An Interpretive Phenomenological Study of Women's Struggles, Hopes and Reasons for Participation in Professional Power-Based Community Organizing in Chicago

Mary Dungy-Akenji

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/3920

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2022 Mary Dungy-Akenji
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOMEN’S STRUGGLES, HOPES AND REASONS FOR PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL POWER-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN CHICAGO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIAL WORK

BY

MARY K. L. DUNGY

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2022
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge first the expertise, guidance, patience and perseverance of my chair, Dr. Amy Krings. My committee members, Dr. Susan Grossman and Dr. Shweta Singh provided wisdom and support throughout the long dissertation process. All of these committee members were immensely supportive and generous with their time and energy, despite this being a ‘Covid” dissertation. I am deeply indebted to all of them.

I am thankful for Dr. Keisha-Marie Alridge for her coding expertise, peer support and resource sharing. Your ideas and input were always en pointe and your digital hugs made this journey a little easier.

This paper would never have been written without the stories, dreams, struggles, frustrations, tears and joys of my participants. They are what made any of this project come alive, and many of them continue to work hard and sacrifice much to try to build a better world for the rest of us.

There are many people in my personal life without whom I would probably not be writing this. I remember watching my own mother sitting and writing her dissertation while two small kids toddled around her (my sister Mattie and I). Without her (and my sister’s) example I may never had the guts to try this. My father always encouraged me to do whatever I thought was best and stood behind me no matter what. My two beautiful, willful, fiery children did not get to choose whether I decided to pursue this degree, but they were there for the entirety of it and watched me struggle and learn. So, in a way it is also their degree too – they certainly
sacrificed for it. Finally, I am thankful to Zachary Corn who has been unflinchingly steadfast, generous and loving, and would never let me quit even when I wanted to.
I wrote this for professional power-based organizers in Chicago. I was radicalized by that field, and I owe an immense amount to the organizers, trainers, community leaders and volunteers from whom I learned so much (about the world, myself, damn near everything). I write this with gratitude and hope.
PREFACE

The idea for this study came from a short research project for a doctoral research seminar, a case study of a local power-based organizing organization. I interviewed four organizers about their use of values and ideology in their community organizing practice and engaged in participant observation of a large monthly membership meeting and a smaller reading group meeting. What emerged was not what I expected. The answers to my interview questions seemed to vary a lot based on gender, as did participation in the meeting events. That paper was for a class and permission to publish the study was not sought, but key themes emerged about women struggling with the model, while still valuing what it provides in social critique and action.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii  

PREFACE vi  

ABSTRACT x  

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION  
Research Question 1  
Social Work and Community Organizing 3  
Key Terms and Concepts 5  
Community Organizing 5  
Professional Community Organizer 8  
Retraditionalization 9  
Responsibilization 11  
Intersectionality 11  
White Supremacy Culture and Racial Capitalism 13  
Sex and Gender 14  
Researcher Positionality 14  

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK  
Critical Theory 16  
Feminist Critical Theory 19  

## CHAPTER THREE: HISTORY AND BACKGROUND  
Critiques of Alinsky-Based Organizing 23  
Answers to the Critiques: Realigning to Address Intersectionality and Global Crises 24  
Professionalization and Organizing 26  
The Impact of Funders 26  
The Professionalization Boom and New Public Management 28  
Gender and Community Organizing 31  
Women Organizing Prior to Alinsky 31  
Feminist Models of Organizing 32  
Women in Power-Based Organizing 33  

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY  
Interpretive Phenomenology Defined 38  
Examples of Interpretive Phenomenological Studies 42  
Assumptions and Reflexivity of the Researcher 47  
Sampling 49  
Sample Characteristics 50  
Data Collection 51  
Data Analysis 54  
Limitations 59  
Provisions for Rigor 61
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rigor within IPA</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: STRUGGLES FACED</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Subordination in the Workplace</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Housework and Supporting Male Colleagues</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males as Natural Leaders</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and Performing Masculinity</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts within the Professional Power-based Organizing Model</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Right Way</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentalized Relationships</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workaholism/Overwork</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Second Shift and the Sexual Division of Labor</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SIX: WHY I ORGANIZE</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing for Joy and Liberation</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing to Address Systemic Oppression</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing on Behalf of Children</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER SEVEN: HOPING AND COPING</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Authentic Relationships</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma informed practices: Healing spaces and time for rest and reflection</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing Spaces</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for Rest and Reflection</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Place for Caregivers in Community Organizing</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situating the Study in the Literature</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualizing Participants’ Struggles</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentalized Relationships with Self and Other</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurability</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilization and Gender</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent Contradiction: Capitalism and Social Reproduction</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retraditionalization</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER NINE: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Grassroots Care into Organizing</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanding Resources for Care</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TEN: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covid-19, Gender and Care</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Expansion of Trauma-Informed Practice in Community Work</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ELEVEN: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Professional power-based community organizing is a practice of grassroots change in which paid organizers guide community members as they band together to make demands on elite groups to redistribute resources (Bobo et. al, 2001; Sites et al., 2007). Conflict-based tactics may be utilized to demand structural improvements from key stakeholders, usually towards progressive political ends that build towards a more just society (Bobo et. al 2001; Wilkinson & D’Angelo, 2019). Community organizing has some roots in social work, and the field of social work has often been admonished for not focusing enough on practices addressing social justice, such as community organizing (Krings et al., 2019; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). Unfortunately, power-based organizing (both labor and community-based) has at times been critiqued for being an unwelcoming space to women and other marginalized groups (Krings et al., 2019). The literature on labor and community organizing has long contained critiques of the gender dynamics present in professional power-based organizing (Craddock, 2019; Hyde, 1986; Kennelly, 2014; Rooks, 2003, Stall & Stoeker, 1998). This dissertation aims to examine what the experiences of contemporary women in professional power-based organizing are like revealing themes in three key areas: struggles faced, hopes held and reasons for organizing for these women. This study constitutes a deep dive into a small data set of ten individual women’s stories to take an in-depth interpretive look at their experience of professional power-based organizing as a woman. Also unique to this dissertation is its critical theoretical lens. This study uses feminist critical theory to evaluate whether these gender-based critiques continue to be salient,
and if so, how and why these same old battles on gender continue to come up again and again. Two concepts from feminist critical theory, retraditionalization (coined by Lisa Adkins); and responsibilization (drawn mostly from Wendy Brown) are used to understand why gender subordination and gendered divisions of labor persist in our current milieu.

Findings fell into three major sections based on the experiences of women in professional power-based organizing in Chicago: struggles faced, hopes held, and reasons for choosing to organize. The struggles faced by these organizers included the themes of sexism in the workplace; conflicts with the organizing model itself — including the insistence on one-right-way of organizing, the instrumentalization of relationships and workaholism; and struggling to balance paid work with “the second shift” of unpaid care work.

Respondents’ hopes for the field of organizing read almost like an antidote to some of the struggles they faced and were based on their reflections about their organizing experience. Hopes held included building authentic relationships based on trust and connection; trauma informed organizing practices like creating healing spaces and allowing time for rest and reflection; and a place for caregivers and their dependents within power-based community organizing. The implications for practice here are that power-based community organizing continues to struggle with issues of inclusion, primarily based on structures of exclusion that come from outside the field, such as that of neoliberal capitalism which responsibilizes its subjects while simultaneously retraditionalizing gender relations which reaffirm women’s subordination.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Professional community organizing has been around for decades and is commonly known as one of Barack Obama’s formative activities as a young activist in Chicago. Chicago itself is often associated with professional organizing as well. Saul Alinsky began crafting his well-known model of community organizing in Chicago’s Back-of-the-Yards community in the mid 20th century (Engle, 1998; Horwitt, 1989), and Chicago has a rich labor organizing history including the groundbreaking Pullman strike (Arnesen, 2002) and Haymarket affair (Green, 2006).

Research Question

This dissertation explores women’s experiences of professional power-based community organizing in Chicago by focusing on the following:

1. What struggles have they faced?
2. What hopes do they have?
3. Why do they choose to organize?

What emerged were stories about what struggles they faced, what hopes they held for the field of organizing as a whole, and why they chose to organize. This study uses feminist critical theory to understand the milieu in which these questions are asked and answered and how neoliberal forces, particularly responsibilization and retraditionalization, constrained and shaped respondents’ experiences.
Early on in the development of professional power-based organizing, critics noted that this model of organizing was not a friendly place for women. For example, one woman was told during her Alinsky training that women could not be organizers. Thankfully she did not listen and instead founded a training center in Chicago for organizers called Midwest Academy (Golus, 2019). This study aims to examine and interpret women’s contemporary experiences of professional community organizing in Chicago and is particularly focused on how women navigate a “radical” professional environment that purports to be liberatory and emancipatory but is potentially just as riddled with inequity as other work environments (Padavic & Reskin, 2002).

Community-based practice, as it is often called in social work, can take a variety of forms including community development, community planning and community organizing (Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018; Rothman, 2007; Sites, Chaskin, & Parks, 2007). Community organizing is unique within social work theory and practice due to its radical stance on resource and power distribution and willingness to employ non-violent conflict tactics to meet goals (North, 2013). Specifically, community organizing is often defined as community members banding together to make demands on elite groups to redistribute resources (Bobo et. al, 2001; Sites et al., 2007). Saul Alinsky is often credited with developing a professionalized version of this style of organizing in the mid-twentieth century (Horwitt, 1989; Engle, 1998; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017).

Since the heyday of Alinsky’s organizing work in the 60s and 70s, the sociopolitical landscape has changed dramatically (Engler & Engler, 2016; Difillipis, Fisher & Shragge, 2010). These changes have presented significant challenges to Alinsky’s original model. The field of community organizing has had to reckon with its history of dismissing the experience of marginalized identity groups like women, people of color, undocumented immigrants and others.
Important voices have historically been left out of professional community organizing due to this exclusion. Additionally, organizing has been challenged to scale up efforts to meet the crises of global capitalism by creating larger coalitions capable of large-scale change (DeFilippis et. al, 2010; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017; Young et. al, 2018) and by taking a clear ideological stance, previously anathema to Alinsky-organizing.

Alinsky intentionally deemphasized partisanship and ideology and presented his organizing style as an alternative to radical leftist politics including the communist politics present in some labor activism of the time (Engel, 1998; Kurinsky & Petkoff, 2016). His methodology was presented as a neutral set of tools to be used by anyone of any political persuasion. This supposed neutrality has become broadly seen as outdated and ineffective, and organizers have shifted toward taking stances on issues once considered too divisive to broach including critiques of capitalism (DiFillipis, et. al, 2010; Engler & Engler, 2016; Lesniewski and Doussard, 2017).

**Social Work and Community Organizing**

The practice of community organization has an important lineage in the field of social work. Early social workers in the settlement house movement, such as Jane Addams, worked to transform communities through community development, labor union work, and peaceful protest (Brieland, 1990; Selmi, 2001). My own introduction to professional organizing happened at my first field placement during my social work graduate education. Additionally, social work’s contemporary guiding documents, the Code of Ethics and the Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards both indicate that social justice, human rights, and democratic participation and inclusion are important social work goals (NASW, 2017; CSWE, 2015). The
Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principals lists several key activities under the principle of “social justice”. These include challenging discrimination and institutional oppression, respect for diversity, access to equitable resources, challenging unjust policies and practices, and building solidarity (IFSW, 2018). Despite social work’s emphasis on social justice and organizing work, very few social workers participate in organizing (Krings et. al, 2020; Mattocks, 2018; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010; Reisch & Wenocur, 1986). This is likely for several reasons including the pressure to ‘professionalize’ and focus on individual diagnosis and treatment rather than structural issues (Reisch & Wenocur, 1986; Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Carey & Foster, 2013; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012).

There are additional contemporary issues internal to community organizing that may prevent social workers from participating, such as the historical exclusion of women and minorities from professionalized organizing. The literature has made clear that participating in this model of organizing for women can be difficult and taxing (Craddock, 2019; Kennelly, 2014; Mizrahi, 2007; Mizrahi & Greenawalt, 2017; Rooks, 2003; Sen, 2003; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). Since the majority of social workers are women (Salsberg et al., 2017), gender exclusion could be a deterrent to social workers who would otherwise consider participating in organizing professionally.

Professional community organizing has a reputation for being unwelcoming to women (Sen, 2003; Smock, 2004; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). The organizing field is sometimes described as having a culture of machismo, a “cowboy” culture (Rooks, 2003; Smock, 2004; Stall & Stoecker, 1998), yet women continue to organize. Are these critiques of gender subordination within the organizing field relevant in contemporary organizing? If they are relevant, what are women’s experiences of professional organizing like and how do they understand them? This
phenomenological study aims to illuminate how women perceive and describe their experiences as professional organizers in the birthplace of professional organizing, Chicago.

Throughout this dissertation I will be referencing various terms which will be defined in the next section. After defining some key terms, I will describe the theoretical orientation of this paper, that of critical feminist theory. Many of the experiences of the organizers in this study can be understood based on their role as women in the workforce, balancing competing demands on their time at work, in the community and at home, as well as pressures to behave more like men at work. Critical feminist theory helps us understand why these dynamics are so. Next, I will describe some of the history and background of professional community organizing in order to make contemporary professional community organizing legible. I will describe the emergence of professional organizing in Chicago as well as external forces such as pressure to professionalize and neoliberal logics of measurability and competition and their influence upon the field. The methods section follows and describes how the study was carried out and why interpretive phenomenology was used to examine women’s experiences of professional organizing. The ten interviews conducted produced rich data which are detailed in the findings section and broken down in the discussion section at the end.

**Key Terms and Concepts**

**Community Organizing**

The term *community organizing* can be applied to several practices involving the mobilization of people around an issue of importance to them. This dissertation is concerned with a type of community organizing which I refer to as professional *power-based* organizing. This model utilizes direct action tactics to create progressive but often pragmatic social change. The Midwest Academy’s community organizing manual adds that organizing should win “real,
immediate and concrete improvements in people’s lives,” give participants “a sense of their own power,” and change “the relations of power” (Bobo et. al, 2001, p. 9). Professional organizers often attend several trainings, one of at least a week in length, usually within their first year of employment in the field. In professional power-based organizing, professionals are paid to run campaigns by mobilizing community members to push for systemic change using a systematized process.

This model of organizing is often associated with Saul Alinsky. Alinsky’s brand of organizing was a zero-sum contest of confrontation, led by “professional” organizers with big personalities and egos (Rooks, 2003; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). Though Alinsky’s work continues to be influential¹, many others have contributed to power-based organizing and Alinsky’s perspective has been contested and critiqued. As I will demonstrate, power-based organizing has changed much since the time of Alinsky, so rather than call this model Alinsky-based organizing, it is referred to in this study as power-based organizing.

An often used organizing manual, *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, describes the process as seven steps. First, organizers work with the community to select an issue and develop a strategy (often using a strategy chart, see appendix H for sample). Second, contact is made with the decision-maker who can deliver the solution to the issue and give the community what they are seeking. Usually, the decision maker refuses to cooperate or oblige in some way, which brings us to the third and fourth steps, announcing the campaign and beginning outreach to allies and others who may support the campaign effort.

---

¹ Alinsky’s *Reveille for Radicals* (1969) and *Rules for Radicals* (1971) are still the top two books listed on Gamaliel’s website article on books for first year organizers to read (Gamaliel, 2022).
Next, after the organization has built power by building a large enough base of support, an encounter, or series of encounters, with the decision-maker occurs, at which point the request to resolve the issue is repeated. The sixth step is more of an ongoing consideration, rather than a step – each event or meeting planned should have the double goal of moving the organization towards resolving their selected issue as well as building the organization by inviting in and training new participants. Finally, after a series of encounters with the decision-maker, often with building levels of confrontation, the organization must assess whether they have achieved their goal sufficiently and decide if they have won or lost. It is then time to evaluate the campaign and discuss where improvements can be made for the next campaign.

An organizer’s day-to-day is often spent building relationships through a kind of meeting called a one-on-one, where the organizer is meeting with a potential volunteer participant to gage their potential to engage in organizing (Smock, 2004). During these meetings, the organizer is attempting to discern whether and why the participant might care about the cause of the organizing campaign, or if the participant shares the values of the organization (People’s Action Training Manual, 2017). These meetings are often considered the lifeblood of organizing, as they are frequently how new people are brought in to the movement. House meetings, or small group meetings, may also be used (Bobo et. al, 2001) Aside from one-on-ones, time may be spent preparing for or leading a training, meeting, or large community action. Time also may be spent on leadership development, the act of encouraging leadership within the base of volunteers by things like inviting them to take on new roles, challenging them to grow, or connecting them with others who share their vision and values. For example, an organizer might invite a

---

2 What constitutes a large enough or powerful enough base of organized people is often deduced using a tool called “power analysis” based on how many organized people it will take to force the decision-makers hand (Stein, 1986).
participant to speak at a public event, lead a meeting, or attend a training to further develop their leadership potential (Bobo et. al, 2001).

Within much of professional community organizing, the term leader refers not to a paid staff organizer but to a volunteer from the community. This person has a stake in the outcome of a campaign and is considered a leader because they can bring in others from the community who look to them for guidance and support. These may be people who play traditional leadership roles, such as a pastor or a rabbi, or they may just be well known in their community. It is an organizers job to help empower and support these leaders, while the organizer is to remain in the background rather than the foreground (Bobo et. al, 2001).

**Professional Community Organizer**

It is worth discussing what the role of professional community organizer entails briefly. North defines organizers as “activists who (a) recruit, train, and encourage the participation of other movement participants and (b) serve as tactical, ethical, and political strategists and advisors on behalf of movements” (2013, p. 4). In an in-depth study of the practice wisdom gleaned from 10 highly-experienced professional community and labor organizers, Brady and O’Conner describe community organizers as those who engage in a process of first community building – getting to know the community, identifying an issue for example. Next is planning, wherein goals and strategy are set, and finally, mobilization (2014). Alinsky describes the role of an organizer in his text that helped define community organizing, “Rules for Radicals”. With the brusque bravado characteristic of Alinsky-style organizers he says:

> Change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together...The organizer knows, for example, that his biggest job is to give the people the feeling that they can do something, that while they may accept the idea that organization means power, they have to experience this idea in action (1971, p. 113).
Community organizers have historically been highly educated (Craddock, 2018; Rooks, 2003), and often white and male (North, 2013). Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) study of labor organizers, though not a perfect comparison to this sample of community organizers, can shed some light on this dynamic. According to her study, in 1980, 12 percent of all lead organizers were women and at the time of the study in 2005, 21 percent of lead organizers were women. The sample from the present study does not reflect this gendered dynamic, as the sample are only female-identified. Though directors of organizations may continue to be white and male, the workers I interviewed do not represent that trend.

**Retraditionalization**

To describe the way gender roles are used and reflected in professional power-based community organizing, the term retraditionalization is used. Though this example has been used to describe dynamics in unpaid social movement work, it is a useful lens to understand gender dynamics in professional organizing as well. Kennelly’s (2014) work on women’s emotional labor in radical organizing uses the term retraditionalization to describe the way that, despite apparent advancements in gender equity between men and women over the years, and despite the manner in which the category of gender is increasingly contested, these advancements have been accompanied by a hidden return to “traditional” oppressive gender roles. For Adkins (1999), economic restructuring has meant a shift towards individual, reflexive and self-regulated work—frequently done by men—and that shift has been accompanied by an increased need for someone to do whatever else needs doing. This can mean women organizers are assigned menial tasks like note-taking during meetings, or it can mean they are, perhaps unintentionally, assigned

---

3 Data on the gender identification of professional community organizers was sought by looking at studies on Chicago organizing and public data but could not find up-to-date information on the gender breakdown of the profession. Future studies could survey the gender identity of community organizing staff. It would make sense to also study the gender of managerial and executive staff of these organizations.
the emotional labor and care work needed for the sustenance of the movement such as repairing
relationships and arranging childcare. More abstractly, it can mean raising and caring for
children who will ostensibly grow up to be radical participants as well. While women do the
lion's share of this emotional labor, care work and menial office tasks, men are often given the
credit for being the individual visionary who makes it all happen (Adkins, 1999; Hochschild,

The following example is not from power-based organizing, but a social movement
mobilization model. It is still illustrative, however, of the way retraditionalization can happen in
radical spaces. One activist mother, when comparing the organizing culture of the 1970s to 2009,
states,

(In the 1970s), many of us made a big struggle that we had to incorporate childcare. And
I think that is different from many groups today; it’s very unfortunate that in some ways
it’s gone backward. I don’t know what to say about that except that, like many other
things, there was a backlash (Law & Martens, 2012, p. 19).

This idea of ‘going backward’ is encapsulated in the term retraditionalization. While
gender roles have been contested and women have benefitted from access to new roles, it is often
assumed that relational work, care work, and emotional labor will be picked up by women
(Adkins, 1999). Kennelly uses this term to describe the ways in which invisible emotional labor
and care work is foisted onto women who are part of radical movements. This term will be used
in this paper to understand and interpret the data found in the interviews with professional
organizers.
**Responsibilization**

The term *responsibilization*, as described by social theorist Nikolas Rose (1996) and elaborated by others, including feminist critical theorist Wendy Brown (2015) refers to the practice of:

…forcing the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider…the notion of individuals naturally pursuing their interests has been replaced with the production through governance of responsibilized citizens who appropriately self-invest in a context of macroeconomic vicissitudes and needs that make all of these investments into practices of speculation (2015, p. 84).

This means something specific for women. Rottenburg describes how, for example, women are expected to be responsible for reproductive labor as well as an impressive professional portfolio. This is managed by either finding a high-paying job that affords the outsourcing of childcare to poorer women, or a highly paid spouse that can support the household on his/her single income (Rottenburg, 2017). She states that,

Neoliberalism’s colonization of feminism is simultaneously producing a very clear distinction between female subjects who are worthy because they are aspirational and thus convertible and the majority of female subjects, who are deemed irredeemable due to their insufficient aspirations and responsibilization (ibid. p. 340).

An example of a properly responsibilized woman is famous author of *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg, who “…emphasizes the importance of planning well for marriage and motherhood” (McRobbie, 2020, p. 31). As COO of Facebook, Sandburg planned properly and responsibly, making enough money to outsource much of the care labor in the household so she can continue to run a large corporation.

**Intersectionality**

The term *intersectionality* helps in interpreting and understanding the way that for my respondents, gender is only one dimension of the way identity impacts their lived experiences.
The Combahee River Collective’s statement on the double oppressions of racism and gender subordination (as well as homophobia) sheds light on the ways that many White feminists have ignored and erased the particular experiences and feminisms of Black women (2015), as does the work of Audrey Lorde (2007) and many others (Hyde, 2013; Pyles, 2009).

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, a legal scholar who used the term to describe the layers of discrimination experienced by Black women. Crenshaw takes the example of domestic and sexual violence against women of color and demonstrates that this issue is deeply complicated by issues like poverty, fear of detention and deportation, and racist historical narratives about sexuality (1991). She notes that services for domestic and sexual violence are designed for women who have not been systematically excluded from resources, employment, and other social supports (Crenshaw, 1991).

Since Crenshaw’s work, the term has exploded in use, sometimes losing its meaning along the way. Sirma Bilge argues, for example that the term, initially an insurgent term used to describe a particular form of marginalization, has been coopted by White feminists and neoliberal managerialism. This cooptation has resulted in the watering down of the disruptive power of the term. Bilge argues that the term intersectionality is now pervasive and many powerful interests are invested in minority visibility and these changes have occurred in keeping with the structural priorities of neoliberalism. She notes that, “the neoliberal reconfiguration of power alignments between state, capital and academia... have converted these unprecedented forms of minority visibility into a non-re redistributive appreciation of difference, so that minority perspectives could be incorporated into an ever-adaptive hegemony without altering its structure” (2014, p. 6). Many white academics have appropriated and tamed the disruptive power of intersectional work, marginalizing the Black and Indigenous women who have worked hard to
assert the concept of intersectionality and its significance in describing their experience (Bilge, 2013). I will be mindful of this dynamic as I am listening to and interpreting the stories of women of color organizers who have generously shared their stories with me. The fact that this study focuses primarily on gender itself is limiting and speaks to the biases of the researcher. However, many of my interview respondents discussed their gender identity only in relationship to other identities they felt were very important, usually a racial or ethnic identity. For this reason it is important to use intersectionality as a tool to understand that, particularly for Black and Indigenous, women, only discussing their experience of being a woman without including their race would amount to an erasure and censoring of their experience.

**White Supremacy Culture and Racial Capitalism**

I will utilize two tools to incorporate a racial analysis to this study. Jones and Okun’s characteristics of *white supremacy culture* will be used to consider the ways that critiques raised in this study may indicate that professional organizing culture mirrors the norms of white supremacy culture rather than incorporating intersectionality.

The concept of *racial capitalism*, first popularized by Cedric Robinson (2000), and further developed by Charisse Burden-Stelly (2020), situates white supremacy in relationship to capitalism. Racial capitalism illustrates how racial subjugation, like gender subjugation, is central to the capitalist project. Burden-Stelly defines modern U.S. racial capitalism as “a racially hierarchical political economy constituting war and militarism, imperialist accumulation, expropriation by domination, and labor superexploitation” (2020). Of particular interest to this

---

4 Superexploitation describes the way that “the exploitation of white men in Europe and America becomes the reason for the exploitation of black, brown and yellow men in Africa and Asia (Harrison as quoted by Burden-Stelly, 2020, p. 14). She further states that superexploitation results from the conjuncture of white supremacy, racialization, and the ‘badge of slavery’ which exacerbates the conditions of exploitation to which white working classes are subjected” (Burden-Stelly, 2020 p. 17).
study is the superexploitation of Black women in domestic labor. Burden-Stelly describes this as “a function of their ‘triple oppression’...Black women’s superexploitation in the capitalist mode of production was based on their race, sex and subordination in the labor market (ibid., p. 17).

Sex and Gender

Finally, I want to discuss how I utilized sex and gender in this study. Though historically, researchers have differentiated between sex and gender, some contemporary critical feminist scholars have taken issue with this. Judith Butler, feminist, queer and critical theorist, takes issue with the notion that while gender is often considered socially constructed, sex is not. Sex, for Butler, “is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms” (1993, p. 2). One’s body parts can be changed, and sex’s ultimate claim on our identities has come under increasing scrutiny. For this reason, the terms “female” and “woman” may be used interchangeably here.

Researcher Positionality

Before becoming a doctoral student, I was a community organizer in professional power-based community organizing. My social positionality may have impacted my initial attraction to community organizing. Growing up in an overwhelmingly White Germanic Midwestern town led me to absorb cultural messages about the “correct” way to be. These cultural messages correlated nicely with the professional community organizing ethos of hierarchy, strict adherence to organizing orthodoxy, and pragmatism. Many of these organizing themes are mirrored in Okun and Jones’ writing about white supremacy culture, namely, a sense of urgency, quantity over quality, only one right way, paternalism, power hoarding, either or thinking, and individualism (2001). Aside from this, I assume my whiteness has influenced every decision I
have made in life, including in the unfolding of this research undertaking. For example, the focus of this dissertation is about gender, as it is an identity I readily relate to, rather than my identity as a white person. Following a critical theoretical orientation for qualitative research, true neutrality and objectivity are impossible and we are all products of our experiences. However, I have made a concerted effort to be aware and explicit about the way this impacts my research. My personal experience inspired my desire to understand if other women faced gender exclusion in professional community organizing. I wanted to understand what the experiences of other women were like, if and when they faced barriers, how they traversed them (or didn’t). I was curious if other women had experiences like mine, or how they differed. It was my hope also that we could learn together about what dreams we had for a model of organizing that would have space for everyone.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Though Alinsky’s model of community organizing was mostly conceived as being an ideologically neutral, pragmatic practice, albeit a conflict oriented one, (Kurinsky & Petkoff, 2016), contemporary models have embraced radical progressive imagination as necessary for our times (Engler & Engler, 2016; Lesniewski & Doussard, 2017). Progressive community organizing is now concerned with resolving broad social inequities, shifting imbalances in power, addressing internalized oppression, as well as leftist political education (Pyles, 2009).

Critical Theory

Critical theory seems an obvious framework for understanding social inequity and power dynamics that operate in our world and that community organizing seeks to impact (Brady & Connor, 2014; Carey & Foster, 2013; Ellwanger, 2013; Postone, 2006; Pyles, 2009), as well as the way those same forces impact the internal work culture of community organizing. Critical theory assumes that the material realities we encounter every day shape the way our society functions as well as a dialectic understanding of social forces and corresponding counter-forces – including those found in professional workplaces (Allen, 2006; Brady & Connor, 2014; Hungerford, 2008, Pyles, 2009). More importantly, critical theory can be used in the case of this study to analyze the ways that neoliberal capitalism impacts the professional lives of my respondents through the processes of responsibilization and retraditionalization.
The founding of the Frankfurt School in 1923 is often considered the birth of critical theory. Historically critical of capitalism, the Frankfurt School was originally to be called the Institute for Marxism (Jay, 1996). Contemporary critical theorists continue to critique capitalism, discussing particularly a form of political economy known as neoliberalism. According to political theorist and radical geographer David Harvey:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (2005, p. 2).

In addition, neoliberalism is accompanied by the weakening of organized labor and a global race to the bottom by capital to access the most inexpensive labor. Feminist and critical theorist Wendy Brown bluntly describes neoliberalism as “an opportunistic attack by capitalists and their political lackeys on Keynesian welfare states, social democracies and state socialism” (2019, p. 18). Mimi Abramowitz, social welfare scholar, highlights how thirty years of neoliberalism have harmed women in particular by cutting social services utilized by women and children, eliminating public sector jobs, and decimating unions (2012). Neoliberalism also has significant impact on organizing outcomes, often limiting and shaping how communities organize and what they can win (Krings, Kornberg & Lane, 2019).

