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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

'Midwife for Power': Towards a Mujerista/Womanist Model of Community Organizing

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Abstract

In recent years, communities have responded to police violence in U.S. cities through confrontational models of community organising that evolved from patriarchal and male approaches. Very often, these approaches have not produced the hoped-for outcomes. In this article, I argue that a women-led community organising model, grounded in feminine relational power-with epistemologies, can lead to innovative policy changes, including in contexts of intractable problems, such as police misconduct. This article presents the Midwife for Power community organising model, which creates space for women organisers to nurture solidarity and creativity across all lines of difference, centres personal testimony and uses collective inquiry to create relational power to address injustice. Theoretically, this model draws on the rich insights of Black and Latina organisers and scholars, as well as traditions of intersectional solidarity. In order to illustrate the model, this article presents an empirical case study of a successful police accountability campaign.

Keywords

Women-Centred Organising; Participatory Action Research; Community Power; Police Accountability

Introduction

On 17 July 2014, Eric Garner, a 44-year-old African-American man, was killed by Daniel Pantaleo, a white police officer, in New York City. A few weeks later, on 9 August 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African-American man, was killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. These murders ignited public protest throughout the United States and a nascent political project that had begun a year earlier as a social media hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, emerged as the main vehicle of resistance to police brutality. Over the following years, public protest after murders of civilians by police in many U.S. cities leveraged the powerful narrative embedded in the hash tag, #BlackLivesMatter. However, the Alinsky-style confrontational power tactics ([Alinsky 1971 & 1989](#); [Betten & Austin 1990](#); [Bobo, Kendall & Max 2001](#); [Ganz 2009](#); [Schutz & Miller 2015](#);) that communities used to hold local police departments accountable led to stalemates ([Garza 2020](#); [Taylor 2016](#)).

In contrast to the Alinsky tradition, this article presents an emerging *mujerista*/womanist community organising model that has been effective in addressing the intractable problem of police misconduct in the U.S. In the tradition of feminist community organising ([Joseph et al. 1991](#); [Mizrahi 2007](#); [Stall & Stoecker 1998](#)), this model is based in women's meaning-making by centring their personal experiences and testimonies ([Fernandez et al. 2020](#); [Garlington 2019](#); [Villenas 2019](#)), but goes beyond feminist identity politics ([Mizrahi 2007](#)) to promote intersectional thinking and action through solidarity and creativity across many lines of difference ([Collins & Bilge 2016](#); [Crenshaw 1989](#); [Garlington 2019](#)). Additionally, and indispensably, the model leverages participants' (hereafter referred to as leaders) innate rationality to understand and critique the world around them ([Mellon Charron 2012](#)) and drives collective critical inquiry and praxis using community-initiated and community-led participatory action research ([Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991](#); Fine 2018; [Maguire 1987](#)).

These three strategies, (1) personal testimonies; (2) intersectional community and solidarity; and (3) community-initiated and community-led participatory action research, leverage feminine power processes that promote community and lead to experimentation and creative problem-solving. As a result, leaders birth their own knowledge and, in so doing, birth their own power. I call this model the 'Midwife for Power'. This article seeks to present the theoretical underpinning of this model and illuminate its workings through a detailed case study. Through critical reflection, I propose that the 'Midwife for Power' model offers an answer to the central question in community organising: how do we create the necessary conditions that enable people to step into their own power?

To illustrate this emergent model, I describe a case of community organising for police accountability in one mid-size city in the northeast of the United States. In September of 2014, an inter-faith community-organising NGO (which will be referred to as HAKI) joined the growing social movement to hold their local police accountable. This 33-year-old NGO was well versed in traditional community organising confrontational 'power-over' strategies. Using these, HAKI had won many of its organising campaigns over the years. However, these masculine *power-over* community organising tactics proved ineffective in getting the local police to engage in implicit bias training, which was the goal of the organising campaign. HAKI leaders therefore used collective critical inquiry to interrogate the stalemate they found themselves in. Through community-initiated and community-led participatory action research, both leaders and organisers (paid staff whose job is to organise a community) were able to step out of the organising blueprint they had been trained in. Having dislodged themselves from the formulaic behaviours they were accustomed to, leaders and organizers were then faced with a newly constructed problem to strategize around. To the new formulation of the problem, they applied feminine relational power-with strategies, drawing on the repertoire of their religious rituals. This transformative paradigm shift ([Kuhn 1962](#)) culminated in HAKI conducting implicit bias training with the police and achieving ongoing success towards police accountability.

In the section below, I highlight key aspects of Alinsky-style organising and contrast that tradition with women-centred models of community organising in order to ground the Midwife for Power model in the literature. I then present a case study on police accountability in community organising to illustrate the Midwife for Power model. In the last section, I present an analysis and identify emerging lessons.

