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ABSTRACT

Environmental justice organizations aim to secure an equitable distribution of environmental resources through the participation and self-determination of affected people, particularly communities of color. Yet organizing in a market economy is complicated: As communities become greener, gentrification can follow, thereby inadvertently displacing low-income communities of color and reproducing environmental injustices. This study informs antiracist community practice methods by examining strategic and ethical dilemmas embedded within an environmental justice organization that is located in a gentrifying Mexican American neighborhood in Chicago. Drawing from interviews, we examine members' perceptions relating to representation, recruitment, and issue selection. We reveal key considerations for community organizations and residents as they work to promote environmental equity without contributing to the marginalization or displacement of communities of color.

Environmental Justice Organizing in a Gentrifying Community: Navigating Dilemmas of Representation, Issue Selection, and Recruitment

Amy Krings and Colette Copic

The practice of community organization aims to advance social justice by strengthening collective power and democratic civic engagement through robust community-based organizations (Bobo et al., 2001; Brady & O'Connor, 2014; Gamble & Weil, 2009; Staples, 2004). Community-based organizations are most viable when their leaders are both indigenous to the community and able to weave together the diverse interests and constituencies of that community (Gutiérrez et al., 1996; Rivera & Erlich, 1998). Yet the practice of weaving diverse interests is complicated: Communities, and the people who reside within them, hold different and sometimes divergent ideas about who can best represent them and how they should identify, prioritize, and address social issues (Rivera & Erlich, 1998; Young, 2012). Therefore, a community organization's ability to recognize and attend to differences according to race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, and social class can influence its ability to effectively build local leadership, develop multicultural institutions, and address systemic issues relating to equity and fairness (Gutiérrez et al., 1996). Without explicitly acknowledging how issues of culture and oppression influence communities and their needs, community organizations risk perpetuating social injustices by objectifying, exploiting, or tokenizing marginalized groups (Burghardt, 1982). Gutiérrez (1997, p. 250) described this process as a central challenge of living in a diverse society because it requires a balance of respecting socioeconomic differences, reducing inequality, and working toward common goals.

Community organizing can be even more challenging within neighborhoods that are transitioning due to gentrification. Gentrification is distinguished by four key characteristics: (a) reinvestment of capital, (b) increases in high-income demographics, (c) landscape change, and (d) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups (Davidson & Lees, 2005, p. 1187). Although gentrifying neighborhoods are not solely inhabited by people of color nor are new residents always White, people of color are more likely to live in places vulnerable to gentrification and to experience the impacts of neighborhood change including traumatic stress associated with losing one's neighborhood, place attachments, and social networks (Fullilove, 2001; Kennedy & Leonard, 2001; Thurber et al., 2019). Gentrification also changes community power dynamics and can threaten the loss of affordable housing, community culture, employment, public spaces, and political influence (Martin, 2007; Thurber et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2018). Thus, long-term residents including the poor, people of color, senior citizens, families with children, and immigrants may be wary of collaborating with new residents. Yet, there is limited research on the strategic and ethical dilemmas embedded within community organizing in the context of gentrification.

To begin to address this gap, this article examines how one community-based organization navigated ethical and strategic dilemmas relating to representation and inclusion within their gentrifying neighborhood. We conducted an interview-based study with members of an environmental justice organization located within the historically Mexican American¹ neighborhood of Pilsen in Chicago, Illinois, USA. First, we explored how members balance efforts to improve the livability of their neighborhood without contributing to ongoing gentrification. Second, we examined how the members engage with new residents, recruit long-term residents, and navigate tensions related to power, representation, and inclusion within their transitioning community. Our findings suggest that, for organizations to successfully advance environmental justice, they must explicitly prioritize the recruitment of, and accountability to, members of historically marginalized groups. If not, they risk improving the livability of neighborhoods in a way that further marginalizes and potentially displaces long-term residents, thus reproducing the very injustices that they aim to address.

