ORGANIZING FOR POWER: UNDERSTANDING CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF POWER IN RURAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

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ABSTRACT

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Community organizing is a practice of building and utilizing collective power, often initiated by groups who have little or no preexisting social or economic power. By acting together in a disciplined, organized, and targeted fashion, organizing is used to exert influence in the public square to achieve policy outcomes, provide mutual aid, and reweave the fabric of social relations in communities, frequently in direct opposition to existing power structures. Thus, creating a shared understanding of power that is fundamentally liberative is key to the success of organizing efforts and moreover, to creating lasting community cohesion that can continue to mount effective opposition to domination and oppression. The analyses in this project are the result of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with highly active members of a rural community organizing network, True North Organizing Network, that operates in schools and faith- and spirituality-based institutions in Del Norte and Humboldt counties and adjacent Tribal lands in rural Northern California. Interview data was analyzed in parallel with field notes taken over more than two years of participant observation. Analyses showed strong connections between conceptions of power, spirituality, and conflict that indicate the importance of organizational approaches that challenge normative understandings of dominating power or *power over*. The project presents these connections and moves

towards hypothesizing new methods for analyzing the efficacy of community organizing practices through generating collective shifts in conceptions of power as collective and relational.

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INTRODUCTION

This project and my time working for True North Organizing Network have been an exploration of myself, my values, and has fundamentally challenged who I am and would like to be. It has forced hard reconciliations with my own past, my positionality, and has been simultaneously the most cathartic and most uncomfortable thing I have ever personally engaged in. The core of my experiences with community organizing have been oriented around self-discovery, pushing myself to explore outside of my comfort zone and allowing myself to imagine what things could be, rather than dwelling on what they are. After all, I was on an entirely different life and career-path before finding community organizing; I had always wanted to be in law enforcement. My inclination towards law enforcement, and more specifically what I saw as power to create change, was heavily influenced by my past experiences with powerlessness.

As a white, cis-gender, middle-class man, my experiences with systems of oppression and of "power over" always have been and will be fundamentally different than others who grew up without the unearned privileges I have been accustomed to for most of my life. Nonetheless, my lived experiences with bullying in school have shaped the way I think about power and powerlessness. Because the focus of this study is on conceptions of and experiences with power, I feel it is only fair to turn that lens towards myself, and to briefly outline why power and domination have become a focus for my research.

Growing up in rural Humboldt County was, on the surface, idyllic. As a kid, I was small, nerdy, bad at sports, and had a passion for music. I started violin at two years old

and practiced for hours every day, driven by some innate desire to be just like my older sibling and to endlessly create. At home, music was supported and encouraged, but at school I was bullied starting in the first grade. I was an easy target, and the environment I went home to was regimented, with high expectations and a firm structure. In short, I felt I did not belong anywhere and felt powerless to change how others saw me at school, or to change my overly structured home life. I was perpetually in-between: uncomfortably wedged between a home that was not comforting, and a school that felt unsafe to me. I felt powerless to change my circumstances and was always looking for excuses to escape. I now understand these experiences as my first interactions with what Alinsky described as "power over" (Alinsky 2010 [1971]). The bullying continued through my third-grade year and got bad enough that I left my school. I still feel a deep sense of shame for leaving and not being strong enough or powerful enough to change my circumstances at the time.

These early lived experiences with bullying and feeling dominated fundamentally shaped my early understandings and conceptions of power. The lessons I had learned were that physically larger and stronger people had power, and those who were not strong, athletic, and generally normative were powerless. As I progressed through high school and grew physically larger, I sought out martial arts and other activities that would lower my chances of experiencing that powerlessness that I remembered so vividly from being a diminutive, nerdy kid. All I knew was that I would do anything to avoid myself or anyone else experiencing bullying and domination like I had. This is not to be comparative – I realize that this is an overly simplistic interpretation of power and

powerlessness. However, it is illustrative to how my worldview at the time and my own understandings of power shaped both my career ambitions and how I understood systems-change in my community.

As an undergraduate student at Humboldt State University many years later, I was required to participate in an internship as part of my culminating experience. It was the Fall semester of 2020, approximately six months into the COVID-19 pandemic and I had few options for placement. Of the choices presented, I saw True North as the most intriguing. I applied for the internship via email and started a few weeks later after an interview with the Director of Organizing, Julia Lerma. Despite True North being a faith- and values-based organizing network, I had never been to a church service of any kind and expressed hesitation in engaging with clergy and congregants – a set of facts I readily shared during my interview. Julia told me that the only requirement for the internship was being open and respectful.