Traditional Organising Model: Confrontational Power-Over

The principles and practices developed by Saul Alinsky in the late 1930s in the Back of the Yards neighbourhood of Chicago have dominated the field of community organising in the United States. His vision for social change rested on polarising confrontational power based on the self-interests of neighbourhood residents to advance a public policy agenda ([Alinsky 1971, 1989](#); [Betten & Austin 1990](#); [Schutz & Miller 2015](#)). Alinsky argued that in order to organise a community, the organiser needed to ‘rub raw the resentments of the people of the community’ ([Alinsky 1971](#)). Mainstream community organising today follows Alinsky’s tradition by focusing on the social inequity that needs to be changed and utilising instrumental and confrontational strategies to secure policy change (Bobo et al. 1991; [Schutz & Miller 2015](#)). The parlance of the field, which is based in military language (fights, campaigns, allies, wins) reveals the inherent masculinity in this model. In this tradition, the expert knowledge of organisers (and allies in the campaign, such as lawyers, policy analysts and researchers) is prioritised. Power is understood in terms of a zero-sum calculation and thus reflected in confrontational power-over tactics. Perhaps the most influential organiser in the Alinsky lineage is Ernesto Cortés. Starting in the 1970s, Cortés worked in San Antonio, Texas, using Alinsky’s key principles to organise congregations across different faith traditions, laying a foundation for faith-based community organising in the U.S. While Cortés emphasised ‘relational organizing’ ([Wood 2002](#)) internally so that members of different faith traditions and community grassroots organisations could develop strong ties and trust ([Warren 2001](#)), externally, he maintained the Alinsky-style confrontational tactics when making demands of public officials or others holding official power. Internal relational power is promoted only so participants can trust each other enough to engage in confrontational tactics ([Alinsky 1971](#); [Betten & Austin, 1990](#); [Schutz & Miller 2015](#)). The focus is not to empower or develop individuals, but rather to create powerful community organisations that can win material gains for a given community ([Alinsky 1971](#); [Stall & Stoecker 1998](#)). In the U.S., Alinsky is considered the father of community organising and his legacy still dominates the field in terms of training ideology and everyday strategies and tactics.

Women-led Community Organising: Relational Power-With

While women in the U.S. organised their communities to advance social justice throughout the last century and a half, a distinctly feminine or woman-centred ([Stall & Stoecker 2004](#)) approach to the field of community organising was not written about until the 1970s and 1980s ([Joseph et al. 1991](#); [Mizrahi 2007](#); [Stall & Stoecker 1998](#)). In 1989, women organisers came together for a three-day national women’s organising conference (Education Center for Community Organizing [ECCO] 1990) and developed *A Framework for Feminist Organizing* ([Joseph et al. 1991](#)), which still has significance but not complete resonance today ([Mizrahi 2007](#)). According to this Framework, the goals of feminist organising include:

1. Creating a more democratic and egalitarian society; transforming society through the reduction of class, status, and power differentials.
2. Meeting human needs through resource recovery and development that support the ecological balance of earth and universe.
3. Eliminating sexism.
4. Eliminating racism, ageism, homophobia, and discrimination against the disabled.

5. Building community (cooperative economic, social, and political arrangements).
6. Enhancing recognition and respect for diversity and differences (by color, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, ethnicity, and healing system).

The framework also includes a detailed methodology to guide women in their community organising. The approach privileges (1) the democratic participation of community members through collective problem solving; (2) residents' experiential knowledge and definition of the problem to be addressed; (3) process as important as end goals; and (4) consciousness-raising of individual community members. It sought to advance 'unity and wholeness' by emphasising 'consensus, cooperation, collaboration, and coalition building' (Education Center for Community Organizing [ECCO] 1990).

While the masculine/feminine dichotomy may be an oversimplification ([Garlington 2019](#)), there are clear differences in these two models of community organising, of which power dynamics and epistemological questions are the clearest. Perhaps the most fundamental distinction between masculine and feminine models of organising is the overarching goal. For women-centred organising, personal and community transformation is as, if not more, important than specific policy wins ([Garlington 2019](#); [Mizrahi & Lombe 2006](#); [Stall & Stoecker 1998](#)). The importance of engaging in a democratic and inclusive participatory process reveals women organisers' understanding of the nature of justice. [Stall and Stoecker \(1998\)](#) write, 'women-centered organizers view justice not as a compromise between self-interested individuals but as practical reciprocity in a network of relationships that make up a community'. While power dynamics were not explicitly explored in the literature reviewed, they are implicit in the issues discussed. The nature of how change is understood as possible assumes the construction of community as an ever-expanding space of inclusion. Furthermore, the aspirational vision of inclusive community presupposes power-with relations.