Another key tenant of critical theory was the critique of logical positivism, an epistemology that preferences “verifiable” empirical knowledge over other forms of knowing (Baert, 2005). Critical theorists found this perspective limiting — so much is worth learning, observing and communicating that is beyond empirical knowledge, and that there are many ways of knowing. In addition, they found that the exclusive focus on empiricism left out the ability to analyze and theorize about society more broadly. About logical positivism’s applicability to the
social sciences, Horkheimer, a philosopher of the Frankfurt School, states the following, “the self-knowledge of present-day man is not a mathematical knowledge of nature which claims to be the eternal Logos, but a critical theory of society as it is, a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life” (Groff, 2014, p. 195). This is not to say that there is no place for science and fact within critical theory, but that facts derived by empiricism only present one dimension of a very complex reality. Critical theorists view positivism’s claims to pure scientific neutrality with suspicion. They assert that claims to ‘neutrality’ in theory and practice are not only disingenuous, but can actually be considered conservative (Baert, 2005). Critical theorists state that in an unequal society such as ours claims to neutrality avoid taking sides and thus aids the continuation of inequality. Indeed, philosopher and social critic Slavoj Zizek states, “truth is partial, accessible only when one takes sides, and is no less universal for this reason” (2009, p.6). This aligns well with the methodology used for this study, interpretive phenomenology.

Though critical theory is mainly associated with critical philosophical perspectives like the Frankfurt School, many social work scholars have also embraced a critical stance for their social work theory and practice (Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Reisch, 2016; Seelman et. al, 2021). Jan Fook, for example describes a critical approach to social work as, “A commitment to a structural analysis of social, and personally-experienced problems, i.e., an understanding of how personal problems might be traced to socio-economic structures, and that the ‘personal’ and ‘political’ realms are inextricably linked” (2002, p. 5). These social workers are critical of social work practices that claim to be neutral and are critical of social work’s role as an agent of social control and oppression in society (Fook, 2002, Seelman, 2021).
Feminist Critical Theory

Feminist critical theory, namely the work of Nancy Fraser and Wendy Brown, is utilized to understand the ways that women navigate their identity in a workplace that is unwelcoming to them, while balancing invisibilized undervalued care work. While wealthier women may be able to pass on much of the reproductive labor of their household (cooking, cleaning, childcare if needed) to poorer women, community organizers can rarely afford to do so (North, 2013). Many feminist critical theorists have critiqued they ways that neoliberalism has impacted gender.

Regarding whether and how neoliberalism has impacted gender subordination, Brown states,

I think the answer is that gender subordination is both intensified and fundamentally altered. The intensification occurs through the shrinking, privatization and/or dismantling of public infrastructure supporting families, children and retirees…Put another way, ‘responsibilization’ in the context of privatizing public goods uniquely penalizes women to the extent that they remain disproportionately responsible for those who cannot be responsible for themselves (2015, p. 105).

Professional women in community organizing are impacted by this dynamic. They cannot afford¹ to outsource their care responsibilities to poorer women, and therefore must balance any care responsibilities at home while making ends meet at a low paying yet demanding job.

There are issues of gender subordination internal to community organizing as well. Community organizing is meant to be an emancipatory endeavor but has often faced (and sometimes silenced) criticism of gender exclusion within its professional ranks (Kainer, 2015; Mizrahi, 2007; Rooks, 2003; Stall and Stoeker, 1998). Also important is the demand put on women to do care work at work. This work may be necessary for the health of the organization but can remain invisible or dismissed by the employer. Emotionally supporting colleagues, superiors, volunteers — often men – may be expected but not recognized as work (Acker, 2006;

¹ According to Zippia, a website dedicated to career advancement and information, the average salary for a community organizer is $46,000. According to Indeed, a similar site, the average is $43000.
Kennelly, 2014). Feminist critical theory pays particular attention to the unpaid labor women often do to care for others emotionally and physically (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Payne, 2005), including in settings both inside and outside the home (Gunaratnam & Lewis, 2001; Hochschild, 2012). Invisible labor in the form of care and support for colleagues and superiors at work is often exhausting, alienating and debilitating (Brook, 2009) and is frequently foisted on to women and people of color without their consent (Gunaratnam & Lewis, 2001). The assumption that women will cover the underappreciated care work has been found to be mirrored in the community organizing field (Kennelly, 2014).

Feminist critical theoretical perspectives help frame the struggles described in this study. If society places undue caregiving and emotional demands on women (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Hochschild, 2012) while simultaneously pushing them into essentialized gendered roles (Adkins, 1999; Banks and Milestone, 2011), and community organizing is a demanding field, women may often feel that they are constantly coming up short as they try to meet all of the implicit and explicit demands of their job and life (Craddock, 2019; Feekin & Widenor, 2003; Kennelly, 2014). This dynamic is further complicated in fields, like professional community organizing, that have typically been dominated by men and value characteristics that are stereotypically considered “masculine” (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). Women in these positions are often expected to act in stereotypically masculine ways, but sometimes paradoxically punished when they do so – often by partners or family members who feel they are not fulfilling care duties or see them as “too masculine” (Eagly & Karau, 2002), or conversely may be pushed into menial tasks, care tasks and retraditionalized gender roles at work (Adkins, 1999; Banks & Milestone, 2011). While fields like construction and stock trading may be stereotypically male dominated careers, one may not assume the same about community organizing. However, Acker
finds that while organizations are considered to be gender neutral entities, they actually value and replicate traditionally male values and traits (2006). She goes on to describe organizational bureaucracy as a way to further hide preference for masculinity and male attributes. In this model, the feminine is seen as weak and a hindrance to productivity. Men are seen as decisive, directive, competitive, strong leaders and achievers, while women are seen as good supporters but weak leaders. Acker finds a strong preference for the former traits in professional life. These are also traits deeply valued by neoliberal capitalism (Gershon, 2011). Because the literature has described organizing as unwelcoming to women (Kainer, 2015; Mizrahi, 2007; Sen, 2003; Stall and Stoeker, 1998), it makes sense that feminist critical theory be utilized to understand women’s experiences as professional community organizers.
CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

In order to understand women’s experiences as professional community organizers, it is helpful to discuss the history of professional power-based organizing. Though organizing existed long before him (See, for example, Eric Arneson’s work on Black labor organizing before the 1930s; and research on Black Women’s Clubs active in the 19th and early 20th centuries — for example Shaw, 1991; Rief, 2004), as well as alongside him (particularly in the civil rights movement — see Payne, 1995), power-based community organizing (especially in Chicago) is usually attributed to Saul Alinsky, who is likewise credited with making community organizing into a profession. Alinsky began his career in Chicago, initially shadowing Chicago mobsters and eventually labor organizer John L. Lewis (Alinsky, 1949; Horwitt, 1989, Phulwani, 2016). Taking several principles gleaned from working with Lewis, Alinsky adapted them to suit a community-based approach rather than labor, soliciting the support of Catholic priests and other community leaders to work together for community change (Engle, 1998). Over time a clear model of Alinsky-based organizing was formed with extensive training being a primary component (Alinsky, 1971). In a study outlining the professional community organizing model utilized by ACORN in the 1980s, Stein states, “Since most of these groups utilize professional social worker ¹ Saul Alinsky in the 1940s, and as formal and informal networks link organizers

¹ Saul Alinsky was not a social worker, though he did study sociology at University Chicago from 1926 – 1932 (Engel, 2002).
throughout the country, it is indeed possible to talk about [Alinsky-based] ‘community organizing’ in the U.S. today as a somewhat coherent phenomenon, despite a diversity of local approaches” (1986, p. 93).

**Critiques of Alinsky-Based Organizing**

Much has changed about power-based organizing since the days of Saul Alinsky. Though Alinsky has made a significant impact on the development of this model, it is inappropriate to label it “Alinsky-style” organizing. Deep and serious critiques of Alinsky’s model have been leveled at and have impacted the way community organizing is practiced. Many organizers, scholars and community members have accused Alinsky-based organizing of being exclusionary of marginalized groups by avoiding the discussion of race, gender, class and other ‘identities’ that could be seen as divisive (Kainer, 2015; Mizrahi, 2007; Rooks, 2003; Stall & Stoeker, 1998; Stein, 1986; Su, 2010; Wilkinson & D’Angelo, 2019). Others have found Alinsky-based organizing to be short-sighted, eschewing long-term vision in lieu of short-term gains. Concrete short-term campaigns to get a new stop sign put up at a dangerous intersection, for example, were favored over larger projects with ambiguous outcomes such as political education. The focus on outcomes rather than process has proven counter-productive, leaving out vulnerable constituencies, ceding ideological battles to the right, and abandoning long-term projects such as consciousness raising and deep community building (DeFillipis et. al., 2010; Kurinsky & Petkoff, 2016; Lesniewski and Doussard, 2017; Stein, 1986; Su, 2010). These and other critics argue that this model abandoned the vision building project, leaving the field open to conservative and right-wing values, and that those values have taken hold (Stein, 1986; Rich, 2005). Jane McAlevey, writer and labor organizer, interviewed organizer Steve Williams who observed the following about Alinsky’s anti-ideological pragmatism, “The ramifications render
the Alinsky model impotent relative to so many contemporary challenges because ideology is a central front of the rightwing, and therefore, the left must contest in this arena” (2015, p. 437). Relatedly, community organizers have critiqued Alinsky’s focus on hyperlocal place-based solutions, noting that national and global forces and structures impact community members’ everyday lives (Calpotura & Fellner, 1996; DeFillipis et. al., 2010; Delgado, 1998; McKnight and Kretzmann, 1984; Stein, 1986). In response, many organizations banded together to form larger coalitions and national organizing bodies such as ACORN, Gamaliel, and NPA. Others became so frustrated with the weaknesses of this organizing model that they left and created their own models of organizing (Gutierrez et. al, 1996; Mizrahi, 2007; Sen, 2003; Stall and Stoecker, 1998).

**Answers to the Critiques: Realigning to Address Intersectionality and Global Crises**

These critiques have not gone unheard, and socio-political changes have also demanded that power-based organizing reconsider some of its residual Alinskyite assumptions if the field wishes to remain relevant. Community organizers have begun to center issues of culture and identity particularly around race and ethnicity, but also gender and class (Liesniewski and Doussard, 2017). Racial justice issues are more frequently centered and campaigns are dedicated to ending racist policies (United Frontline Table, 2020), or towards replacing problematic politicians, such as Anita Alvarez, the former Attorney General of Illinois, who made a career based on policies punitive towards communities of color which she framed as being “tough on crime” (2016, Lulay).

After the crash of 2008 and the subsequent uprisings, community organizers have acknowledged the value of social movements as a response to widespread crises. Many have attempted to integrate certain aspects of movement building into their organizing practice
(DeFillipis et. al. 2010; Lesniewski and Doussard, 2017; Engler and Engler, 2016). This combines the ability to mobilize a large number of people with a new embrace of ideology and values. Organizers are increasingly trying to articulate and imagine the world they are trying to build (United Frontline Table, 2020). Organizing training now may incorporate social critiques of systems of oppression such as racism and global capitalism (People’s Action Training Manual, 2017).

To address the scale of the social problems community organizers now face, they are building coalitions to create a united front, sometimes partnering with organizers across the globe. Advances in technology have made communication between coalition partners, campaigns and social movements easier – mass texts, tweets, and other mediums make the sharing of data rapid and free or inexpensive. Videos of police or army response to protesters, strategy documents, up-to-date action planning, and issue frames can all be shared widely in a matter of minutes (Engler & Engler, 2016; DeFillipis, et. al, 2010).

Since Alinsky’s time, all of these dynamics have impacted power-based organizing. Though it's Alinskyite roots are still visible, they are increasingly contested. Most power-based organizing models now center on issues of racism and economic inequality, employing ideology to communicate the organization's vision for long term change (DeFillipis, et. al., 2010; Lesniewski and Doussard, 2017; United Frontline Table, 2020). This new embrace of ideology has breathed new air into organizing. Political education about various forms of oppression is more often integrated into every level of training. With respect to this study, many of the respondents reported feeling grateful for the opportunity to examine their own internalized oppression and complicity within systems of oppression that harm themselves and others. This included awakenings about gender oppression and discrimination, some of which they ironically
experienced through their work as professional organizers. This is perhaps not surprising, however. Organizing, though it has changed over the years to meet the demands of a changing world, remains of-the-world. That is, professional organizing is a product of society and will therefore reflect, just like all professions, some degree of the same dynamics exhibited in broader society: gender subordination, racism, meritocracy etc. In the next section I will discuss some of these forces and their potential impact on professional community organizing.

**Professionalization and Organizing**

**The Impact of Funders**

To understand what professional community organizing is and the pressures that women in that field face, it is important to understand the dynamics that contribute to professionalization in that field. It has long been argued that the resources an organization receives will impact the organization in various ways (Cress & Snow, 1996, Cress & Snow 2000; Della Porta, 2017; Faber & Auriffeille, 2005; Markus, 2015; Mosley, 2010; Piven & Cloward, 1979). Though resources and formalization can strengthen an organization so that it is sustained during slow periods of organizing activity, when mass participation wanes (Staggenborg, 1988), formalization and funding have an ambivalent relationship with community organizing. For example, in community organizing, foundations and elite donors have often been regarded with suspicion out of a concern that they will co-opt or tame radical politics of organizing institutions (INCITE, 2007; Jenkins & Eckert, 1986; Jenkins, 1998; Piven & Cloward, 1979). Even progressive foundations tend to be focused on metrics and have demands that are not necessarily aligned with the goals of the organization (INCITE, 2007). Funders may rely on benchmarks and outcomes to measure the effectiveness of the work their money is spent on. This often focuses the professional organizer’s work on quantifiable benchmarks like the number of people in
attendance at a meeting or the number of signatures on a petition rather than long term transformative goals (Petitjean, 2017). This focus on quotas, grant reporting, and quantifiable outcomes can cause organizers to feel overworked or burnt out, and cause them to neglect important parts of their work that are not quantifiable, such as relationship building (INCITE!, 2009, Hwang and Powell, 2009). One nonprofit director in Hwang and Powell’s study on professionalization in the nonprofit sector stated

> Every single grantor we have has a different evaluation tool or format or criteria they want us to use, and we measure all of them. Once you get it down, it changes and they want different information than before. Every year more and more time goes into the reporting and less time to actually working with people (p. 289).

One can imagine how this would impact already busy community organizers’ workloads. Professional community organizing has a history of relying on metrics since its inception to calculate whether a campaign can be won based on the number of people ‘organized’ or mobilized (Alinsky, 1971; Engel, 1998; McAlevey, 2015). The “power” of a power-based organizing institution is often measured by both social scientists and organizers in resources (Della Porta, 2017). For many organizers these resources were quantified by the amount of “organized people”, or “organized money” possessed by the organization (Stein, 1986). These are described throughout the organizer training process to be the tools needed to win campaigns. This emphasis on numbers is both internal to the organizing model and rewarded by funders and donors. These dynamics become important to this study because as donor demands impact workloads, they directly impact the professional organizers flexibility at work. Donors begin to define what constitutes “good organizing” and women organizers have less leeway to define their own path based on their needs and abilities as workers.
The Professionalization Boom and New Public Management

The professionalization boom in the latter half of the 20th century impacted all fields of work in the United States (Hwang & Powell, 2009) around the time Saul Alinsky was building up his model of professional community organizing. So-called “professionalization” impacted almost every field, to the degree that Harold Wilensky wrote an essay entitled, “The Professionalization of Everyone?” (1965). Many fields, including the nonprofit sector, added management professionals whose job it was to make sure the organization functioned in a professional manner. Hasenfeld and Garrow describe how professionalization has played out in the more recent neoliberal era using a term called *new public management*. New public management, like the professionalization boom described by Wilensky, has been pervasive in all fields and is characterized by competition, performance and output measures, cost-effectiveness and corporate management strategies (2012). Abramovitz notes that this dynamic has pushed social service agencies to be “run like a business”, encouraging a variety of changes including “faster work, measurable outcomes and monitoring” (2018, p. 4). Hwang and Powell’s study on professionalization among nonprofits describes the process of ‘rationalization’ as fundamental to the way nonprofits changed to become more professional. They state, “Rationalization denotes the integration of formalized roles and rules around unified sovereignty, entailing the construction of nonprofits as ‘actors’ with clear identities” (2009, p. 272). Foundations encouraged this process by rewarding ongoing trainings, quantifiable metrics, and bureaucratization. Indeed, in Hwang and Powell’s study of 200 nonprofits, "The prime carriers of rationalization in our study are managerial professionals and foundations" (2009, p. 293). In non-profits, the culture of the organization is pushed to “rationalize” both by internal management staff and external forces such as funders.
The culture of community organizing reflects this dynamic as well. Professional community organizing requires extensive training on the practice and principles of the field (Alinsky, 1971) as well as managerial trainings on topics like time management and effective supervision. Indeed, one researcher described the field thusly: “community organization is a highly bureaucratized and formal operation of progressive politics...The resulting organization has a rigid structure, a bureaucratic arrangement of authority, and formal set of rules for collective action.” (Ellwanger, 2013 p. 206, 212). Professional power-based organizing, therefore, refers to organizing in which professionals are paid to run campaigns by mobilizing community members to push for systemic change using a systematized and bureaucratized process.

This dynamic has resulted in a top-down decision-making style and is exemplified in Alinsky’s descriptions of both the process of organizing and the training of professional organizers. For example, Alinsky describes with pride his special ability to cut deals with power-brokers behind closed doors, like Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly, whose tenure included the Memorial Day Massacre—a labor demonstration gone awry when police killed ten unarmed union demonstrators during a steel strike (Norden, 1972; Kurinsky & Petkoff, 2016). These highly developed skills and special abilities meant that professional organizing staff were situated to lead and make decisions, while community participants ought to follow. While superficially, community volunteers/leaders were visibly at the forefront, organizers were often manipulating from behind the scenes. In this model, community leaders could become props, essentially, while organizers quietly influenced the direction of campaigns. The line between professional organizer and voluntary leader became very clear, with the small, professionalized staff at the top of the bureaucratic pyramid. Jane McAlevey, longtime union organizer, described Alinsky’s
method as a departure from early labor organizing, “Alinsky’s ‘people’s organizations’ — what he called ‘O of O’ or Organization of Organizations — were top-down rather than bottom-up formations, staff-driven and focused more on tactical warfare\(^2\) than on keeping people organized to control their own destiny” (2015, p. 417). This is in contrast to early\(^3\) labor organizing that occurred prior to Alinsky, when participation was more evenly distributed throughout union membership to maintain rank and file democracy (McAlevey, 2015; McAlevey & Ostertag, 2014). As one seasoned organizer put it, “Alinsky did not invent community organizing, but he did codify it into a practice” (McAlevey, 2015, p. 419).

As discussed previously, funders have a role to play in this dynamic as well. The emphasis on metrics combined with the growth of professionalization and managerialism (Wilensky, 1964) has caused many funders to favor nonprofits with highly trained staff, quantifiable measures of success, bureaucratic procedures (Hwang & Powell, 2009) and pragmatic centrist politics (Jenkins, 1986). That these dynamics would impact professional organizing particularly makes sense given its lineage. Saul Alinsky created both a formal funding and training apparatus. He relied heavily on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development begun in the Archdiocese of Chicago for support (Engle, 1998). These apparatuses helped him facilitate the professionalization of a field previously dominated by volunteer organizers who did most of their learning on the job and who saw themselves on equal footing with the people they organized rather than as experts (McAlevey, 2015). This dynamic continues in professional

---

\(^2\) “Tactical warfare” here means a focus on creative tactics used to demand that a person in control and power or resources make those available to the community organization, to cede some of that power to the will of the community organizer and leaders.

\(^3\) McAlevey describes key moments when democratic representation for rank-and-file union members was lost – the first being when the more radical and representative CIO joined with the more conservative and craft-based AFL in 1955 after the CIO was severely weakened by McCarthyism (2015, pp. 29–31).
community organizing today. Though professionalization served to legitimize many careers, including nonprofit work and community organizing (Hwang and Powell, 2009), it also created rigidity, a sense that there is only one right way (and many wrong ways) to organize. The formal training and funding apparatus connected to community organizing reinforces this through organizer education and grant expectations. This rigidity limits flexibility, which many workers need, especially workers with care responsibilities at home. It also limits women’s ability to stand up to the norms of the apparatus, who’s reach and power can make it seem impossible to contest.

**Gender and Community Organizing**

**Women Organizing Prior to Alinsky**

The model of professional power-based organizing often credited to Alinsky is not the only method of organizing by any means. It is preceded by a militant labor movement in the US, which has been well documented, and lesser-known activist work done by women. For instance, in Chicago, Black women’s club members worked to improve the lot of their communities, fight lynching, and organize for the right to vote (Knupfer, 2006). These Black women’s clubs often formed nation-wide organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (Rief, 2004; Shaw, 1991). They also admonished White women for excluding them from the suffrage movement and ignoring the plight of Black women. These club members traveled internationally to educate foreigners about lynching, economic oppression and learn about the colonization of Black communities globally (2004).

In addition, the often White middle-class and upper middle-class women of the settlement house movement engaged in their own forms of organizing. Jane Addams’ Hull House for example often hosted organizing meetings for women’s labor unions in Chicago
(Brieland 1990), and organized demonstrations against the capture and assassination of Sacco and Vanzetti (Selmi, 2001). Jane Addams also helped to co-found the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the NAACP. Through this work she often collaborated with key leaders from the National Association of Colored Women and included prominent member Mary Church Terell on the executive committee of WILPF (Rief, 2004).

These women engaged in international gatherings and conferences to discuss peace with women all over the world. Black women, though often underrepresented at these gatherings, gave invaluable perspective. For example, at an international peace conference in 1919, Mary Church Terell addressed the otherwise all white group by saying, “You may talk about permanent peace till doomsday, but the world will never have it until the dark races are given a square deal” (Rief, 2004, p. 212). These models of organizing differ from Alinsky’s model and may not constitute “professional” power-based organizing, but they certainly made a difference to the communities impacted by these pioneering women activists (Brieland, 1990; Knupfer, 2006).

Feminist Models of Organizing

In addition to women’s organizing legacy prior to Alinsky, there are many other models that developed alongside or in reaction to Alinsky’s power-based professional community organizing model (Cossyleon, 2018; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1994; Mizrahi, 2007; Stall & Stoeker, 1998; Sen, 2003). Mizrahi’s longitudinal study of women organizers identified some key practice principals of feminist organizing for example (2007). Key approaches included: an “emphasis on collective problem-solving”, an “emphasis on process as part of the product or goal”, an “emphasis on consensus, cooperation, collaboration and coalition building” and “utilizing

---

4 These models are presented in the literature and here as ideal types. Many organizations and organizers utilize a blend of models and tactics.
consciousness-raising” (Mizrahi, 2007, pp. 40 – 42). Cossyleon’s study of voluntary (unpaid) participation in women-centered organizing by mothers revealed another alternative model. She states, “Women-centered organizing uses non-antagonistic tactics and focuses on self-sufficiency through community ties, economic independence, and education” (2018, p. 5). While some feminist models eschew conflict tactics (Cossyleon, 2018, Stall & Stoeker, 1998), some have critiqued the move away from conflictual tactics, noting that the move may have depoliticizing effects (Fisher & Shragge, 2000), but Gutierrez and Lewis’ work on organizing with women of color proposes a hybrid approach – using confrontational tactics when they are necessary with collaborative tactics when they are possible, with an attention to intersectionality of participants’ identities (1994). It also seems important to point out that the key founders of the Black Lives Matter movement were queer Black women (Petermon & Spencer, 2019).

**Women in Power-Based Organizing**

Power-based community organizing has changed a lot since its Alinskyite inception. Primarily this change has occurred by centering issues of race and income inequality rather than avoiding ‘politically divisive’ issues, integrating a long view of social change rather than focusing on pragmatic short-term gains, and more honesty and clarity about ideology (DeFilippis et al, 2010; Lesniewski and Doussard, 2017). Questions remain, however, about community organizing’s relationship to gender. Power-based organizing has frequently been accused of harboring a culture of “machismo” (Kainer, 2015; Mizrahi, 2007; Stall and Stoeker, 1998) or a “cowboy mentality” (Rooks, 2003). Rooks’ study on the culture of labor organizing in the US describes how that environment can be particularly hard for women. Work performance seemed to be measured by one’s willingness to relinquish one's free time to the job. If an organizer was “serious” about working for justice, they must give up everything else. The demanding nature of
the job was romanticized, characterizing the organizer as a martyr dedicated to the cause (2003).

Rooks identified that this dynamic caused extreme disruptions to organizers’ personal life, particularly for women who had care-giving roles at home. Kainer’s study of women labor organizers in Canada corroborated this theme, noting that, "All of the women interviewed spoke to the unbounded obligations of their work and the explicit expectations by their labor employers to fully commit to organizing” resulting in “problems, hardship, and anxiety in their personal lives” (2015, p. 110). Though the above studies are based on interviews with labor organizers in the US and Canada, it is likely that several of the themes could mirror community organizers experiences in the US.

Ellwanger’s work on the community organizer as a charismatic leader affirms that the culture of giving all of oneself to the work is mirrored in community organizing. Ellwanger noted that for an organizer to be trusted as the charismatic leader of a group, the organizer must appear selfless, giving much in order to gain nothing (tangible) but the empowerment of the whole (2013). It has been found that female participants in social movements also experience guilt based on gender. For example, the expectation to work hard and often is not only limited to paid professional organizers. Activists who participate voluntarily in organizing may struggle with the pressure to constantly be involved. Craddock's (2019) study of volunteer activists in the UK found that women, in contrast to men, frequently felt guilty about not doing enough of the “right” kind of activism, and that women's caregiving demands often prevented them from achieving the standard of "ideal activist". Craddock states, "it is argued that the ‘ideal activist' is male, given how the identity is narrowly defined by doing ‘enough' of the ‘right' type of activism (direct action) which results in women feeling guilty and blaming themselves for their perceived failure to achieve the identity" (2019, p. 138). Women activist’s contributions may be significant,
but if they are not the ‘correct’ sort, they are not valued by the organization. Behind the scenes work, including providing childcare, relationship building, and data entry may often be relegated to women and also discounted and invisibilized because these tasks are not “important” or “skilled” work (Craddock).

Though balancing caregiving, activism, and other roles can prevent full involvement in organizing activities, that may not be the only reason these female activists reported feeling guilt and self-blame. Kennelly’s phenomenological study with Canadian female volunteer activists found that regardless of how much activist work they were doing, women still exuded an “overwhelming – at times even crippling – sense of responsibility and culpability” (2014, p. 243). Kennelly found that women often were led to organizing because of their dismay about grave unfairness in the world, and their inability to watch so much suffering. Women’s taking up the mantle of the suffering of the world is not liberatory for women, Kennelly argues, but the result of retraditionalizing gender – while the structure of gender is debated, the social relation remains steadfast (2014). These women are doing the feeling work of the movement, and it can lead to burnout and an early exit from the movement (Craddock, 2019, Kennelly, 2014).

The above two studies examined radical voluntary activism and gender in Britain (2019) and Canada (2014). Rooks’ study on the culture of labor organizing showed that professional union organizing can be a difficult place for women to thrive professionally. Mizrahi has researched professional community organizing women in the United States and found some similar themes of exclusion and made suggestions toward building an alternative model of organizing for women (Dobie and Richards-Shuster, 2008; Mizrahi, 2007; Mizrahi and Lombe, 2006). The sample of 48 participants was drawn from a professional organizing conference for women convened in 1989, with 27 of them interviewed again in 2003. Over the course of those
13 years, only three of the 27 participants remained professional organizers. Though this study generated interesting and useful data, there is still much information to learn about women’s experiences as power-based community organizers in the contemporary milieu.

First, it is not clear in Mizrahi’s study what sort of community organizing the respondents participated in, for how long, and in what locale. Because so few remained in organizing in the second round of interviews, one wonders when the others left organizing and how long ago. This dynamic is less a critique of her study perhaps, and more indicative of the difficulties of surviving the professional organizing field. I hope to extend her study with a contemporary example, as much has changed since 2003, including a global financial collapse in 2008 that arguably had a significant impact on organizing culture (Della Porta, 2017). I also hope that my sample will allow for a deep dive into the experiences of these women organizers. The only study outlined above that utilizes phenomenological methods is Kennelly’s study of volunteer social movement activists in Canada. Thus, an in-depth phenomenological analysis of the experiences of professional power-based women organizers in a major US city could deepen our understanding of how women in power based organizing experience their professional lives.