During my internship, I helped to organize a city council candidates forum and was trained on how to operate the Rapid Response Network – a sort of community-based E911 service for reporting ICE raids. While both experiences were valuable, what was of far more consequence were the exercises of self-exploration required by the organization. A foundational component of organizing culture is based around a core "organizing principle" in the Faith in Action network: "the first revolution is internal." Organizers and interns in the network are encouraged to write a public story (Ganz 2002) which captures why they are involved in grassroots, social justice community organizing. I found this exploration challenging, but deeply rewarding. Because of my privilege as a white man in

the rural United States, I was not accustomed to being challenged to examine my positionality and how it shaped my perspective and actions. Engaging in deep introspection in this way can be painful, but it was formative, and pushed me to reconsider my understandings of community, power, and leadership. Moreover, I began to wonder why I had never been challenged in this way before.

It was undeniable that most of the country and world felt powerless in the face of COVID at the time my internship with True North was supposed to end. At the time, so much was out of my control that it was hard not to think about how personal stories and lived experiences shape understandings of power. Most businesses were closed, I was on unemployment after being laid off at my job as a bartender, and I was faced with growing uncertainty about my ability to support myself. Despite the desperation I felt at the time, I knew I had been challenged while doing my internship and asked to stay at True North.

As I entered the Master's in Public Sociology program in Spring of 2021, I was increasingly involved with True North's organizing work. I began helping with the facilitation of Local Organizing Committee (LOC) meetings and assisted with vaccine outreach and immigration clinics. I had asked the management team at True North if I could do my 240 hours and final project on some of the organizing work I was engaged with. While the organization was open to me working on something related to the work I was doing, nothing seemed to capture the essence of what the organization was really accomplishing. It can be easy to base a project on something that is quantifiable or easily measurable: I thought about doing projects on how many people enrolled in an individual service, participated in an action, or engaged in policy research. None of these ideas

captured what I wanted them to. I felt that True North had done more for the community and for me personally than any single program evaluation or small project could adequately capture. I reflected about my most meaningful experiences and realized that what True North had given me was something that I could not sufficiently capture through such a narrow project.

What I have taken away from True North and what I chose to address in this project, is a fundamentally different understanding of power than I had ever experienced before. In organizing, power is neither good nor evil, it is simply "the ability to achieve purpose." Confronted with this, I began to think, "what would the world look like if people had a fundamentally different understanding of their own power?" I knew that in my experience, shifting my understanding of power changed my career goals, my education, and my worldview. It morphed my conceptions of my childhood, of being bullied, of feeling like I did not belong, and altered the way I saw the people around me, in the community that I grew up in and the world, and the structures that worked to undermine our collective voice. It made me want to understand more.

This project became an exploration of my own story and positionality and how power is contextualized within lived experience. The core goal of the project was to offer a different metric for how organizing is judged in the public eye: instead of focusing on concrete policy outcomes, programs, and services, organizations should be judged on what is truly valuable – the ways they reweave the webs of social relations in a community and bring people from all walks of life together to accomplish shared goals. In an increasingly polarized world full of demagoguery, vitriol, and extremist rhetoric,

there has never been a more important time to move towards liberation through relationship- and community-building.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

While the practice of congregation-based and faith-based community organizing is not particularly novel, there is a wide range of definitions and symbolic boundaries that are present between political social movements and pre-political community organizing. As a result, a concentration of this literature review is on defining the symbolic boundaries that separate relational, congregation-based and faith-based community organizing practices from sustained social movements and activism, and on operationalizing key concepts essential to understanding the pragmatic how, what, and why of community organizing.

This literature review covers (1) a brief history of sustained social movements and how they differ from community organizing for the purposes of this paper; (2) an orientation to and discussion of social capital theory and how it applies to social movements and community organizing; and (3) an examination of Faith in Action National Network, the national organization which True North Organizing Network is an affiliate federation of. There is a large body of literature which describes various community organizing efforts within urban, metropolitan areas, but relatively few studies on the practice of rural, relational organizing. However, because this project is focused on True North Organizing Network, a rural federation of Faith in Action, the topics for this literature review were chosen to be broadly applicable to True North's methodologies and organizing model and to give background on common organizing practices and applications. While there is an express focus on Faith in Action's methodologies due to

the direct links to True North, studies that focus on other organizing groups are also examined. A robust discussion of social and relational power can be found under the “Theory” subheading rather than included explicitly in this literature review.