Of particular interest to the questions explored in this article are the epistemological assumptions in women's organising. Numerous scholars highlight the centrality of personal testimony in both constructing knowledge necessary for political activity ([Garlington 2019](#); [Fernandez et al. 2020](#)) and developing deep relational bonds that promote trust and community ([Villenas 2019](#)). [Villenas \(2019\)](#) argues that 'witnessing and testimonio were at the center of relational pedagogies that promoted relational politics'. [Fernandez et al. \(2020\)](#) look to [Yosso's \(2005\)](#) Community Cultural Wealth framework to unpack the inherent power in women's use of testimony. In this framework, 'linguistic capital' is one of the six forms of capital oppressed communities of colour use to build resilience and resistance. 'Linguistic capital' includes the 'culturally grounded modes of story-telling in oral histories' ([Fernandez et al. 2020](#)). This is in contrast to the Alinsky model, which uses personal testimony as a strategic tool for confronting public officials and securing a policy win rather than as a means towards leadership development, personal and community empowerment, and ultimately, an epistemological shift away from expert knowledge to community knowledge.

The strategies used in women-centred organising reflect a move from the moral framework of individual rights undergirding the Alinsky model to an ethic of collective well-being ([Stall & Stoecker 1998](#)). Thus, there is a focus on building trust and solidarity to promote the development of a strong community. While intentionally nurturing the collective, organisers also focus on developing the leadership of individuals. Because leadership development is seen as the basis for collective wellbeing and power ([Guinier & Torres 2000](#); [Harris 2010](#); [Isasi-Diaz 1996](#); [Mellon Charron 2012](#); [Ransby 2005](#)), organisers acquire a long-term perspective when working for social justice since the time and resources needed to develop leadership in individuals are considerable ([Belensky, Bond & Weinstock 1997](#); [Dyrness 2008](#); [Gaventa 1980](#); [Gittell et al. 2000](#); [Isasi-Diaz 1996](#)).

Black and Latina organisers and scholars have rejected the notion that there is one type of feminist organising and are expanding the vision of organising from one grounded in white feminism to one that leads with an intersectional lens and is open to communities in all their diversity ([Collins 1990](#); [Garlington](#)

2019; Gutierrez & Lewis 1994; [Isasi-Diaz 1996](#); [hooks 2000](#); [Mizrahi & Lombe 2006](#)). [Villenas \(2019\)](#) describes ‘creating race-conscious learning communities’ as central to movement building. Given that, unlike the Alinsky model that insists on having expert outsiders as organisers and privileged positional power, women-centred organising creates leadership development spaces and scaffolding for community members to emerge as leaders and become paid organisers. This is evident in the legacy of civil rights leader Ella Baker who believed everyone could become a leader and dedicated her work to the development of leaders among students in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee ([Ransby 2005](#)). This commitment enabled residents of colour to become their own community’s leaders.

Although scholarship focusing on women-centred community organising has increased over the past two decades, there are still few empirical examples of women-centred community organising informing theories in the field ([Mizrahi 2007](#)). This article adds to the growing literature by expanding current theses to include collective critical inquiry and providing a case study of the application of womanist/mujerista community organising principles.

Midwife for Power Model – Birthing Transformational Power-With

In line with feminist scholars’ call for reflexivity ([Reinharz 1997](#)), I will make my positionality explicit. As a Latina immigrant, I have experienced the toxicity and violence of nativist, racist, anti-immigrant and anti-poor public policies since I arrived in the U.S. as a child. As an adult, I chose to become a community organiser because of my personal experiences, but also because of my moral and political worldview which is grounded in radical democracy. I have organised for social justice for over 25 years in numerous communities. As a result of the victories and failures, I have come to understand that my role is to be a creator of life-giving spaces where people can step into their power. Over a decade ago, rooted in a vision of womanist/mujerista organising ([Fernandez 2020](#); [Mizrahi 2007](#); [Villenas 2019](#)) and my birthing experiences with my three children, I began to identify myself as a midwife for knowledge, which evolved over time into a midwife for power ([Foucault 1980](#)). Few community organisers write about their work ([Mizrahi 2007](#)). In this article, I share the lessons I have been constructing over the years as I engaged in womanist/mujerista organising strategies, which I call the Midwife for Power model. The Midwife for Power model challenges the Eurocentric masculine white patriarchal capitalist logics of the Alinsky/Cortés organising tradition that uses confrontation and power-over ([Garza 2020](#); [Mizrahi 2007](#); [Stall & Stoecker 2004](#)). It is inspired by antiracist democratic logics characterised by trust, mutuality and reciprocity across lines of difference.

In the ancient tradition of midwives, we have a useful metaphor. In many ways, midwives have been the protectors of the collective wisdom of women over thousands of years. This wisdom has ensured and maintained the life of our species. Midwives teach, support, encourage, but they do not birth life. The mother does the labour. It is the mother who creates life. It’s painful. It’s dangerous. The labour does not always progress in a linear predictable fashion. And it’s really messy. Through it all, the midwife is there to guide. She points to the light at the end of the tunnel. The midwife doesn’t try to speed up or control the process. She listens and identifies a mother’s strength. She leverages that strength to support the labour process. Midwife and mother work as a team, trusting in one another. The work is organic. The result is a life-changing creation.