Environmental Justice Organizing: Representation and Environmental Gentrification

Environmental justice attends to the fair distribution of environmental burdens and amenities (*distributive justice*), the use of inclusive processes to achieve such outcomes (*procedural justice*), and the creation of places where marginalized groups, including residents of color and immigrants, feel welcome and safe (*interactional justice*; Schlosberg, 2007). The philosophy of environmental justice embraces the idea that all people and all communities are entitled to equal protection under environmental health laws and regulations (Bullard, 1996).

The need for an environmental justice movement emerged because of systemic racial discrimination embedded within land use practices, including disproportionate exposure to chemicals and toxins in homes, schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces; unfair enforcement of environmental and public health laws; and exclusion of individuals and groups from land use decision-making processes (Bryant & Mohai, 1992; Mohai et al., 2009). In response, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (1991) established the foundation of a movement composed of people of color to “fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities” and to “respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages, and beliefs.” Participants critiqued mainstream environmental organizations for not hiring people of color and neglecting issues that disproportionately affect the poor and people of color (Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007; Taylor, 2014). Thus, critical questions of power, inclusion, and representation have been central to environmental justice work since its inception.

Many early environmental justice campaigns successfully secured environmental and public health protections by building power through locally representative community organizations

¹ For the purposes of this article, we use the term “Mexican American” when describing the long-term residents of Pilsen or the neighborhood’s cultural identity. We use the term Latinx to describe respondents who self-identified as “Hispanic,” “Latino,” or “Mexican American” in our interviews.

(Gibbs, 2002). These campaigns influenced decisions related to environmental hazards associated with waste facilities, heavy transportation, and contaminated waterways as well as amenities such as green spaces, fresh food, clean water, affordable housing and transportation, and safe waste management. Many campaigns were part of broader efforts to improve the long-term livability of urban areas that had been disinvested through deindustrialization, redlining, White flight, and austerity-based cuts to state and federal spending in cities (Anguelovski, 2016). However, as historically disinvested places were cleaned, some were no longer affordable to existing residents. This process of greening, land revaluation, and displacement is known as *environmental gentrification* and can result in a loss of social and racial equity (Checker, 2011; Dooling, 2009). Thus, as gentrification contributes to the shortage of affordable housing in the United States and globally (Aurand et al., 2017; Maciag, 2015), some environmental justice organizations are placed in the contradictory position of opposing local investments to prevent the displacement that may follow (Checker, 2011; Dale & Newman, 2009). Furthermore, when local growth coalitions, including elected officials and developers, characterize these changes as part of an apolitical “sustainability” agenda, gentrification is framed as an inevitable, if not desirable, process, thus diminishing potential for community resistance (Checker, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2007).

Given the need for social workers to advance social justice, and environmental justice in particular (Jones & Truell, 2012; Kemp et al., 2018; McKinnon, 2008; Teixeira & Krings, 2015), this article contributes to practice knowledge by examining community organizing in a gentrifying neighborhood. We ask two interrelated questions: (a) How do members of community-based organizations navigate strategic dilemmas related to securing necessary investments in underserved neighborhoods without contributing to the displacement of existing residents? (b) How do members of community organizations think about and engage in recruitment and leadership development among long-term and new residents?

Research Design and Methods

This study used an exploratory case study research design (Yin, 2009) to examine the work of an environmental justice organization based in Pilsen, a neighborhood in southwest Chicago, Illinois. With Institutional Review Board approval, we conducted interviews with leaders and members ($N = 11$) of the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO).

Study Context: Gentrification in Pilsen and the Creation of PERRO

Pilsen has been a working-class Mexican American enclave since the 1950s when immigrants sought affordable housing and employment in nearby foundries, metal shredders, factories, and meat packing plants (Anderson & Sternberg, 2013; Curran, 2018). Through the 1960s, when urban renewal and highway construction destroyed many of Pilsen’s neighboring communities including the area surrounding the historic Hull House, more Mexican immigrants moved to the neighborhood (Betancur & Kim, 2016). Although Pilsen residents experienced interpersonal and

institutional discrimination, including redlining and public neglect, community leaders—some of whom were trained in community organizing theories and methods at Hull House—collectively worked to improve the conditions of the neighborhood while resisting the city’s urban renewal plans (Betancur & Kim, 2016, p. 6).