Chicago remains a hotbed of power-based organizing. To my knowledge, there are no phenomenological studies on women’s contemporary experiences of paid community organizing in Chicago. This study aims to use a feminist critical theoretical lens to shed light on how women interpret and describe their experience as a professional organizer in that milieu, with a particular focus on their struggles, hopes, and reasons for organizing.
CHAPTER FOUR
METHODOLOGY

To understand women’s experiences of professional power-based community organizing in Chicago, I created an interpretive phenomenological study utilizing ten in-depth interviews. Phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for the study of nuanced lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Padgett, 2008; Patton, 2015; van Manen, 1990), including professional roles in specific fields (Smith and Nizza, 2022). This made it a good fit for my study on women’s experience of professional power-based community organizing. This methodology was also selected because I have personal experience as a professional power-based organizer. In some methodologies, prior experience with the research topic may be considered a prohibitive conflict of interest. However, it is acceptable and even encouraged in phenomenology for the researcher to have experience with the research topic (Moustakas, 1994; Preston & Redgrift, 2017; Smith and Nizza, 2022; van Manen, 1990). Finally, the theoretical underpinnings of interpretive phenomenology account for structural conditions which underlie any research and which impact our experiences. What Husserl called a lifeworld, Heidegger called being-in-the-world (or Dasein), and Merleau-Ponty’s lived body theory, all illustrate a foundational appreciation of contexts in which experiences occur (Horrigan-Kelly et al, 2016; Kennelly, 2017; Koopman & Koopman, 2018). The experiences of my respondents reflect structural dynamics that exist in the world around them, such as gender construction, the division of labor along gendered lines, and neoliberal capitalism, for example. Identifying a method that allowed for consideration for such dynamics was important.
**Interpretive Phenomenology Defined**

Phenomenology is the study of experience and has its roots primarily in the philosophy of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty (Finley, 2013). The two most common schools of phenomenological research in social sciences are interpretive phenomenology, which this study will utilize, and descriptive phenomenology. A brief word about their differences seems merited for the purposes of clarification. Descriptive phenomenology is attributed to Husserl and aims to understand and explicate a phenomenon that is relatively unknown using a systematic and precise method. Moustakas, for example, describes a clear step by step process by which a researcher can arrive at the essence of the phenomenon using descriptive phenomenology. The researcher must adhere strictly to the practice of “bracketing”, intentionally isolating and separating their experiences as much as possible from that of the respondents, to ensure that the presentation of the phenomenon is based on the data alone and free from any of the researcher’s preconceived notions or ideas (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

According to Laverty, “Bracketing defends the validity or objectivity of the interpretation [of data] against self-interest” (2003, p.32). The aim of descriptive phenomenology is to remove the self from the interpretation of the phenomenon to find its true essence. Descriptive phenomenology is also called “transcendental” phenomenology because it requires that the researcher must adhere to bracketing and other guidelines in order to “transcend” their preconceived notions (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This makes descriptive phenomenology more prescriptive than interpretive phenomenology, which relies on a more iterative process and includes rather than excludes the positionality of the researcher1.

---

1 A caveat about bracketing: Though not prescribed by all interpretive phenomenologists, Smith and Nizza suggest that if a researcher has prior experience with the research topic, reflexive practices such as journaling, memoing, or the creation of a reflexive statement prior to beginning research should be used. I created a reflexive statement and
Interpretive phenomenology, otherwise known as ‘existential’ or ‘hermeneutic’ phenomenology is concerned with individuals’ interpretation of their experiences and assumes that it is impossible for any researcher to completely “transcend” their relationship to the phenomenon at hand. This worked well for my study on women’s experiences of professional organizing, one that I shared with my respondents, as a former organizer myself. Heidegger, though a student of Husserl’s, moved from descriptive phenomenology towards hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. He viewed “phenomenology as an interpretive endeavor” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 7), and believed that transcendence or separation from the experience studied was impossible (Laverty, 2003). Laverty notes that Husserl, was occasionally critiqued by fellow phenomenologists as being too ‘positivist’ in his assertion that presuppositions could be bracketed to arrive at a pure understanding of the phenomenon. “Heidegger, on the other hand, further erased any distinction between the individual and experience, interpreting them as co-constituting each other and unable to exist without the other” and considered “bracketing as impossible, as one cannot stand outside the pre-understandings and historicality of one’s experience” (2003 p. 15).

Merleau-Ponty was also skeptical of Husserl’s assertion that we ought to bracket out our preconceptions. “Unlike Husserl, but like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty looks beyond the subject-object divide to try to gain insight into the concrete structures of worldly experience” (Carman, 1999, p. 206). Unlike Heidegger though, Merleau-Ponty focused on the human body and world as foundational to our understanding of how we experience things. Rather than considering experience as something that just happens in the mind, he describes our perceptions of experience as embodied:

---

engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the process of my study. Though not called “bracketing”, these practices did attempt to create awareness of my own preconceptions.
The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind, I have tried, first of all, to reestablish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world (...) the insertion of mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body and correlative, with perceived things” (Merlau-Ponty, 1964:p.3).

The experiences of my respondents often referenced the structures of the world around them, with some of the respondents even naming specific systems that they felt directly harmed by, such as racism, capitalism and patriarchy. Interpretive phenomenology, at least philosophically, encourages the researcher to be attentive to the structural backdrop in which their research occurs, but in my case, many respondents named that backdrop themselves. This makes sense, given that many organizers are encouraged to engage in consciousness raising activities through organizing, which would require them to reflect on their own experiences of systemic oppression. Though interpretive phenomenology has philosophical roots that are concerned with the way experiences are embedded in social structures, this has not always translated into research that appreciates context. Contemporary uses of phenomenology in social science research have been critiqued by some, saying that these research methods do not always embrace this situatedness that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty described as central to phenomenology. Sociologist Jacqueline Kennelly uses Merleau-Ponty to critique this strain within phenomenological research, stating,

Phenomenology has unfortunately, at times, been misrepresented as an approach to social research that focuses exclusively on the ahistorical and uncontextualized experiences of participants, taken as ‘truth’ without reference to larger systems of power, cultural constraints and historicity (see Creswell, 2012 for such a representation of phenomenological approaches). This is a highly problematic and impoverished reading of phenomenology and the potential it carries for complex and socially situated research (Kennelly, 2017, p. 306).

2 Merleau-Ponty, a Marxist as well as phenomenological theorist, was also fundamentally concerned with how material conditions impacted our experiences of the world, stating every system of production and property implies a system of relations between men such that their social relations become imprinted upon their relations to nature, and these in turn imprint upon their social relations.
Kennelly goes on to describe reembracing Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the body as the vehicle through which we experience the world as a way to course-correct phenomenology to resituate phenomena and experiences in the world in all its complexity of systems (2017). Perhaps due to the concerns outlined by Kennelly above – avoiding being reductive, thus robbing phenomenology of some of its usefulness, interpretive phenomenology tends to be less reliant on formalized research methods, instead allowing the method to be defined by the phenomenon in question (Sloan and Bowe, 2014). Rather than find the purest objective description of an experience of a phenomenon, as in descriptive phenomenology, (by bracketing and separating the self), interpretive phenomenology allows for meaning to arise based on the interactions between the data and itself – using the data to analyze the data (Laverty, 2003). This *hermeneutic circle* is described by Sloan and Bowe as, “the process of understanding a text by reference to the individual parts along with the researcher's understanding of each individual part, by further reference to the whole document” (2014, p. 10). Smith describes the hermeneutic circle thusly, “The hermeneutic circle is perhaps the most resonant idea in hermeneutic theory and argues for the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a whole series of levels. To understand the part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the part.” (2007, p. 5). In practice, the hermeneutic circle can look a variety of ways. For example, Hycner states “This will involve listening to the entire tape [or recording of the interview] several times as well as reading the transcription of number of times” to get a sense of the whole interview (1985, p. 281), or Smith gives the example of comparing a transcription extract with the rest of the full transcript (2007).

The theoretical underpinnings of interpretive phenomenology have been critiqued for not translating into a clear methodological approach for researchers who are new to
phenomenological research to use. (Laverty, 2003). Because interpretive phenomenology often is iterative and flexible, rather than reliant on a methodical process (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989), I selected a framework with clear benchmarks for a good interpretive phenomenological study, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2011a; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith and Osborn 2003). Smith is careful to state that his “guidelines are not prescriptions, and that there is room for adaptation, particularly as a researcher becomes more confident” (2011b, p. 57), but as a new researcher, I was glad to have his guidance to adhere to. Two articles deemed to be exemplary of the IPA process by Smith and Nizza (2022) will now be reviewed to illustrate the IPA process. These are not directly related to my research topic but illustrate the best practices of IPA as outlined by Smith. These are followed by two examples of IPA studies focused on gender and work, to illustrate how IPA can be useful in explicating data similar to that of my study.

Examples of Interpretive Phenomenological Studies

IPA is said to be useful in studying “professional experiences, such as being a therapist or healthcare worker” (Smith and Nizza, 2022, p. 4) as well as life transitions. Huff et al. researched early-career engineers’ experience of their workplaces. The article first outlined the background of the professional field and its unique demands, and rational for method of IPA – that “the research question focused on nuanced, psychological phenomena” (2019, p. 453). Their study utilized a series of two semi-structured interviews with seven students, the first occurring one month prior to graduation and the second 5 months into their career. The goal of these interviews was to gain “rich and personal accounts of identity in their engineering contexts rather than descriptions of generic experiences” (Huff et al., 2019, p. 454). The researchers then utilized IPA standards for data analysis by reading through the transcripts twice, first listening to the audio file while reading the transcript, second while making notes about descriptive, linguistic and
conceptual items that piqued their interest in the transcript. This process was repeated for all interviews and then compared across the data and three key themes were discovered. These themes were then outlined in the findings with several quotes to illustrate them.

Conroy and de Visser’s study on student non-drinkers also uses IPA to learn about the lived experience of sobriety among college students. The IPA framework was chosen because, “IPA provides an idiographic framework well suited to understanding the lived experiences of individuals who share a common life phenomenon, while explicating the analyst’s efforts” (2015, p. 1486). Using semi-structured interviews with five respondents, this study described the experience of college students who choose not to drink alcohol. They utilized an “iterative approach to analysis” which “involved initial transcript notation, thematic coding and specification of superordinate themes” (2015, p. 1486). Conroy and de Visser presented four recurrent themes from the data and illustrated these with quotes from respondents.

Spiteri and Xeureb’s phenomenological study of women returning to work after maternity leave is a useful illustration of IPA as well. Purposive sampling was used to locate and interview 10 first-time married Maltese women who had returned to full-time work after maternity leave following the birth of their first child. Transcripts of 10 semi-structured interviews were read and reread to distill key themes. While the researchers read over the transcripts, general notes were made about phrases or ideas that might turn into themes (2012). Spiteri and Xeureb then compared these themes to each line of the interview, utilizing a hermeneutic circle to sense whether their themes were accurate. The authors also note that “a reflective journal was kept by the researcher, which was very useful during the analysis of the data; this is considered to be an integral part of the interpretive research process with phenomenological research” (2012, p. 204). Three group experiential themes were identified.
across the data with quotes supporting each theme. The authors chose to include at least five subthemes for each of the three group experiential themes. Unfortunately this made the data feel rather scattered. While it allowed for the authors to engage an idiographic approach, focusing on the particular rather than the general, it was difficult to follow the equally important patterns of convergence in the data (Smith and Nizza, 2022) or draw conclusions. Though the content of many of Spiteri and Xeureb’s themes shared some similarities to mine, for example their subthemes of role overload — exhaustion due to balancing care work and paid work (p. 207), or discrimination and lack of support at the workplace (p. 209), it was important to me that I learned from their example. Too many themes (or subthemes, as they called them) can make drawing out group theme convergence difficult and paints a scattered picture of the phenomenon.

Finally, I wish to examine an IPA study on women who work in the male-dominated profession of audit managers, and their choice to resign from that field. This study was of particular interest because the primary author was herself a former audit manager who had resigned from the field, and the authors state, “the researchers were interested in whether her reasons were similar or different to those of other women former audit managers” noting that, “one of the researchers was able to make sense of the lived experiences of the participants due to the background shared” (Groenewald & Odendaal, 2021, p. 918). Using purposive sampling, the authors identified six women for semi-structured interviews lasting an average of 43 minutes. The authors utilized an independent second coder familiar with IPA studies. The results included three themes, one of which contained two subthemes. Though this study offered less detail about the IPA process used than the above studies, the study bears some similarities to mine. The research was focused on women’s experiences in a professional field with a legacy of being male-dominated, and one of the authors had direct experience with the topic studied, just as I
have my own direct experience as a professional power-based organizer. Unfortunately, this article did not outline how the researcher who had direct experience engaged in thoughtful reflexivity, if at all. This may be due to page length restrictions in journal publications. The only article that mentioned researcher reflexivity was Spiteri and Xeureb’s study on women returning to work after maternity leave, in which the authors described keeping a “reflective journal” (2012, p. 204).

According to IPA researchers, Conroy and de Visser, “IPA is characterized by two broad phases: an empathic phenomenological analysis of individual experience from an ‘insider’ perspective is followed by an interpretative analysis from an ‘outsider’ perspective” (2015, p. 1486). In interpretive phenomenology, the researcher’s prior experience cannot be completely bracketed and is understood as inseparable from their interpretation of the data (2014). We are all, in a certain respect, “insiders”, because we (and the rest of the world and its attendant complexity) cannot be separated out from our analysis. While it is still necessary that the researcher understand clearly what their relationship and assumptions about the phenomenon are, these are not removed or erased. The researcher’s personal experience with a phenomenon can even aid in the interpretation and description of the phenomenon. In the case of this study, my prior knowledge and experience with the culture, language and norms of professional power-based organizing in Chicago aided in the analysis of the interview data.

Interpretive methods can incorporate reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Sloan and Bowe (2014) describe reflexivity as an approach in which “the researcher uses empathy or relevant prior experience as an aid to data analysis and/or interpretation of meanings” (p.12). Because the researcher’s experience can be taken into account, coconstitutionality can occur, wherein the divide between the subject and object of research is softened and participant and
researcher co-create the essence of the phenomenon through a reciprocal and dialogical process (Garko, 1999) The close proximity of the researcher to the phenomenon in question is not considered a hindrance in interpretive methods, but an asset. Preston and Redgrift state that interpretive phenomenology does not demand that the researcher remain neutral, and that “interpretive phenomenology contends that humans are unable to discard their prior knowledge, noting that it often leads them to a particular research topic in the first place” (2017, p. 8). This is also the case with me. When reflecting upon my own professional organizing experience, I became curious about the question of women’s experience within organizing. If I had not had that experience, it is unlikely I would have pursued such an area of study. Within phenomenological research, it is common for researchers to select topics with which they have personal meaningful experience (van Manen, 1990). In Young’s phenomenological study on female body comportment, for example, she describes her own experiences of being physically timid and unsure as a way to contextualize and enrich her description of the phenomenon (1980).

In this study on women’s experiences as professional organizers, I have personal experience and an evolving interpretation of that experience. I have practiced community organizing as both a volunteer and as a professional for the past decade and also as a woman and mother. I have a passionate curiosity about how women experience organizing as well as how this field can be more nurturing to women’s development as powerful organizers in their communities. As Binswanger states, “One learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be...the passion” (as cited in Finlay, 2013, p. 175). The embrace and intentional use of the passion of the researcher in interpretive phenomenology is viewed differently in descriptive phenomenology in which the researcher tries to isolate and separate their perspectives and experiences from the data.
Assumptions and Reflexivity of the Researcher

Even in interpretive phenomenology, in which a researcher’s situatedness is not completely erased, mindfulness of researcher bias is encouraged. Finlay notes that researchers must approach the data with, “critical self-awareness of their own subjectivity, vested interests, predilections and assumptions and to be conscious of how these might impact on the research process and findings” (Finlay, 2008, p. 17). Smith and Nizza note that while many interpretive phenomenological researchers are “insiders” who have had direct experience of the research topic, that this can be both an asset and a deficit. While being an insider may help with recruitment and data interpretation, they note that “insiders may have strong and personal ideas about the experience” (2022, p. 13). They recommend considering how the researcher might answer the interview questions and writing a personal statement about the researcher’s thoughts in the early stages of the study. I have been a participant in three studies on community organizing written by other scholars and have spoken and thought at length about my organizing experience. For this study, however, I wrote a personal statement about my professional organizing experience before gathering the data and kept a reflexive journal of my reactions throughout the research process.

My personal experience as a professional organizer is significant to me. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to organize both professionally and as a volunteer in power-based community organizing, and I believe this experience was profoundly formative and liberatory. It was also difficult, and at times I felt unable to participate based on caregiving demands I had as a mother. My experience of exclusion from full participation in community organizing is reflective of many of the critiques found in the literature discussed in prior sections of this dissertation. After the birth of my second child, my boss and executive director, also a mother, urged me to
ween my youngest child early so I could attend a weeklong community organizing training out of town. My children were often a cause of irritation at evening meetings, as there was rarely childcare provided. This occurred while I was volunteering as well. For example, at an evening meeting where my children were being particularly “disruptive,” it was suggested by a (different) visibly annoyed director that I start my own childcare cooperative, rather than continue to bring my children to meetings. As a busy single-parent working and going to graduate school, I did not have time to start a childcare cooperative so that I could continue to volunteer my time at that organization. I did not experience these events as aberrations in the professional power-based organizing field perpetrated by a few directors, but as part of the cultural norm of the field. I have worked professionally in four large power-based community organizing institutions and volunteered with several more in Chicago over the past decade but continue to see issues such as these crop up.

My personal experience as a professional organizer and mother colors my engagement with the data. While I was careful not to transpose my experience over those of my respondents and used reflexive journaling to try to be aware of my preconceptions, complete objectivity is not possible nor the goal of interpretive phenomenology. When respondents would share stories or experiences that spoke to the ways our working environment was patronizing and unwelcoming, I would often respond with recognition and solidarity. This meant that during the interviews I was not silent and distant, but open and reciprocal with the respondents — laughing, shaking my head, and feeling angry, sorrowful and hopeful along with them. This dynamic can be seen as a weakness, I was not a silent, objective recorder of information given to me by my respondents. However, in the methodology of interpretive phenomenology, some interaction and exchange is optimal to create a safe and open space where respondents' pain and joy are treated as significant
and seen. In this way, insider experience can enrich the data. (van Manen, 1990; Sloan and Bowe, 2014). Additionally, my experience with the data helped me to discern that this may be an issue worthy of study, helped me understand the experiences of my respondents, and helped me to access them via my personal network.

**Sampling**

Purposive sampling, “the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses” (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2015, p.2), is the traditional sampling method for phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007; Smith and Osborn, 2003). Smith and Nizza note that recruitment for participants in interpretive phenomenology “tends to occur through referral by gatekeepers, by other participants, [also known as snowballing], or through your own contacts” (2022, p. 15). Sample size is traditionally small for interpretive phenomenological studies, as the goals of data collection are idiographic in nature rather than general – the goal is for interpretation of the data to go deep rather than wide (Smith & Nizza, 2022; van Manen, 1990). The number of participants in interpretive phenomenological studies tends to be rather small, averaging about ten participants per study (Creswell, 2007; Spiteri & Xuereb, 2010; van Manen, 1990), with many studies having less than ten — some interpretive phenomenological studies being based on a single case-study (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Professional power-based organizers can be a difficult group to gain access to. I had many useful connections with women who currently organize professionally and leveraged these to gain access to 25 initial respondents. Additional connections were made upon the recommendation of initial respondents who shared my contact information with seven more interested prospective participants. Thirty-two professional power-based organizers were identified in total, but seven were removed due to not fitting the inclusion criteria of female-
identified paid professional organizers employed in power-based organizing for at least two of the past five years in Chicago. The definition of professional power-based organizing is explained in the literature review in more detail but can be summarized as a professional method of community organization with a highly trained paid staff who aim to redistribute power and resources more equitably for their community utilizing direct-action tactics (Bobo et. al, 2001).

Of organizers that fit the criteria, 26 were contacted, and 12 responded that they were willing to participate in the study. Of the 12, only ten were responsive and set up a time to be interviewed. All respondents were carefully de-identified by using pseudonyms and removing all identifying information. See Appendix F for a demographic table of respondents.

**Sample Characteristics**

I did not use a demographic survey with my respondents. I was concerned that it would compromise the trust needed to construct an alliance of safety and sharing about information that could be considered sensitive. The professional power-based community organizing universe is small, with many organizers knowing one another well. Organizers are often connected professionally via citywide, statewide or even nationwide coalitions, which can be a conduit for training, tools and information — but also gossip. The environment can be competitive and intense (North, 2013), and organizers protect their confidences carefully. Professional power-based community organizing in Chicago happens in a rather small community of people who know one another well, and I wanted respondents to feel safe speaking as freely as possible – indeed some did critique colleagues and even bosses, making anonymity very important. Several respondents did, however, share demographic information throughout the interview. For example, all non-white respondents shared about their ethnicity or race, and all mothers shared about motherhood. Seven of the ten respondents were parents of at least one child. Five of the
respondents had a child under the age of ten. Most respondents were in their twenties and thirties, and two respondents were in their 40s. All had been organizing for 5 or more years on a variety of issues like immigration, housing, electoral power, and restorative justice.

Three of the respondents self-identified as White, three as Asian, two as Latin American, and two as African American. Again, due to concerns about protecting anonymity and given organizers’ reticence to discuss their relationships to colleagues and supervisors in the field, I did not collect more detailed demographic information or use a demographic questionnaire. Any details about respondent’s identity were offered by them during the interview. Appendix F also contains a table of demographic information. Pseudonyms were created for each participant based on commonly chosen names in the average birth year of participants.

In the findings section of this dissertation, each initial quote from participants is accompanied by the participant’s race/ethnicity and parenthood status — if they are a mother they are introduced as such. The fact that racial or ethnic identity was mentioned by all respondents who were not White indicated the importance of that identity to these respondents, and many scholars have described the importance of ethnicity and race in qualitative research (Baca Zinn, 1979; Cannon et. al, 1988).

**Data Collection**

An open, interactive interview process is recommended for phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis as described by Smith (2011a; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith and Osborn 2003) typically utilizes semi-structured

---

3 This research considers race and ethnicity to be socially constructed, or as scholar Lelia Lomba De Andrade states, “race and ethnicity are products of social interaction and institutional relations” (2000, p.69). These social interactions and institutional relations are deeply significant in material ways, as many of my participants identify. Therefore, it was important to identify the race of respondents, as I have done on each of their first quotes presented.
interviews for data gathering. Smith and Nizza outline the importance of flexibility in the interview process thusly,

The guide is intended as a model for the researcher; however during the interview, flexibility becomes paramount...ultimately the interview needs to be a cooperative endeavor. When participants feel at ease and able to talk about what is important to them, their level of disclosure increases, making the data ‘richer’ (2022, p. 23).

The flexible nature of semi-structured interviewing allows the respondent to set the direction of the interview, focusing on topics important to them or raising new considerations that the researcher had not anticipated. This flexibility and responsiveness to the energy of the respondent is common in interpretive phenomenology. For example, Levin describes the importance of empathetic listening for phenomenologists thusly, “Our listening needs to learn receptiveness, responsiveness and care. Our listening needs to return to the intertwining of self and other, subject and object; for it is there that the roots of its communicativeness take hold and thrive” (Levin, 1989, p.223). For women to be open about their struggles and hopes in a very challenging and values laden field, empathetic listening and creating a feeling of trust and reciprocity was important.

Because in interpretive phenomenological analysis interviews are flexible and semi-structured, the interview guide needed to allow for flexibility. Smith and Nizza recommend a range of six to ten questions, starting with “a broad descriptive question concerning a specific experience” to help the respondent settle into the interview noting that complex or sensitive questions “are best kept for later on when rapport has been established and the participant is feeling comfortable and talking freely” (2022, p. 22). They also advise against combination questions which can be divided into two separate questions, as these may confuse respondents and disrupt flow. They also advise against highly theoretical questions which may be hard to answer directly (2022).
While my interview guide is six questions long and begins with a broad descriptive question – ‘why do you organize?’, I was still learning about phenomenology and had yet to discover the clear directives of IPA as described by Smith. Therefore, I included two combination questions, which really amounted to an interview guide that was longer than I intended and disrupted interview flow. In addition, I asked directly about respondents’ perceptions of their gender role within organizing, which is a highly theoretical question to include in an interview. Both of these issues with my interview guide represent weaknesses in my data, as they likely impacted participants’ ability to give detailed and rich answers. In the case of the two-part questions, several respondents had to interrupt the interview to ask me to remind them what the second part of the question was, for example.

These interviews took place between March 29, 2019 and November 3, 2019 at a location of the respondent’s choosing that was sufficiently quiet and where respondents felt comfortable disclosing their experience. Because I have interacted with many of the respondents in the past through my professional organizing work, the interviews often began with a brief check in on how they had been doing and some personal sharing from both myself and the respondent. Some participants, for example, asked after my children, who were often known to the respondent via protests, meetings and events. Participants seemed to feel comfortable complaining about their work or spouse or other personal life developments. After a degree of rapport was established, the interview began. The interview questions began with a broad question to contextualize respondents’ relationship to their work: “Why do you organize?” followed by other questions about their organizing experiences, hopes and challenges (see appendix A for the full interview guide). The interview questions were flexible and the content of the interview was dependent on the respondents’ answers. It occasionally made sense to skip some questions to give adequate
attention to other topics that came up in the interview, especially as I sensed a topic’s deep meaning for the respondent. The tone of interviews was varied but at some point during each interview, it became clear that each respondent cared deeply about their community organizing work. When respondents became passionate, the flexibility of a semi-structured interview allowed us to follow the path of that passion and hear the full breadth of a respondent’s experience. Immediately after each interview, I made detailed notes about my impressions of the interview including details not captured in the audio recording like location, body language, the presence of a pet or baby, as well as my own feelings about the interview. For example, I recorded reflections about participants’ ingenuity, resilience, or how much I related to their struggles of balancing unpaid caregiving with an intense career. The reflexive journaling process aided me in tracking any details that could enrich the data as well as engaging in researcher reflexivity.

Data Analysis

As previously stated, I utilized Smith’s process of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for this study. All interviews were recorded with permission from the respondents as per Loyola University Chicago’s IRB protocol. They were fully transcribed on my personal computer. The recording was listened to three times to be sure each transcription captured all data correctly. During the transcription process, I continued the process of reflexive journaling, recording my impressions, feelings and ideas throughout. The act of listening to and transcribing the interviews unveiled new insights about the experiences of participants and my own reflexivity. For example, during the first reading, notes were more like first impressions, while the subsequent readings often forced me to consider the meanings of participants’ statements more abstractly. This process of notetaking and reflection also helped me to consider
the structures that participants were coming up against, and occasionally naming in the text (capitalism, patriarchy, racism, ableism etc).

The coding process for my study was done manually, which is typical of IPA, as coding software has been deemed ill-suited for phenomenological studies (Groenewald, 2004; van Manen, 1990). Smith and Nizza state that coding software is most valuable when using a larger amount of data and that they, “would not recommend using such tools in IPA when you are still learning the ropes” (2022, p. 33) As a doctoral student using IPA for the first time, I would say that I am still ‘learning the ropes’, but this meant that I needed to spend more time and effort coding by hand. Using Smith and Osborn’s guidelines for IPA, notes about descriptive, linguistic and conceptual features of respondents’ statements were made on the left-hand margins of the transcript (2003). This process was repeated a minimum of four times per transcript to ensure as much pertinent information was gathered as possible. Smith and Osborn note that it is important to, “read and reread the transcript closely in order to become as familiar as possible with the account. Each reading has the potential to throw up new insights” (2003, p. 67). To track which notes were made on which date, different colored ink was used upon each reading. Doing this allowed me to track dates of transcription notes with my reflexive journal entries. The reading and re-reading of the transcripts with new notes taken each time encouraged me to discover new layers in what participants were communicating about their organizing experience, including metaphors used or unconscious but significant word choices. For example, on the second reading of Ashley’s transcript, I noticed that she used the metaphor of weaving and fabric to describe relationship building frequently. I then spent some time reflecting on what that could be illustrating about her organizing experience.
Once the series of notes were completed, *experiential statements*\(^4\) were written on the right-hand margins of the transcript and recorded into a spreadsheet. Corresponding quotes and page numbers for each experiential statement were also recorded on the spreadsheet averaging about 25 statements per interview. These experiential statements were then clustered into *personal* experiential themes for each interview. According to Smith and Nizza, the preferred method of clustering in IPA is to print experiential statements and cut them out so that each is on a separate piece of paper. They then recommend that you,

> “place all the pieces randomly on a large surface where they can be easily repositioned (e.g., a board, a large table, the floor). By working this way you will have a bird’s-eye view of all the experiential statements and be able to shift them around, grouping them in different ways while obtaining a spatial representation of the grouping” (2022, p. 43).

Therefore, experiential statements were printed out and cut up, then pasted on to notecards with corresponding illustrative quotes on the backside. After spreading them all out on my dining room table, I arranged and rearranged them until I started to make connections, using the quotes on the backs of the cards as well as the transcript to remind me of the context of the experiential statement. These were then clustered into piles and recorded on an Excel spreadsheet. Each cluster became a personal experiential theme based on the content of the experiential statements within the cluster. These themes were compared with the whole of the transcript (using the hermeneutic circle) to make sure they reflected the spirit of the interview as a whole. (Sloan and Bowe, 2014; van Manen, 1990). This was done for one interview at a time. The goal was to understand each respondent’s experience of professional organizing, her struggles and her hopes, before moving on to the next interview. This honored the idiographic nature of each woman’s experience. Only after this was done with each transcript were themes

\(^4\) Experiential statements were formerly known as emergent themes in Smith’s IPA process. I will be using the terminology advised by Smith and Nizza’s recent publication as it has the most up-to-date language (2022).
compared across the data to find commonalities and divergences among participants organizing experiences, struggles and hopes.

To compare the data across the interviews, personal experiential themes were combined and reshuffled into 288 notecards with corresponding illustrative quotes. These were then clustered into piles of group experiential themes. The first round of clustering resulted in 23 group experiential themes. Many of these themes could be further reduced into nine main group experiential themes, some of which included subthemes. These were further organized into three sections: struggles faced, hopes offered, and reasons “why I organize”. There were three themes about struggles: gender subordination in the workplace; conflicts within the professional power-based model (containing three subthemes: “one right way” of organizing; instrumentalized relationships; workaholism/overwork); and the sexual division of labor. There were three themes about hopes: building authentic relationships; engaging in trauma-informed organizing practice (containing two subthemes: healing spaces; time for rest and reflection) and a place for caregivers within organizing. Finally, there were three themes about why participants chose to organize: joy, systemic oppression and children. These themes were selected based on the following criteria: frequency of theme occurrence throughout data overall; the number of interviews in which a theme was present; the degree to which the theme reflected the overall story conveyed by the data; and salience across the data (was the theme accompanied by a rich description, detail, strong emotion for example). This is aligned with IPA as described by Smith.