So it is with birthing power. The organiser is there as a guide. She has to identify the strengths of the individuals and community she is working with and leverage them to advance an organising agenda/campaign. By collectively labouring to imagine life-giving processes and just policies, people are able to experiment, to experience their agency, to understand themselves as powerful. But birthing power is not easy. It’s hard work. Sometimes it’s painful, even dangerous. Usually, a step forward is followed by multiple steps backwards. Often, people do not believe they will be capable of their role in a campaign. They may not believe that they can create strategy or actually make a difference. They have been told, in many ways, that

they are not capable or intelligent. Their dignity has been denied them so many times they cannot see their own power. The field of organising has long established strategies and tactics for campaigns. Strategies and tactics can be charted on Excel sheets, classified, interrogated and revised. But people's power cannot be so easily systemised. It is neither linear nor predictable. It is born of an organic process that is life-giving and life-creating. It is the labour of a community.

The Midwife for Power model is an example of women-centred organising ([Fernandez 2020](#); [Mellon Charron 2012](#); [Ransby 2005](#); [Villenas 2019](#)). However, it builds upon previous models of women-centred organising by insisting that people cannot fully enter their own power without engaging in collective critical inquiry. A review of the literature revealed that collective critical inquiry has not been identified as one of the key pillars of women-centred organising. I am not suggesting that critical inquiry does not occur in women-centred organising, but only that it has not been presented as a central element. The Midwife for Power model centres collective critical inquiry.

Here, I draw on the legacy of [Paolo Freire \(1974\)](#) and Black women leaders of the Civil Rights movement, Septima Clark, ([Mellon Charron 2012](#)) and Ella Baker ([Ransby 2005](#)), as well as Gustavo Gutierrez and his framework of Liberation Theology (1974; [1983](#)). They all argued that every person has the capacity to interrogate their oppressions and analyse the world around them and the texts of their cultural traditions. Moreover, they argued that lasting social change requires the action of those most impacted by social inequalities. While the notion that every person can think and act for themselves may seem basic and commonly accepted, I have met few practitioners in the field, whether community organisers or social workers, whose actions reflect this reality ([McKnight 1996](#)). The Midwife for Power is predicated on an unwavering commitment to the innate rational capacity of people regardless of the opportunities they have had for formal schooling. It is also committed to creating spaces and processes that allow individuals to collectively interrogate and critique the injustice they have experienced and then imagine and co-create a vision of liberation and strategies to advance that vision ([Christens, Tran-Inzeo & Faust 2014](#)). To this end, the Midwife for Power uses community-led participatory action research as the primary tool to maintain spaces for collective critical inquiry. [Stall and Stoecker \(2004\)](#) have suggested that there is a need for an 'integrated humanist' model that moves beyond masculine and feminine modes of community organising. While there is merit in this call, I have found that the metaphor of the Midwife for Power provides clarity about the role of the organiser (a guide) and the purpose of organising (power). The Midwife for Power decentres the organiser.

The case study below describes the implementation of the Midwife for Power model.

Case Study: A Police Accountability Campaign

HAKI is a network of 40 Christian and Jewish congregations that organises for racial and economic justice. It is led by a Latina immigrant with a staff of Black, Latina and Jewish women. In the fall of 2014, motivated by the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, about a hundred Black, Latino and White HAKI leaders met to discuss police misconduct in their city. After Black and Latino leaders shared stories of being stopped by police when driving for no apparent reason and being subjected to excessive use of force, the membership reached consensus that the organisation would embark on a campaign to hold the police accountable. An interracial steering committee of women and men clergy and lay leaders was established to design the campaign.

After learning from each other's stories of interactions with the police and studying research about police misconduct, the steering committee decided that an implicit bias training for the police would be the first campaign goal. Leaders invited a former State Police officer who conducts implicit bias trainings for police departments across the state to present to the committee, who would then compare what they had heard to the highly successful model used in Oakland, California (<https://www.coalitionforpoliceaccountability.com>),

which posits that implicit bias trainings are most effective when police officers and community members receive training together.

In the first months of 2015, a small group of clergy had an initial meeting with the police chief. At that meeting, they presented the experiences of leaders of colour routinely being pulled over while driving, without legitimate cause, and of excessive use of force. The police chief questioned the stories, claiming that there were no specific facts to support the allegations of racial profiling carried out by the police department. In response to the clergy's request that the police conduct an implicit bias training together with leaders, the police chief argued that they followed all the state requirements on police training, which included issues of racism, and did not need to conduct any additional training since there wasn't a problem to solve. The clergy presented research from a local university professor ([Hakstian 2014](#)) that supported the anecdotal evidence they had shared, positioning the city in the worst top ten in the state for police racial profiling. The police chief countered that his own data demonstrated that the police department did not racially profile individuals. Because the murder of Michael Brown had ignited a growing social movement, #BlackLivesMatter, the police chief made reference to the events in Ferguson and stated that inferences were being made that portrayed all police officers everywhere as racist and biased. It was a contentious first meeting.

