, and textual analysis of five neighborhood groups in the South Bronx, Su argued that the focus on individual racism in neighborhood community organizing is due to a color-blind approach—that is, a proposed neutrality toward issues of race in American law that actually perpetuates racial inequality. Su argued that this color-blind approach in community organizing is consistent with the views and practices of the wider society.

The study herein examines community organizing practice in one neighborhood in Québec, Canada. The aim of the study was to understand how race is constructed in the daily practice of community organizers who work in a low-income, multiracial neighborhood, to understand the potential for social action. Given that race is understood here as a social construct

arising as a result of particular social, historical, and political factors (Omi & Winant, 1994), community organizing practice is examined herein for its constitutive role. Using postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1985) and the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972a, 1972b, 1976, 1982, 1994), I suggest that issues of race in neighborhood community organizing are predominantly constructed as *difference* and *needing help*, with complementary characterizations of community organizing practice as *open* and *helpful*. I argue that such characterizations suggest a discourse of neutrality in community organizing, a discourse propped up by state policy that renders social action in neighborhood community organizing less likely, given the decoupling of race and power the discourse implies. The unique contribution of this study is an analysis of the ways community organizers' resist these characterizations of residents and the associated community organizing practices. Building on community organizers' oppositional efforts, I offer suggestions for an *anticolonial approach* to community organizing in diverse neighborhoods, an approach that installs colonial discourse as the target of change in community organizing practice.

CONTEXT

Given that previous research suggests a link between context and community organizing practice, it is important to first understand Québec and the unique context it presents.

Québec is a predominantly French-speaking province in Canada with a historical and political context deeply tied to a sovereigntist agenda. Beginning with the election of a separatist provincial political party, the Party Québécois, in 1976, social policy in Québec has been designed to protect French language and culture, all within the subtext of a nation-building agenda (Ship, 2005). To explain its approach to pluralism, government documents in Québec often draw on a few key notions, such as integration, interculturalism and openness. Integration is a central policy focus of the Québec government with various ministries and policy statements explicitly referring to integration and the importance of learning French and contributing to Québec society (Marhraoui, 2004; Rimok & Rouzier, 2008; Ship, 2005). Interculturalism is Québec's equivalent to the Canadian policy of multiculturalism. Although never explicitly defined in policy documents, the notion of interculturalism, according to Bouchard and Taylor (2008), "seeks to reconcile linguistic and cultural diversity with the continuity of the French-speaking core and the preservation of the social link" (p. 19). The notion of openness is also referred to in Québec government documents and websites. "L'ouverture à des cultures différentes" (openness to different cultures; Gouvernement du Québec, 2010a) and "openness to the world" (Gouvernement du Québec, 2010b) are promoted as core values.

Despite such claims, racialized groups living in Québec experience disproportionate poverty and marginalization. In 2006, the poverty rate of visible minorities in Québec City was 50.6%, immigrants were 44.1% whereas the poverty rate of the Canadian-born population was 29.9% (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2007). Rates of poverty in Montreal reflected a similar pattern. In addition, in 2006, immigrants in Québec had an unemployment rate significantly higher than their Canadian-born counterparts (Zietsma, 2007). Incidents of racial profiling by police were also reported in the media during this study. After police killed two unarmed young men in separate incidents, public protests and community organizing campaigns against police brutality erupted in some neighborhoods (Mair & Manicom, 2008).

Despite glaring issues of racial inequality and injustice, public debate at the time of the study was most concerned with *reasonable accommodation* and the rights of *cultural communities*.¹ In response to public debate, in 2007, the government created a commission to “formulate recommendations to the government to ensure that accommodation practices conform to Québec’s values as a pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian society” (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 17). Some groups organized against the commission as a whole, arguing that the premise of the “reasonable accommodation” debate was racist (No One Is Illegal-Montreal, 2007; Simone de Beauvoir Institute, 2007). Since the release of the commission’s final report, immigrants to Québec are now expected to sign a declaration that highlights the primacy given to French language and culture as well as the imperative of integration that immigrants face.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND MICHEL FOUCAULT

To demonstrate the link between race and power, this study draws on postcolonial theory and the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault’s ideas regarding power were one of the principal elements of his work. Instead of a conventional view of power as located in or held by institutions and leaders, Foucault argued that there are dispersed forms of power taking place in every moment at the farthest most reaches of everyday life (Foucault, 1976). This dispersal of power comes about through a power/knowledge nexus. As Foucault put it, “The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces the effects of power” (1972b, p. 89). The result is that certain interpretations and actions come to be understood as common-sense and normal such that it is difficult to think in any other way.