---

5 Smith and Nizza note that because IPA research may result in a larger number of themes than can be useful in a paper, “it is often more effective to select a certain number of interrelated experiential themes to include in the paper, rather than try to include a condensed version of all themes” (2022, p. 65). Because this is a doctoral dissertation, all themes will be included, but Smith and Nizza gave an example of a study they did which resulted in eight themes. The article they published from the study included only five of these.
in which “a theme is judged as recurrent if it occurs in at least half the transcripts and only these themes are presented” (2011, p.21)

After the clustering of group experiential themes, a code-book was developed. Because this code-book was to be used by a peer co-coder, the initial longer list of 23 group experiential themes was used. A definition for each superordinate theme as well as one or two corresponding quotes from the data were included. The peer coder, a doctoral student of psychology familiar with the organizing model, was given two interviews to code as well as the code-book. I selected the interviews for the peer-coder based on a couple of criteria. One of the interviews I had been uncomfortable coding because I strongly disagreed with some of the respondent’s answers. I thought it important to allow another researcher to look at the transcript with fresh, and perhaps more unbiased eyes. The second interview I chose because the interview was with a Black organizer who works exclusively on issues impacting Black and Indigenous People of Color. Because I do not share that identity, I thought the co-coder, who is a Black recent PhD graduate, might glean new material from the interview based on her shared racial identity of the respondent, perhaps revealing some blind spot of mine. The peer coder read the interviews twice without the code-book initially to allow for her own internal responses to guide her. She then wrote down notes and clustered these into thirteen themes (see Appendix G for a list of co-coder themes). She then re-read the interview with the code-book in hand to see if her connections were reflected in the code-book or if new ones arose. Most of the new themes identified by the co-coder dovetailed with the personal experiential themes already identified for each interview and could be folded into the already existent 28 group experiential themes in the codebook. A debriefing interview was held over Zoom to discuss the outcomes of the peer coding process and discuss discrepancies. The co-coder and I agreed that most of the themes she identified
overlapped with the 28 themes in the codebook. The debriefing interview did result in one unique additional group experiential theme, “White supremacy”. This was very helpful to me, as a White researcher, who may have had a blind spot for such a code due to my membership in the majority culture in this case. This code was integrated in as a subtheme to the group experiential theme of “conflicts within the organizing model: one right way” and is elaborated on in the findings section.

Limitations

There are several limitations to using the method of interpretive phenomenology. The small sample size routinely used in such studies affords the ability to “gather the rich, first-person accounts of a phenomenon required for IPA” (Smith and Nizza, 2022, p. 14). This is useful for the study of the ideographic, or specific, rather than the generalizable. This means that the findings of the study speak to the particular experiences of its participants and cannot be generalizable to a wider public. Additionally, sampling was based on who I had access to via my community organizing network which could have skewed the sample to include people who had similar experiences of professional organizing to mine. This similarity could also be considered an asset, as Smith and Nizza note that homogeneity of sample can be helpful when focusing on a highly specific experience: “Participants need to be more ostensibly similar than they are ostensibly diverse so that differences between them are more likely to be accounted for by individual characteristics than by, for example, demographic characteristics” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 14). Accordingly, it is possible that introducing even more homogeneity in my sample could have helped focus the data more on the specificity of the experience and removed other potential distracting differences. My sample was rather diverse in regard to ethnicity and parenthood status. A stronger sample may have removed some of these differences, focusing on
one grouping, such as childless Latina professional power-based organizers in Chicago, for example. A sample such as this, that focuses on a single non-white ethnic/racial group, could have allowed me to use a more intentionally intersectional lens that more directly factored in racial identity as well as gender. While all of the respondents who were not White discussed their racial and/or ethnic backgrounds as important to their experiences of organizing, the diversity of the sample made it difficult to arrive at convergence across the data regarding a theme around this. One way I could have dealt with this problem is to ask about race directly, and how race and gender intersected for respondents. This could have brought intersectionality more squarely into the study and allowed respondents to describe their experience of intersectionality in their own words. The narrow focus on gender limits my study in some ways. Perhaps a future study could address race and intersectionality of professional power-based organizers more directly.

As previously identified, I stumbled onto Smith’s in-depth description of the IPA process after the data had been gathered. Though I designed the interview guide along some of his guidelines, it was only due to happenstance. The interview process was based on a much more rudimentary understanding of phenomenological principals and methods, and this impacted the strength of the interview guide. Questions were less clear and understandable than I would now prefer them to be for an IPA study. If funds were available, it would have been ideal to consult with an IPA researcher throughout the process to check some of my choices and advise me throughout the process. A peer-coder who has already completed several IPA studies, for example, could have advised my coding choices and could have done their own data analysis on a few transcripts. Because my funds were limited, I paid a friend who is also an academic to peer-code for me. She has completed qualitative studies, but, like me, was new to IPA.
Options for deepening this study could have included a second round of interviews (using a guide more squared with the principals of IPA). It would be interesting to longitudinally compare themes and how things may have changed (or not) for participants. This may be a possibility for continued research by me or other researchers interested in women’s experiences of community organizing.

In addition, though member-checking was attempted few respondents returned my requests for feedback, and the responses I did receive were brief. The member-checking process occurred over email during the COVID pandemic when many people were anxious and busy with pandemic-related concerns. Though deep co-constitutionality was the goal, this was curtailed by difficulty accessing respondents during a crisis. Member-checking will be discussed further in the next section.

Finally, my previous role as a professional power-based community organizer can be seen as potentially biasing this research endeavor. Though according to the norms of interpretive phenomenological research, personal experience and investment in the phenomenon studied can actually be considered an asset (Garko, 1999; Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1994), my experience and preconceptions needed to be accounted for. To address this, I created a personal statement about how I would answer the questions if I were a participant in my own study, so that I could be aware of my feelings and beliefs. I also engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the data gathering and analysis process, as recommended by Smith and Nizza (2022).

Provisions for Rigor

The quality of a phenomenological study is often based on the adherence to the steps outlined in the prescribed process of deriving the essence of a phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2003; van Manen, 1990). It is not always clear, however, how rigor is to be assessed in
phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). Several of the methods for assessing the rigor of qualitative analysis may be generalized to phenomenological research, including the use of member checking, the clarification of researcher bias, memoing, and thick description (of the experience of the phenomenon; Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological researchers may add specific criteria for the assessment of rigor in phenomenological research. Polkinghorne states, “The degree of validity of the findings of a phenomenological research project… depends on the power of its presentation to convince the reader that its findings are accurate” (1989, p. 57). Validity is determined by the reader’s assessment of the truth of the portrayal of the particular experience of the phenomenon in question (Hycner, 1985). Because interpretive phenomenology can be regarded as more of an art than a science (Finlay, 2009; van Manen, 1990), verifiability can be difficult to discern. Though phenomenology is an excellent method to uncover the experience of a phenomenon, its weakness may be in the difficulty of determining a study’s rigor. The more esoteric the method, the more complex it is to rely on standardized rules for determining rigor. Phenomenology demands a high degree of reflexivity and intentionality while not always providing guidance through clear documented procedure (Groenewald, 2004). As a new researcher, I relied heavily on the IPA guidelines outlined by Smith to navigate this ambiguity.

Hycner’s work on the interpretation of interview data in phenomenology (1985) offers some additional provisions for improved rigor. If possible, the researcher should include a team of readers to inspect the transcripts and verify the themes and key phrases. Hycner notes, “such independent verification is a helpful check in further establishing the rigor of the study” (1985, p. 286). For example, in Reitz’s study on batterers’ experiences of being violent, she assembled and trained a team to help evaluate themes for each of the nine transcripts which were then compared
and discussed in a group setting (1999). While I did not have the resources to assemble such a

team, I did pay for a peer to assist with coding two of the transcripts to provide some

independent verification.

Hycner continues on to describe techniques to measure validity in phenomenological

research. For Hycner, the perspective of the respondents is key: “they are able, at an experiential

level to validate the findings of the research, that is, whether the findings are valid for them”

(1985, 297). Because I have ongoing relationships with the respondents, I had hoped that

member checking would assist in ensuring validity. I sent an email to each participant inviting

them to engage in member checking, encouraging them to respond within a month and a half if

possible. The email, sent in March of 2021, included a draft write up of the findings and quotes,

with their quotes identified for them. While three participants responded, their responses were

brief and affirmative, expressing admiration about how far the research had come and such. One

respondent offered to meet via Zoom to offer more in-depth discussion, but when I followed up

several times to schedule, she was unresponsive.

**Rigor within IPA**

Thankfully, Smith has published an article on the evaluation of IPA studies. For Smith, an acceptable IPA study must meet the following four benchmarks: “clearly subscribe to the theoretical principals of IPA – it is phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic; sufficiently transparent so reader can see what was done; coherent, plausible and interesting analysis;” and have “sufficient sampling from corpus to show density of evidence for each theme” (2022, p. 17). Sufficient sampling in this case means that for a sample of more than 8, there must be

“extracts from at least three participants for each theme + measure of prevalence of themes or
extracts from half the sample for each theme” (2011, p. 17). I will address each of these four benchmarks in turn.

1.) Clearly subscribe to the theoretical principals of IPA: phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic.

Though Smith and Nizza are careful to clarify that, “IPA is not philosophy,” but an “approach developed for the close examination of participant’s experience” (2022, p. 6), it is rooted in phenomenology, the study of human experience. IPA is also one of the most concrete and concise interpretive phenomenological research methodologies. IPA is identified as ideal for “complexity, process or novelty” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 55). The study of women’s experiences as professional power-based organizers in Chicago is both novel and complex, with participants feeling hopeful and fulfilled in their experiences in some respects, while also experiencing frustration, barriers, and significant pressures as can be seen throughout the literature review and my findings.

Smith and Nizza note that hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, was influenced by Heidegger, who “considered that the meaning of experience was not always self-evidently visible and that getting at that meaning involved digging deeper beyond the surface appearance or encounter” (2022, p. 7). For IPA, both the respondent and the researcher are engaging in a hermeneutic endeavor. The respondent is trying to make sense of their experience during the interview and the researcher is trying to make sense of the respondent’s sense making, resulting in a “double hermeneutic” (2022). The hermeneutic endeavor on the part of the researcher often involves “detective work” (2022, p. 8), balancing attempting to understand the experience from the point of view of participants, as well as asking critical investigative questions from the data such as, “what is the person trying to achieve here? Is there something leaking out here that
wasn’t intended, Do I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of?” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p 54). IPA acknowledges that meanings of experiences are constructed “by individuals within both a social and personal world” (2003, p. 54), and that the researcher explores and interprets possible meanings within the data with this perspective in mind. What this means concretely is that a good IPA study should contain interpretation both in the findings section to accompany quotations and extracts, and in the discussion section (Smith and Nizza, 2022). The results section should cycle between quotations and interpretations, after quotations, “offer[ing] an analytic commentary on what is happening in the extract and how it illustrates the experiential theme” (2022, p. 59). The discussion section is a more abstracted version of this. Smith and Nizza note that because IPA is inductive, researchers may not know what the results of the study will be ahead of time and should be prepared to introduce new literature in the discussion section if needed (2022). In my results section, I attempted to engage in the rotation between quotations and interpretations as described above, while still retaining a narrative flow that attempted to honor the narrative arc of what respondents were communicating in their interviews, balancing the particularity of their voices with the ways that their stories converged with others. In my discussion section I introduced concepts from the literature that I had briefly introduced in the literature review but address more in depth when discussing my findings and the research question.

The third pillar of IPA’s theoretical underpinnings is idiography, or a focus on the particular. Smith and Nizza state, “There is in an interest in understanding particular experiences of particular people in particular circumstances and a belief that this is best achieved by focusing on single cases to be analyzed individually before making comparisons between cases (2022, p. 8). This is why during the data analysis phase, transcripts are read over so carefully and fully
analyzed before moving on to comparing themes across the entire data set. Smith and Nizza note, however, that this attention to the idiographic does not mean general statements cannot be made about the data, showing patterns of convergence across the data, but that close attention is paid to honor the particularity of participants’ narratives (2022). In my findings, I attempt to balance the convergence and divergence of participants’ experiences as they relate to the experiential themes presented. Though some respondents’ experiences overlapped in many regards, most had different reasons for connection with the theme. For example, some participants were concerned about childcare not because they had children, but because they organized people who had children, or because they had seen other professional organizers leave the field when they had children. I also tried to highlight when a participant had an experience that was counter to many of the others described, for example the respondent who was skeptical of the use of healing practices within the field of professional organizing.

2.) Sufficiently transparent so reader can see what was done:

The IPA process as described by Smith can be complex, and it is my first attempt at an IPA study. However I have done my best to highlight the steps I engaged in throughout the process. I selected the method of IPA as I was interested in a particular unique experience, that of being a woman engaged in paid professional power-based organizing in Chicago, to learn what their contemporary experiences were like. I have attempted to be transparent about my stake in this research project, as my own experience colors my desire to tackle this question in the first place. I have described the development of the interview guide, the data gathering process, analysis process and also any associated weaknesses I saw with my process.

3.) Coherent, plausible and interesting analysis:
I have attempted to balance coherence with fidelity to the idiographic nature of the data and the narratives offered by participants. Each theme is supported by multiple quotes throughout the findings section and interpreted, connecting the quotation to the theme and other quotations. In the discussion section I offer a deeper analysis of themes utilizing two key concepts from feminist critical theory to offer what I hope is an interesting interpretation of the findings.

4.) Sufficient sampling from corpus to show density of evidence for each theme:

Each theme presented in this dissertation is supported by data from at least half the sample. However, not all of these extracts were presented in the write up as quotations, sometimes because they were redundant, poorly worded or lacked descriptiveness. For that reason I have included tables in the appendices listing all extracts for each theme to illustrate a measure of prevalence. In the findings section of the dissertation, each theme is supported by quotations from at least three participants.
CHAPTER FIVE
STRUGGLES FACED

This dissertation explores women’s experiences of professional power-based community organizing in Chicago by asking: what struggles have they faced, what hopes do they have and why do they choose to organize? As discussed in the data analysis section, nine group experiential themes (and eight subthemes) emerged from the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process. The exploration of women’s experience as professional power-based organizers in Chicago is addressed by asking: how do respondents interpret their experience as professional organizers; what have they struggled with, what do they hope for, and why do they continue to organize? The themes correspond to these questions and are organized as: struggles faced, hopes offered, and reasons “why I organize”. The themes about struggles were: gender subordination in the workplace; conflicts within the organizing model (which includes three subthemes: one right way; instrumentalized relationships; workaholism/overwork) and the sexual division of labor/second shift. The themes about hopes were: building authentic relationships, trauma-informed organizing practice (which includes two subthemes: healing spaces; time for rest and reflection), and a place for caregivers in organizing. Finally, there were three main themes about why respondents organize: organizing for joy and liberation, organizing because of structural inequity, and organizing on behalf of children. These themes are explored by offering interpretive analysis between key quotations that illustrate how various respondents related to each theme (Smith & Nizza, 2022)
Gender Subordination in the Workplace

Professional power-based community organizing has been described as a field dominated by masculine ideals and male staff (Sen, 2003; Smock, 2004; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). While it may be expected that this has changed over the years, interview respondents reported continuing instances of gender subordination and gender-based exclusion at work.

Office Housework and Supporting Male Colleagues

A common complaint among respondents was the experience of having menial tasks foisted upon them or other women in the office. This dynamic has been documented and these menial gendered tasks have often been labeled “office housework” (Williams, 2014). Office housework may consist of tasks such as notetaking, scheduling, or other simple detail-oriented tasks. Erica, an East-Asian participant described office housework thusly:

This is my pet peeve. It is not necessarily organizing specific, but notetaking for example is one of those things I said I intentionally do not volunteer for...or I only do it when there is a rotation in place. And in the context of large-scale events: logistics roles always, always — like sign-in, or something that just requires a competent individual to be detail oriented. But men never get asked to do that. –Erica

Three of the interviews mentioned notetaking specifically but fulfilling office housework tasks can have much broader implications than being asked to do menial tasks like taking notes during meetings. If menial tasks are relegated to women on staff, is more meaningful work reserved for men? Erica expressed concerns about this:

When it comes to like, I don’t know, bold visionary stuff, I feel like women don’t really get asked to do that kind of thinking...When a man proposes this big bold idea, it’s met with all this praise and validation. Whereas the women just feel like, ‘I can’t—I either won’t get the same response if I do that, or I feel like I just can’t take the risk in this role. –Erica

1 These subheadings do not represent subthemes, as some of them (office housework and performing masculinity) did not have enough extracts to merit their own theme according to Smith’s IPA (Smith, 2011).
The “risk” involved in visionary leadership here sounds like it is experienced as unsafe. Though women like this respondent may wish to do bold visioning, they may feel it is risky speaking up because they will not be supported in the way their male colleagues are (with “praise and validation”) The language of risk makes one wonder if a reprimand of some kind would be expected, as if a balance had been upset or challenged. “I can’t take that risk in this role” makes the role sound precarious in a sense. Perhaps in some unspoken way she sensed that she would be encroaching on male territory? Indeed some respondents even described an unspoken expectation from male colleagues that the women of the office would support the men in their work and ideas.

**Males as Natural Leaders**

Though women may have important perspectives to share when it comes to bold visionary leadership, some respondents noted that women’s labor often went unnoticed at work, and one White respondent described how men were seen as the “experts”:

I think one thing that is visible is recognition of who’s an expert. I feel in that way that sometimes the labor of female organizers is not seen because there are still certain people who are seen as the smartest, or who know what the best way is…I had an experience when [a male colleague] started…he went in [to a coalition meeting] and wasn’t saying anything different from what [a woman colleague] had said but everyone was like, ‘Oh yeah, good idea!’ you know. Patriarchy, sexism, it’s still in the air. –Lisa

Because the men in her coalition were listened to, regardless of experience (the male colleague was described as having just started the job), it made the women in the room feel erased. A biracial Latina mother expanded on how her work felt invisible and unacknowledged:

I think the biggest thing is the unacknowledged and unappreciated amount of emotional labor that goes into building out programs and bases and even dealing with male co-workers and superiors…like all of this emotional labor, and also a whole bunch of labor that somebody else was taking credit for. — Ashley
The above quotes describe a tendency for people to support, encourage and trust men to lead professional organizing work. Men’s ideas are met with “praise and validation” by others. This sometimes was something male colleagues seemed to expect from respondents. One White mother respondent described some ambivalence about becoming the “woman behind the man” as she called it, in her former job—and refusing to do so in her current position:

I have stood up for him a lot because he's been a really great friend and super supportive. And now that we're working on a project he is just being a fucking drama queen and I just feel like this is how men in organizing are. And there is an expectation that I am just not going to fulfill with him of me being his cheerleader and saying his ideas are the greatest. And I just feel like that was pretty consistent in all the organizing I did, especially the higher up you get. –Lauren

The expectation that women would “cheerlead” for their male colleagues seems to suggest that men automatically were entitled to support for their ideas and leadership. In this framework, maleness is a precursor for leadership potential. Men’s ideas and plans and suggestions are somehow more useful, significant or trustworthy, and women should get behind them and support them.

**Leadership and Performing Masculinity**

Conversely, some women were encouraged to act more masculine in order to be seen as having leadership potential. If a woman is in leadership, one Black respondent reported, her comportment was retrained to align with the cultural norms of masculinity.

The way that we are taught and moved to be in leadership is very masculine. Even though they try not to do respectability politics. But the way that you have to dress\(^2\) as a trainer in the training room, the way that you have to project your voice and have a loud commanding...like gestures and just be unapologetically abrasive. –Nicole

---

\(^2\) I still have numerous black blazers in my closet as I was told that if I want to be respected as a female trainer, I had to wear a black blazer as they commanded respect and a bit of fear. This was encouraged by supervisors of all genders. In fact, a theme that did not make it in to this dissertation was that women are not always good allies when addressing gender subordination, sometimes actively perpetuating it.
This respondent felt that she and other women were encouraged to adopt “masculine”
traits, to replace their “feminine” traits. Nicole described this process as being “organized out of”
being feminine: “A lot of those things that are kind-of attached to femininity or being
femme...you were in a lot of ways punished for and organized out of behaving that way.” This
seems paradoxical to the prior point about what appears to be an office “division of labor”, with
menial feminized tasks in the form of office housework relegated to women. Some respondents
even experienced both dynamics, where women were both encouraged to do gendered office
housework as well as act more masculine. Nicole, for example, pointed out both as issues that
women had to confront in her experience. Another respondent described her resistance to her
work culture’s preference for what she describes as “forcefulness”, perhaps similar to Nicole’s
descriptor “unapologetically abrasive” “masculine” leadership above:

"I hear them all day. They’re just…they’re so loud. I can’t even think straight. It is like
this forcefulness that is really well regarded. I don't know if it has to be this loud yelling
like this, I don't know. Like that doesn’t work for everybody. I'm not going to talk to
people like that. That is not who I am, you know. It's every part of it. And it's in the
training style, it's how we talk to folks about accountability.”–Sharon, a Black mother

Both above quotes mention the training style. These respondents are not from the same
organization but both describe a forceful, loud, abrasive presence in the training room if you
want to be seen as a good trainer. Training rooms are also significant because, like classrooms,
they are where concepts are taught and passed on to the next generation of learners, or in this
case, organizers and volunteer participants. Ideas about what it means to be powerful, a
community leader, and even what our vision should be are conveyed in these rooms.

This preference for “masculine” leadership style, and the continued deference to male
leaders experienced by the women in this study is in keeping with the literature describing
women’s experiences in male-dominated professions (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero,
With one participant there was a feeling that some of the problem comes from Chicago’s community organizing heritage. Ashley opened her interview by stating, “In Chicago we have a very very rough history of organizing, particularly because of patriarchy and white dudes.” This feeling that professional power-based community organizing reflects cultural tropes of whiteness and masculinity repeats in other interviews. One East Asian mother respondent described her dismay in finding this to be true in her experience:

To me, a lot of times we are trying to follow a method that has been created by white men. That’s like always the case, from school to here. I was so shocked and disappointed when I saw it in organizing cause this is the place of liberation. –Jessica

It sounds here like part of what makes facing issues of exclusion in professional community organizing so difficult is the hope that this professional field would somehow be shielded from trends of social exclusion present in broader society. Because community organizing is about liberation from various forms of oppression, shouldn’t the professional model reflect these values?

**Conflicts within the Professional Power-based Organizing Model**

Many of the participants in this study identified conflicts within the professional organizing model they were part of and these were divided into three subthemes. Respondents raised concerns that the professional organizing world they worked in was often dominated by allegiance to “one right way” of doing community organizing; that relationships within the work were often instrumentalized or used to create measurable outcomes for the organization; and that the sexual division of labor, especially the unpaid care work often done by women, made it hard for women to fully participate in this model of organizing.
One Right Way

Part of what respondents identified as problematic within the model was that critique did not feel “allowed”. There seemed to be a sense that there was only “one right way” to organize and that other models of organizing, mobilization, radical action were not as effective or meaningful. It can become difficult to critique something when any alternative is labeled inferior or threatening in some way. One respondent stated:

I want us to–for folks who are really bought in to the old ways, not to be defensive, but be open minded to figuring out how we can include more people. It’s not about you personally being bad, it is always about the fact that this structure isn’t working for all of us. –Jessica

For this respondent, it sounds as if critique is not about harming or complaining necessarily but is meant to be generative. It is about making space for other ways of knowing and being. If there is only “one right way” of knowing and being, however, critique is seen as threatening. Nicole who raised a critique within her organization was frustrated when the labor of resolving the critique was dumped back on her:

I don’t have all the answers. What I can say is something is missing, or something is fucked up. And then it’s kind of like, ‘well you pose the problem, like you should have the solution’ (Laughs). You know, ‘fix it’… but there is so much missing and very little capacity to address or deal with it. And I also think too much pride to bring in other folks to be like, ‘Oh we should actually do some training, we could get some coaching around this kind of stuff. –Nicole

It sounds as if this respondent felt that her critique was seen as “her problem”. Something that she generated, because she spoke up about it. Rather than the entire organization taking collective responsibility for changing the organizational culture, for example, she was asked to come up with a solution on her own. This keeps problems, which may be systemic, from ever being addressed by power brokers within the organization. This respondent went on to say, “We also need to be looking at people as whole people, not just as their work selves…[as if] their
personal time is their personal time and they need to figure their shit out on their own…which feels very masculine to me.” In this framework, problems that people are facing are seen as personal, more fitting for a culture embracing rugged individualism, or neoliberal responsibilization, which will be discussed more in the discussion section. While critique about the organizing methodology was perceived as not welcomed, the rules about how to organize were perceived as prescriptive by some respondents. The parameters of what constitutes good organizing seemed to be narrow for these participants. Sharon stated,

I think some folks think I am doing everything but trying to organize. And that is—that feels like crap!...I think we shit on a lot of other organizations that don’t do things just exactly the way we do...If we really knew how this shit worked, it would have already been won. So let’s trust people, let’s experiment. –Sharon

What constitutes “correct” organizing in this instance seems rather restrictive. Sharon may feel as if she is doing a lot, but it does not seem to count if it does not fall into what others deem appropriate –the orthodox way is the only way. Activities that do not fall strictly within the parameters of orthodox organizing may be cast as “doing everything but” organizing, as described above. This limits what Sharon is able to achieve and how much of herself –her ideas and experiences– she can bring to the professional organizing work. As she describes, this limits her ability to experiment and cultivate trust with others. Another respondent describes how deep relationship building is needed in her profession but not allowed for because it’s not considered part of her job description:

When we step outside of the box and do things that feel more like [weaving a strong fabric between people] we’re oftentimes told that we are not doing our job—and particularly if you are someone who does this as a profession–it’s like, ‘This is your job description. How does that thing you’re doing that is building community fit into that?’… We have to meet certain goals because we get grants from certain people. –Ashley
This respondent seems to say that the model’s inflexibility may be linked to meeting the demands of funders who often prefer quantifiable outcomes. Relatedly, this same respondent went on to say that this organizing model is effective at achieving concrete objectives—can “get business done”, albeit by abiding by a prescriptive method. She seems to say that rigidity and efficiency may come at a cost however:

The type of organizing model that people often call the Alinsky-style model, which is very prescriptive…can get business done…and in certain situations that is important. But if that’s all the organizing culture, then you leave out people who don’t primarily identify with that, which is bad for our movement. –Ashley

Ashley seems to connect the prescriptiveness of the organizing model she describes as also leaving out people who ought to be included. “Getting business done” may be important in some respects, she seems to say, but it may require balancing that goal with other goals, such as inclusion. Ashley seems to be drawing out that inclusion may require more flexibility within the organizing model, perhaps more openness to other ways of doing things. Another respondent reflected on times where she has tried to introduce her own ideas about other ways of doing things in her professional organizing environment without much success:

I don’t feel appreciated for those kinds of ideas, it’s like we already know how to do this, you know. We got this, we understand…there is so much untapped historical knowledge, global knowledge, youth knowledge. –Sharon

Sharon seems to feel that her ideas got shot down because they fall outside of the prescriptive model. It’s as if other ways of knowing and doing were not seen as relevant. The best way to do things had already been discovered and passed down via training and organizing dogma from the forefathers of professional organizing. Sharon seems to acknowledge what is lost when there is a strict adherence to one prescriptive model—the loss of a store of vast knowledge that lies outside of the orthodoxy. What is the resistance to change within this model
of organizing about? Is it simply that this model works the best at creating social change? One White mother respondent, Beth, even described what sounds like the historical immutability of the field:

The funny thing about organizing is that it hasn’t changed much. I think the world has changed a lot…but the tactics and strategies and expectations and the meetings and the campaigns and the result and the reactions…it’s pretty much the same…Like we are all doing the same Midwest Academy book. And I think we are ready for like a new…book.

This particular model of professional power-based organizing experienced by some of the respondents seems to be preventing critique and change. Unfortunately, in being unwilling to change, the model is also limiting the possibility of growth and expansion. Even as the literature describes the many ways organizing has shifted to meet contemporary challenges like global capitalism, mass incarceration, growing inequality and identity movements, the experience of practicing professional community organizing for respondents was often marked by the field’s intransigent culture and continued insistence on “one right way” to organize.

Instrumentalized Relationships

As previously mentioned, there is frequently a calculus done in this model of organizing in which the organization with the most “people power”–people willing to attend a protest for example–is seen as most effective (Alinsky, 1971; Engel, 1998; Della Porta, 2017; McAlevey, 2015). The number of people involved in an organization or campaign also serves as a data point that can be reported to funders as a concrete measurable outcome (INCITE!, 2007, Hwang and Powell, 2009). Several respondents commented on this dynamic, noting that the emphasis on numbers can sometimes make human being participants into “seat fillers”. Rather than the entire complex person being appreciated, they are seen as numbers driving turnout at a protest, for example. Jill, a Southeast-Asian mother, noted how this instrumentalized view of people was
often tied to funding and had the potential to undermine trust: “We’re too much of a culture of productivity and turnout and the dollars. But you have to invest the time—it’s that whole go slow, move at the speed of trust thing.”