Through conversations with the ACLU, the U.S.'s premier civil rights organisation, leaders learned that the reason for the discrepancy in the research findings was that the police department's data on traffic stops used the city's population as its universe, while [Hakstian's \(2014\)](#) research compared traffic stops to the driving population of the city. The latter is considered best practice given the low levels of car ownership among low-income people of colour. The leaders realised that debates regarding methodological approaches to quantitative data collection and analysis only served to deepen the stalemate, so they decided to systematically collect stories from residents about being racially profiled and/or the victim of excessive use of force at the hands of the police using a participatory action research framework.

An initial training with 60 leaders was conducted by HAKI's executive director. The key challenge was to get leaders to understand themselves as researchers. Over the next several months, HAKI held follow-up research meetings/trainings in four Black congregations and one Latino congregation because leaders had decided to hold interviews at their congregations. However, leaders faced difficulties finding respondents for interviews. The steering committee met to address the problem and realised that the population most often targeted by police, young Black and Latino men, were not typically church-goers, so the group realised that outreach within congregations would not be enough.

Meanwhile, the clergy group succeeded in getting the police chief to agree to attend a public assembly hosted by HAKI at the Baptist church. The steering committee planned the meeting using the traditional Alinsky/Cortés-style tactic, a public accountability session, which is a key part of the community organising repertoire, in which community members present testimony and research and then ask for commitment from a public official. A week before this planned meeting, the police chief backed out of the public assembly because he did not approve of the flyer which said, 'Please attend – we need to fill the church to show our power!' The steering committee decided to hold the public meeting anyway to highlight the police chief's decision not to attend. At the meeting, people brainstormed strategies for the research and identified locations for potential respondents: barber shops and basketball courts.

Subsequently, the police chief agreed to reschedule a meeting with the community for the following month as long as the agenda and questions to be posed were given to him ahead of time. Leaders presented several testimonies of racial profiling and excessive use of force from the data being collected through the participatory action research project. Leaders also presented research on best practices for effective implicit bias training of law enforcement. After the presentations, a Black woman minister and member of the steering committee asked three questions:

1. Given what we have heard about the most effective results for implicit bias training, will you implement implicit bias training across all levels of your department, from command staff to regular officers?
2. Will you include leaders from HAKI congregations in the implicit bias training to ensure the best impact of the training?
3. Will you work with HAKI to develop a strong partnership that will be mutually beneficial by developing trust and respect between the community and the police department through ongoing communication, meetings, joint trainings, and joint projects?

In response, the police chief said that they were complying with all state-mandated anti-bias trainings and did not see the need to go beyond that. According to the Alinsky/Cortés model of community organising, when the target of a campaign refuses to agree to the demands of the community, the community group should escalate their political pressure tactics by designing increasingly confrontational tactics until the target of the campaign relents and gives in to the demands of the community, thus, reinforcing the *power-over* paradigm of that organising model.

Although the campaign had not been successful, the training in participatory action research and the interviews that leaders conducted during the summer months promoted a culture of collective critical inquiry. To reflect on the failure, HAKI held a meeting of about 30 leaders. Leaders used the Question Formulation Technique – QFT ([Rothstein & Santana 2011](#)), a strategy from the Right Question Institute, to interrogate the police chief's decision. Over the course of two hours through two rounds of question generation (brainstorming exclusively in questions) and prioritising questions, the group arrived at a set of key questions to guide the work forward. In January 2016, the steering committee met to create an action plan based on the questions that were prioritised the month before. As the group discussed and debated, a question, which had been identified as a priority question, but had not survived the process of elimination, caught the team's attention:

Instead of trying to get the police to hold an implicit bias training and inviting ourselves to it, why don't we just hold an implicit bias training and invite the police to our training?

This question shifted the campaign goal 180 degrees. Using this question, the steering committee began to strategise in a way that turned the campaign goal on its head but kept previous tactics of sharing testimonies and presenting research. The committee asked themselves what testimonies would they give to ask the police to come to HAKI's implicit bias training? Quickly, the committee realised that leaders would testify to the many ways *they* had internalised bias and racism. Then they would present research on the benefits of implicit bias training and offer a specific trainer to conduct the training.

In April 2016, unlike previous large public accountability sessions in Black congregations, a group of 25 HAKI leaders met at a white Catholic church with the police chief, his deputy and six officers of colour. The meeting was led by a Black woman minister from an A.M.E. church. After introductions, three leaders, a White woman, who was a retired emergency room psychiatric nurse and member of the Catholic church, a Black man, a Jamaican-immigrant Baptist minister, and a Latina immigrant from another Catholic church shared personal stories of occasions in which they had acted, unintentionally, in racist ways and concluded by acknowledging they had implicit biases that needed to be uprooted and exposed. Once the testimonies were over, a Black male leader presented research on the benefits of training that enabled people to see their implicit biases, making it possible for them to overcome those biases. Then, the Black woman who was facilitating the meeting said:

We know the HAKI membership will benefit from an implicit bias training and we think the police department would benefit as well. Will you join us and attend the training?