¹ Although nowhere is the term *cultural communities* given an explicit definition, the label *cultural communities* has been commonly used in Québec to refer to minority groups that are not White Francophone or White Anglophone (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008).

It is through what Foucault referred to as discourse that these power relations are manifest. Beyond referring to language and/or communication, Foucault defined discourse as “practices obeying certain rules” (1972a, p. 138). The rules Foucault referred to are embedded within language and text, silently and often unconsciously making certain interpretations and actions available for use (Leonard, 1997). Carabine (2001) elaborated: “Discourses are historically variable ways of speaking, writing and talking about, as well as practices around, an issue. They have outcomes/ identifiable effects which specify what is morally, socially and legally un/acceptable at any given moment in a culture” (p. 274).

This definition points to the way in which discourse constructs reality in unequal ways. Those with influence over the constitutive process of phenomena such as race can construct meaning, and its effects, in their interest.

According to Foucault, power is not a singular unified force. Rather, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1976, p. 95). Resistance occurs when ideas and practices that were once normalized by discourse are rendered problematic such that they are understood as contingent and arbitrary (Foucault, 1986). Such recognition does not depend upon full comprehension of that which is opposed nor does it necessitate precise counter behavior (Foucault, 1982). There is, however, recognition that ideas and actions are contested and have the potential to contribute to the injustice that is the target of change.

In the context of colonial relations, Foucault’s work is particularly instructive. A relationship of dominance and subordination is legitimized by colonial discourse. Colonial discourse demarcates the truth as well as the center from the periphery, the same from the different, and the self from the other (Said, 1978). Through colonial discourse, the colonizer was the liberator and civilizer, and the colonized the savage, “in perpetual need of western leadership” (Tew, 2002, p. 56). Thus, the colonization of people becomes an eventuality, and furthermore, as Spivak (1985) argued, an obligation: It is a forgone conclusion that the colonizer must act to rein in the qualities of the other for the betterment of itself as well as for the other.

Through colonial discourse, White, Western systems and knowledge are presumed superior, and naturally so. The benefits of colonialism to the White colonizer are concealed in statements and practices that delimit the inferiority of the colonial subject. In this way, all that is White and Western becomes the invisible norm against which all others are evaluated and found to be lacking: “Whiteness comes to self-name . . . simply through a triumphant ‘I am not that’” (Frankenberg, 1997, p.7). In Western nations, the systemic privileging of White skin continues to underlie the nation-building process: White skin distinguishes those who are of the nation and those who are its outsiders (Frankenberg, 1993). Furthermore, the binary between insiders and outsiders must be constantly shored up in order to maintain the legitimacy of the nation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007).

Scholars have applied this analysis to the Canadian and Québec context. Bannerji (2000) asserted that definitions of who is Canadian (and/or Québécois), and who is not, are contemporary versions of the colonial discourse. Bannerji noted, “A thinly veiled, older colonial discourse of civilization and savagery peeps out from the modern versions. Here difference is not a simply marker of cultural diversity, but rather, measured or constructed in terms of distance from civilizing European cultures” (p. 107).

The nation-building project of Québec suggests similar influences of colonial discourse. Recent policies to address racialized groups and the issue of immigration, according to Markopoulos (2004) and Ship (2005), center the White French Canadian identity in Québec, although never explicitly stated.

METHOD

This study is an in-depth case study of community organizing in one neighborhood in Québec, Canada. A case study, according to Stake (1995), “is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case” (p. xi). A qualitative approach is most useful when “we want to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of the case, its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts” (Stake, 1995, p. 16). A case study methodology was considered optimal because of the focus on the context of the phenomena under study. Given that the concept of race is a social construct, it is important to investigate its contextually-specific emergence.