While instrumentalizing relationships in order to fill the need for turnout at an event is problematic, some respondents additionally noted that people’s stories and experiences could be instrumentalized. Beyond being a number adding to impressive turnout figures to report to funders, people’s stories could also be instrumentalized to impress funders. While sharing personal stories of alienation and trauma caused by oppressive systems can be an important step for empowerment when done in a supportive environment, one respondent notes it could be considered traumatizing if done in a transactional way:

We are skipping a whole lot of steps. We are just kind of pumping people into organizing with like no support, no skills, you know what I am saying? No accountability on our part…. We prop people up to tell really deep, difficult, traumatic stories, and we don't hold them. We don’t stay with them through that…a lot of times we don't ask for consent in a real way. Or we ask folks who are like, not in a space to give consent…Lets be in deep relationship, but actually how do we do that in a way that honors our people and where they are, that's not just extractive?—Nicole

Nicole seems to be illustrating a tension between pushing for turnout or good stories that will add to the power of an organizing campaign’s narrative cache and building authentic respectful relationships with volunteer participants in this model of organizing. Building trusting relationships takes time, rather than “skipping a whole lot of steps” to get what is needed—in an extractive sense—from people without bothering to build a relationship. As the previous quote from Jill said, one must “move at the speed of trust”, letting the degree to which trust has been built determine which next steps are appropriate. In contrast, an extractive model demands that people show up and share themselves whether they feel ready or supported to do so or not. While this instrumentalization of relationships may be effective in “getting business done” in the short
run and impressing funders, it does not build trust, lasting relationships or community. Ashley describes a similar problem of this model of organizing not weaving a “strong fabric” between people:

There’s nothing there, there is no fabric…You might know someone’s story and what brings them to the work, but that isn’t going to weave a home for people…I think a lot of what is missing from organizing spaces, both community and labor organizing, is an element of slowing down and building…and having a strong fabric between people. And that’s devalued in our organizations, its devalued in our culture. And it’s something we femmes have to contend with all the time. –Ashley

For Ashley, the task of taking time to “weave a home for people” seems to require “slowing down and building” a “strong fabric between people”. The metaphor of weaving may be worth exploring here. Weaving itself can be slow and laborious, with the final product—the fabric—coming along slowly. Perhaps sometimes it seems as if not much is happening at all until towards the end when you see the value of the slow work. Weaving is also about intricate interconnectedness between fibers, or perhaps in this example, people. This is the antithesis of an instrumentalizing of people. In weaving people together to form a community, each person is a valuable fiber creating the whole of the fabric—neither can exist without the other. On it’s face, the process of “weaving a home” may be reminiscent of normative femininity, but this vision of home seems broader than the isolated nuclear family with its accompanying sexual division of labor. This sounds more like a vision for a political home where everyone is valued—not for what they can contribute with their bodily presence at a protest or the gravitas their story and experience lend an organization, but for their humanity.

Building a political home for people where trust is earned over time and participants’ full humanity is honored proves especially important when working with vulnerable populations like
young people. One participant who worked with youth described an interaction she had with a young person who was recently harassed by the police on the way to school:

[Jill asked him] ‘Oh did you tell your parents or when you got to school that morning did you tell your teachers that you got stopped by a cop?’ They’re like ‘No’...They were scared to tell the adults in their lives...It takes trust to do that. They have to trust me to even file something anonymously. You know? – Jill

Earlier, Jill identified that it is important to “move at the speed of trust”. The cost of instrumentalized relating means that people like this young person may be left behind in the rush to tell compelling stories and make a large showing of turnout at various direct actions. The context of the conversation Jill had with this young person was an organizing meeting where Jill’s boss had been concerned that the turnout was low—not enough people had shown up. Jill identified that the “low turnout” allowed her and the people there to support this young person, who may not have told his story if turnout to the meeting was higher. When organizations do not “move at the speed of trust” it seems that they may leave behind the people who most acutely experience the oppression these organizations are trying to upend.

Part of what may be hard about building trusting relationships is that trust seemed to work like a two-way street. When organizations did not trust their participants to know what is best, the participants had a hard time trusting the organizations. While volunteers did have some limited decision-making power, they did not always have the power to set the agenda or impact the norms and values of the organization. The power to make decisions about day to day organizing tasks can be contrasted with the power to set an organizing agenda or determine values and norms of an organization (Krings et. al, 2019). There is a certain vulnerability associated with letting people participate fully in the decision-making process, a loss of control
when you let others take the reins and lead. One respondent described good organizing as allowing volunteer participants to take control of the process:

I think that great organizing looks like if [the professional organizer] gets sick for a week, the campaign doesn’t fall or falter because there are so many people involved that already know what to do. And you can just call on them and say I can’t do it this week and I need you to step in. And not be gatekeepers and say, ‘Ok these are things I am responsible for because I don’t really trust you to do them’…It’s about trusting folks. –Sharon

Sharon seems to be indicating that because organizers may not trust leaders, they are unable to let go of control. Is this because of the theme we discussed earlier—that there is only “one right way” to practice organizing—and professional organizers are the ones with the understanding of that one right way? Or perhaps some of the hoarding of control is due to the delineation between paid professional organizer and volunteer participant. If an unpaid participant is able to do what a paid organizer can do, does that threaten a paid organizer’s legitimacy? One respondent, Jessica, noted, “There’s this real delineation between organizer and leader and sometimes it can be super paternalistic…like I am a professional, but I am really just paid to do what other people are doing for free”. There are obviously important positive reasons for individuals to be paid to organize full time, as few community volunteers have the ability to dedicate a minimum of 40 hours per week towards that process. Paid organizing, however, presents challenges and contradictions, many of them born of the demands of the larger world of paid work in late industrial capitalism (Reisch & Wenocur, 1986) and the non-profit industrial complex (INCITE, 2007)

Workaholism/Overwork

One final important way that people are instrumentalized, according to the experience of many of these respondents, is through the labor of the professional organizers themselves. The literature on professional organizing often describes workaholism as a key feature of the
organizing work culture (Craddock, 2019; Rooks, 2003). The trend of increased working hours is not exclusive to professional community organizing, however. One study in 2013 found that United States workers work an average of 4.5 more weeks than they did in 1979 (Mishel) and 11 more weeks than average workers in Germany (Pugh, 2015). One can imagine that when social justice issues are at stake, the sense of urgency combined with a culture of workaholism could create a stressful work environment. One respondent described the pace in her workplace thusly:

It’s breakneck…I mean, who is really creating these timelines? Are they real or are they imagined?...We should not be sidelined by every little thing that springs up…Press conferences every week, protests every week…And no celebration, no matter how much sweat, blood and tears goes into it. We say ‘this went well, that didn’t go well’ and on to the next thing. And so how does that feed you? Where’s the joy? Where’s the living?...Cause it’s doing something to us. It’s doing something to our leaders. It’s affecting all of us. Our leaders are exhausted because we are asking them to show up on Tuesday and then I need you again on Wednesday night and Thursday. –Sharon

Sharon seems to describe the timelines and pace being determined by something outside of herself, she wonders if they are even real—perhaps if they even have a meaningful purpose. The timelines and pace are imposed from the outside and are described as “doing something” to the people involved—perhaps causing exhaustion. She identifies a lack of joy, or being fed. This breakneck pace may be due to what Rooks (2003) and Kainer (2015) describe as the expectation within professional organizing that staff will abandon themselves, their personal lives and needs, to their paid organizing work. There may be an assumption, as these authors identified, that if one is not willing to sacrifice all, then one must not really be dedicated to the mission of the organization. Sharon asks, “where is the living?” at her workplace. She seems to say that they are merely surviving, rather than living. A short while later in her interview she says, "I need to live, Mary. I mean live not just exist…I need my kid to see me live”. Living, rather than merely

---

3 “Leader” here refers to unpaid volunteers from the community who work on various organizing campaigns that impact them.
existing, is important to Sharon not only for her own satisfaction but to demonstrate something to her child. Perhaps to show that she as a Black woman deserves to thrive, rather than merely survive. This sounds similar to Audre Lorde’s conception of caring for the self as “an act of political warfare” in a society that undervalues and demands much from Black women (1988, p. 126). Sharon finished her response by sarcastically describing that, “If you don’t live and die at the office, you must not really love your community!” She seems to insinuate that there is an expectation that the only way to show dedication to improving the conditions of the community is to “live and die” for the cause, in this instance by living at work.

Another respondent noted that it is not possible for everyone to participate in that level of workaholism:

There is definitely a culture still of ‘who’s working harder?’ you know, ‘who’s working all the time?’ Those are the people who are celebrated, you know. And those are gonna be white men. Like, what do you expect? It’s so infuriating to see that re-exemplified in our space. –Jessica

Jessica seems to be reflecting that in a workplace she had hoped would be uniquely liberated or unique in its understanding of inequity and differences in capacity, it was hard to face that a culture of meritocratic workaholism was still present there. Jessica seems to point out that the people who are most able to work “all the time” or “harder” are the ones with the most ability to participate in workaholism. The workers who will suffer most in such an environment are people least able to fully participate in workaholism. This includes workers with additional demands put on their time and energy outside of work because of systemic oppression such as racism, ablism, xenophobia or homophobia, or caregiving responsibilities of various sorts. One Southeast Asian respondent who has a child and also cares for her aging parents describes how women respond in such a work environment:
I think women and femme-identifying people, like, there's so much we do for—and it's hard to name. So sometimes you need to take heart and just process and be able to name it. Because, like, I crashed last Friday and was like, 'Why am I so tired? The elections were Tuesday, it's four days later, I shouldn't be this tired.'—Jill

Jill seems to have a difficult time describing what she is feeling. She does not finish the phrase, “there is so much we do for…” Is it because the subject she is referring to is expansive? Maybe it’s not only “so much we do for organizing” nor only “so much we do for family” or the community, or our partners. She states that its “hard to name”—perhaps she is not sure how far the expansiveness goes and she needs more time “to process and name it.” She does note that the result of the “so much we do for…” is that she is exhausted and sometimes has to crash. She also seems to blame herself a bit, asking herself, “why am I so tired?” All of these are possible interpretations, and all reflect the way in which neoliberal subjects, especially women, are responsibilized to take on care work and gendered and often underappreciated tasks in the workplace, as well as illustrate the cost of workaholic environments upon women.

The sense of urgency present in much of organizing coupled with the expectation of workplace devotion (Kainer, 2015; Pugh, 2015; Rooks, 2003), the insistence on “one right way” to organize, and defensiveness when confronted with critique are all criticisms raised by my respondents that are reflective of the work done by Jones and Okun on white supremacy culture. Jones and Okun’s list of characteristics of white supremacy culture include, for example: a sense of urgency which, “makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision making, to think long term…frequently [resulting] in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results.” This is “reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money”, and that measurability is seen as more important than quality (2001). Jones and Okun also list defensiveness, in which criticism or new ideas are seen
as threatening, and only “one right way” of doing things is endorsed. Many of these listed characteristics of white supremacy culture reflect the critiques described in my findings. It is significant that many of these characteristics have also been described as expressive of neoliberal capitalism. For example, a ‘sense of urgency’ plays out as the speeding up of work (McCallum, 2020), the invasion of work into our “free time” and long or unpredictable hours (ibid.; Pugh 2015). This is especially true when it comes to the emphasis on measurability, a central project in neoliberal governmentality (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2004; Gershon, 2011; Rose, 1996). In the discussion section I will draw out some of these characteristics of neoliberalism, particularly the way measurability forces organizations shoehorn their work into auditable organizing that can be easily compared with ‘competitor’ organizations.

Workaholic culture can be dehumanizing and alienating to any worker, but it is particularly hard to sustain for people who do unpaid care work at home or in their community. For parents, particularly mothers who still take on most of the necessary care work in homes and communities, there is often a “second shift” of labor that must be done when they arrive home from work (Hochschild, 2012).

The Second Shift and the Sexual Division of Labor

The final theme based on the struggles identified by respondents was the sexual division of labor, or “the second shift”. A study done in 2000 found that women did two to three times more household chores than men as well as caring for children and dependents, particularly women who are not wealthy enough to pay others to assist with those tasks (Bianchi et. al, 2000). But some scholars have argued that workplaces continue to fail meet the needs of women employees with caregiving responsibilities, and that this is particularly true in workaholic
environments where employees are expected to work more than 50 hours per week and feel a sense of devotion towards work (Blair-Loy, Hochschild, Pugh, 2015). Professional power-based community organizing is arguably one of these work environments (Kainer, 2015; Rooks 2003). This dynamic seems to be reflected in the experience of some respondents.

One White organizer who has a small child put it bluntly

It’s just not family-friendly at all. Like for female-identified folks, even with a great partner, you just do the bulk of the domestic work. And being expected to do 70 or 80 hours of work per week and work on the weekends, it’s just not doable. Even if you don’t have kids. –Lauren

Lauren seems to express that a supportive partner is not sufficient to make up for the labor foisted on to women caregivers and workaholic environments. She also expands her horizons of people adversely impacted by overwork to include childless people. The amount of work they are asked to do at her job is “just not doable” for anyone, she seems to say. Other respondents described the difficulty of balancing the competing schedule demands of work and care responsibilities:

After school [work] stuff is hard, Saturday [work] stuff is hard. I mean, it’s just managing a schedule beyond my own which makes things really tricky. Like, I didn’t pick up [child’s] report card yesterday because I had a full day and I didn’t manage his schedule and compare it with mine…I also have two elder parents. So having elder parents means I have also their schedules to manage, with doctor appointments, and my dad is on dialysis so I have to make sure he gets picked up and dropped off on Mondays Wednesdays and Fridays. –Jill

This respondent contends with being a caregiver on multiple fronts. She is a full-time organizer as well as part of a “sandwich” generation, in which she must provide care for not only her own child, but aging parents. She missed picking up her child’s report card from the teacher. She expresses that this happened because she “didn’t manage his schedule” and compare it with

---

4 Also descriptive of “reflexive occupations” as described by Beck, Giddens and Lash in Reflexive Modernization, whose work is expanded on in the discussion section (1994).
hers, conveying that the onus was on her. In a responsibilized framework for motherhood in neoliberalism, it is single family households who must address all caregiving responsibilities without the provision of state sponsored social supports. Jill continued on to describe the process of managing her child’s schedule and her own work hours. When the school failed to provide transportation to the after-school program for her child, she and other parents had to come up with their own solutions:

It was extra logistics around…ok for two weeks I have to figure out how I am going to leave work at three o’ clock just to get them to the after-school program and run back to work to finish my shift until like five-thirty, six o’ clock. But when I was working downtown, that was not possible so I had to find another parent…so it was like…working with other parents in a collaborative way to make sure all the kids were safe for like those windows. So it was in relationship and networks and community that helped figure that all out. –Jill

The institutions surrounding this respondent such as her employer, her child’s school, and the after-school program failed to provide a necessary service to her and her child, as well as the other families at her child’s school—supervised transport to the afterschool program provided by a responsible adult. To resolve this issue, this respondent took it upon herself along with other parents to solve the problem themselves. This solution, however, meant taking time out of her work schedule to meet her child’s need, at least for part of the time, and the extra work of contacting another trustworthy parent who had the flexibility to help the respondents’ child get to the program. It also meant that some less connected parents may not have had any workable solution to this problem. This extra work is often invisible to others and is not considered “real” or “necessary” work, indeed some respondents felt judged by other organizers for time put into their care demands at home. Sharon expressed feeling judged for the care she provides to her son:
I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a nurturing personality, and a lot of times I’m judged by other organizers as someone who is being, you know, a caretaker, someone who is not all in because I’m not showing up like 80 hours a week because I have a Black child that I’m raising and that is my number one priority. There is no greater job [than that] in this country, in this world. I will not martyr myself. –Sharon

Sharon seems to be expressing the tension between two significant demands competing for her time and energy, that of her work and the raising of her child. She identifies that caring for her child is her “number one priority.” She finishes this thought by declaring that she will not martyr herself, perhaps meaning that by extension she will not martyr the thing she values the most—the care of her child. This respondent also describes that her workplace seems to superficially support her as a mother, but still disapproves of the amount of time spent on the tasks of motherhood: “I can be not well-regarded for the time I spend with my kid or whatever, but at the same time people are tripping over themselves to tell me how great my child is, you know?” Sharon seems to be drawing out the juxtaposition of praising mothers for the outcome of their reproductive laboring but denigrating mothers for the time it takes to provide that labor. This quote bespeaks a contemporary tension with care work in the US: exceptional children are seen as socially valuable in various ways, but we do not want to shift our policies to be more supportive of the care these children require. Though children and dependents may be superficially welcomed, their care is not supported institutionally by policies and programs that help mothers and caregivers. One respondent feared that as women left the field, the cycle of exclusion of caregivers and their dependents would continue.

There is just a lot to organizing that makes it really hard for people who are directly impacted to be involved, period…If we keep losing women and femme-identified organizers, parents, moms, you’re going to keep creating policies and base-building around people like yourselves…and create a structure that can only welcome people who are single, male-identified…who have a lot more time on their hands because they aren’t, they don’t have family responsibilities. And that doesn’t reflect everybody. And so the
less you reflect everybody, the less the world is going to be better for everybody…Who actually is at the table? Who can actually be at the table for the whole time that the table is discussing things? –Jessica

Jessica confessed to me in the interview that she was planning on leaving her position soon. She had seen other women leave when caregiving demands could not be balanced with the workaholic atmosphere. Here she seems to be communicating concern about the loss of those voices, which seems unappreciated by the organization. Part of the importance of representation is that without the presence of these voices, their ideas, values, needs and hopes are lost, absent from the discussion (Krings & Copic, 2021). Though caregivers, primarily women, have unpaid care demands outside the home, and therefore different capacities to participate in work, there is a blindness to this difference in capacity as well as a blindness to the repercussions of ignoring this difference. In a field whose goal is to make “the world better for everybody” as Jessica described above, it is striking that differences in capacity could be ignored. Pretending everyone faces the same material conditions and demanding that all workers show up the same can feel like erasure for some respondents. As Sharon put it,

I don’t feel like I get to rest when I get home…I am working with poverty issues in my own life. I am working with incarceration issues in my own life. I am worried about my child when they walk out the door…No I don’t think there is an understanding that we all have different capacity…I think with a lot of liberal folks there is an understanding that we are all supposed to show up in the same way. –Sharon

This illustrates the neoliberal tendency to ignore difference and assert that we live in a post-racial, post-feminist world in which we are all finally equal (Brown, 2015; 2019; McRobbie, 2020). The erasure of difference and the assumption that everyone has the same capacity—as, for example, a white upwardly mobile male—ignores intersectionality and ignores the way that Black women have historically been exploited. Critical theorist Charisse Burden-
Stelly describes Black women as *superexploited* via their race, gender, and labor, using the example of low-paid domestic labor in the twentieth century to illustrate how these women were locked out of upwardly mobile work yet were the backbone of their communities (2020). Summarizing Black Marxist Harry Haywood, Burden-Stelly states that superexploitation “constitutes a combination of direct exploitation, outright robbery, physical violence, legal coercion and perpetual indebtedness” (2020, p. 17). When neoliberalism encourages us to imagine that we are all able to “achieve” at the same rates, it ignores significant differences in material and structural conditions that we face based on historical and intersectional loci of oppression. Though community organizations may have liberatory goals that they organize around and believe in, they are still located in neoliberal society and will be impacted by neoliberal values, such as the erasure of difference, and bootstrap individualism.

Organizations could be blind not only to differences in capacity among paid organizing staff but also to differences in capacity among volunteer participants. Sharon noted that in her workplace, people tended to move on without folks who do not have the capacity to keep up the pace:

I think it’s a privilege to be able to spend your spare time organizing, you know, and folks aren’t recognizing that. And so you’re saying, ‘Come to this meeting on a Saturday or Sunday’ when a lot of our folks have to work on those days and the other half have to do everything they didn’t get done Monday through Friday. And then you’re saying, ‘Oh ok well because these [other more flexible] folks can come, let’s just keep on going’

–Sharon

Sharon seems to be highlighting the role that privilege plays in how decisions are made in organizing. Those who have the time and resources to be at meetings on evenings and weekends are the ones who get to organize to make improvements in their communities. Workaholism mirrors other meritocratic structures that exacerbate inequities. Women, who are still often
tasked with social reproduction, care work and other marginalized work such as office
housework, are doing a large amount of labor that many people, including employers, do not
recognize. These women are expected to keep pace with workers who have few demands on their
time external to the workplace, for example able-bodied, single, white, men. It is no wonder that
respondents report feeling tired, underappreciated, or as Sharon put it “trying their damnedest to
be in two places at one time, all the time.”
CHAPTER SIX

WHY I ORGANIZE

Respondents each had several unique reasons for being drawn to organizing in the first place as well as continuing to participate in organizing, despite some of the struggles they faced as professional woman organizers. These reasons were quite diverse but could be categorized by three main group experiential themes: organizing for joy and liberation; organizing in response to systemic oppression; and organizing on behalf of children.

Organizing for Joy and Liberation

There were several ways that participants were drawn to organizing because of some enjoyment they received from the work. Beth was frank that she prefers spending time in professional organizing spaces over other work environments, noting that her spouse’s experience working in suburban schools was very different from hers working in organizing:

I like to be in a place where the people I am hanging out with are radical. It brings me energy and brings me fulfillment personally…to be talking about how we are making things better. (Her partner)’s job is not that way. And it sucks the soul out of him and he hates it. And his co-workers are nice people but they are not trying to change anything. Like what their intent is in life and what their focus is about…like, it’s gross. It’s the system, and ‘how much money can I make’ and ‘how big is my house’ and ‘how am I going to get my kids in the best schools’…it feels good personally to be in a powerful environment.

Here Beth seems to be identifying how important it can be to spend time with people who share your values. She identifies that being in a work community where bourgeoisie values of accumulation and achievement could “suck the soul” out of her partner, and she seems to
indicate that it would do the same to her. She seems glad that her co-workers share her values more closely. She also says,

You spend so much time at work, and I want to be working at a place where I can go to sleep at night knowing that the work we are doing is legit, is powerful, you know, has social justice values...It’s not enough to be in the non-profit world. It has to be an organization that wants to change the system.

This quote also seems connected to the first in terms of time spent at work. We already discussed the amount of time that professionals in the US spend at work–more than ever our time is dedicated to our job, and for Beth, she seems to value that the large amount of time spent at work be with a group of people who share her values, which she describes as “social justice values”. She contrasts this with her spouse’s situation which she describes as soul sucking. Beth also uses the term “powerful” to describe her work. As an organizer I was taught that power is a neutral tool that is basically defined by the ability to act\(^5\) to make, prevent or control change. Beth seems to convey power as something positive, something that can make her values a reality in the world around her.

Another respondent, Ashley, seems to describe finding belonging in organizing:

Organizing is the first place where I felt like I belonged. Truly it’s the first place where I felt I had not only the ability but the support to speak my truth and what I thought without being...without being told I’m not or it’s not right.

For Ashley, organizing seemed to offer a place where she could talk about her experiences and beliefs without someone telling her she was wrong in some way. Directly after this quote, she dives into how she could talk about systems of oppression that have impacted her (which we will discuss in the next section on themes on organizing inspired by systemic oppression). This indicates that it was important for Ashley to find a space where she could

\(^5\) Alinsky preferred the Merriam Webster definition at the time of his work, “the ability to act” (Phulwani, 2016, p. 867).
utilize a social critique to interpret and understand her life experiences. Perhaps part of what she is highlighting, when she says she could “speak my truth” without being told she was “not right or it's not right” is that she actually was able to critique structures impacting her experiences and then was able to form solidarity with others who have had similar experiences.

Other respondents described the way that empowerment plays a role in why they organize as well. Lisa tells a story to illustrate this:

I think leadership development and the process along the way is really meaningful–has been a growth for me and also our members. Today we had this meeting about rent control and one of our members chaired...she was so tough. The only thing she said she would have done differently is pound the table harder... And she just was someone who [initially] came in thinking you have to be really nice to people...she was just so empowered. And I would say, it’s for those moments that I still organize.

Lisa’s story about this member illustrates how the process of developing critical consciousness can transform people who participate in organizing, proving to themselves and everyone else that they have a voice, especially when working in solidarity with others who have shared values and concerns. For Lisa, witnessing these moments of empowerment keeps her motivated. Some background context seems useful to share here–Lisa had seemed worn out when we began our interview that day. When I asked my opening question, “why do you organize,” she groaned, putting hear head in her hands saying, “Oh Mary…sorry, it’s been a really long week. I’ve asked myself this question a lot this week.” She laughed about it afterward, but it made our conversation about the formerly “really nice” member who then became an empowered defender of affordable housing all the more poignant.

It is important for me...organizing being a space for people to deconstruct any oppression that they may have felt and kind of challenge that. I think I'm really excited by that when that happens and especially with women...who have had this experience of like living a certain way most of their life and now they are like, 'fuck that...no don't treat me like shit. I have a voice and I've been waiting to use it for a long time.
In the previous quote, Lisa mentions the word “empowerment”, which has varying definitions. This quote begins to flesh out what empowerment means for Lisa. The act of deconstructing oppression here seems tied to looking at experiences as related to structures that are much larger and deeper than the people impacted by them. She describes that sometimes the process with women who have been “living a certain way most of their life” can be transformed into people who stand up for themselves. This implies that the “certain way” that these women were living was in a way where they did not feel safe or able to stand up for themselves. It sounds like for Lisa, this transformation happens when organizing provides “a space for people to deconstruct any oppression”. Sharon states something similar about one of the reasons she organizes, saying, “You know the main thing to me is that we build a shared understanding about how everything that is happening to us is not our own individual fault”. Sharon seems to affirm, as Lisa did, the importance of analyzing the systems of oppression around us. For Sharon and Lisa, this seems to be an important part of their reason for organizing. It seems that in their view, organizing can be a vehicle by which people can contextualize their experiences, particularly those of oppression, as not being due to some personal failing on their part, but due to structural forces beyond their control—often structures which rely on an ideology describing misfortunes as resultant from personal failings.

For another respondent, Erica, who does both community and electoral organizing, the training methodology seemed very important in the process of developing what sounds like critical consciousness. She says, “I have a real hunch that the training methodology does play a central role in developing both awareness and introspection”. Erica seemed to prioritize training for several reasons, also citing its importance in bringing organizing “up to scale” via building a broad base of participation. For Erica, both leadership development and training were central to
the project of base building—getting an ever-larger number of people involved in power-based community organizing. She describes the need thusly:

Training and leadership development [are her top priorities] because we are never gonna get to scale [otherwise]. When are we going to get to a point where we have mayoral candidates that we can really believe in or be more aligned with at least? We need to be able to develop people who, in the electoral space, can run viable campaigns, because a lot of the people who really share our values and are really great candidates have no chance in hell. But elections are not the only arena... We're seeing in our coalition context, ED's are leaving...who do we have that's prepared to take their place?...I think we need a laser focus on base building.

Here Erica is connecting that investment in training and leadership development can help bring in new trained organizers and volunteers to “get to scale”—get large enough to address the issues that need tackling and replace people who are beginning to leave the field. Unlike Ashley and Beth’s personal descriptions about the joy and enrichment they have gotten out of their organizing experience, Erica describes her organizing goals here as a more professional than personal, connecting them to goals for the field in general.

Ashley also discussed her professional goals and the mark she wants to leave on organizing. She started by describing the social safety net that we need for everyone to thrive in our country, contrasting it with the structural supports available in other countries, such as Denmark:

On the way to work today I was thinking about a podcast that I listen to pretty regularly. There was a woman on the podcast from Denmark...she was explaining the lifestyle and how people are more carefree and work less. She's like 'I get free health care, free school and like, I get time to like, be a person.' What more could you ask for?

Ashley became emotional describing our need for such programs in the United States. As a mother of a young child, she was experiencing firsthand our lack of care infrastructure. She

---

6 Erica shares more personal reasons for organizing related to systemic oppression in the next section.
goes on to describe how she sees her own role in organizing as tied to this vision for improved infrastructure:

There is literally, in my opinion, no other way to do this than paying people more, taxing people more, and really building a government that provides for people...if I end my organizing life with a piece of that being won, I will be very happy. For me it comes down to...we have to drastically change not just the institutions but how the public views ourselves and what we deserve...I am working towards building a society and a government that takes care of people.

Ashley starts out this quote talking about concrete measures that she feels would move society closer to her vision. In the end she talks about the public’s perception of what it deserves, which she seems to indicate is a government that takes care of its people. She sees her own vocation as tied to building such a society. The emphasis on a government that “takes care” seems worth exploring here. Feminist scholarship has written about care from various perspectives (Fraser, 2016, Kittay, 2011; Tronto; 2015), some advocating that it ought to be recentered in our politics (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). For Ashley, it sounds like care is not something that should be gendered, privatized, relegated to families–and ultimately the women in those families–to address. Here care seems to be made a public, rather than a private, area of concern. Something that we all pitch in for and is ultimately coordinated as a public good.

**Organizing to Address Systemic Oppression**

Many respondents described more than one reason for choosing to organize, and cited reasons that fell within more than one of the themes (for joy and liberation; to address systemic oppression; and/or on behalf of children). Nine of the ten respondents, however, described the importance of addressing systemic oppression as tied to why they choose to organize. Some put this very directly in their responses, as Jill does here, “I organize because it’s a messed-up world and it’s hard to live with all of that and watch it go down” or Jessica, who says, “I organize for
myself, you know? I don’t think that the world as it is right now is an easy place to live for me”.

Others go more in depth, describing how the systems have impacted them and their loved ones directly. Nicole describes how the safety net provided by the state was glaringly insufficient and failed her family, which had members in foster care.

- My mom specifically…she just never really had access to…service and supports that she needed….And yeah experiencing from the outside, the foster care system, and just the many times there were opportunities for intervention for like my brother, my sister, my mom, that the state didn’t provide and have capacity to provide, didn’t care to.

Nicole describes how these experiences of her family being neglected, going without a safety net or structural supports, was part of what made her want to be active, but also explains that as a backdrop, she was raised in a broader family of Black activism and self-determination.

Nicole also describes watching her grandmother lose her home to gentrification.