To our shock, the police chief said, ‘yes, of course!’ Then the chief also agreed to assign a police captain to work with the trainer, a nationally recognized facilitator whose services had been secured, on developing the implicit bias training, and offered several possible dates for the training. The meeting ended and most people, HAKI leaders and police officers, stayed for over 20 minutes mingling and chatting. The next day, the police chief called HAKI’s executive director and said, “That was a great meeting last night. I have an idea. Let’s make it easy. Instead of having to figure out where to have the training and getting the police there, why don’t we just have it at the police station and you can all come to us? The executive director responded, “That’s a great idea. Let’s do that.” When leaders heard about the call, they responded, “that is exactly what we have been asking for since the beginning – for almost a year and a half!”

The implicit bias training took place in July at the police headquarters. In addition to the entire command staff, 22 captains and the police chief, 75 HAKI leaders participated in the training. Of key importance was creating an opportunity for police and community members to be in dialogue to promote understanding across their respective positionalities. At the end of the training, a journalist from the local newspaper arrived. He talked to a small group of participants. In that conversation, the police chief referred to having had a difficult ‘rocky’ start with HAKI, but after a ‘great meeting in April’, the training was made possible. After the police chief characterised the process several times using those words, HAKI’s executive director asked the chief, ‘you mentioned having a rocky start and then having a great meeting in April. What happened at the meeting in April to make today possible?’ The police chief responded quickly, ‘That’s easy. You saw us as human beings.’

Analysis and Emerging Lessons

In the U.S., the divide between the police and the community is seen as an intractable problem ([Garza 2020](#)). In this case, collective critical inquiry through Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) and the QFT methodology led to innovation because they motivated participants to employ collaborative power-with strategies to build community internally to the public arena with the police. What is extraordinary about this is that it required a complete reorientation to the training and experience they had about the tactics necessary to win organising campaigns. In the end, this is a story of community transformation, even if it is partial and time-limited. It gave participants a glimpse of what is possible. The innovation expanded leaders’ notions of community and leveraged personal testimony through radical vulnerability.

MOVING FROM US AND THEM TO WE – POWER-WITH STRATEGIES

In seeking to find common ground across differences in faith traditions, race and class ([Collins & Bilge 2016](#)), organisers leveraged HAKI’s 40 member congregation’s long-standing commitment to creating community within their congregation. The centrality of community building and bonding social capital ([Putnam 2001](#)) to congregational life cannot be underestimated as a variable in understanding the way power is understood in relational terms for internal community organising. Organisers built upon this deep-seated ethic of community (Belensky, Bond & Weinstock 1999) to develop solidarity across faith, race and class differences ([Collins & Bilge 2016](#)). As [Putnam \(2001\)](#) argues, bonding social capital is necessary for nurturing bridging social capital. Faith-based organisers understand the work of building solidarity and a common agenda across faith, race and class lines (bridging social capital) as central to building internal organisational power that will enable the organisation to advance a social change agenda ([Warren 2001](#); [Wood 2002](#)).

Concretely, organisers worked to promote interfaith solidarity by using sacred texts that highlight the primacy of working for justice ([Gutierrez 1973](#)), whether it be economic justice, such as the Jubilee Year (Isaiah 61:1-2), or welcoming immigrants (Leviticus 19:33-34). Arriving at a common ethical vision

leads to the development of what [Delehanty and Oyakawa \(2018\)](#) refer to as moral imaginary, an ethical framework that links people's troubles to collective action. Birthing a moral imaginary required nurturing trust and mutuality as well as an understanding that a collective moral vision, a moral imaginary, is power. Power that is relational: *power-with* not *power-over*. In addition to creating bridging social capital ([Putnam 2001](#)), stories or ethics from sacred texts can be wielded to change public opinion and the positions of public officials ([Braunstein 2017](#)).

HAKI's jurisdiction spans an entire county, which includes wealthy white suburban communities as well as cities with significant populations of colour, so the membership represents the racial and class diversity of the region. The economic inequality and racial segregation that characterises this county ([Rothstein 2017](#)) has been addressed by HAKI's organisers promoting meaningful relationships across race and class and by training on shared scriptural principles ([Swarts 2011](#)). This organisational objective is understood as intersectional power-building ([Collins & Bilge 2016](#); [Crenshaw 1989](#)). These commitments to the value of community and shared scriptural understandings of social justice mandates created enough bridging capital in the form of interracial and interclass trust and social/political will to come to consensus on working on police accountability after the murder of Michael Brown.