Data for this study was collected via semistructured interviews, reactive observation, and archival research. Archival research included examining community organizers pamphlets, flyers, forms, and other documents. Reactive observation refers to research in which the participants are aware they are being observed and they “are amenable to interacting with the researcher only in response to elements in the research design” (Angrosino, 2005, p. 732). Observations took place between May 2007 and November 2007 and included attending meetings, rallies, workshops and outreach sessions such as going door-to-door and handing out information at public locations. I took handwritten notes when attending events.

Semistructured interviews were conducted one-on-one with community organizers, with in-depth discussions on their roles, their views, and their practices. During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect upon occasions they felt were especially memorable, because of either their success or shortcomings, to draw out context and the relevance of race. Sixteen community organizers participated in at least one interview, 11 were observed, and 9 participated in a second interview.

Data analysis in this study used Mason’s (1996) three levels of qualitative data analysis (reflexive, literal, and interpretive). Regarding discourse analysis, this study relied on Carabine’s (2001, p. 280) “snapshot” approach to

Foucault's genealogical discourse analysis, focusing on discourse in a particular moment, rather than tracing its history. To ensure study trustworthiness, a number of steps were taken such as prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants in this study were recruited through cold calls to neighborhood organizations and by word-of-mouth. Sixteen community organizers participated in this study representing a total of six organizations. Each was active as a paid staff member working on at least one of the following issues: the lack of affordable housing, housing conditions, health care, affordable transportation, migrant working conditions, women's issues, and neighborhood safety. Two were involved in the issue of racial profiling. As a group, participants had a total of 73 years of experience in community organizing. The range of years of experience in community organizing varied from less than 1 year to 14 years. Four of the participants were men and six identified as being from a racialized group. Throughout this article, the names of participants, their organizations and the neighborhood in which they work have been obscured for confidentiality reasons. This presents a limitation to the study, in that community organizers identities can not be linked to the analysis presented herein.

ANALYSIS

The Social Construction of the Other

To understand how race is constructed in neighborhood community organizing, this study examines views and practices toward residents and associated community organizing activities. The majority of community organizers in this study (9 out of the 16) constructed racialized groups in the neighborhood using two primary characterizations: (a) as different and (b) as in need of help. Such characterizations individualized residents' experiences, locating inequality and lack of opportunity as an individual issue. Understandings of approaches to community organizing were similarly individualistic: Characterizations of community organizing and community organizations emphasized the importance of being open and helpful. Such characterizations contribute to a discourse of neutrality in community organizing practice that is tied to state policy and that decouples the connection between race and power.

The other as different. When discussing residents, several community organizers in this study spoke of "difference." differences of culture, background, and life experience. For example, community organizers spoke of "different ideas and opinions," "different sets of values," and "difference in country, difference in situation." Community organizers also noted different motivations for participating and ways of participating in community

organizing. One community organizer offered the following advice to a new community organizer: “Be ready to respect and to experience difference and to respect it and to take it in to account in your work. You have to modify your ways; you have to adjust your work.” Used in this way, the notion of difference performs the discursive work of neutrality: It enables community organizers to highlight that residents are “not like me” or “not like us” without attributing any value to that statement, good or bad, positive or negative. Difference is simply a fact of life and reference to it is a reminder that assumptions must be put on hold and community organizers must modify their practice. However, a neutral approach to race, as it is used here, is also a depoliticized one: It calls to mind the individual attributes of residents rather than the systemic constraints they face. An emphasis on difference fixes the gaze on the immigrant other, rather than the system in which they live and the community organizers’ role in it.

Interventions proposed by community organizers to address difference reflect a neutral view of the system. Several community organizers, when asked what advice they would offer to a new community organizer working in the neighborhood, emphasized the importance of being “open to difference,” and “open to what other people have to say.” One community organizer described it this way: “You have to be personally open and used to culture shock in order to be able to show respect.” For one community organizer, difference in community organizing practice created the need to be *open-minded*: “Stay open-minded; take for granted that you will have a lot to learn. Make an effort to see things from the perspective of the people you are hoping to help.”