- Watching gentrification, my grandma losing her apartment, I think it was like a series of being on the ground, having some organizing framework from my family and then talking to real people is kind of like how I would say I got politicized.

Nicole seems to draw from personal experiences of abandonment by the state (as with her family of origin), exploitation by markets (in the form of gentrification) and organizing framework from the local community of Black activists.

- Family of origin experiences were also foundational for Erica, who describes the way systems have impacted her family:

  - I organize because I just think the current state of the world is untenable for my life, for people that I care about, for people in my communities....I think I've just seen...the impacts of capitalism, of patriarchy, of racism in my family.

  Erica frames her own life and the people she cares about as impacted by structural forces and connects this directly to her desire to organize. Capitalism, patriarchy and racism are all
explicitly named as having negative impacts on her family life. She goes on to illustrate how this has occurred, using her perception of her father as an example:

I think a lot of my dad's anger is from patriarchy and from racism because he… I think a lot of my dad’s anger growing up stemmed from his experiences of racism day to day and from being a stay-at-home dad. Being an East Asian man, you’re not supposed to be a stay-at-home dad... you’re supposed to be the provider for your family and that's definitely always been my mom. And so I think that created a lot of personal tension and turmoil for him. And on top of that experiencing all of these judgements from people around him.

Erica describes her dad as “angry” during her “growing up”. While that may have hurt her interpersonally, she does not mention this, but describes how she has interpreted that anger in a structural lens. She points out that racism and “judgements from people around him” may have contributed to his anger but goes more in depth about how patriarchy may have harmed him and contributed to his “personal tension and turmoil’. Being a stay-at-home dad was not aligned with traditional gender roles for an East-Asian man, and she connects this with his pain as expressed through anger. Here Erica is exemplifying the process of using a structural analysis to understand personal pain and oppression. By doing this, she can then create solidarity with others who have witnessed how systems like patriarchy and racism have harmed their families of origin. Rather than passing on internalized forms of oppression, Erica is critically examining her life to “deconstruct oppression” as a former respondent put it.

Another respondent described her organizing as inspired by her family’s immigration experience. Jessica, an East Asian mother, stated, “I organize for my grandparents and parents who came to this country looking for a better life, honestly, for my generation. And we are not doing better [than they were]”. Jessica seems to be describing a kind of debt she feels she owes previous generations for the sacrifices they made to come to a new country, often with the hopes
that future generations would reap the benefits of that sacrifice. Or perhaps Jessica is angry on their behalf that their dream has gone unfulfilled.

Relatedly, two organizers identified that anger about structural inequity is what pushes them to organize. Lauren states,

My first introduction into being angry enough to want to do something was around my student debt...I have six figures of it...I have the debt because I grew up poor and so I just got deeper and deeper into my story which kept me doing the hard work.

For Lauren, it sounds like she understands her organizing as a response to being pushed by material circumstances to become angry—in her case—student debt. This sounds like it was only initially the thing that angered her, as she then reflected perhaps on why she had the debt—“I have the debt because I grew up poor”—here she seems to be putting together that the structure of income inequality has impacted her directly. She, like previous respondents, has learned to challenge dominant narratives about responsibilization—that we should consider any personal misfortune (or fortune) ours to address alone. Rather than her saying, for example, I have the debt because I made a poor choice in taking out a loan (a view aligned with the ideology of responsibilization), she identifies that structural issues, like poverty, impacted her choice—which was less free than the ideology of responsibilization lets on. She is re-writing her “story” as she puts it, to include the ways that structures have shaped her life.

Veronica, a Latina Mother, also highlights the role anger plays in driving her organizing, saying:

Yeah I am really driven by anger I realize, and rage...I feel I have such a high stake in it. I am a mom, I am a woman, I am a women of color, I live in a community that is mostly people of color that’s deeply racist. I work in defending and collaborating with those same people who are in my community.
Veronica seems to contextualize her anger as related to the way she herself has stakes in the outcome of her organizing work. She seems to be saying that her liberation is also tied up in this work. She also mentions the racism in her community. Though Veronica organizes in Latinx communities of color, she has found that anti-Black racism specifically may be present there. Is she indicating that she is also angry about this? Perhaps because it is harming the possibility of interracial solidarity? If the stakes are high for her, she may see that solidarity across divides such as race are needed to make headway on the things she cares most about.

While some respondents may tap into their anger about structural inequities to drive their organizing, Ashley seemed a bit sad at times when describing why she organizes:

While I am driving back from dropping my son off to daycare to this office I’m looking around and seeing...the infrastructure and how gross it is and just thinking about me and my partners life. And how if we had subsidies for our lives and we did not have to work as much how much easier it would be on us and our kid. And then I was struck with such dread because I was just like, I don’t know that this country will ever (quaver in voice)…get there.

Ashley was a relatively new mother at the time of the interview. While she was in the car after dropping her son off, she is making observations about what she can visually see (gross infrastructure) and about her and her partners own life. She is doing all of this while listening to the aforementioned podcast on Denmark and all of the social supports the country offers. The clash between what she is hearing versus what she is seeing and feeling is apparent, and causes her to emote a bit. At one point she appeared to be on the verge of tears during this discussion. In my reflexive journaling, I noted that this experience for me was emotional as well. I experienced deep solidarity with Ashley in her experience as a working mother trying to navigate the lack of supports for working parents (who are not wealthy), that seeing and feeling the lack of support for public goods can be saddening, especially when we compare it to what we know to be
possible. Finally, she mentions dread,—“I don’t know that this country will ever…get there”, she says. What she also seems to express here is doubt, or even fear, perhaps that she and others will have to live like this, or perhaps her fear as a new mother that her child will continue to have to struggle the way she does. She also seems to say that “this country”, the United States, is a particularly unlikely place to hope for subsidies for families like hers.

Ashley goes on to describe that it will take drastic change to create robust care infrastructure, like that of the aforementioned Denmark, here in the United States. When describing how we see ourselves as people and what we believe we can do to improve our situation she says: “There are moments where I am like, ‘Oh yeah, we can do it!’...But then there are days when I talk to a person here and they are just not there yet. And they say stuff that I just cannot believe that they believe...about people, about themselves”. Ashley seems to be describing again some sadness she feels about how much work lies ahead. This quote came after her discussion of what people think that they deserve as a society, so she seems to be reflecting on conversations she is having with people who feel that they and others do not deserve what she feels that they do—public goods that support the marginalized, including hardworking mothers like herself. In the previous section she had referenced what we think we deserve as a society, and how “...we have to drastically change not just the institutions but how the public views ourselves and what we deserve” which she seems to interpret to be a “society and a government that takes care of people”.

Lauren, who earlier identified anger at structural inequities as inspiring her organizing, goes more in depth about what structures she wants to see changed in her organizing work. Lauren had just left a director position at a power-based organization and was just beginning to focus on volunteering with a local mutual aid organization. She seems to be identifying some
tension she feels about the transition, and here identifies how federal work is important to her, “The local stuff is obviously important but for me it’s the big federal national programs that can regulate the speed at which we are in decline in all of our systems.” This framework for Lauren may come from the importance she places on climate change, as shortly after the previous quote she says, "I mean for me right now, if we are not talking about how to take down corporations around climate, we are dancing in a burning building." Lauren seems to feel deeply concerned that her organizing must address climate change and those who perpetuate it, who she identifies as corporations. She seems to be missing the access that power-based organizing, which often utilizes coalitions⁷, afforded her. To connect these two quotes, Lauren seems to feel that large crises, such as climate change, require large scale action, when she says, “it’s the big federal national programs that can regulate the speed at which we are in decline in all of our systems”.

For Lauren, big complex problems require big solutions, organizations collaborating to address large targets. Regarding the targeting of corporations, she also zeroes in on key players within those corporations, saying:

> We know the list of people. Like why are we not making their lives really really difficult? And I know that it's scary. And that's the big stuff where people are gonna be uncomfortable.... for me its these billionaires who are buying elections. It doesn’t matter how much any of us recycle. We just gotta stop the fossil fuel industry.

Lauren left her director position in power-based organizing because mutual aid organizing worked better for her as a mother of two young children. This context matters here because some of what she seems to be expressing is frustration that “we” are not tackling the climate crisis in the way she thinks makes sense. She says, “We know the list of people”, ostensibly some powerful bad actors who are preventing action on the climate crisis. But who is

---

⁷ See Lesniewsky and Doussard’s *Crossing boundaries, building power: Chicago organizers embrace race, ideology, and coalition* (2017).
“we” here? Is it society? Is it organizers? Perhaps she is expressing some frustration that she is no longer leading power-based professional organizing and is feeling impotent that she is not working directly on the kind of things she is describing. Using conflictual tactics to target key power brokers is more a tenant of power-based organizing than the mutual aid work she is now a part of. She also seems to be identifying another kind of impotence—that of the isolated action of individual consumers. In stating, “it doesn’t matter how many of us recycle” she seems to be pointing out that atomized consumer choices will not be the thing that saves us. For her, broad based action targeting bad actors, such as key stakeholders in the fossil fuel industry, is the way to address the climate crisis.

Organizing on Behalf of Children

One final theme on respondents’ inspiration for their organizing work was children. All of the mothers in this study expressed that they organized on behalf of their own children, and one of the childless organizers mentions children as well. Sharon says,

I want to show my son that there are different ways to lead, and that collaboration is the only way to win…I organize because in this time frame of my child’s development, he’s learned so much. He’s met so many tremendous people. He’s developed so much. And I just think that it was ordained that as part of my life that I be exposed to [organizing] and that he be exposed to [organizing].

Though in earlier sections, Sharon has described struggling against dynamics within professional organizing—for example those that make parenting hard—here she also seems grateful for the opportunities organizing has afforded her son to learn and grow. Organizing seems to have offered him new and unique experiences that were not otherwise available. For other mother participants, they saw their organizing as trying to fight for a better world for their children. Jill for example, says “it feels like I'm living out a purpose and a bigger role in my life, and to help change the community that I want my son to grow up in.”. Lauren states, “The last
few years of wanting better for my kids has been the thing that’s kept me wanting to find some way to sanely organize”. Veronica says she organizes “because its how I find meaning and the only way I see to be able to have a better place for my kids, because its pretty…gonna be pretty bad”. These three quotes from Jill, Lauren and Veronica are short, but all point to wanting the world that their children inherit to be better than the current world they are experiencing. Veronica’s quote in particular seems to highlight her fear as a mother when she says, “its…gonna be pretty bad”. Lauren brings out that for her, the method of organizing must be “sane”. Sane organizing might mean that it takes into account some of the recommendations outlined in the previous findings in this chapter on hoping and coping, for example. As a mother, it might mean she is more able to balance her care responsibilities with her job—either because her workplace becomes more accommodating or because we institute public social supports for caregivers and dependents everywhere.

Jessica also identified that she organizes for her children:

I organize for my child, because I feel like I'm constantly having to compromise between affording a place and like the quality of his care or education. And that's ridiculous. I've seen that growing up. I've seen that like living in different incomes and households. And I feel frustrated and angry that I have to try to figure that out for him too. So I organize for a lot of reasons. For people I love, for people I care about. I know a lot of us are struggling. And it's just not living. So that is why I organize.

Earlier, Jessica identified that she also organizes for the previous generation of immigrants in her family who came to the United States hoping for a better life. Here she seems to express frustration that some of the financial struggles she grew up with, she is again facing as she raises her child. She identified that she and many others are struggling—“a lot of us our struggling” and contrasts that with “living”. Having to decide between affording your home, quality of childcare or education is not really living, struggling to decide which necessities to pay
for is not really living, she seems to be saying. She seems to say she organizes because she hopes for something better for everyone.

Finally, Nicole, who does not have children also brought up children as an explanation for why she organized, but in a unique way. Right after I asked the opening question, why do you organize, she said:

I organize for a lot of reasons. I would say first, I’m 30. I don’t have any children of my own yet. And I think a big part of why I don’t have children yet is cause I’m terrified…I think especially I just fear if I have a black son.

For Nicole, it sounds like part of why she organizes is because she is afraid of how unsafe the world is for Black children particularly Black boys. Though this is an outlier in the theme of “organizing on behalf of children”, it seemed worth mentioning. It is the first response she made to my interview. Though the aforementioned respondents named their children as reasons for organizing, Nicole seems to say she is organizing in part out of her fear for any potential children she may or may not have. Her fear on behalf of Black children perhaps is a better interpretation of her rational for organizing. In either case, she seems to indicate that the structural material circumstances of racism impact her decision making. Not just to organize, but the decisions she makes about her body and capacity to protect and parent a child in an environment that is fatally oppressive to Black children.
CHAPTER SEVEN

HOPING AND COPING

Though respondents in this study had many critiques and concerns about the professional organizing world they were involved in, most of them remained committed to the field. As respondents reflected on their experiences, they articulated hopes about what respondents felt could strengthen and improve what they viewed as the fundamentally important field of community organizing. One respondent described it thusly:

There is a deep value and success in structural organizing. Like the basic concepts of being in deep relationship with folks, listening to the community and shaping our issues from the problems people are experiencing, investing in community resources and trusting the leadership of people who are on the ground. –Nicole

These concepts sound fundamental to the practice of organizing, but as we explored previously, many respondents report that often relationships are instrumentalized rather than deep; that rather than listening to community members’ ideas, often participants are instructed to do things the “one right way”; and that needed supports for caregivers and their dependents are unavailable or dismissed. As they reflected on their experiences, many respondents had good ideas about how these issues could be remedied through a few key practices. Three themes that had salience in the data were: building genuine relationships; engaging in trauma-informed organizing practices (containing the two subthemes of healing spaces and time for rest and reflection); and demanding a place for children and caregivers.
Previously, we heard from Ashley, who described building a community of strong relationships as weaving of a “strong fabric between people” which requires “slowing down and building.” Slowing down to build deep relationship and community is hard, of course, in our world of outcomes-oriented logic. As described previously, funders want to see evidence, often quantifiable, that work is being done, in exchange for funds. Because of the increased focus on quantifiable outcomes, as well as the socio-cultural emphasis on individuality in the US, it may be counter cultural to “weave a strong fabric between people”, as Ashley suggests. It certainly takes more time than instrumentalizing relationships to reach measurable outcomes and demanding that everyone participate at the same capacity and in the same way. Jessica notes that in the workaholic culture at her job, “we really cut short the relationship building. We really cut short that community building part”.

Sharon describes the necessity of authentic relationships, saying “People in the work should have real relationships with people they work with...getting in relationship with people and really understanding what the needs are, not taking for granted what you know they are”. Sharon seems to be insinuating that professional organizers in her milieu have assumed that they think they know what is best for people, rather than engaging in connecting with them to learn from them what they think is best for themselves and their communities. Part of what it takes to build strong relationships is trust. Volunteer participants, often called “leaders”, must be trusted by the organization and its staff. Their stories, perspectives, needs and visions must be centered and honored, and these “leaders” must be allowed to lead the work. Nicole describes how trusting these participants is key to her organizing: “What’s working? I would say for this, I’ll
speak specifically to [her workplace]. Honestly, when we trust our people.” This respondent helped build an organization that has a specific caucus just for Black women. This caucus develops campaign strategy and direction for the entire organization. Their number one rule presented at every meeting is “Trust Black women, believe Black women”. Nicole seems to be highlighting the importance of centering the voices that most understand the issues the organization fights for. It is also an exemplary way of trusting community leaders to lead, rather than staff attempting to control campaign decisions or achieve specific outcomes. This method appreciates community participants’ full humanity and values them and all they bring to the work. It is a step away from instrumentalized relationships towards building authentic relationships. In addition to letting volunteer participants lead, it is important to value their stories and experiences when they share them and understand that sometimes these may be painful to recount. Nicole imagines what this can look like when a professional organizer is meeting with a person one on one: “What does it look like to do a one to one with someone that actually respects and is mindful of harm and trauma that folks have experienced?” Perhaps to build genuine relationships takes not only more trust in their leadership, but also more empathy and respect for their experiences. Part of our shared humanity is that all people experience pain, sometimes deeply. That the sharing of those experiences must be treated with respect and care was described by four respondents as central to their organizing philosophy. It can be liberating to share stories with others about pain and oppression one has faced. It can also be very difficult or even traumatizing. Four respondents recommended integrating trauma-informed practices into community organizing, while one expressed skepticism and felt that her experience with organizing was liberating on its own.
Trauma informed practices: Healing spaces and time for rest and reflection

We previously heard from a respondent who described how in her experience, sometimes people’s painful stories were used by organizations without much regard for how that process may have felt to the participant. Nicole said, “We prop people up to tell really deep, difficult, traumatic stories, and we don't hold them. We don’t stay with them through that.” While we already addressed this quote under the section on transactional relationships, I bring it up here because it so well illustrates why she and the three other respondents who mentioned healing spaces feel that there is a need for trauma informed organizing practice.

Thus far we have discussed respondents’ suggestions that we build trusting relationships with participants and trust them to fully lead the work. Both of these best practices could prevent the “extractive” use of participants for their stories and experiences. Additionally, the power of healing space for those impacted by trauma as well as slowing down to allow for time to reflect and rest were recommended by participants in this study.

Healing Spaces

Four of the respondents mentioned the importance of spaces designated for healing, while one remained skeptical of their use. These practices could be rooms designed for people to go and decompress during a training, or actual meetings or retreats designed just for the purpose of processing and healing together, for example. One described the need thusly:

[A healing retreat is about] respecting and knowing that the type of stuff that we do in [organizing] together a lot of the time is unpacking our trauma…sometimes even recognizing that we have trauma. And that there needs to be space for people to heal…or start healing or being taken care of…whether it’s taking care of themselves or having somebody take care for them with them. –Ashley
The importance or recognizing trauma and what the healing of trauma requires seems to be a priority here for Ashley. Recognizing that people need care and space to heal, and that organizers should take that into consideration makes participants’ well-being something that is collectively addressed. This moves beyond atomized models of mental health care that responsibilize healing to individuals and their paid therapists. Rather than assume that all participants have every support they need in their personal lives to meet their needs independently, the organization can recognize that part of its mission is to recognize oppression or trauma they have had to face. This is in contrast to seeing those experiences as an individualized “personal problem” that should be dealt with alone and in private, though many organizers and leaders may choose to go to therapy as well. Another respondent went into more detail about what healing practices look like in her organization:

"I do think that the resources and spaces that we create and provide are super important. So like having healers when there are femme folks or non-femme folks who may have experiences with trauma...being able to have folks in the space use different materials. We bring a lot of the elements in--so we use sound therapy, spend a lot of time in nature, we do sitting practices and meditation, and we do physical activity, and kind of like bringing in all of our resources, and kind of like reaching back to ancestors. --Nicole"

Nicole illustrates how her organization was creative, utilizing whatever tools could be helpful in helping people address their mental health needs. These spaces honor both the toll that organizing can take on people’s emotions as well as the space needed to process and heal the trauma people experience. These traumas are often the outcomes of social inequities of various forms: racism, gender subordination, economic instability, homophobia, ableism, ageism, xenophobia and the like. When these experiences are given their due respect, true and deep solidarity can be formed. Not all participants found such practices to be useful, however. One respondent found the act of organizing in and of itself to be most therapeutic:
I think a lot of people who have very strong critiques of this Alinsky model or really any agitational model...that pushes them away from that, they go into other methodologies like...momentum [based organizing], or you know, into healing practices or other stuff like that which maybe more explicitly carries an anti-patriarchal lens. But I have never been drawn to that really. I think it's because I've personally experienced so much transformation through agitational organizing and through agitational training and I've seen so many really powerful women invest in me. –Erica

Erica conceded that while these healing practices or other organizing models might be anti-patriarchal in their framework, the agitational (power-based professional) organizing that she had done was positive and empowering to the degree that she did not feel swayed by the need for healing practice or alternative models. She did also seem to concede that she was skeptical of such practices, saying “Honestly when [organizing peer] started all her healing stuff I was like, you know, skeptical (laughing)...I was like, what is this? You know, like, how is it compatible with this methodology that I feel so invested in?” Erica’s feelings about healing practices are strikingly different from other participants who discussed such practices. She seems to express anxiety, beneath her skepticism, about whether these practices are compatible with the organizing method she feels connected to. Perhaps she is concerned that the time and attention given to healing practices will take time out from the more traditional organizing practices she deems important—as we previously identified, the pace of organizing for many of these respondents can feel hectic, with overwork being the norm. In such an environment, it would be no surprise if Erica was worried that another thing, healing practices, were added to her workload. Though workaholism was not something Erica raised as a problem in her interview, the low boil of workaholic stress could make a retreat about healing seem like it was just more work.
Time for Rest and Reflection

Part of why it can be hard to engage in the practices described above—forming authentic relationships and creating healing spaces—is that in a workaholic environment, it can feel like there is too little time. When workplans are full to the brim with campaign tasks and organizers are under the gun to produce measurable outcomes, everything else can get pushed to the side. This includes the time for rest and reflection, which could generate some of the insights necessary to improve the work. One respondent described the pace at her organizing job thusly:

I think it’s really hard. You just gotta keep going and there’s no time for rest built in. It’s like we don’t even know how to rest for somehow...There have to be some more regenerative practices put in place so we don’t die...too quickly. Because, like, it’s a crush!...So regenerative practices that are sustaining, that give us life for as much emotional and intellectual stuff that we are pouring out.--Jill

Earlier Jill had asked herself, “Why am I so tired” after a tough electoral season of organizing at her job. Here she seems to be identifying that in order to “not die...too quickly” one has to survive the “crush”, perhaps referring to the pace of the work. A healing retreat, as described in the previous section, is a regenerative practice, but not necessarily a practice that staff can take time off to do on a regular basis. Days off or retreats after big events and long campaigns are important, but do not integrate rest and reflection into the daily routine of work, or into the work culture. Though most respondents described evaluating events together as a staff, they did not describe having regular predictable intervals of time to process, rest and reflect. Another respondent described it as feeling as if campaigns were more about claiming wins rather than learning and reflecting together:

Reflection is supposed to be a huge part of our work. It’s not. It should be. It should be. Because we’re just moving on, you know. I think we are just moving through robotically, you know. And even if we were able to make an impact, it won’t be lasting, because it’s
not as intended. It’s not about us doing it together and moving forward together…It’s like we got to get this thing done, and even if I never see you again, I can claim it. –Sharon

Sharon identifies that sometimes the professed value of reflection does not really get its due in her organization. This is similar to Nicole’s point that the foundational values of community organizing—“being in deep relationship with folks, listening to the community and shaping our issues from the problems people are experiencing, investing in community resources and trusting the leadership of people who are on the ground”—are important and useful, but as we have seen, those values may get lost at times. Sharon seems to be connecting time for reflection with being able to make a more lasting impact, stating, “even if we were able to make an impact, it won’t be lasting”—without reflection, choices are made robotically, hindering the ability to make an impact. In the final line of the above quote, Sharon seems to convey that the culture of “getting things done” can sometimes overshadow building relationships and meaningful engagement. That it is more important to “claim it”, than to ever see the people who helped get you there again. When no space is made to pause and reflect, it can be hard to learn as you go, shift to accommodate emerging needs, or include everyone in the process. Indeed, when the pace is dictated by the organization rather than by participants, sometimes people get left out. One respondent noted that some participants, in this example she describes femme folk and mothers, need flexibility around time.

We got a lot of pushback from our femme folks around how we use time. Like, yes it is one thing to be disciplined and structured, and it’s another to be shaming and belittling and demeaning. So how do we actually organize ourselves to move at the pace of our people? If half of our folks in the room are moms and they can’t be there at eight, are we cursing them out when they walk in at 8:10? Or are we like, ‘Yay you’re here! We’re going to get started?’ –Nicole
Nicole asks an important question regarding who determines the pace in professional organizing work—“how do we actually organize ourselves to move at the pace of our people?” In an earlier quote, Sharon noted that sometimes in fast paced organizing, only those who have free time are able to participate. In the above quote, it seems that Nicole is attempting to carve out an organizing practice where if busy people (in her case, Black mothers) are able to participate, their ability to join in a meeting should be celebrated. Rather than “shame them” for being late, be celebratory that they can find time in their packed schedules to volunteer to improve their communities. For Nicole, perhaps “moving at the pace of our people” means slowing down and recognizing that people have very different capacities to participate, but that does not mean they should get left behind or not have a voice. In a culture that values outcomes and workaholism, time for rest and reflection can be seen as a superfluous waste. Building deep relationships, allowing space for healing and allowing for rest and reflection all take time away from outcomes-oriented tasks like building turnout numbers or racking up impressive policy wins. In a culture that values independence, cultivating interdependence can be seen as foolish. But for many people, especially those who must care for dependents, these things are urgently needed in order to participate meaningfully in professional power-based community organizing.

**A Place for Caregivers in Community Organizing**

As we have already discussed, several respondents felt that their workplaces did not always make allowances for the needs of caregivers. Because caregivers often need extra supports and flexibility, they were seen as cumbersome to organize, getting in the way of outcomes, rather than bringing an important perspective to the work. Multiple respondents brought up the issue of childcare being pivotal in their ability to organize with caregivers, or as a
caregiver themselves. For example, one respondent talked about caregivers being unable to be “at the table” without childcare being provided:

What matters to my organizing the most…it’s about who’s at the table and who’s not at the table…And for everyone who is at the table, it’s always very clear who is not at the table, and who is not in those spaces. So, you know, there’s not been as much childcare offered at meetings or trainings and things like that. And having known that the reason why I was tied to this organization was because of childcare…like I’ve worked really hard over the past few years to always make sure that there’s childcare and things like that at trainings. To remove obstacles for other people the way they were removed for me. – Jill

Jill seems to be illustrating the importance of noticing who is absent in organizing here when she says, “it’s always very clear who is not at the table”. The image of a table was used by Jessica as well, who is also a mother, when she asked, “Who actually is at the table? Who can actually be at the table for the whole time that the table is discussing things?” Jill goes on to describe how this connects to her own introduction to organizing:

Certainly, when I was a leader coming into this work I could not have attended all the meetings that I attended if there wasn’t childcare…I remember being really thankful that I could be in those spaces because there was childcare—and it was free too…That makes a huge difference. So without that I don’t think I would have reconnected with [the organization]

Because childcare support seems to be integral to why Jill was able to get involved in organizing, she wants to make sure other mothers have the opportunities she did. It sounds like her organization has not been offering it as much recently: “there’s not been as much childcare offered at meetings or trainings and stuff like that”. Without childcare, parents who want to be involved in community organizing have the options of bringing their children to meetings, often at which children will be bored and potentially annoy other adult participants, paying for a babysitter (affording a babysitter is another barrier) or simply staying home. Another respondent
noted that as a parent, it is hard to bring your children into spaces that are not welcoming or friendly towards them:

We cannot just say this is a space for children. We have to actually make it a space for children. Otherwise we are not doing children justice. Because you know as a mother you’re trying to bring your kids into a space and if there’s nothing for them, they are going to find something that is not for them. And you can’t focus on your things. They are upset because they don’t have something to do, they are bored. —Ashley

To “just say this is a space for children” sounds like a kind of window-dressing for Ashley. She identifies that this makes it difficult for the mother, “you can’t focus on your things” as well as for the children—it is not “doing children justice” and “they are upset…are bored”. “Actually mak[ing] a space for children”, she seems to insinuate, requires something more. Several respondents had ideas about best practices regarding childcare and there are many radical resources out there for childcare that incorporate activism, political education and liberation. Many of the suggestions from respondents included ways to actually include children in the work of community organization rather than cordonning them off in a church basement while the adults do the “real” work of organizing upstairs. Nicole said: “The kids shouldn’t just be stuck in a room…we should be intentionally putting our people in relationship with children and actually building community”. This same respondent went on to describe how her organization goes about this:

As a part of our training, every hour someone has to go sit in the childcare room and do something with the kids for 20 or 30 minutes, whether it’s read a book, watch a movie with them or play a game…we like intentionally bring them into the collective space. —Nicole

In the above example, children are everyone’s responsibility, rather than just that of the parents or the people tasked with childcare for that day. Everyone interacting with the children

---

1 See for example Lessons from Planning Radical Childcare by Law & Martins from Don’t leave your friends behind: Concrete ways to support families in social justice movements and communities (2012).
helps demonstrate both to the children and to the adults that children matter and have a place in the vision and values of the organization. Sharon described a vision for an organization where families were centered:

I just, I’m thinking about an organization that offers something for every member of the family, you know? So, when you offer childcare programming and summer camp programming, when you offer internships and leadership development programs that are funded, when you offer after school programs for kids K through high school age, you are building a foundation that is going to last for generations. There’s room for everyone in this–that is what that says to me. There’s room for everyone here. –Sharon

Sharon interprets her own vision here, “there is room for everyone in this–that is what that says to me.” She may be offering a kind of response to Ashley’s point about “just say[ing] this is a space for children. To actually make a space for children and their families, to actually show–rather than window-dress–means to act to provide community organizing opportunities appropriate to each age group. Sharon also seems to be identifying that providing organizing entry points for youth will build a foundation for the future of the work that will “last for generations”. Sharon went on to explain that even kindergarten age children can learn about organizing, what their rights are, that they can change the world. It can be important to teach them before oppressive systems harm them or their loved ones: “You know, those kids in kindergarten, you don’t have to wait until a crisis happens. They know how to respond to power. You know, I think children of color need that. Who needs it more?” In this sort of framework, the needs of the children are made the community’s top priority, rather than something that is tacked on. Rather than a last-minute call for a couple of childcare volunteers and a box of crayons to entertain the kids at the adults’ meeting, the organizing could be designed around the needs of children—the future generation of organizers and activists.
When the needs of children and other dependents are seriously considered in organizing, caregivers and mothers are more able to fully participate. This respondent noted how important it is to have mothers at the table:

Honestly the moms are some of the best organizers and the best fighters and just the best people that we have in the work, period. And them being able to feel like a community is holding them and holding their children actually allows them to be more present and not distracted.—Nicole

When the needs of mothers and their dependents are meaningfully addressed, Nicole seems to say, mothers can be some of the best contributors to organizing efforts. Mothers and other caregivers have a unique perspective to share in the organizing work. They may know what the most vulnerable people, who are often discounted by society, need and they know that the lives of those they care for are of the utmost importance, regardless of what anyone, including their workplace, police, or society says. Dependents like children, the elderly or people with disabilities are often portrayed as less important than fully grown able-bodied adults who can work in a capitalist system that values them for their labor productivity. These children and other loved ones can be made to seem invisible, unproductive, unimportant or even deviant in this framework. How important it is, then, that organizing spaces are created that value the presence of these children and loved ones.