Sustained Social Movements and Community Organizing

Community organizing encompasses a broad category of combined, localized social organization structures, leadership development, and relationship building. All community organizing is united by practices that attempt to connect community-based organizations, cultivate and uplift the voices of citizen-leaders, and build social power for the good of the community (Tattersall 2015: 382). In urban settings, community organizing can be geographically limited to specific neighborhoods that share ideals or values, such as a large church or congregation that has been organized to mobilize and build social capital, or in some cases it can be contained to a single large apartment complex (Stall and Stoecker 1998: 729).

Due to the ambiguity of the term community organizing, even when applied to urban settings where it is more commonly practiced, it can be difficult to discern the symbolic boundaries of where community organizing ends, and social movements or sustained activism begins. As sociologist Connor Bailey (2013) notes, “social movements start with a growing consensus that a problem exists and the realization that others share the same view. (416)” Taken at face value, this assertion would encompass both social movements and community organizing practices.

Importantly, community organizing can be a myriad of practices, principles, and methods that attempt to create thriving community networks and provide a foundation for

multi-issue movement work. While activism or mobilization are not themselves constitutive of community organizing, they can be captured in specific instances under the auspices of community organizing if framed within a network of sustained community relationships based around shared values (Lim 2008; Andrews et al. 2010; Bunyan 2021; Stall and Stoecker 1998).

One of the most popular community organizing models in the United States and other regions of the globe today is the Alinsky model – named after a prodigious organizer and criminologist, Saul Alinsky. Frequently referred to as the "father of modern community organizing," Alinsky was integral to connecting neoliberalism to faith-based community organizing practices by professionalizing and monetizing organizing as a career and building organizations that mimicked corporate power structures. Alinsky also founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) which remains one of the largest community organizations in the United States today (Warren 2002). The IAF was a realization of combined labor and faith-based organizing practices that drew on Alinsky's experience as a labor organizer with the Carpenter's Union in Chicago. Among numerous contributions, Alinsky was the architect of the modern community organizing model and worked extensively to leverage intermediary and centralizing institutions such as churches and schools. Alinsky's model was focused on leveraging social capital built by these centralizing institutions and tapping into a values-based approach to building powerful organizations. His model was heavily reliant on building power through common self-interest and leadership development (Walls 2016: 38).

In recent years, Alinsky has been widely criticized by sociologists and social movement scholars as being a catalyst for the neoliberalization of community organizing (Swartz 2010; Stein 1986). However, many of the largest community organizations - namely the IAF, Faith in Action (formerly Pacific Institute for Community Organizing [PICO]) and the Gamaliel Foundation - continue to use modified versions of Alinsky's organizing model (Phulwani 2016: 863). Most critiques of the Alinsky model are centered around challenging hierarchical power structures, and the professionalization of organizing. Two competing models include *Public Education*, which aims to organize through education of the public regarding social issues, and *Horizontalism*, focused on creating horizontal sets of power relations within organizations (Walls 2016: 95-100). Both of these models have seen limited success in praxis compared to the Alinsky model, but offer different perspectives on organizing influenced by contemporary movements such as Occupy (Walls 2016: 101-104).

Defining organizing as a social movement is controversial and difficult to operationalize, with differing perspectives largely oriented towards better defining the symbolic boundaries that separate organizing praxis and social movements. Drawing on Arendt's existential phenomenology, Bunyan (2021) argues that the difference of *politics* vs. *the political* is an important distinction that helps define the symbolic boundaries between community organizing and social movements. This "political difference" provides a basis for understanding and interpreting the actions of a social plurality versus individual empowerment. In other words, social plurality is seen by Bunyan as a means of understanding the ways that groups of individuals engage in organization building – a

constant tension between taking action and building organizational culture while maintaining intra-organizational relationships that sustain the organization and surface new leaders and issues (Bunyan 2021: 913). This is a key distinction between a movement which focuses on action, and creating a lasting, multi-issue organization through community organizing. That is, community organizing is "pre-political" in this context and can provide structure for social movements to build from, whereas social movements are distinctly political in nature and are a focused effort of a group rather than a social or political plurality of individuals.