As noted, the notion of “openness” is widespread in state policy documents. It may also be consistent with goals in community organizing: Community organizers’ attempts to get to know residents and build relationships may be compared to openness. There is likely to be good uptake of the notion in community organizing given that one who is against being open-minded is, by extension, closed or narrow minded, a socially objectionable position to take. Notions such as *being open* hold appeal in a liberal pluralist society in that it reflects a certain degree of acceptance of racialized groups. However, the notions of *openness* and *open-minded*, as they are used here, also perform several discursive functions within the discourse of neutrality. First, such notions assume community organizers have the capacity to be open. They suggest that community organizers are able to be neutral actors, able to keep their assumptions in check, and able to put aside bias, influence, or investment in the status quo. Second, such an approach supposes that community organizers’ assumptions are discoverable, operating on the surface of community organizing practice (as opposed to deeply rooted and systemic)—and easily changed. Third, there is an assumption that community organizers and residents enter into any exchange as equals: Interactions between community organizers and residents are shaped by

individual character—that is, the capacity to be open—and issues of injustice, power, and privilege are secondary. As such, the notion of “openness” does not adequately account for power relations that shape community organizers’ understanding of the other and themselves and the opportunities and privileges each accrues. This study indicates that, without concerted attention to systemic constraints, a focus on openness easily slips into a narrow view focused on individuals.

The other as in need of help. The majority of community organizers in this study constructed residents as immigrants in need of help: “It is a reality for an all-immigrant community to need a lot of things.” This was often done by emphasizing the needs that follow from the immigration process, particularly immigrants’ lack of family, and the loneliness and isolation immigrants feel as a result. A discussion of issues of race as also systemic was notably absent among these community organizers. Residents’ needs are an important consideration in the community organizing process, often laying the foundation for trust-building and future social action. However, an analysis of race that pivots on these points without regard for systemic constraints reproduces, rather than resists, the discourse of neutrality and the individualistic approach it implies.

One recurring notion that poignantly demonstrates an inattention to systemic issues was the notion of integration. Community organizers described integration as an imperative facing residents, rather than as a constraint or socially constructed ideal. For example, one community organizer described her work as “helping with [residents’] integration,” and another community organizer proposed that translation was one way to meet that goal: “If you want to integrate people, you need to speak the language of the people in front of you.” Another community organizer described committee work as contributing to residents’ integration. Embracing integration as a need among immigrants is not surprising given that, as mentioned previously, integration is a keystone of immigration policy in Québec (Ship, 2005) and Canada (Li, 2003). However, the notion of integration performs the work of the discourse of neutrality in that the neutrality of the existing system, and its capacity to embrace and welcome immigrants, is taken for granted. This deference to the notion of integration suggests that the goal of community organizing was not to bring about wider systemic change on issues of race but, rather, to ensure that residents were able to participate in the system *as is*.

An individual-level of analysis was also indicated in this study by a belief in the neutrality of organizations: Services in the neighborhood were viewed as able and adequate to meet residents’ needs. One community organizer expressed it this way: “The reality of this being an immigrant neighborhood is a big one and most community organizations have to adapt their services or their activities to that reality and I think that they do it well.” Community organizers credited community organizations with

adapting services to suit immigrants, for building a positive neighborhood identity and for building an effective network of resources to address residents' needs. Within the discourse of neutrality, community organizers' approach to issues of race stopped at the individual; organizations, like society more broadly as discussed, were not linked to the issues of inequality and injustice paramount in the neighborhood.

Here I have argued that neighborhood community organizing practice predominantly constructed issues of race as issues of individual difference and need. This approach is reinforced by a corresponding emphasis on openness and being helpful within community organizing practice and community organizers' broader assumptions of neutrality among organizations and society more generally. Such approaches signal an individual-level analysis and contribute to a discourse of neutrality that places inequality and injustice on the basis of race outside the scope of change.