Despite historical and contemporary efforts to resist gentrification and preserve its Mexican American identity, many working-class Latino families have left Pilsen, whereas younger, single, and White people have moved in (Ballesteros, 2018; Betancur & Kim, 2016; Curran, 2018; Wilson et al., 2004). Between 2000 and 2017, the number of family households in Pilsen decreased by 26%, whereas the number of one-person households increased by 30% (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2015), resulting in a net loss of 19.9% (8,678 people) of the population.² The loss of Latino families changed the character of the neighborhood as well as its resources: Public elementary school enrollments declined by approximately 40% since 2005, compared with a 20% decline across the city (Ballesteros, 2019b). Relatedly, many local businesses that were owned by or catered to Latino families closed, whereas upscale restaurants and shops opened (Ballesteros, 2019a). These changes contribute to Mexican American families feeling excluded, unwelcome, or disconnected from their community, in part because gentrification is often accompanied by heightened surveillance (Thurber et al., 2019).

Within this neighborhood context, and in response to concerns about contamination associated with nearby industry, PERRO formed in 2004. Since its inception, PERRO has been a multicultural and multiracial organization that consists of a small cadre of active leaders and members (approximately four to nine people) and a larger, less active base that follows their social media accounts (approximately 500 people). All members are volunteers although periodically PERRO has secured short-term grants to pay a part-time organizer. The grassroots organization “believes all people have the right to live in a clean and healthy environment, regardless of their race and class” and its mission is to “spread awareness about this concept of environmental justice and make Pilsen a healthier place to live, work, and raise children” (PERRO, n.d.).

The members of PERRO participated in a number of successful campaigns that have improved the quality of air, soil, and human health within Pilsen. In 2005, when its founding members (including lifelong residents and members of the Pilsen Green Party) were concerned about the environmental and health impacts associated with a local foundry, they conducted tests that found the soil nearby contained alarmingly high levels of lead and other hazardous materials (Pupovac, 2017). Tests by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) confirmed these findings, forcing the owners of the foundry to install new air filtration systems and to pay for soil remediation on affected properties. These findings also led the Illinois and U.S. EPA to increase air quality monitoring in Pilsen. Additional successful campaigns held metal shredders and a lead

² Here, we use the term Latino, as this is the term used in the Betancur and Kim (2016) report.

smelter accountable for air and soil contamination (Rowan, 2013), and PERRO was part of a decade-long campaign, which included international environmental organizations, to close two coal-fired power plants including one located in Pilsen. These plants contributed to an estimated 42 deaths, 66 heart attacks, and 720 asthma attacks per year (Levy et al., 2002).

In its early years, PERRO also participated in anti-gentrification campaigns such as opposing luxury housing developments and supporting a 2004 referendum to require public meetings on all proposed zoning changes (Pupovac, 2019). However, since 2014, it has not taken a public stance on questions of development. Instead, recent work has focused on environmental education and issues such as the distribution of water filters and promotion of solar panels.

Table 1. Description of Respondents.

Respondent ethnicity (N=11) ³	Current resident, current activist	Current resident, former activist	Nonresident, current activist	Nonresident, former activist
White (n = 5)	3	n/a	n/a	2
Latinx (n = 7)	2	1	2	2

PERRO is now at a crossroads. Many of its original members have moved out of Pilsen or left the organization. As a community-based organization composed of unpaid volunteers, PERRO is struggling to determine how to prioritize its limited resources to recruit members and select issue campaigns. It was within this context that PERRO leaders asked Author B (Copic), who had volunteered with the organization for 2 years, to conduct interviews with its members for use in a technical report about revitalizing the organization. An interview guide was co created by Author B and PERRO’s lead organizer with questions relating to perceived strengths of the organization, needs relating to recruitment, and priorities for future issue campaigns. Follow-up questions asked participants to explain if or how PERRO should address gentrification in Pilsen (see Supplemental Appendix 1: Interview Guide). Outcomes of the study include the technical report that was provided to PERRO leadership as well as this article.

³ Note that because one respondent identified as both White and Latinx, this person was included in the table in both categories. For this reason, although there were 11 respondents, the table reflects 12 identities.