A respondent seems to indicate that some models of organizing do a better job of this than professional power-based community organizing. Beth, who recently left power-based Alinsky style organizing, describes her new job working within a different organizing model:

I have to say, it’s not until I came to [current organization] in all of my different places I have been that I could say I could stay at [current organization] forever…It’s because it is a completely different environment. I mean, we do make sure we have childcare at meetings, but it’s not just, ‘Let’s make sure we have childcare for meetings.’ It’s actually like, families are a part of everything. We do family things for every piece…It’s not like
childcare is an extra add-on afterthought that we have to take care of. We legitimately always have children around regardless of what it’s about…It feels a lot more holistic and that is for sure why I feel like I could be there forever…there’s nowhere else I could go that looks at an entire community and an entire family as a unit. –Beth

This sounds remarkably close to Sharon’s vision for a place for “every member of the family” that expresses that there is “room for everyone in this”. Rather than window-dressing a place for children, as was Ashley’s criticism of some organizing spaces, Beth seems to feel that her new professional environment really centers children and their families. She identified that she had to leave professional power-based organizing to find that kind of environment, however. The women in this study remained committed to community organizing’s potential for liberating people from oppression and building an equitable society. They found hope through their clear vision of how the world (and often community organizing!) could be a better place. The key themes included building genuine relationships; engaging in trauma-informed organizing practices; and demanding a place for children and caregivers.
CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION

This dissertation explores what the experience of contemporary professional community organizing in Chicago is like for women by asking the following: how do respondents interpret their experience as professional organizers; what have they struggled with, what do they hope for, and why do they organize? The previous findings chapter is divided into three sections which address these three main questions. In this section I seek to situate my contribution within the literature on women and organizing as well as to further interpret my findings using a framework that situates the findings within a structure impacted by neoliberal forces, namely that of responsibilization and retraditionalization.

In the section outlining the history and background of professional power-based community organizing in Chicago, I discussed organizing history, including how forces of professionalization—especially the increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes—have shaped organizing work. I then reviewed the literature on gender and community organizing and how others have critiqued organizing for the various ways it has been inhospitable to women (Craddock, 2019; Kennelly, 2014; Mizrahi, 2007; Mizrahi & Greenawalt, 2017; Rooks, 2003; Sen, 2003; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). Few of the studies I found, however, utilized phenomenology to deeply explore what women’s experiences were like.
Situating the Study in the Literature

Kennelly’s phenomenological study of volunteer participants in UK global justice movements found that women carried the brunt of what she called the “feeling work” of the movement—women participants felt compelled by the pain in their hearts to address inequities but often felt guilt when their work did not resolve said inequities, or that they were not doing enough. My study extends Kennelly’s study on volunteers in the UK to professional paid organizers in Chicago. While there is some overlap with Kennelly’s findings, especially in my section on why my participants choose to organize, my study is much more focused on navigating the organizing terrain as a paid professional. Feeling work and guilt, as used by Kennelly, may be reflected in the section on why my respondents chose to organize. In the finding sections on “why I organize”, several respondents described witnessing inequity in the world as making them want to do something, similar to Kennelly’s respondent who said, “It is this pain in my heart” that leads her to organize (2017, p. 1).

Mizrahi has studied women organizers longitudinally and even worked with respondents to develop an alternative model. These were not necessarily organizers in power-based community organizing, however. My study is inspired by the work of Mizrahi and her ilk but aims to focus on a detailed and idiographic account of professional organizers in a particular organizing model—contemporary paid professional power-based organizing in Chicago. My findings do confirm many of those found in the literature. For Craddock (2019) and Rooks (2003), a central theme was the importance of organizers giving up ‘enough’ of their time and energy, with women often falling short on the ability to give enough due to pressures outside of organizing such as socially necessary care work. Like Kennelly, Craddock researched unpaid volunteer activists involved in organizing. Rooks, however focused on organizers. Her findings
about women participants’ inability to give “enough time to their paid organizing job was reflected in my data as well. Organizing, for my respondents at least, remains a workaholic field, with women the least able to participate in the culture of workaholism because of unpaid care work obligations. Overall, my research affirms and builds on much of the literature on gender and organizing, seeks to deeply explore the meaning and context of my participants’ experiences in a detailed and idiographic way.

**Contextualizing Participants’ Struggles**

There were five key themes highlighting the ways that women in this study struggled within the professional community organizing model they worked in: that despite perceived modern advances in the treatment of women, they experience gender subordination at work; their workplaces often believed there was “one right way” to organize; that relationships with people were often instrumentalized rather than honored; workaholism and overwork permeated the work culture; and that the sexual division of labor (and their workplace’s unwillingness to acknowledge this division or support women through it) prevented women from being able to participate fully. These themes of struggle will be examined here using the framework of neoliberal forces, particularly those of responsibilization and retraditionalization.

As discussed in the previous section on theoretical framework, neoliberalism is largely a form of political economy organized around the primacy of free markets. Aside from neoliberalism’s impact on economic structures and the state, Michel Foucault, Nikolas Rose, Wendy Brown and others have described the ways neoliberalism shapes our “private lives”, our relationships with ourselves and others. Our relationships can be instrumentalized as the “cost-benefit analysis”, formerly a tool reserved for markets, extends to all aspects of life, including the private sphere and personal relationships (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2004; Rottenburg, 2017).
**Instrumentalized Relationships with Self and Other**

The personal life of an individual under neoliberalism is described by Foucault as being dominated by entrepreneurialism—a person is “an enterprise for himself” devoted to the development of one’s personal capital by employing cost-benefit analysis to daily life choices. Marketable skills, experiences, and talents are combined in the individual to form an “ability machine” that can be seen as capital in itself. (2004). In this milieu, life decisions ought to be based on market rationality defined by competition and choice. Market rationality is indeed a lens through which all life can be understood, not merely the economic. Anthropologist Ilana Gershon says that relationships under neoliberalism are “alliances that should be based on market rationality” (2011, p. 540). People are either business partners or competitors, each person working on cultivating their own “corporate individualism—a flexible bundle of skills [managed by] oneself as though the self was a business” (ibid, p. 546). Relationships governed in this way will of course become characterized not by care, solidarity or even democracy, but by cold cost-benefit analysis, competition, and isolation. Philosopher Wendy Brown describes individuals as beholden to a new form of existence under neoliberalism which allows “market-instrumental rationality to become the dominant rationality organizing and constraining the life of the neoliberal subject” (Brown, 2015, p. 108). Others have framed this dynamic as “self reflexivity”. Beck, Giddens and Lash’s work on reflexive accumulation and the individualization of risk also describe the ways that individuals, rather than collective institutions, now bear the responsibility (and risk) of planning for individuals’ future (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). Binkley points out that the increased technology for measuring risk was accompanied by “the curtailed influence under the ever-expanding pressures of the market, of those collective institutions (classes, states, civic institutions, labor unions, communities) whose function it was
to implement risk-minimizing policies” (2009, p. 92). Many have pointed out that this individualization of risk is more easily shouldered by some than others, highlighting that structural factors play a key role in one’s ability to assume risk and make and act upon calculated anticipatory decisions based on market rationality (Adkins, 2003, Binkley, 2009).

The women in this study described the many ways that relationships in their work environment were instrumentalized. Participants became “ability machines” that produced a type of social capital, whether they were bodies in a seat at a large public meeting or protest, or whether they supplied a more intangible form of capital, that of their story, their identity or their experience. Respondents described this dynamic as “extractive” earlier in the findings section, and it seems worth revisiting here:

We are skipping a whole lot of steps. We are just kind of pumping people into organizing with like no support, no skills, you know what I am saying? No accountability on our part…. We prop people up to tell really deep, difficult, traumatic stories, and we don't hold them. We don’t stay with them through that...a lot of times we don't ask for consent in a real way. Or we ask folks who are like, not in a space to give consent…Let’s be in deep relationship, but actually how do we do that in a way that honors our people and where they are, that's not just extractive? –Nicole

In addition to the pressure to instrumentalize relationships with volunteers, the study participants’ relationships to themselves were also instrumentalized as they too were expected to create value for their job at the expense of their (or their family’s) well-being. Workers in the field are expected to have such a strong devotion to their job that long hours, pressure to keep up an intense pace, and little pay do not hinder their passion. There is little respect for the need for rest and reflection, and little space made for those with caregiving responsibilities. This dynamic also exacerbated gender and other inequities because those who are most able to thrive in careers

---

1 Foucault’s term, Birth of Biopolitics, 2004.
that demand overwork are those with the most free time, resources, social supports, physical abilities and fewest caregiving responsibilities.

Increasingly under contemporary neoliberalism, workers are expected to self-manage without a boss telling them what to do (Lash, 1994; Rose, 1996). Rather than work being supervised by a superior, outputs and outcomes are monitored remotely, with the onus on the worker to be sure to report favorable numbers and outcome measures. Both due to pressures to professionalize, as previously discussed (see Hwang and Powell, 2009; Reich and Wenocur, 1986) and due to neoliberal emphasis on decentralized control mechanisms, measurability and quantifiable outcomes have become increasingly important. For community organizations, this dynamic most frequently is manifested through meeting criteria for funding (Hwang and Powell, 2009; INCITE!, 2007; Jenkins & Eckert, 1986; Jenkins, 1998). We will now explore the ways that these neoliberal mechanisms for self-management have impacted women in particular, and are highlighted in the struggles outlined by respondents in this study.

**Measurability**

As discussed, measurability, or auditability, is a key feature of neoliberal governmentality (Rose, 1994). A group of feminist geographers writing about neoliberal dynamics in academia describe the power of neoliberal reliance on measurability thusly, “Audit culture, with its feedback mechanisms and ostensible goal of ‘continuous quality improvement,’ is designed to elicit compliance without resistance” (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1234). The emphasis on measurable outcomes in the nonprofit world, including professional community organizing, is significant (Hwang and Powell, 2009; INCITE!, 2007). In order for organizations to be funded, they must prove their effectiveness, manifesting in a scramble to measure organizational outcomes. The number of leaders sent through various training modules, the number of volunteer
door-to-door canvassers, the campaigns to win changes in policy, the number of headlines made, are all quantifiable measurable outcomes that an organization may share with donors. In addition to this, qualitative outcomes like personal stories shared by participants, often stories of trauma and loss and subsequent political involvement, are used to help win over funders. When organizations are controlled by the drive to produce measurable outcomes and snappy stories to impress funders, community members may feel used, as if they merely represent a number or a dramatic story, and workloads of organizers may be stretched to the limit. This prevents organizers from having time to be reflective, creative and intentional about their work and the possibilities of new directions:

I think people are really hungry for some serious creativity, and we're just so stuck in patterns...there's just so much to fight and we're so busy...Nobody has any capacity to do anything and we're all scrambling for funding. That keeps us from being able to be as creative as I think we all want to be. I keep making plans of like, let's do tequila and legos and like, reconstruct society, what we want, in a different way. Not fucking butcher paper. But I haven't done it. When do I have time to do it? –Veronica

This dynamic is not merely the fault of sloppy organizing. The push for measurability can be understood as part of a larger neoliberal push towards a marketized model where organizations can be easily compared based on a common set of replicable metrics. This encourages competition within the nonprofit sector, effectively creating a “market” for both donors and volunteer participants (Hwang and Powell, 2009; Rose, 1996). There is immense pressure, then, for organizations to produce such outcomes to stand out from the crowd.

When the focus is only on measurability, many other things get short shrift. For example, popular education, political education or consciousness raising do not always produce snazzy immediately measurable outcomes (Su, 2010), nor do building authentic relationships and creating time for rest and reflection. The outcomes of such activities may take years or even
decades to manifest, and it would take valuable organizer time away from their work plan to measure something so complex. Providing support for caregivers can be resource intensive and does not improve an organization’s “bottom line” but does lead to inclusion for people who would not otherwise be able to participate. The long-term impact of providing radical pedagogy to children present in child-care at organizing meetings, for example, may be incredibly difficult to measure but that does not mean it is not deeply important. Very unfortunately for professional organizing, which tends to operate under a tight budget, donors are rarely interested in funding these sorts of difficult to measure efforts.

**Responsibilization and Gender**

The term “responsibilization” is useful here in understanding how neoliberalism impacts mothers working in community organizing. This term was introduced in literature on governance (Rose, 1996) to mean the offloading of control from the state and other powers on to individuals who are then expected to govern themselves internally. It is a way to describe what happens to people in societies which individualize risk, as described by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994). In this framework, individuals are expected to make calculated, enterprising personal choices to derive success from a competitive marketplace. Responsibilization puts personal fate completely in the hands of the individual, rather than systems or structures, “forcing the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider (Brown, p. 84, 2015)”. I am particularly interested in the way responsibilization is used by Rottenburg (2017) to describe how certain groups of women are labeled as more “deserving”, aka sufficiently responsiblized. Upwardly mobile women who are seen as making calculated decisions to further their personal enrichment deserve “balance” between career and family because they have been planful. Rottenburg describes what she sees as an increasing social consensus that women ought to invest heavily in their careers and
“professional portfolios” before having children, and that women who fail to do so may be seen as not sufficiently “responsibilized”. In this milieu, it is up to individual women to plan ahead, first focusing on a highly compensated career and other lucrative activities, and then taking on caregiving responsibilities after their career is established and resume sufficiently impressive. She cites trends in which companies like Facebook and Google offer to freeze the eggs of their female staff, encouraging these women to wait to have children until they can be responsibilized mothers. These women often will make enough money to outsource much of the labor involved in caring for dependents. Frequently that labor will be outsourced to poorer women who society sees as not adequately “responsibilized”. In this way, “responsibilized” women are able to achieve a high-powered career as well as raise children, without the childrearing having such an impact on their career trajectory.

This framework can help us see some of the experiences of the women in this study through a new lens. The women who are mothers in this study would likely not be considered sufficiently responsibilized according to this logic. Community organizing is not an appropriate career choice if one wants to be upwardly mobile and afford to outsource one’s caregiving tasks. Adequately “responsibilized” women would wait to have children until they were established in a high paying career, or with a highly paid spouse. The needs of women who have children without the funds to pay a poorer woman to watch over their children and assist with other reproductive labor tasks are erased under this framework. Their needs and the needs of their dependents do not fit in and are therefore not attended to. The dismissal of the needs of mothers experienced by respondents in my study is reflective of the “responsibilization” view of motherhood: that if you are unable to pay for round the clock care for your children, it is no one’s problem but your own. Care for dependents is seen as a personal responsibility—it’s as if
society (and the field of community organizing) is saying to these women, if no care is available to your child because you cannot afford it or access it, you should not have had children. As Wendy Brown frames it, “an impoverished single mother is framed to fail in the project of becoming a responsibilized neoliberal subject” (2015, p.107). Brown goes so far as to describe people who become “responsibilized human capital” as socially male because of the way they relate to the market, society, and the division of labor between care work and professional work.

**Persistent Contradiction: Capitalism and Social Reproduction**

Of course, Capitalist society needs children, even in a solely instrumental sense, to replace an aging labor force and military. One irony of neoliberal capitalism, however, is its failure to invest in the future of its workforce— or individualized units of capital as it were (Fraser, 2016). Children and other dependents are seen as more and more a private problem to be dealt with individually rather than as human beings or members of society that we all have a social obligation to support (Fraser, 2016, Brown, 2015). Children may be praised by neoliberal capitalist society (especially for their achievements), but the care of them is the responsibility of no one but their mother (and the wealthy mother’s paid army of caregivers and homemakers). What does this mean in a country where roughly 30% of single mothers live in poverty (Livingston, 2018)? We heard this from a respondent, Sharon, who said: “I can be not well regarded for the time I spend with my kid or whatever, but at the same time people are tripping over themselves to tell me how great my child is, you know?” The caregivers in this study often found that their superiors and colleagues never considered, or were resistant to considering, what caregiving responsibilities meant for caregivers’ work life. The need for childcare at evening and weekend meetings was often ignored or at best an afterthought, and those who had to care for aging parents were similarly on their own. The care of dependents was seen as a hinderance
rather than providing a social good for the benefit of a collective society. Social theorist Ulrich Beck characterizes this predicament thusly, “The market subject is ultimately the single individual ‘unhindered’ by relationship, marriage or family. Correspondingly, the ultimate market society is a childless society…(Beck, 1992, p.116)”.

Of course, society cannot function without children, nor care. As feminist Kathi Weeks describes,

…the enormous amount of time, skill and energy devoted to childcare, eldercare, the care of the ill, the care of the disabled, self-care and community care, without which the economic system would not exist, is provided mostly free of charge, disproportionately by women, in the moments left outside of income generating work (2021, p. 9).

Herein we see the way that society seems to run on invisible or unpaid work—primarily done by women. This is similar to Fraser’s concept of the “crisis of care”. She describes the way in which neoliberal capitalism now pushes women to work longer and more unpredictable hours away from the home, yet is dependent on them to reproduce the next generation of workers to continue capital expansion. With the undercutting of public supports for reproductive labor (and the care of dependents in general), women are responsibilized to manage their reproductive choices in a way that best supports their personal market profitability. Fraser characterizes the problem as, “…a progressive neoliberalism, which celebrates ‘diversity’ meritocracy and ‘emancipation’ while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction. The result is not only to abandon defenseless [or inadequately responsibilized] populations to capital’s predations, but also to redefine emancipation in market terms” (2016, p. 113).

Retraditionalization

One key theme in my findings section was gender subordination in the workplace. Some respondents felt they were encouraged to take on menial tasks involving some attention to detail (office housework) but little creativity, boldness or vision. In addition, respondents described an
unwritten set of expectations about how they ought to behave, which varied based on circumstances. For example, sometimes respondents were expected to support and “cheerlead” their male colleagues’ leadership and ideas, while in other circumstances, such as when respondents were taking on a leadership role—such as leading a meeting or training—they were encouraged to take on what they thought were “forceful” or “masculine” characteristics. The respondents expressed frustration and surprise that this was something they had to face in such an “enlightened” work environment. Again I would like to look beyond the field of organizing to understand these dynamics.

For women in capitalist democracies like the United States, many freedoms have been realized. For some theorists, modernity has meant women’s entrance into a world of choice where the only limits on her life are that of her imagination. Beck, Giddens and Lash in particular argue that with the end of Fordist structures of hierarchy, exclusion and control, the advent of “reflexive modernization” has unleashed a focus on the enterprising self, freed to manage and create itself however it wishes (1994). Lash, however, establishes that this self-management can entail a form of return to traditional structures, stating, “Premodern and communal-traditional forms of regulation (are) conducive to information flow and acquisition which are the structural conditions of reflexive production” (Lash, 1994, 127). This can take the shape of the office “family” or team where a kind of kinship is developed and called upon to foster work devotion and self-regulation—often not in exchange for wages so much as in exchange for what Lash calls “substantive goods…workmanship or the good of the firm”. Lash finds this dynamic of reflexive production to be especially apparent in knowledge-intensive

---

2 Lauren
3 Sharon
4 Nicole
workplaces where the pace of innovation makes the rule oriented Fordist structures impractical, leading workers to self-manage out of a sense of devotion to work, shared identity, the good of the team (Lash, 1994).

Feminist critique of this perspective notes that Beck, Giddens and Lash did not take into full consideration the way that gender would play out in this post-Fordist regime of reflexive modernization that supposedly frees us all to be creative and upwardly mobile. While Lash concedes that there are “reflexivity losers” as well as winners (Lash, 1994 p. 127), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim diverge from Lash and describe how reflexive modernity was more or less a net positive for women. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim assert that while gender equality is not yet complete, it is on an upward trajectory guided by the process of late modern individualization: “Thus, as women were increasingly released from direct ties to the family, the female biography underwent an ‘individualization boost’ and, connected to this, what functionalist theory calls a shift from ‘ascribed’ to ‘acquired’ roles. It opened up new scope for action and decision and new chances for women (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p. 55)”. They often emphasize the power of work and wage earning as a path for women’s liberation from the stricures of family life, describing waged work as a sort-of equalizing force:

Money is also a kind of ‘objective indicator’ of the importance of what one does. Whereas work in the family is invisible, outside employment has a tangible result that can be seen every month on your bank statement. Money that you have earned yourself demonstrates in a direct way the value of your work and output; it awards self-confirmation and self-confidence and recognition by others (ibid. p 62-63).

This breathless embrace of the reflexive enterprising self which can invent and reinvent itself as the market demands and appears to be free of the forces of external control and coercion, has been critiqued as simplistic and naïve (Adkins, 2003; Binkley, 2009). Binkley, for example, states that this view of the enterprising self employs “only a very thin notion of structure and a
highly rationalist understanding of individual agency, one that does not apprehend the structuring influence of society on the mundane” (2009, p. 97). Though not necessarily contemporaneous or in conversation with Beck, Foucault and others have pointed out how the reflexive “enterprising self” is still controlled and surveilled, (by the audit rather than direct superiors for example) and that this self creates alienated and transactional relationships (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2004, Gershon, 2011). Others might point out that though some women may be “liberated” from the demands of family caregiving roles, somebody has to provide care for dependents—and it is most frequently marginalized women who are employed and poorly paid to do that work (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Isaksen et al, 2008). Finally, though entering the waged labor market may be new for some women, there are many sectors of poor women who have always had to work away from home, being economically, and often racially, precluded from the status of housewife made popular in white middle-class Fordism (Burden-Stelly, 2020). Feminist scholars such as Lisa Adkins and Angela McRobbie directly critique the assertion that women are now and will continue to be ever more free due to the forces of what Beck, Giddens and Lash call reflexive modernization and its accompanying emphasis on the individualization of risk and reward.

Adkins asserts that rather than reflexive modernization and accompanying individualization freeing women to be more autonomous, it actually obscures the ways that women continue to be pushed into traditionally gendered roles. Adkins uses the frame of tradition to describe whether and how women continue to be subordinated in a reflexive individualized milieu. Rather than the modernity completely overtaking tradition, Adkins argues that tradition is “simultaneously produced or co-constructed with the modern” (1999, p. 124). In this sense, she follows Lash’s line of argument that reflexive modernization can actually
reinvigorate the need for what can be considered “traditional” forms of social organization.

Adkins states,

I suggest that reflexive modernity, while certainly signaling new modes of interaction, involves not a simple detachment or disembedding of individuals from social categories such as those of class and gender, but also re-embedding process in circuits and networks in which new, yet traditional—or re-traditionalised—rules, norms and expectations are at issue” (2000, p. 260).

The shift from Fordist forms of hierarchical monitoring to team and self-monitoring based on shared identities and goals invites the formation of new communities with ambiguous divisions of labor.

Adkins indicates that the success of some workers in this post-Fordist regime of reflexive accumulation may be dependent on the poorly compensated (or unpaid) work of women and marginalized (1999, 129), similar to the argument Fraser made in the previous section about the crisis of care inherent in capitalist accumulation. Though Adkins points out that long hours of intense work often requires the unpaid care work of a supportive (female) partner, and care for any dependents, she also shows that even when women work along side men in reflexive occupations, their labor may be assigned in gendered ways. She states, “Thus, the operation of familial relations no longer depends on being ‘related’…it could be argued that workplace practices themselves may currently be implicated in the deployment and construction of new de-naturalized yet re-traditionalized forms of family and kin bonds” (p.132).

If reflexive workplaces now are inhabited by work ‘families’, what does this mean for women at work? Banks and Milestone’s study on women working in small new media firms⁵

---

⁵ One might expect the culture at a new media firm to be quite different from community organizing, but I maintain that we have something to learn from Banks and Milestone’s study. Though the workers interviewed by them tend to say the quiet part out loud (women diffuse tension with their “bright and chirpy voices”, p. 12), these are records of the dynamics present in work cultures in reflexive occupations that are fast-paced, knowledge-intense, and often male dominated (such as professional power-based organizing).
illustrate how women were often expected to go above and beyond what was in their job description to do additional gendered tasks. Women were expected to:

…provide nurturing, emotional support to disgruntled and marginalized team members, exclusively young men…not in any official capacity as, say, union representative or team manager—but, it transpired, as an unofficial ‘mother’ figure to the ‘guys’, or when required, as the ‘soft’ face of management diktat (2011, pp. 11-12).

As was described in my findings, some women in my study were often called upon to be a cheerleader for men who were struggling with their organizing tasks in some way, as well as smooth over relationships when needed and take on tedious office housework. In this way, the ambiguity of a team dynamic can turn into women acting as ‘work mother’ or ‘work wife’ to other team members.

Banks and Milestone also find that reflexive occupations demand near total flexibility, which, as discussed in my findings, can be difficult for workers who care for dependents. They state that, “For employers, flexibility means that workers must preference only business priorities and duly contort themselves to meet the prevailing demands of any given project; it less often means that workers exert some control over when and where they choose to execute their roles” (2011, p. 13). Banks and Milestone go on to say that care work often requires “routine and stability”—something hard to come by these days in any field. They conclude that “so-called ‘reflexive’ forms of cultural production, rather than leading to the detraditionalization of social relations (as has been widely argued) and the dissolution of sedimented forms of social power, can exert what has been termed a (paradoxically) ‘retraditionalizing’ effect (2011, p. 3).

While some feminist scholars would rather describe Adkins findings as a “reinstatement of gender hierarchies through new subtle forms of patriarchal power” (McRobbie, 2008, p. 47) than retraditionalization, others continue to turn to the concept of “tradition” to understand why
neoliberal “freedoms” have not been fully extended to most women or other marginalized groups—
in other words, why retraditionalization, or reinstatement of gender hierarchies, is occurring. Wendy Brown takes this up in her most recent book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2019). Though Beck and Beck-Gernsheimer argue that reflexive accumulation and individualization may help women override traditional gender roles, Brown believes that neoliberal trends such as these actually reinstate tradition. The breaking down of the state, unions and other forms of collective society, part of the neoliberal project, necessitates a reliance on tradition to govern collective life. She argues that as early in neoliberalism’s inception as the writings of theorist Friedrich Hayek, there was a regard for the importance of traditional values. Brown notes that, “For Hayek, our freedom is founded neither in law nor in politics, but in the evolved, often inarticulate principals of conduct and opinion forming a cohesive people, principals that we ‘freely’ accept and abide” (Brown, 2019, p. 75). Because neoliberalism was conceived by its founders as de democratizing6, tradition was understood to be the glue that holds society together and governs conduct. Brown continues, “for Hayek, the great error of social democracy rests in its attempt to replace historically evolved spontaneous order, born by tradition, settled into custom, with rational master designs for society” (ibid., p.107). The neoliberal undercutting of collective institutions was to be replaced with a spontaneous governance by tradition, privately accepted and engaged by individuals and their families. Brown argues that what Hayek and the other founders of neoliberalism did not anticipate, was the encroachment of tradition into the public sphere, rather than remaining at the level of private use by individuals and families. She notes that,

---

6 Brown cites the 1975 Trilateral Commission for popularizing the neoliberal conception of the “excess of democracy” which claimed democracy was in crisis because of its unbounded reach (2019, p. 73).
As rights become a crucial vehicle for expanding conservative Christian morality into the public sphere, this morality is disembedded from tradition and therefore detached from both the organic roots and the spontaneous effects that Hayek ascribed to tradition (ibid., p.115).

Hayek saw tradition as a non-coercive way to govern society—he thought people would voluntarily conform to these norms. Brown is pointing out that our current return to tradition, with its corresponding encroachment into the public sphere, Hayek would find abhorrent—an encroachment of what she describes as conservative Christian morality into the public arena and meted out by the state and courts. Additionally, far from Hayek’s conception of collectively shared traditional values, the nature of the encroachment of conservative Christian morality is connected to “the reactive energies of white male woundedness and displacements” and functions “as a retort to those it holds responsible for its wounds” (ibid. p. 121). In this sense, Brown notes that this contemporary return to tradition is more about revenge and resentment than actual traditional values. She points out the many ways that the contemporary supposed return to traditional values lacks what former (premodern) traditional values had—a secure mooring to a Judeo-Christian orientation, lost to the enlightenment and science. These new “rootless” traditional values are easily appropriated, manipulated, used by market logics or by reactionary backlash to perceived threats to white patriarchy in an already unstable and threatening climate of neoliberal capitalism. Brown states that when “suffering and humiliation, ressentiment unsublimated,” is born from loss of entitlement, they “become a permanent politics of revenge, of attacking those blamed for dethroned white maleness—feminists, multiculturalists, globalists, who both unseat and disdain them” (2019, p. 177).