Resistance

The discourse of neutrality was resisted by a significant proportion of the community organizers who were participants in this study (7 of the 16). In addition to naming systemic issues such as racial profiling by police, they challenged the narrow view of residents previously discussed, and put into question associated community organizing practices. This section highlights two facets of resistance found in this study: rendering the discourse problematic and oppositional community organizing practice. Of the six participants in this study who were from racialized groups, five are referred to here.

Problematizing neutrality. Neutrality toward issues of race was problematized—that is, denaturalized and rendered contentious—in several ways by community organizers in this study. First, community organizers identified issues of systemic and organizational racism. Examples included discrimination from employers, the immigration system, racist landlords, and racial profiling by police in the neighborhood. In the words of one community organizer, “Police brutality is rampant throughout [this neighborhood]. I mean people are just being harassed up and down the street, by loudspeakers, by the police. There is a war in [this neighborhood].”

Second, community organizers identified issues of White privilege and power. One community organizer described it this way: “If you take any organization or institution and in a nation state like Canada where I think White supremacy is extremely prevalent, that White supremacy trickles down. I think it molds all of our institutions.” Organizations in the neighborhood had largely White staff and several community organizers considered this problematic, given the diversity of the neighborhood. One community organizer noted, “I am assuming that anybody who does community organizing in [the neighborhood], is going to be White and middle-class but that is a pretty good assumption.”

Third, the notion of integration was described by some community organizers as a barrier to creating change. Some criticized the focus on integration within funding streams. One community organizer was troubled by use of the word *integration* among her peers and coworkers: “I’m a little bit scared that when people talk about integration that they are actually talking about assimilation which is impossible and unfair.” By equating integration with assimilation, this community organizer rendered the notion of integration, and its normative assumptions, problematic. Such an analysis of the wider system, including discussions of systemic racism and White supremacy, are oppositional to the discourse of neutrality in that, rather than a view of the wider system as neutral (i.e., blind) to issues of race, racism becomes a principal target of change.

Oppositional practice. Community organizers in this study also opposed the discourse of neutrality through their community organizing efforts. Oppositional efforts functioned in two ways: first, by undermining the inherent logic of the discourse so that residents were constructed as agents and as people situated within a set of historical, political, and social conditions that contribute to inequality and oppression; and, second, by taking action against oppressive practices in society, in their own organizations and among community organizers.

Community organizers’ made efforts to construct residents as agents rather than as needy and as objects of community organizing practice. Residents were viewed as skilful and knowledgeable of community organizing with “the energy to fight.” One community organizer demonstrated her belief in the agency of “people of color” this way:

If you have met one third-worlder who is exiled, then everyone can figure out that they have a very similar story of colonialism and migration and war and struggle and models of community organizing that are so progressive they would throw democrats here on their asses.

Some community organizers were concerned about the lack of ties to ethnocultural organizations in the neighborhood arguing the community is “organizing itself.” Implicit here is a view of residents as agents, as knowledgeable and as key players in the process of change.

Community organizers working on issues of systemic racism understood their role as politicizing resident’s experiences. By working with residents to make the connections to relations of power, these community organizers hoped to get residents involved in bringing about change. As one community organizer put it:

You let them know that the only way you can win in court one day is to really challenge it by disrupting it, by engaging with it politically—that is the only way you can actually change anything in the long term.

Politicizing people's day-to-day life was key for community organizers' mobilizing campaigns. One community organizer, in speaking of the systemic barriers that racialized groups experience, noted the difficulty of speaking publicly about those experiences: "If you have been sold and eaten up the Canadian dream, it is really hard to speak out against it because you feel like you are surrounded by believers and you probably are." Success for this community organizer meant people publicly naming the "Canadian dream." She explained,

The Canadian dream is the mosaic where you can still dance your cool dances and eat your weird food and maybe we will like it but at any moment we can take that away from you, at any moment we can decide that you are asking too much.

This politicization of daily life included Canadian history: "You are fighting for the history that has long been erased or that no one wants to talk about." By acknowledging the history of oppression in Canada and its contemporary legacies, this community organizer, in affect, recoupled history and present day inequities otherwise diminished by a discourse focussed on individuals and system neutrality.