Data and Analysis

The data for this study were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between October and December 2017 with key informants ($N = 11$) including current and former board members, organizers, and participants. Although respondents were given the option to interview in English or Spanish, all interviews were conducted in English. Recruitment included a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Requests for interviews were announced at group meetings and posted on the organization's social media platforms in English and Spanish. In addition, Author B reached out to individuals recommended by other respondents who did not initially respond to public advertisements. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, with founding members often telling longer stories about the history of the organization as compared with newer members. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and make up the data for this study. Table 1 details the self-described racial and ethnic composition of the respondents, along with their resident and membership status. When asked about their race or ethnic status, four respondents identified as White, six as Latinx, and one as White and Latinx.³

The interview data were analyzed using a three-step coding procedure adapted from Emerson et al. (2011). The first step used open coding, in which each transcript was read in detail to identify emergent topics from the data. Analytical memoing was performed to make sense of these topics and emerging themes. In the second step, we began to cluster stage one's descriptive codes. We applied these clustered themes to the full data set, determining the consistency and relevancy of each theme. In stage three, we theorized if and how the broader stage two categories were related. Once again, we performed analytic memoing, this time with the goal of identifying key dilemmas and contradictions within each category.

This method of research has several notable limitations. Most importantly, because we are using a case study methodology, we do not attempt to determine generalizability. However, we apply the theories and methods of community practice and environmental justice organizing to contextualize our findings, which can lead to analytic generalization (Yin, 2009). Second, as with any community-engaged research, our findings should be viewed in light of the authors' positionality. At the time of the study, Author A (Krings) was a faculty member in a school of social work and Author B was an undergraduate student in environmental science, both in the United States. Both authors are White cisgender women. Despite these limitations, several aspects of the study increase its validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). First, Author B was engaged within PERRO meetings for 2 years (2015–2017) prior to the study's inception. Engagement included neighborhood door knocking, event planning, and community meetings with members of the city health department. Through this prolonged engagement, Author B was able to build rapport with participants, thus increasing access and reciprocity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Second, because we prepared a technical report for the organization, our respondents and PERRO members were able to review our initial findings and comment on their accuracy. This

form of member checking resulted in the confirmation of findings, and a more nuanced understanding of the organization's history.

Results: Strategic and Ethical Dilemmas Within Environmental Justice Organizing

In this section, we examined how the leaders and members of PERRO navigate dilemmas related to (a) balancing a need for environmental remediation and amenities with the ongoing gentrification in the community and (b) recruitment and leadership development among new and long-term residents. All quotes are presented with three self-identified descriptors: ethnicity, status as (non)resident of Pilsen, and current involvement in the organization.

Issue Selection and Environmental Gentrification

Since its inception, PERRO and its cadre of volunteer members have participated in campaigns to reduce contamination, hold polluters accountable, and protect affordable housing in Pilsen. Despite not currently working on affordable housing issues, all of our respondents agreed that there has been a loss of affordable housing in Pilsen and some were aware that their efforts to reduce contamination and improve access to environmental amenities could contribute to unwanted redevelopment in the community.

There was a time there where [other leaders] were really focused on the environmental stuff, and I was actually kind of our [PERRO] representative focused on the other issues, primarily the gentrification issues. So this is something really dear and close to my heart. And when we won the fight over the coal plants, the very first thing we pivoted to from there was that this is not gonna be—we're not gonna allow this to be used as a way to increase gentrification in the neighborhood. (White, former resident, former member).

However, when asked to prioritize contemporary issues meriting PERRO's attention, the majority of respondents did not believe that the group had capacity to address gentrification.

We are an environmental justice group. The group spent a long time cleaning up Pilsen, so it would be nice if some of the low-income folks in the neighborhood could stay around to appreciate it, but yeah PERRO can't tackle the United States housing crisis. (White and Latinx, current resident, current member)

Although this respondent wanted long-term residents to be able to enjoy the fruits of PERRO's labor, gentrification was considered to be inevitable because of its roots in social, political, and economic forces beyond the scope of the neighborhood. Similarly, three respondents opposed prioritizing the issue of gentrification because of a concern that doing so would contribute to the loss of PERRO's organizational identity. One told us that "It's just difficult because we have to remain focused . . . We can't just do all social services or human rights because, yes, they're intertwined but you still have to remain focused or else you lose your identity too" (Latinx,

former resident, former member). In contrast, other respondents argued that because gentrification is the most important issue in the community, the group would be wise to address it.