Once the campaign entered the public sphere, the feminine *power-with* strategies of interfaith, interracial and interclass solidarity were put aside. Instead, dichotomous thinking of us and them replaced a sense of community. Moreover, the us and them division was not deployed neutrally. Rather, it was laden with moral/ethical meaning. HAKI organisers and leaders understood themselves as the righteous, upholding the moral north star, passing judgment on the police who represented immoral unethical behaviour. The categories of victims and villains permeated the thinking. This strategy was used intentionally. Faith-based organisers are trained in the methodology developed by Ernie Cortés ([Warren 2001](#)), which proffers the idea of moral power as a strategy for moving public officials. From William Wilberforce's 18th Century abolitionist movement ([Metaxas 2009](#)) through the 1950s and 1960s' civil rights movement for racial justice ([Branch 1989](#)), many social movements for such justice have deployed the strategy that frames racial justice as a *moral issue* rather than just a *political* or *policy issue*. However, after a year and a half of the *power-over* tactic of wielding the high moral ground, it was clear the tactic was counterproductive.

In addition, the HAKI organisers deployed a racial analytic lens to all its interactions with the police chief. Following the thinking of Guinier and Torres (2000), they trained leaders in the concept of race as a diagnostic tool to understand racism as structural and not simply interpersonal. By looking at the experience of people of colour with the police, one could understand policing as a structural problem. In other words, the problem was not, as the police chief kept suggesting, one of 'a few bad eggs' ruining it for the rest of the police force; rather, the root of the problem was inherent in the structures, systems, policies and practices of contemporary U.S. policing. In addition, HAKI's positionality in wielding arguments and actions grounded in a moral high ground underpinned a confrontational strategy that challenged police conduct by implicitly questioning the morality of police as individuals, as well as the very core of policing structures and culture in the city, and not just the isolated conduct of a handful of officers. These masculine adversarial strategies were in line with Alinsky-style community organising models, but these methods did not work with the police, which became increasingly evident over the course of a year and a half of community organising.

TACTICS OF PERSONAL TESTIMONY TRANSFORMED INTO A RITUAL OF 'PUBLIC CONFESSION'

The leaders interrogated the stalemate using collective critical inquiry through the QFT and thus birthed innovation. As leaders began to develop the agenda for holding an implicit bias training themselves instead of the police, they moved into a phase of introspection and acknowledgement of their own externalised racism on the part of white leaders and internalised racism on the part of leaders of colour (People's Center for Survival and Beyond – <https://pisab.org>). This process of self-interrogation dislodged the masculine

power-over methods that had wielded an unexamined moral high ground and ongoing moral gaze ([Foucault 1975](#)). As leaders planned the meeting with the police, they employed the tactics they were accustomed to using at public accountability meetings – personal testimonies. The testimonies of the varied ways their actions exhibited racism shifted from previous testimonies of being victimised by police misconduct to ways in which they also participated in perpetuating racism in the community. Furthermore, for some leaders, this act of naming participation in what they considered ‘an evil’ was, at least unconsciously, grounded in religious traditions of confessing one’s sins, whether to community members or to their God. In this way, leaders continued the custom of leveraging the repertoire of religious ritual to advance their political agenda.

They understood that a solution to the problem they were addressing required participation of all stakeholders because, as people of faith, they believe in the interconnectedness of people. In other words, the process of planning a meeting with the police chief that would argue that everyone participates in racism ([Kendi 2019](#)) enabled leaders to apply the principle that they used routinely to build feminine relational *power-with* across lines of difference. The shift also allowed leaders to see police officers as working-class people who, in many ways, were affected by societal injustices as well. They thus moved from seeing police as ‘the other’ to seeing them as members of the same community, at the very least in geographic terms. This is not to say that leaders forgave or now dismissed police misconduct, but rather that they could see the police as members of the community. When the police chief reviewed this case study, he commented on the Alinsky model saying, ‘it’s very confrontational and forces the sides apart even further’. He added that the implicit bias training was made possible because ‘both sides “deescalated” themselves, saw the problem from a broader perspective, and began to listen to each other instead of trying to push a one-sided perspective from either direction.’

RADICAL VULNERABILITY

The idea of acknowledging, admitting or confessing the ‘sin’ of racism to the police chief was a form of radical vulnerability. It was not only admitting fault, but it was conceding that they were also ‘guilty’ of the *very issue* they had been accusing the police department of, albeit without the physical violence. By making themselves vulnerable, the leaders were able to argue, logically, that they needed implicit bias training. And by extension, the logic they utilised made it clear that everyone needed implicit bias training, including the police. This use of public vulnerability in front of public authority is counter to the theory and practices of Alinsky-style community organising that posits *power-over* tactics to bring the apparatus of the state to acquiesce to the demands of the community. Public demonstrations of vulnerability or complicity in any sense would usually be considered an exhibition of weakness in male-oriented paradigms of community organising. Yet, it was this feminine model of power that allowed for the exhibition of vulnerability that, in fact, disarmed the police chief and his officers in this campaign and led them to agree to implicit bias training. It is an example of the power of collective moral reimagining ([Delechanty & Oyakawa 2018](#)).