Despite normative narratives to the contrary, well-organized, robust social movements and sustained activism have a long history in the United States that stretches back to the colonial era (Skocpal and Amenta 1986). Activism and sustained movements, while themselves not distinctly community organizing, represent operationalized understandings of participatory democracy operating within deeply entrenched and intersectional systems of oppression. Despite the exclusionary, patriarchal, and white supremacist foundations inherent in the American political system, social movements and organizing have consistently subverted systems of oppression and continue to do so today (Walls 2015; Swartz 2011; Skocpal and Amenta 1986).

American voluntarism is remarkable; however, it has been widely characterized by social movement scholars as spontaneous and arising from tight-knit communities evocative of mid-twentieth century suburbia or a large congregation (Skocpal, Ganz, and Munson 2000: 527). Indeed, this assertion that political movements in the United States arise purely from spontaneous interactions and a culture of belonging drives a larger

discourse in American politics that attempts to maintain the status quo and downplays the role of well-organized movements that are successful in disrupting deeply engrained and pervasive systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism. Some early examples of such movements include organizations like the American Anti-Slavery Society, which aimed for state- and national-level policy change and appealed to a broad cross-section of American society who were excited by the prospect of participatory democracy (Skocpal et al 2000: 531). While not community organizing as defined for the purposes of this project, the American Anti-Slavery Society provides an example of a well-organized activist organization that aspired to build social power on a national level and sought to create an environment of sustained activism.

Fundamental to the success of sustained activism and community organizing is the development of leaders and education of new members in organizational practice, principles, and methodology (Andrews et al. 2010: 1192). This quality makes community organizing and multi-issue sustained activism distinct from fragmented, spontaneous social movements. Central to leadership development within community organizations is the practice of shared authority, and "leading from behind." By adopting a model of leadership that stems from collective development and active participation through leadership, organizations create internal politics of mutual constituency rather than a customer or client relationship (Andrews et al. 2010:1198).

Fostering a set of horizontal social relations within organizations is critical to creating a thriving network of relationships which can form the basis for larger social movements, especially in communities of color. An example of organized community

structure with a horizontal social hierarchy is the Montgomery Improvement Association. The Montgomery Improvement Association led the Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped provide the impetus for a national civil rights movement, demonstrating the importance of relatively apolitical organized community structures in helping build larger-scale, distinctly political social movements (Stall and Stoeker 1998: 730). While there were distinct and clearly identified leaders within the movement, the Montgomery Improvement Association organized itself around a horizontal power structure which helped to build a larger, national, political social movement. This is exemplary of a group that trained its members to be leaders – a key shift in organizational dynamics.

As Robnett (1996) notes, mobilization theorists have frequently focused on the mobilization of movement members or "followers" rather than analyzing the relationships within and between movement leaders (1664). The traditional dichotomous approach to understanding organizational leadership (i.e., "leaders" vs "followers") and the linear conceptualization of social movements as masses of followers organized by leaders is overly simplistic in nature. Instead, leaders are frequently mobilized by the masses they will eventually lead (Robnett 1996: 1665). This observation provides a lens for analyzing community organizing efforts as collective movements focused on organizational dynamics, shared culture, and shared ideals.

One reason for the distinction between movements and organizing is Robert Michel's "iron law of oligarchy" which argues that formally structured movements inevitably lead to oligarchy and immobility (Stein 1986: 96). Additionally, as movements subside, either due to failure, success, or loss of momentum, the organization structures

frequently collapse. This is a key difference between the goals of community organizing and the goals of social movements. While sometimes aligned with the political goals of social movements, community organizing exists as a means of creating stable community structures and networks of relationships that ensure that the organization does not fall apart as a result of major successes or failures (Phulwani 2016: 867).

While there is a robust body of literature that addresses the role of community organizing in urban environments, and a broad range of interpretations of systems of power in populous areas, there has been little analysis of the role of community organizing in rural regions of the United States (Bailey 2013; Tattersall 2015). This is possibly in part because congregations in rural communities are much smaller, which gives organizers less established social capital to build from. Nonetheless, it is clear that much more analysis is needed to clearly identify why regional, geographically dispersed organizing efforts have struggled to gain traction in rural America (Phulwani 2016; Tattersall 2015; Walker and McCarthy 2010).

Social Capital

Much like the term "community organizing," social capital is a concept that has been operationalized in different contexts and with an array of definitions that collectively span centuries. Although there is a robust body of literature that clearly defines and operationalizes social capital in these many different contexts, it is critical that the mechanics of a term as broadly construed be fleshed out and contextualized within a community organizing framework. While there is more literature on social capital than can be addressed adequately here, this section attempts to contextualize the

broad strokes of social capital theory for the purposes of clarity, and to provide insight into the ways that social capital is operationalized for the purposes of community organizing.