Right now the pressing issue is not the lead in the soil in the neighborhood. The pressing issue is raising rents. Maybe merging those efforts and energies in trying to bring—the environmental side to the conversation but also respecting that that isn't the main goal for most people here right now. (White, former resident, former member)

This respondent did not view attention to environmental topics and gentrification as mutually exclusive. In fact, they proposed that by taking on issues of relevance such as affordability, the groups could be more successful in applying an environmental justice lens.

Community Representation in a Gentrifying Community

Nearly all respondents expressed anxiety about how to sustain the organizational membership of PERRO; these fears were in fact the genesis of this study as members wanted to pool their ideas about recruiting and retaining new members. One respondent explained that community participation within PERRO is important “because changing policy without the community is the same thing that the Alderman [local elected official] does. It's not a collaborative decision-making process. It's just a few people deciding what it should be—that is not ideal” (White, former resident, former member).

Yet, although the membership of PERRO desired a community-based and representative organization, nearly all its leaders and organizers, who are also responsible for recruitment and task distribution, have been and are White or middle- to upper-class Mexican Americans. Consequently, some worried that PERRO's organizers are better able to recruit and retain White members than Mexican American long-term residents.

Part of the problem may have been, as much as people accepted me very much in the neighborhood community, and I had so many allies, and of course my family—my wife and the whole of her family are immigrants from Mexico, I was still a White male representing . . . [an environmental justice] group in a Latino neighborhood. So that probably was not the best idea. And I tried very hard to get others to kind of take more of a leadership role that—actual Latinos. But that was always hard for us 'cause we just never had people who could devote the time that I was able to devote. So that's certainly a part of the picture. (White, former resident, former activist)

Thus, although many respondents stated that it would be important for future leaders and organizers to live in or near the neighborhood, to maintain social connections to the community, to speak English and Spanish, and to be Mexican American, they struggled to find effective ways to recruit and share power with Latinx participants. Several respondents suggested that it is

easier to recruit the newer residents who are more likely to be affluent, White, young, and without children. In contrast, the longer term Mexican American residents were perceived to be constrained by time, money, language barriers (meetings are held in English), and, for some, limited protections due to their legal status. Two respondents told us,

Spanish-speaking residents are scared. A lot of them are undocumented still. They're scared. I think what we've been doing is good. Going out, educating, giving them the [lead water] filters. As for them coming—A lot of them are having to work. They don't have time to come to a meeting. (Latinx, current resident, current member)

It's hard to volunteer your time when it's not life or death. Like the environment is not life or death, the environment is more, well, *it is* life and death, but just at the end of your life by a few years here and there. It's a lot less critical than shutting down the schools and having to move out because of rising rents. (White and Latinx, current resident, current member)

In this way, PERRO respondents articulated core contradictions within the group: They wanted Latinx leadership and membership, yet they positioned themselves in service to or as educators of Latinx residents. Furthermore, because they relied on volunteers to “get things done,” they tended to accept the help of all participants, no matter what their social identity was.

Respondents varied in their perceptions about what, if any, role new residents should have within the organization. Six respondents viewed newcomers as a nonthreatening catalyst for PERRO to expand its engagement with environmental justice issues. One respondent said,

Right now in Pilsen, like they said, there's gentrification. There's a lot of new people moving in, but it's not necessarily *new* people. Because people who are my age (32) who are maybe fourth generation Latino are moving into Pilsen, too, maybe back into it. . . . They may not look like the Latino from the 60s, they may have a degree now, they may make a little more money, but they don't want to buy, they want to rent. How do we get those young Latino millennials to become more active when it comes to community, environmental issues, educational issues? I think PERRO can help do that. (Latinx, current resident, former member)

Although this respondent emphasized that people moving into the neighborhood include Latinos who have roots in the community, others argued that any newcomer should be welcome in PERRO; their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status did not matter. One respondent said,