Some of the community organizers (4) in this study concerned with systemic racism were also working to bring about change within organizations. This included efforts to increase access, examining racism within their own organization and organizing discretely around issues of systemic racism despite being told to do otherwise. An example was one community organizer who shared her contact information at a workshop on immigrant issues even though her supervisor explicitly told her not to. As she explained, "I am stretching what I can do."

One community organizer described a form of antiracist advocacy work in her community organizing practice.

We go as translators, not as literally linguistic translators but as everything translators, even like antiracist-filter translators. If you are not going to take it from high-school-educated single woman with five children from the Caribbean, if you are not going to listen to her, then maybe you will listen to me. Or if she doesn't really feel like she is in the position to really be asserting herself then I will help do it but always doing it with her guidance and at the end of the day always kicking back with her and saying, "What a bunch of assholes." . . . You are just using your privilege in a way that is not trying to become part of the boys club.

Openly acknowledged here is worker privilege and the role it takes in contributing to the process of change. Oppositional practice for some community organizers included problematizing community organizing itself

through an analysis of worker privilege and Whiteness. One community organizer pointed out most community organizers are “going to be White” and added, “I just think people need to be clear about the positioning in their own lives.” By insisting that those who are White examine their motivations and develop greater self-awareness, this community organizer denaturalized the privilege and power that Whiteness holds. One community organizer’s frustration with her peers’ approach to community organizing led her to speak out at coalition meetings. She cautioned specifically against supposed worker neutrality, arguing instead for a form of reflection.

The problem is not because the immigrants have a different culture. The problem is that we all have culture, including people from here, and the fact that *it is not neutral the way you work*. It comes from a culture, so be aware of this. It’s part of the job. That is the first step. [Emphasis mine]

Otherwise invisible by the social construction of the immigrant other, here the culture of the dominant group is made visible and integral to an understanding of community organizing practice. The supposed neutrality of the community organizers and the wider society was rendered problematic and brought into focus as the target of change.

DISCUSSION

This study, similar to others (Goode, 2001; Su, 2007), found that race was constructed in neighborhood community organizing practice as an individual issue distinct from the broader relations of power in which it occurred. Here, racialized groups were viewed as different and needy, emphasizing an individual-level analysis while, at the same time, forsaking a systemic analysis (as was the case with the notion of integration). The object of the discourse was the immigrant other, and the ways in which systemic issues, such as racial profiling, constrained participation and created needs, was foreclosed. Furthermore, the assumption in the data that community organizers and community organizations could respond with openness to such difference not only implied neutrality was possible, it also failed to account for the ways in which the broader system is not neutral but, rather, deeply tied to relations of power that bring about racism. This supposed neutrality included the invisibility of Whiteness: the ways in which the existing system accrued benefits to those individuals of White European descent was taken for granted by many participants. The immigrant was the object of the discourse and the various ways in which the system contributed to their exclusion was absent from analytical understanding and action.

As Foucault’s work suggests, complicity to the discourse of neutrality by community organizers was not irrational. Rather, such an approach

was viewed as reasonable and useful: Such policy terms as integration and openness were repeated by community organizers and considered central to their work. Furthermore, an approach consistent with the discourse of neutrality was doable—that is, possible. Funding in community organizing is a primary mechanism through which certain actions are made possible and other actions are ruled-out (Grahame, 1998; Naples, 1998; Stone & Butler, 2000). A focus on the ways residents were different and needy, as community organizers pointed out, was encouraged by funding parameters that rewarded this analysis. Although community organizers in this study held broadly to a social action approach in their community organizing activities, their practice simultaneously negated issues of power perhaps due to the extent to which domination and subordination based on race is normalized in social policy discourse.

Interestingly, in this study, the shared discourse between state policy and community organizing practice did not serve to legitimize state downloading of social welfare provision onto communities. Recent studies of community organizing suggest contemporary community organizing sometimes emphasizes self-help and capacity building as opposed to social action, and state social policy was viewed as the primary instrument of this influence (Craig, 2007; Dolhinow, 2005; Vromen, 2003). In this study, however, the direction of community organizing was not toward self-help and community independence from state institutions. Rather, community organizing in this study sought to involve residents directly with the state and increase state influence over residents' lives.