Community organizing has a long history of employing the construct of social capital as a means of empowering systematically disadvantaged groups and to increase the accessibility of political structures by organized pluralities. That is, within an organizing context, social capital can be defined as structures of social organization that hold value and are held in a social trust. Importantly, social capital can be a means of facilitating organizational cohesion and coordination for mutual benefit (Wood 2002: 8).

Robust social networks have been shown to create a sense of participatory democracy and have long been a key component of building social power. Scholars (Wood 2002; Warren 2001) have argued that the widespread success of community organizing in the United States can be largely attributed to its ability to build upon pre-existing social capital resources already existent in local congregations. By leveraging existing social capital, organizers can efficiently build coalitions connected by shared values. As a result, community organizing groups can simultaneously organize around multiple issues, and leverage networks that exist within and between congregations and congregants. Warren (2001) argues that faith-based social capital also plays a role in creating a strong sense of group cohesion, by increasing the strength of social bonds within congregations. This dynamic of creating a more cohesive congregation is part of the quid pro quo nature of organizing in partnership with churches and communities and

is demonstrative of the role of social capital within a political economy (Swartz 2011: 460).

Within social capital theory, there are distinct types of social capital that can be attained by individuals or groups. Among these are *bonding* (exclusive) and *bridging* (inclusive). *Bonding* social capital refers to social relations that tie together individuals from similar socioeconomic niches. Some scholars have noted that creating a network of *bonding* social capital, if built within an environment of reciprocity and trust, can provide social infrastructure that encourages a shared culture of putting common good over individual self-interest (Ishimaru 2013: 9). For example, in a study focused on enhancing parent leadership that observed low-income Latinx parents going through a 12-week leadership course, Bolívar and Chrispeels (2011) found that building social and intellectual capital helped parents better navigate the school system and assisted them in understanding the role of collective action in changing policy and social dynamics in schools (33). Additionally, bonding social capital is good for mobilizing solidarity, but can be less valuable from an economic sociological perspective. This is because "the 'weak' ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are more valuable than the 'strong/ ties that link me to relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is very like my own" (Putnam 2000: 23). In other words, creating a broad social network is more valuable when examined from a perspective of social economics.

Bridging social capital describes reciprocal social ties between individuals with very different sets of lived experiences, such as relationships built between low-income

Latinx parents and classified school staff. Trust that exists within these relationships can create norms of mutual responsibility, produced by social capital, that extend across communities. Such ties can also be utilized by parents to help with decision-making processes in schools and even school districts, especially when the changes proposed arise from a sense of mutual trust and collective benefit (Ishimaru 2013: 11). Faith-based community organizing groups commonly assert that the fundamental locus of social power exists within community relationships. Therefore, both *bridging* and *bonding* are important mechanisms through which organizations are able achieve social change. However, existing social capital is never sufficient and faith-based community organizing groups push leaders and members of their organizations to build more through intentional, individual, relational meetings called “one-to-ones” (Swartz 2011: 463). One-to-ones are a primary tool used by community organizing groups that is used to intentionally expand upon existing webs of social capital. Effective one-to-ones serve to build mutual trust, and to identify each other’s values and self-interest. Of critical importance is the intentionality of the meetings, the time-limited nature, and active participation from both participants. One-to-ones are conducted regularly between organizing staff, leaders, potential leaders, congregation members, and with elected officials (Christens and Dolan 2011: 539). Putnam (2000) argues that bonding social capital is more-or-less metaphorically equivalent to superglue, whereas bridging social capital is like WD-40 (26).

Despite the popularity of social capital and its widespread application throughout the social sciences, there is controversy about its acceptance and the implications of

giving too much value to it. Somers (2008) writes extensively about the harms of operationalizing social capital as a tool for understanding social change, describing it as a "perfect storm" (215). Importantly, Somers critiques the idea that social capital is the best, or the only, means of describing the value of social relations, arguing that the International Monetary Fund's adoption of social capital as "the missing link" in fighting international inequality is deeply harmful, problematic and exemplary of why it should not be in such common use. Additionally, Somers argues that social capital itself is inherently a neoliberal term that oversimplifies and monetizes the fabric of social infrastructure – that is, it economizes the ways that society builds relationships and understands them, reducing them to quid pro quo. In fact, Somers argues that social capital has partially become a well-known tool because it fills a gap identified by rational-choice scholars and economists in how to best include social relationships in economic models (Somers 2008).