[Gentrification] is inevitable. It's history. When the neighborhood started, it was White, it was Czech, Polish. Come on now. It's nobody's neighborhood, it's everybody's neighborhood. Who can you tell, “You're not welcome here?” It's for everyone. (Latinx, current resident, current member)

However, other respondents were skeptical of engaging with new residents, perhaps because they were perceived to interrupt or ignore the existing social and cultural networks within the neighborhood and the organization. One respondent said,

It's really hard to build community when these people [new residents] are not people who want community. It's exactly what gentrification is, they want to disappear the community. They want to disappear what brings people together and just turn it into something that's nice and like Starbucks. So it's really hard to have community when people don't want it. (White, former resident, former member)

Thus, a key difference in opinions about newcomers had to do with their perceived degree of, or interest in, engagement within the community.

Discussion

In an effort to inform culturally responsive community practice methods, this study examined strategic and ethical dilemmas that are embedded within an environmental justice organization located in a rapidly gentrifying Mexican American neighborhood. We found that, since its inception in 2004, PERRO and its members have done the hard work of improving environmental quality in Pilsen. Specifically, the organization pressured a local foundry to reduce its emissions, built relationships with representatives of environmental protection agencies to hold polluters accountable, and contributed to the closure of a noxious metal shredder. They did this in a neighborhood context where local groups were organizing to address threats associated with gentrification, displacement, heavy policing, school closures, street-level violence, and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies (Kern & Kovesi, 2018). Yet, as gentrification in Pilsen accelerated, the members of PERRO had to grapple with new organizing dilemmas.

We found that all our respondents want PERRO to be a vibrant, community-based organization. Nearly everyone emphasized that leadership should be locally based, bilingual, and connected with the Mexican American community. Furthermore, they provide an open door for those who want to participate. However, the extent to which PERRO's organizers and members actively recruited Pilsen's politically marginalized residents, including those who are undocumented, only speak Spanish, or are poor, was less clear. Respondents could provide a litany of barriers that hinder the participation of Pilsen's Mexican American residents. We do not dispute these claims; in fact, previous research demonstrates that people who are socially or economically privileged are more likely to participate in politics, and to successfully influence political outcomes, than people who are poor or people of color (Brady et al., 1995; Diaz, 1996). More specifically, gentrifiers are more likely to mobilize than long-term residents and may even take over indigenous organizations (Freidus, 2016; Martin, 2007). However, we wondered if existing members have effectively talked themselves out of trying to recruit marginalized residents or addressing at least some of these barriers. For example, most meetings are held exclusively in English at a local bar. This, of course, can alienate potential participants, including people who

only speak Spanish or families with children. Likewise, PERRO has recently positioned itself in a top-down position of providing services or education to long-term Mexican American residents rather than as equals working together to build grassroots power and influence.

Although we acknowledge that it is perhaps unfair to expect the volunteer members of PERRO to take on more labor, it is also possible that, by incorporating a recruitment and leadership development strategy that focuses on, and is accountable to, Pilsen's long-term Mexican American families, they may have more success in reinvigorating the organization. Put differently, without an intentional recruitment strategy, the organization will likely continue to attract members with few structural and linguistic barriers while struggling to include long-term residents or to represent their interests, thus becoming a *gentrified organization*.

We also found that although respondents agreed that gentrification and displacement are problems for some residents, most questioned the organization's collective ability to prevent these problems or wondered whether prioritizing housing issues would dilute their mission. There are unquestionably limitations to the power of local organizing in a globalizing world (DeFilippis et al., 2010); however, siloing urban greening without also tending to development and affordable housing can contribute to environmental gentrification (Krings & Schusler, 2020; Rigolon & Németh, 2018). By focusing on the natural environment and neglecting Pilsen's affordable housing issue, PERRO may align more closely with the philosophy of environmentalism, rather than an environmental justice logic that integrates a holistic understanding of what it means to live in a healthy community (Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007). More importantly, PERRO risks repeating the mistakes of mainstream environmental organizations that did not hire (or, in this case, mobilize) the poor or people of color nor did they prioritize issues that disproportionately affect them (Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007; Taylor, 2014).