The policy framework from which the discourse of neutrality draws many of its central concepts developed from within nationalistic claims and the goal of protecting the French language and culture in Québec. In deploying this discourse, community organizers contributed to the reification of the nation by acting on categories and qualities of belonging generated in the interests of a nation-building project. Community organizing thus reflected a civilizing mission not that distinct from that of the Settlement House Movement at the turn of the century in that, despite concerns for social justice and poverty issues, workers drew upon colonial discourses to make sense of their work (Lasch-Quinn, 1993; Valverde, 1991).

By drawing on Foucault's notion of resistance, it became clear in this study that almost half of the community organizers resisted the discourse of neutrality in some way, in effect reasserting the link between race and power. This was apparent in their focus on systemic issues facing racialized groups, such as racial profiling, and their questioning of the neutrality of community organizations and community organizers. Any civilizing function of the state was rendered visible by community organizers problematizing the language of policy upon which the discourse of neutrality was secured and by naming the mechanisms of the state by which the population was ordered and controlled. Residents were not objects of community organizing

but rather skilled and knowledgeable, and thereby the subjects of community organizing activities. Further, the connection between race and power was redrawn by community organizers who raised the issue of White privilege and the worldview it reinforced. By calling attention to Whiteness in community organizing practice, and insisting on self-reflection to understand the role of Whiteness in shaping practice, some community organizers denaturalized the privilege and power that Whiteness holds.

Resistance by some community organizers to the discourse of neutrality has lessons to offer an anticolonial approach to community organizing. The term *anticolonial* (as opposed to *postcolonial*) as I am using it not only underscores the present-day manifestations of colonialism but also installs colonial discourse as the object of change and social action strategies. As in social action community organizing more generally, anticolonial community organizing seeks to address residents' concerns through the lens of power undertaking conflict strategies that are intended to increase accountability and dismantle systems of oppression. It also insists on an analysis of dominant understandings of race (such as those embedded in policy) to challenge their normative assumptions and lay the foundation for social change based on subordinated knowledge and experience. To deconstruct dominant understandings of race and strengthen oppositional efforts, community organizers must go beyond individual needs and reject models of practice that respond to residents as categories and, instead, work with residents as self-defined agents of change. Further, rather than draw on existing assumptions and knowledge rooted in colonial history and White supremacy, community organizers must facilitate emergent understandings and approaches to bringing about change. This is achieved, at least in part, through emancipatory models of education that, according to Freire and Macedo (1985), allow for a "decolonization" (p. 104) of the mind in that participants identify their own circumstances in relation to power and work together to bring about change that reflects those circumstances.

As community organizers in this study suggest, community organizing practice must, itself, be rendered problematic. The results of this study suggest that community organizers were not necessarily prepared to identify the constructions of race that permeate their work; it is difficult to extract oneself from deeply rooted understandings of race and gain a critical distance from them. For community organizers to adopt an anticolonial practice, critical reflection must be incorporated into practice such that community organizing includes critical questioning of values, assumptions, and activities that are ordinarily taken-for-granted (Fook, 2002). As community organizers become aware of how they may be participating in dominant discourses, and how their collective beliefs and actions constitute power relations, there is a greater likelihood of community organizers gaining distance from those practices and finding activities oppositional to the injustice they seek to change.

CONCLUSION

In this case study of community organizing in a neighborhood in Québec, social action was less likely, given a discourse of neutrality in practice propped-up by notions of openness and integration consistent with state policy. This link to state policy suggests a discursive bridge between policy and practice that extends official state agenda into community. In addition, varied and dispersed forms of resistance were identified: Community organizers problematized the discourse of neutrality's conceptual underpinnings and deployed strategies that countered its aims. As this study demonstrates, social action community organizing activities that embrace an anticolonial approach are necessary to undermine dominant understandings of race persistent in the wider society, in organizations and among community organizers in general, reinstalling a focus on locally—defined issues and approaches to change.

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