---

7Brown draws heavily from Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals here, noting that Judeo-Christian values when rooted to commonly held tradition formed the basis of a conscience, similar to Freud’s ego. Though Nietzsche describes this conscience as self-cruelty, it also helped restrain and sublimate the will-to-power (Brown, 2019, chapter 5).
One might expect that a field like community organizing to be immune to the forces of retraditionalization (for Adkins), reinstatement of gender hierarchies (for McRobbie) or nihilistic ressentiment disguised as tradition (for Brown), but as discussed, this field’s emphasis on liberatory values does not make it immune from forces larger than itself. Just as Banks and Milestone (2011) found that women were encouraged to support male colleagues and take on more menial tasks, so were the respondents in my study. I have shown how many of the critiques raised in the findings, including themes of gender subordination, instrumentalized relationships, overwork, measurability, and gendered labor, can all be understood as reflective of neoliberal logics, particularly those of responsibilization and retraditionalization.
CHAPTER NINE

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Respondents in this study levelled real and significant critiques of their workplaces as professional community organizers and the field overall. This should not be taken out of context, however. Many of the critiques leveled by my respondents can be found in contemporary workplaces all over the US. As illustrated earlier, our work lives are increasingly unpredictable and over demanding (McCallum, 2020; Pugh, 2015), with little time for care for dependents, let alone ourselves. As discussed, these forces may have more to do with neoliberal capitalism than organizing itself, so placing blame squarely at the feet of the professional power-based organizing field is misguided.

That is not to say that this information cannot be useful for organizers themselves, funders, and executive staff. The experiences of participants highlight important ways that some organizers are struggling and what they hope for, as well as what inspires them to continue to organize. Community organizers, funders, and executive staff should consider the struggles of the respondents in this study as well as the corroborating literature indicating that for women and other marginalized groups, professional power-based organizing presents significant barriers to participation. What can be done now, however, aside from being honest about the impact of these dynamics on professional organizing culture, has already been addressed by my respondents. Respondents described the importance of authentic relationships built on trust and respect; trauma-informed organizing practice that makes space for healing and rest; and a place
for care and caregivers. Time and resources must be carved out for these practices which can restore overburdened workers. As we have established, however, this can be difficult if funders are not interested in granting money towards these practices, which are not easily connected to the sorts of outcome measures funders frequently demand. These practices also push against the neoliberal logic of responsibilization—of the entrepreneurial self which takes into account the market value of each personal choice with an emphasis on individual responsibility for one’s own wellbeing. Organizing will also have to recon with neoliberalism’s obsession with making everything auditable so that organizations can be compared in a market-like system, as well as society’s contradictory stance toward social reproduction and care work.

**Building Grassroots Care into Organizing**

Nevertheless, even as respondents in my study were confronted with neoliberal forces much larger than themselves, they found ways to push back. In a culture that demands responsibilization from subjects while simultaneously chipping away at public goods for caregivers and stability for communities, respondents found their own ways to carve out practices such as rotating childcare duties or healing retreats to collectively address trauma.

It was the Black Women’s Caucus that made up a specific set of criteria. And it's like, oh, you know, another layer on top of that it’s not enough to just pay formerly incarcerated folks and send them through regular training. Like folks need ongoing support. Folks need to be in an intentional, healing process of their own. And we also need to be looking at people as whole people not just like their work selves, and their personal time is their personal time and they need to figure their shit out on their own. Which in that— that kind of lends in itself— also feels like very masculine to me. –Nicole

---

1 When trying to figure out how to bring more women into the organization.

2 For responsibilization and women’s mental health, see McRobbie, 2020.
Significantly, this organizer engaged in a democratic process with the Black women she organizes to allow them to come up with solutions, one of which was the inclusion of ongoing space for healing that saw the participants as whole people. Other organizers told stories about ways their organizations are making childcare at meetings part of the normative culture of the organization. Respondents in this study are pushing for work cultures in professional power-based organizing that are aware of and trying to remedy the forces of responsibilization and other brands of neoliberal exclusion. These are valiant and important efforts. However, these women should not have to build the infrastructure that makes care possible on their own—as a society we need to create the material conditions for the hopes and recommendations that participants highlight: building authentic relationships, space for healing, time for rest and reflection, and a place for caregivers and dependents. Without the “public infrastructure supporting families, children and retirees”—and I would add, people with disabilities, that Brown referenced as necessary to push back on gender subordination, women or other caregivers, will be left piecing together short-term solutions to crises of care that are continuously inherited from generation to generation. While it is admirable that organizers (and many others) come up with community-based mutual aid-oriented solutions to deficits caused by the gaping holes in our care matrix, these are piecemeal solutions that put the most onus on those who can least afford to give more of their time and resources for the care of their communities. Piecemeal grassroots efforts to piece together a social safety net for families and dependents, for the healing of trauma, for time to rest in a workaholic society may be considered valiant and a necessary survival strategy. They, of course, are not enough, as mentioned, and must be rebuilt over and over again generationally,—especially in an increasingly mobile and atomized society— and miss many in need who will fall through the cracks of a piecemeal system. Moreover, such efforts do not
challenge the maldistribution of labor and resources inherent in this crisis. For example, low-income mothers banding together to organize their own childcare for meetings so that they can organize speaks to their resilience and drive to improve their communities and allows for their participation in community organizing, but should the onus be on them?

**Demanding Resources for Care**

Throughout the literature, feminist critical theorists and scholars have bemoaned the erasure of a social safety net that supported care and kept the more destabilizing aspects of neoliberal capitalism under (some) control. Brown, for example, ties gender subordination to the withdrawal of support by the state for things like, “affordable, quality early childhood and after-school programs, summer camps, physical and mental health care, education, public transportation, neighborhood parks and recreation centers, public pensions, senior centers and social security” (2015, p. 105). *The Care Manifesto*, published during the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasizes that our society needs a complete overhaul, to be completely reorganized around care (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). They state that their “vision advances a model of ‘universal care’: the ideal of a society in which care is placed front and centre on every scale of life” (ibid., p. 19). The authors outline how this can be instituted on multiple social levels including kinships, states, economies and the world. They state that,

> Across different scales of life, this vision translates into reimagining the limits of familial care to encompass more expansive or ‘promiscuous’ models of kinship; reclaiming forms of genuinely collective and communal life; adopting alternatives to capitalist markets and resisting the marketisation of care and care infrastructures; restoring, invigorating and radically deepening our welfare states; and, finally, mobilising and cultivating radical cosmopolitan conviviality, porous borders and Green New Deals at the transnational level (2020, p. 20).

It is easy to imagine how this vision would drastically change the way respondents would experience professional community organizing practice. These material conditions would
drastically alter the foundations of responsibilization and retraditionalization. The concerns raised by the professional organizer respondents in this study reflect these dynamics which are symptomatic of neoliberal forces that encourage individuals to be entrepreneurial about all aspects of their lives, including relationships— and that if they are not sufficiently entrepreneurial, they are irresponsible— not adequately responsibilized. I have also tried to understand the ways that women are still encouraged to fulfill gendered stereotypes at work and the role that tradition continues to play in the way that labor is divided, appreciated and compensated.

Between the forces of responsibilization, in which women are encouraged to focus on resume building and achieve, waiting to bear children until they are wealthy enough to pay a more marginalized woman to raise them and retraditionalization which seeks to re-ascribe patriarchal gender norms to these same women, contemporary young women are in a double bind. This bind is all the more difficult for marginalized and poor women who cannot easily conform to the demands of responsibilization.

A final key question to ask here might be what is the role funders can play in the effort to shift the culture of professional organizing? Many respondents made the connection that the demands of funders often make finding solutions to the critiques raised here difficult. Indeed, respondents and researchers alike have criticized the role of funders in skewing organizer workloads and focus (INCITE!, 2007). Arguably, the emphasis on measurability/auditability, workaholism, and instrumentalized relationships (often instrumentalized in order impress funders), are all critiques that can at least be partially traced to the need to fulfill funder demands.
CHAPTER TEN

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Covid-19, Gender and Care

Since these data were gathered in 2019, the COVID 19 pandemic has ravaged the world. The effects have been felt everywhere, including the way it has impacted caregivers, primarily women. The pandemic’s impact on women and labor has been documented. According to the World Economic Forum, “Women have been hit harder than men by job losses around the world due to the pandemic, taking on the bulk of the extra caregiving responsibilities during lockdowns” (Reuters, 2021, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/12/gender-equality-covid-19-pay-gap/), while the New York Times ran a series of articles called “The Primal Scream: Examining the Pandemic’s Effect on Working Mothers”. Oxfam published an international report on inequality and the way the pandemic has exacerbated already existent global disparities, highlighting health disparities based on race and class. They also highlighted the global impact on women:

Women, who have suffered the harshest economic impacts of the pandemic, collectively lost $800 in earnings in 2020. While employment for men is recovering more quickly, 13 million fewer women are expected to have been in employment in 2021 compared with 2019; Latin America, for example, has experienced a reduction of 9.4% in women’s employment. Over 20 million girls are at risk of never returning to school, while women and girls have faced a significant increase in unpaid care work, which was estimated at 12.5 hours each day even prior to the pandemic. Women informal workers have been among the most affected economically, facing a “triple crisis” of COVID-19, increased unpaid care work, and insecure and precarious paid work, pushing many further into poverty (Oxfam, 2022, p. 23).
This same report also stated that the world's 10 richest men more than doubled their wealth during the pandemic while the poorest lost more of what little they had. It is likely we will continue to learn about all of the ways the pandemic is impacting us, exposing the ways we have come to rely on unsustainable and inequitable systems. Gathering another round of interviews such as the ones used in this data would be fascinating—how have women working in professional community organizing fared throughout the pandemic and how has the field shifted (or how has it not) during the pandemic? Have women had to leave the challenging field of professional power-based organizing during the pandemic? How has this impacted women through the lens of intersectionality, as it is likely impacts vary based on nexuses of race, class, ability, country of origin and more. Some of the key critiques raised in this study, especially concerning overwork and the gendered and underappreciated nature of care work have been topics of discussion and widespread social critique during the pandemic. Perhaps, as author Arundhati Roy famously put it, the pandemic is a portal— or can be if we seize the moment— in which we can find a new way (Roy, 2020). This is a tall order of course, when sometimes the pandemic has felt more like a centrifuge for money, privilege and power, but perhaps beginning in pockets of resistance where the soil is fertile, new ideas can emerge. Community organizing could be a vanguard space where awakenings take place and collective consciences of resistance can be formed.

Finally, as previously identified, one weakness of my study was that it focused mainly on gender and did not directly take on the race or ethnicity of my respondents. While this allowed me to extract many key themes regarding gender, work and organizing, it may have deemphasized the importance of other identities, such as race, to my respondents. Perhaps

---

1 See https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/wellness/workers-arent-burnt-out-from-the-pandemic-were-burnt-out-from-overwork-opinion/ar-AAORVep
another study could look at the way participants sharing a non-white racial or ethnic identity experience this model of professional power-based organizing. The respondents in my study indicated that racial and ethnic identity did impact their experience in various ways, and a study focusing more squarely on that could bring new insights. In the future, I may review some of the key findings of my study around “white supremacy culture”, do a chapter on outliers related to race that did not make it into the themes because of IPA’s rules regarding theme prevalence, or repeat this study with a focus on intersectional identities within professional power-based community organizing.

The Expansion of Trauma-Informed Practice in Community Work

Another area that could be explored is how community organizers are confronting trauma in their work. This study touched on some of the ways my respondents address trauma in their organizing practices, but more research could be done on how the new surge of research and public interest in trauma, its impacts (both interpersonal and societal) and its treatment have been taken up by professional organizing. Because organizing is often done with marginalized communities impacted by trauma and because consciousness raising often results in confronting past trauma to form solidarities with others who have been harmed, good training for organizers on trauma-informed practices will only help the field. Many trauma theorists have also been outspoken about the ways that the systems of racism, capitalism and gender subordination exacerbate trauma and harm generations and communities\(^2\) and the field of organizing can be a site of experimentation for trauma-based practices that help heal and bring resilience to organizers and the communities they work in.

---

\(^2\) See Resmaa Menakem’s My Grandmother’s Hands (2017), or Gabor Mate: How capitalism makes us sick (Mieli, 2014).
CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSION

This dissertation explored what the experience of contemporary professional community organizing in Chicago is like for women by asking about struggles they faced, what they hoped for, and why they choose to continue to organize. This study used the lens of feminist critical theory to analyze how neoliberal forces, particularly responsibilization and retraditionalization, constrained and shaped respondents’ experiences. For these respondents, several struggles emerged that could be organized around a few key themes. Despite apparent moves towards gender equity at work throughout neoliberal postmodernity, respondents reported that they still encountered gender subordination in the workplace. This came in various forms but sometimes resulted in being expected to cheerlead or support male colleagues, take up “office housework” or even act “masculine” when taking on leadership roles. In this way, gender seemed to be re-essentialized (even when roles could be flipped, they aligned with stereotypes). Women also continued to struggle with the model of professional power-based organizing, especially with its insistence on a one-size-fits all model and fast paced workaholic culture. The pace and workaholism were especially difficult to manage for women who had unpaid care responsibilities of one stripe or another, making a final area of struggle the balancing of paid work and unpaid care work.

The section that followed discussed why my respondents were initially drawn to, or continue to be drawn to, this model of organizing that has historically been so difficult for
women. Some of them were inspired by the empowerment of others that they got to be part of, or simply enjoyed being in “radical spaces”. Others were drawn to organizing because they saw it as a remedy for a troubled and unequitable world. All of the respondents who were mothers reported that they organized on behalf of their children.

Respondents also discussed their hopes for what organizing could become. Many were already experimenting with practices that they were using to meet some of the needs identified in the struggles section. Time for building authentic relationships was considered important as well as acknowledging trauma and allowing space for the healing of trauma. Time for rest and reflection was a theme that could remedy the breakneck pace of workaholism. Finally, many respondents hoped for a place for caregivers and their dependents in the organizing work they were doing. Respondents acknowledged the need for caregivers to be present to set the agendas and share their wisdom with community organizing, as they are often on the frontlines of the social fallout of neoliberal austerity policies, racism, and patriarchy.
Introduction of study:

- Introduce self: I have been involved in community organization for 10 years in Chicago, care very much about the movement, and am hopeful that understanding the impact of gender could help us build more effective practice.

- Overview of contemporary literature on organizing documenting the emergent need for attention to gender

Guiding interview questions: Organizing and Gender

1. Why do you organize?

2. Throughout your organizing experiences, how has your gender identity impacted you?
   a. Were there specific roles or responsibilities in organizing that have been impacted by gender in your organizing?
   b. Have your experiences of gender led you to specific types of organizations or specific organizing methods?

3. How would you describe your priorities when participating in social action and organizing?
   a. Or what guides you in this work?

4. How do you feel about organizing today? What should the priorities be?

5. What is working well in organizing for female-identified individuals? What is not?

6. What have I missed?
APPENDIX B

TABLE OF GROUP EXPERIENTIAL THEMES

STRUGGLES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender subordination in the workplace</th>
<th>Conflicts A.) One right Way</th>
<th>Conflicts B.) Transactional Relationships</th>
<th>Conflicts C.) Workaholism/overwork</th>
<th>Sexual division of labor/second shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Something to prove - as a woman - Lauren</td>
<td>Focus on outcomes, numerical metrics, encourages claiming empty victories – Sharon</td>
<td>Lack of concern for others, cold indifference – Sharon</td>
<td>Urgency, breakneck speed - Sharon</td>
<td>Organizing is not for moms – Jessica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago organizing = patriarchal - Ashley</td>
<td>Work culture: uncaring – Sharon</td>
<td>Self interest is not sufficient - Beth</td>
<td>Problems in organizing mirror social problems - Sharon (pay, exploitive)</td>
<td>Parents leave organizing - Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men are &quot;natural&quot; leaders - Jessica</td>
<td>Dismissive of other ways of knowing - Sharon</td>
<td>Difference in capacity - Jessica</td>
<td>Living vs existing - Sharon</td>
<td>Assumption that mothers are uninvested organizers –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>Organizing is not liberated - Jessica</td>
<td>One right way - Sharon</td>
<td>Difference in capacity when organizing black women - Nicole</td>
<td>Turnover - Veronica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Masculine traits = leadership - Nicole</td>
<td>Policy campaign outcomes are more important than relationships - Sharon</td>
<td>Insensitive or indifferent to varying levels of capacity - Sharon</td>
<td>No time to be creative - Veronica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Menial tasks/office housework - Menial tasks/office housework - Nicole</td>
<td>Denigration of direct service – Sharon</td>
<td>Competition - divides us - Lisa</td>
<td>No time for rest - Jill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Sometimes men still dismiss women</td>
<td>Organizing as a profession - Ashley</td>
<td>Transactional relationships with leaders - Sharon</td>
<td>Ability to have a life - Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizers – Beth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalized oppression - Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescriptive, outcomes oriented model – Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t be effective our of relationship - Sharon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unionizing - Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to abandon care work – Sharon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing work culture is not a liberated space - Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't care if we are loved as an organization or if we love what we do – Sharon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders as whole people - Sharon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing is hard, &quot;a lot of labor&quot; - Veronica</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care as bad - train the femme out – Nicole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office housework - Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One right way - Nicole (one size fits all)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders as whole people - Nicole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time to organize as a parent – Beth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maleness = leadership - Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance vs competition in organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing without appreciation of immediate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwork, measurability - Nicole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are first to suffer in workaholic environments –</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office housework</td>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>What is &quot;good organizing&quot; and how is it measured? – Jessica</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Women do more work – Jill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alinsky style - does not weave fabric - Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is allowed to be a visionary</td>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>One right way - Jessica</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>DIY support systems – Jill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Numbers more important than trust and transformation - Jill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model is sexist but valuable</td>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Expertise more important than experience – Jessica</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Systems are not built for parents, have to make own – Jill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transactional relationships with leaders - Nicole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too emotional</td>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>One right way - Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td>Managing multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leaders as whole people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions = weak - Lauren</td>
<td>A few negative experiences should not discredit the whole practice – Erica</td>
<td>Emphasis on outcomes and productivity - Jill</td>
<td>Unfriendly to moms and femmes - Lauren</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men demanding women's support - Lauren</td>
<td>More than &quot;one right way&quot; to organize – Beth</td>
<td></td>
<td>Raising a child is a full time job – Sharon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Woman behind the man&quot; - Lauren</td>
<td>Organizing has not changed much - Beth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defending and covering for</td>
<td>Few training models/little</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men - Ashley</td>
<td>variation – Beth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepped up because men were not doing a good job - Nicole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female bosses can be gender oppressors - Veronica</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femmes need more/better mentors - Lauren</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s emotional labor - relationship maintenance - Jessica</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cleanup crew – Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and worry - Erica</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

TABLE OF GROUP EXPERIENTIAL THEMES

HOPING AND COPING
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hoping and Coping</th>
<th>Hoping and Coping</th>
<th>Hoping and Coping</th>
<th>Hoping and Coping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A.) Authentic</td>
<td>- B1.) Trauma</td>
<td>- B2.) Trauma</td>
<td>- C.) A space for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships</td>
<td>informed</td>
<td>informed</td>
<td>Caregivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>practices -</td>
<td>practices -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Healing spaces</td>
<td>Rest and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Leaders as whole people - Sharon**
- People have internalized trauma and oppression - must cultivate trust to organize them - Jill
- Let femmes set pace - Nicole
- Can stay long-term at job because they support mothers - Beth

**Leaders as whole people - Nicole**
- Refusal to deny needs - Sharon
- Leaders determine speed - Nicole
- Childcare removes barriers to organizing – Jill

**Trusting vs controlling leaders - Sharon**
- Culture as redemptive - Sharon
- Reflection should be part of our work - Sharon
- Who is at the table - impacted by childcare – Jill

**Let leaders lead - Sharon**
- Space for healing - Nicole
- Exhausted - Ashley
- Childcare – Ashley
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Recognizing and respecting trauma - Ashley</th>
<th>Time for regenerative practices - Jill</th>
<th>Childcare is everyone's responsibility – Nicole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trusting leaders works - Nicole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOMP practice - Erica</td>
<td>Never been drawn to healing practices – Erica</td>
<td>Need time to be creative - Veronica</td>
<td>Moms can be great organizers – Nicole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability only works in deep relationship - Jill</td>
<td>Women’s ways of knowing/storytelling - Lauren</td>
<td></td>
<td>Childcare as a battle – Nicole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep relationships are hard but worth it - Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage building relationships with children – Nicole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing relationships can be transformational - Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Youth need organizing more than adults do – Sharon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing youth is crisis prevention – Sharon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organizing youth is crisis prevention – Sharon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our vision must have a place for everyone,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Our vision must have a place for everyone,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including children – Sharon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femmes as vanguard – Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village of caring adults raise children – Sharon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

TABLE OF EXPERIENTIAL GROUP THEMES

WHY I ORGANIZE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why I organize – Joy</th>
<th>Why I organize - Systemic Oppression</th>
<th>Why I organize - Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training and leadership development/base bldg - Erica</td>
<td>Political education - Nicole</td>
<td>World as unsafe place for black children - Nicole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity – Lauren</td>
<td>Importance of understanding systems - Sharon</td>
<td>Organize for children - Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living vs surviving - Jessica</td>
<td>Systems and institutions are not trustworthy, must make own - Nicole</td>
<td>Organize for child - Jill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training methodology is significant – Erica</td>
<td>Organize for self - Jessica</td>
<td>Organize for a better place for my kids 8 - Veronica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to get there - Lauren, Ashley</td>
<td>We work hard with little public good to show for it - Ashley</td>
<td>Organize because want better for my kids - Lauren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize because of daily grind of life - Ashley</td>
<td>Organize for my child - Jessica</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need a comprehensive strategy based on the leadership of directly impacted/grassroots - Nicole</td>
<td>Organize out of anger - Lauren</td>
<td>Living vs surviving - Sharon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to directly impacted</td>
<td>Corporate power - Lauren</td>
<td>My children are why I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People on the ground, actually adjusting direction accordingly - Nicole</td>
<td>Organize - Beth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to and need for joy - Sharon</td>
<td>Climate change - Lauren</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global perspective expands our vision and desire for better world - Ashley</td>
<td>Local and global - Lauren</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing - 1st place I could be authentic self - Ashley</td>
<td>Internalized oppression Erica, Lisa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space to deconstruct oppression - Lisa</td>
<td>Organize because systems have harmed me and people I love - Erica</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewarding to see people become empowered - Lisa</td>
<td>Organize to change the system - Lisa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We spend so much of our time at work - it helps to like it/get meaning from it - Beth</td>
<td>Driven by rage - Veronica</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical space more energizing than bourgeoisie space - Beth</td>
<td>Need for confrontation - Veronica</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brings energy to be around</td>
<td>Crave radical disruptive action -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radical action - Beth</td>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents don't discuss immigrant experience - Jill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize because world is messed up - Jill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals to blame for social problems - Ashley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize for previous generations - Jessica</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

GRAPHICAL ILLUSTRATION OF THEME PREVALENCE
APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Parenthood Status</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
<th>Years Spent Organizing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Not a Parent</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>East-Asian</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Not a Parent</td>
<td>East-Asian</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Not a Parent</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Southeast-Asian</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G

PEER CODER THEME LISTS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical models of organizing</td>
<td>Models and methods (Alinsky)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools for organizing</td>
<td>Agitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational ties of organizing</td>
<td>Family influenced why they started; &quot;powerful women invested in me&quot;;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Healing practice&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;difficult time asking for help&quot;; &quot;People do not do introspection on their own&quot;; &quot;I have a certain level of awareness of what my shit is&quot;; &quot;a holistic understanding of myself&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Intersectionality&quot; of identities, power and oppression</td>
<td>Gender and age &quot;aging out and moving into retirement&quot; or do something else with their careers; women of color, racial identity/&quot;women take care of everything&quot;; &quot;men never get asked to do that&quot;; Sexism - male organizer bullshit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC: Barriers/&quot;impacts of capitalism, of patriarchy, of racism&quot;/ Gender dynamics</td>
<td>&quot;patriarchy&quot;; gendered &quot;note taking&quot;; avoidance, &quot;get everything else done before I have to talk to this leader&quot;; &quot;training and leadership development&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Lack of support&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;a work context where there are productivity demands and output demands and expectations, all of that, like that's extra toxic&quot;; &quot;Structural aspects of that in elections, like public financing&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions and the future of organizing, &quot;bold visionary stuff&quot;</td>
<td>Access to resources; comprehensive and expansive understanding of the system; deep relationship with community; getting paid well to do this work; role or not taker in rotation; qualification for a role is a &quot;competent individual to be detail oriented; &quot;culture of accountability&quot;; base building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership &quot;throughout organizing and throughout life&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;white men&quot;; interviewers styles of training others, invitations to speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Subtheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational ties of organizing</td>
<td>&quot;A history and a legacy&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariame Kaba, Anita Alvarez</td>
<td>&quot;A movement ecology framework&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Institute by Carlos Saavedra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octavia Butler and mass protest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MST/Landless Workers Movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC: &quot;Healing process of their own&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;recognition of the harm and trauma folks have experienced&quot;; &quot;folks to be on their own journey&quot; to be better organizers; theoretical pillar of &quot;personal transformation&quot; from movement ecology framework; &quot;the way to change the world is to change ourselves first&quot;; &quot;conflict and tension between law and people&quot;; Trust and mistrust;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC: Intersectionality of identities, power and oppression</td>
<td>White supremacy culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers/ gender dynamics</td>
<td>&quot;leadership is like very masculine&quot;; &quot;he literally tried to organize to get her fired from the fellowship because she did not want to work at his organization&quot;; interviewees gendered &quot;secretarial things&quot;; &quot;Rabbit hole of capitalism versus racism&quot;; access to funders; access to sit in these conversations around literally the globe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Really struggling&quot;/&quot;I see the horrors&quot;/&quot;Hidden and unacknowledged&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Pumping people in to organizing with no support, no skills&quot;; Not holding people as they tell their trauma or bring their selves into the work&quot;; &quot;A work context where there are productivity demands and output demands and expectations. All of that like, that's extra toxic&quot;; Follow the money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectability politics</td>
<td>&quot;respectability politics&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions and the future of organizing, &quot;new wave&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;One on one training with a lens around blackness and directly impacted folks&quot;; Incorporating childcare; access to resources; comprehensive and expansive understanding of the system; &quot;deep relationship&quot; with community; Getting paid well to do this work; Tole or note taker in rotation; consent; &quot;the capacity to articulate their own analysis...help cocreate analysis and strategy in a way that folks who have experienced the issue can identify it, can do it themselves&quot;; accessible language; global approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Roots to organizing
Leadership

Whiteness, maleness
APPENDIX H

SAMPLE MIDWEST ACADEMY STRATEGY CHART
# Midwest Academy Strategy Chart

After choosing your issue, fill in this chart as a guide to developing strategy. Be specific. List all the possibilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Organizational Considerations</th>
<th>Constituents, Allies, and Opponents</th>
<th>Targets</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. List the long-term objectives of your campaign.</td>
<td>1. List the resources that your organization brings to the campaign. Include money, number of staff, facilities, reputation, canvass, etc.</td>
<td>1. Who cares about this issue enough to join in or help the organization?</td>
<td>1. Primary Targets</td>
<td>For each target, list the tactics that each constituent group can best use to make its power felt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. State the intermediate goals for this issue campaign. What constitutes victory?</td>
<td>What is the budget, including in-kind contributions, for this campaign?</td>
<td>Whose problem is it?</td>
<td>Whose has the power to give you what you want?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will the campaign</td>
<td>2. List the specific ways in which you want your organization to be strengthened by this campaign. Fill in numbers for each:</td>
<td>What do they gain if they win?</td>
<td>What power do you have over them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Win concrete improvement in people's lives?</td>
<td>• Establish leadership group</td>
<td>• What risks are they taking?</td>
<td>• Be backed up by a specific form of power.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give people a sense of their own power?</td>
<td>• Increase experience of existing leadership</td>
<td>• What power do they have over the target?</td>
<td>Tactics include</td>
<td>• Media events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alter the relations of power?</td>
<td>• Build membership base</td>
<td>• Into what groups are they organized?</td>
<td>• Actions for information and demands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What short-term or partial victories can you win as steps toward your long-term goal?</td>
<td>• Expand into new constituencies</td>
<td>2. Who are your opponents?</td>
<td>• Public hearings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Raise more money</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Strikes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. List internal problems that have to be considered if the campaign is to succeed.</td>
<td>• What will your victory cost them?</td>
<td>• Voter registration and voter education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• What will they do/ spend to oppose you?</td>
<td>• Lawsuits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• How strong are they?</td>
<td>• Accountability sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• How are they organized?</td>
<td>• Elections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Negotiations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© Midwest Academy
28 E. Jackson Blvd. #605, Chicago, IL 60604
(312) 427-2304 mwacademy1@aol.com www.midwestacademy.com

Adapted from Bobo et. al (2001, p. 34).
REFERENCES


Kennelly, J. (2017). This is the view when I walk into my house’: Accounting phenomenologically for the efficacy of spatial methods with youth. Young 25(3), 315-321.


Mosley, J. E. (2010). Organizational resources and environmental incentives: Understanding the policy advocacy involvement of human service nonprofits. *Social Service Review, 84*(1), 57-76


Petitjean, C. (2017). When organizers are professionals: The transformation of community organizing into a profession is a barrier to radical political change. *Jacobin* https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/07/community-organizing-staff-professionals-social-movements


VITA

Dr. Dungy attended University of Iowa where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies with a Minor in Studio Art. Dungy then attended University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration and the Lutheran School of Theology, earning a dual degree, a Master of Social Work and a Master of Theological Studies, in 2011. Prior to pursuing her doctoral degree, she served as a power-based community organizer working on primarily affordable housing, but also exploring electoral organizing, family-centered organizing, and faith-based organizing. Dungy began her doctoral studies at Loyola University Chicago in Social Work during the Fall of 2017 and served as a Research Assistant and Teaching Assistant to Dr. Amy Krings. Throughout her doctoral program she initially assisted with and then directed the Chicago office of a professional social work agency, Social Work p.r.n.