In sum, our findings demonstrate how, by not engaging Pilsen's long-term Mexican American families, PERRO may neglect issues that are priorities for these residents while taking on issues of greater interest to new, predominately White and childless residents. This can, of course, reinforce the cycle of attracting new residents while creating real and symbolic barriers for long-term residents or those with children. Second, although PERRO could succeed in cleaning the air and water of the neighborhood, new affluent residents would benefit from these changes as the poor are pushed out, thus reproducing environmental injustices through environmental gentrification. For these reasons, it is necessary for community practitioners, advocates, and residents to center their work around issues of community self-determination *and* racial or ethnic justice. Without doing so, it is unlikely that a White-majority organization in a historically Mexican American enclave can ethically or effectively advance environmental justice.

Implications for Community Practice

Bearing in mind the dilemmas identified above, we suggest the following practice principles for community workers, activists, and residents who aim to improve the health of humans and the

environment in a way that does not contribute to gentrification. These strategies complement anti-racist and culturally responsive practice principles.

First, it is important for community workers to recognize that residents of place-based communities hold differing ideas about who can and should represent them. This matters because questions about how to identify, prioritize, and address social issues can map onto social identities such as race, ethnicity, and class (Gutiérrez et al., 1996; Rivera & Erlich, 1998; Young, 2012). Relatedly, because residents with more racial or ethnic privilege and a higher degree of income experience fewer barriers to participate, the first practice principle requires an intentional recruitment and leadership development strategy that concurrently reduces structural barriers to participation. Pragmatic examples include translation services at all meetings, outreach through multiple languages and media sources, and meetings held in family-friendly places that are comfortable to all residents. Similarly, organizations like PERRO can require elected leadership to resemble key demographics of the neighborhood such as race or ethnicity, length of time as a resident, renters versus homeowners, or social class. The Dudley Neighborhood Initiative provides an example of a community organization that required its elected leaders to represent the racial and ethnic composition of their community (Medoff & Sklar, 1994).

Second, community practitioners should use an intersectional rather than siloed approach to issue selection (Krings & Schusler, 2020). This is particularly important because organizations that improve the natural or built environment of a neighborhood also risk contributing to gentrification and displacement of people intended to benefit from their efforts, thus increasing segregation and inequality (Dale & Newman, 2009). Similar to critical race theory, an intersectional approach acknowledges that people of color experience intersecting oppressions including ethnicity, culture, nationality, and language barriers (Anguiano et al., 2012).

Third, community workers have many opportunities to redistribute power in a manner that builds local influence without tokenizing marginalized groups. Rather than reinforcing existing power inequities through service provision or public education, organizations can bring residents together to learn from each other, analyze data, and identify concerns and strategies of resistance. By challenging prevailing notions of expertise, and at times in partnership with academics, community groups can ask questions that challenge the status quo and produce their own findings (Krings et al., 2019; Teixeira et al., 2019).

Finally, because community-based concerns are often shaped by global economic and political systems, it is necessary to advocate for reforms that address environmental, racial, and economic injustices at systemic and institutional levels.

Conclusion

Neoliberal and structurally racist policies, including those limiting environmental and public health regulations or reducing spending on affordable housing and social services, require social

workers and community activists to update their practice theories and methods. This is particularly the case in gentrifying neighborhoods where community workers must balance fears of displacement and cultural erasure with desires to improve access to local amenities. This study examined the dynamics of this difficult balance and provided strategies for community practitioners, activists, and residents to promote environmental health and wellbeing while attending to environmental gentrification, affordable housing, and cultural representation.

Our findings reveal new lines of inquiry. For example, more research is needed to understand when and how to build solidarity between new and long-term residents while attending to socioeconomic differences (Dobbie & Richards-Schuster, 2008; Gutiérrez et al., 1996). This includes questioning what it means to be an “ally” within a gentrifying neighborhood and what are the consequences of including people who could be considered gentrifiers within neighborhood organizations. Such questions could shed light on how to prevent or mitigate harm associated with gentrification while building local leadership, developing multicultural institutions, and addressing systemic issues relating to equity, fairness, and inclusion.

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