In summary, the innovations made by leaders to birth feminine *power-with* in the public sphere were: (1) enlarging their definition of community to include the local police; (2) engaging in a ritual of ‘public confession’ as one leader put it; and (3) employing radical vulnerability. These innovations transformed the campaign, not only through having the police chief say, ‘That’s easy. You saw us as human beings’, but also a year later, in his newly elected position as sheriff, saying at the local mosque on the annual Open Mosque Day, ‘Raise your hand if you have implicit bias. You should all be raising your hand because we all have implicit bias. I learned that from HAKI.’

Those powerful and far-reaching innovations were possible because organisers (1) nurtured a community characterised by intersectional solidarity and mutuality; (2) believed in the innate problem-solving capacities of leaders; and (3) trained those leaders to engage in collective critical inquiry. Furthermore, the impact of this work not only changed the thinking and actions of one police chief but has enabled an ongoing

relationship with the police department to address racism in the police and the city. In effect, this campaign redrew the social boundaries of the power dynamics (Howard 2000 in [Dworski-Riggs & Day-Langhout 2010](#)) that existed between the community and the police.

Ongoing Impacts of the Police Accountability Campaign

The womanist/mujerista community organising vision of mutuality and community transformation is evident in the outcomes, both internal and external, that emerged from the police accountability campaign. The table below outlines the impacts of HAKI's organising.

DATE	Externally – POLICE	Internally – HAKI
2016	HAKI trains all of the Command Staff of the police department and 75 community members together.	HAKI leaders engage in a six-month series of small interracial study groups over pot-luck dinner, culminating in a three-day antiracism retreat.
2017	At Open Mosque Day, the police chief acknowledges having implicit bias and encourages everyone to acknowledge it as well.	HAKI unifies its criminal legal system reform and immigration policy reform work into a joint analysis of mass incarceration in both systems as it builds deeper solidarity across race, nationality and faith tradition.
2019	HAKI leads anti-racism training for every police officer through one-on-one conversations between police officers and community members.	HAKI institutionalises a CORE Strategy Team of Black and Latino leaders to guide all campaign decision-making.
2020	HAKI organises the city's first hearing on racism with three hours of testimonies. City agrees to the establishment of a committee to explore the possibility of an unarmed crisis response team.	HAKI leaders organise several marches and vigils to stand in solidarity with the community in Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd. HAKI leaders join statewide campaign for state-level police reform.
2021	Police department agrees to officers wearing body cameras while on duty. Mayor accepts the community's proposal for an unarmed crisis response team and allocates \$500,000 for its implementation.	Haki begins a new participatory action research project to explore alternative economic structures to build Black and Latino economic power.

Limitations

This article represents the experiences of HAKI organisers and leaders, both clergy and lay members. The Board of the organisation gave permission to write about their organising. The police chief read and approved the case study, making a few suggestions. Since he was not available to be interviewed for this article, there is no information on the variables at play internally at the police department. However, in 2016, the police chief announced he would run for sheriff, an elected position, a month after the April meeting during which he agreed to the implicit bias training. Clearly, his decision to run for public office had to be part of the calculus when he agreed to have the police department participate in the implicit bias training. It is not clear if he would have made the same decision had he not been about to run for sheriff.

On the other hand, the police department, after his departure, continued to work with HAKI as is shown in the table above. In addition, it is impossible to know whether or not the power-with model would have produced a successful outcome if it had not been preceded by power-over confrontational methods. However, it does seem unlikely that a small interfaith community organisation would be able to out power-over the police.

Another variable at play during the course of this campaign was the national movement known as Black Lives Matter (BLM). This movement injected a powerful critique of policing in the U.S. into the public discourse. The strength and pervasiveness of this movement across the country had an impact on police departments. The chief of police referred to BLM in one of the early meetings with clergy, saying that he would rather work with HAKI than with the BLM people on the streets. HAKI organisers reasoned that their work might not have been possible without the conditions created by the BLM movement, which created a sense of urgency for police reform at all levels of government throughout the nation.

Conclusion

The Midwife for Power model seeks to create the conditions for people who have been oppressed or marginalised to birth their own power and advance communal transformation. Some of the essential elements for promoting the birth of power or what could be called The Midwife for Power Toolkit include: (1) unconditional belief in the innate intelligence/power of every human being; (2) an unwavering commitment to the idea that people are liberated only through their own agency; (3) creativity in designing spaces and strategies that enable people to use their life experiences to make meaning and move into action; (4) fostering of solidarity and mutuality across lines of difference; and (5) engaging in collective critical inquiry as a way to fully activate people's agency and power. In addition, an unwavering belief in abundance at all levels allows for the community's potential to be realised. Many of these values echo those of the *Framework for Feminist Organizing*, developed in 1989 at the three-day national women's organising conference hosted by the Education Center for Community Organizing (Joseph et al. 1991).

A Midwife for Power seeks to create spaces and mechanisms that encourage people to be the agents of their own liberation. When the oppressed do the hard work of birthing their own power, not only are the boundaries of power redrawn to make possible new political, economic and/or social realities, but deep internal and collective transformation/liberation occurs. As people give birth to their own power, they participate in the creative force of the universe.

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