Although Somer's (2008) arguments have been received by the academic community with some tepidity, critics of Alinsky-style organizing culture have long argued that the neoliberalization of community organizing and its ties to the nonprofit industrial complex represent a danger to the idea of participatory democracy and social power building. By understanding social relations as economic, organizers are only looking at a component of the social fabric that they are intending to build upon. One example was the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2008. A former Alinsky organizer, Obama was able to leverage the tools of community organizing for the purposes of a national political campaign. One of the primary tools

was an understanding of economized social relations. Hyatt (2008) argues that these relations were exemplary of “high neoliberalism” (19) which included displacing the responsibility of government for providing services and creating competitive markets for service delivery. Indeed, many of Obama’s policy suggestions followed a neoliberal understanding of community and involved “leveraging change through market-oriented incentives” (Hyatt 2008: 21). Obama is not unique among Alinsky organizers in his analysis of political and social economies, nor was he unique in his perspectives on leveraging social capital, at least not within the context of community organizing as an established practice.

The construct of social capital is a useful tool for understanding the actions of community organizing groups and for conceptualizing the political economies of social spaces and public administrations. However, its use must be more nuanced and contextualized within other theories of social relations. While bonding and bridging social capital are well-known and highly regarded academic concepts, pragmatic understandings of social capital as commonly taught by faith-based community organizing groups should not be misunderstood or misconstrued as intentionally exploitative. Rather, pragmatic social capital is a reciprocal set of relations that can be a powerful mechanism for creating localized change and building social power.

Relational Organizing and Faith in Action National Network

Within the scope of organizing groups that identify as faith-based, congregation-based, or single-denominational, it is helpful to consider the differences in strategy and outcomes that these groups have created and achieved, and the points of distinction

between methodology and power-building strategies. While many of the most successful community organizing networks throughout the United States and internationally operate loosely based on the Alinsky-style model of organizing and power building, there is diversity among organizational interpretations and critiques of Alinsky's methods and biases. Originally founded as the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) and renamed in 2018, Faith in Action has been doing congregation-based community organizing in the United States since 1973. With more than 50 organizational affiliates, or federations, in cities all over the United States, Faith in Action and its federations are composed of a large membership of congregations from a variety of faith traditions, and to a lesser extent civic groups like parent-teacher organizations and neighborhood associations (Whitman 2006). This approach to organizing is called "relational" organizing, because it is focused on building social capital and establishing a network of reciprocal relationships built on a foundation of shared values and trust. Faith in Action does not have a purely formulaic or prescriptive approach to organizing, instead focusing on building an organizational culture that trains leaders in interpersonal relationship building, public relationships, and developing leaders through congregation- or cluster-based activities. Utilizing an approach and organizing principles stemming from the work of prolific community organizer Saul Alinsky, Faith in Action recognizes the necessity of tension, conflict, as well as personal story, pain, and lived experience in the practice of community organizing (Gupta 2021: 3144).

By utilizing a decentralized model based on local power-building, Faith in Action and its federations can operate as independent entities, with the national network largely

functioning as a unifying shell that provides training, professional development, and support for smaller local federations that would otherwise be unable to access quality, cohesive staff and leadership training (Chabolla 2004). This model prioritizes relationship building within communities and provides a structure that allows the national organization to leverage social capital both at a large scale and at the hyper-local. However, it has frequently been criticized as "stop-sign organizing" because of its focus on giving communities voice in what they want to change in their neighborhoods. Sometimes, this results in organizing efforts that are hyper-local, like adding or moving stop signs, to give communities a sense of empowerment, develop new leaders, and get new leaders fully involved in common organizing practices. Whitman (2004) argues that this approach helps build trust and more genuine social capital at the local level, providing a higher level of group cohesion and longevity than other models of organizing focused on larger-scale actions and wins.

In addition to focusing on local politics as a means of training leaders, helping new leaders contextualize their own story and how it intersects with community organizing is important to faith-based community organizations, including Faith in Action. In a study of a similar Alinsky-style faith-based community organizing network in the Midwest, Oyakawa (2015) found that leaders who formed politicized personal narratives developed a sense of identity in their participation with organizing networks and were far more likely to participate in sustained activism. Similar processes are utilized by Faith in Action's federations and are central to most faith-based leadership development models. Oyakawa (2015) describes these methods as "politicizing their

personal experiences and personalizing their political beliefs" (395). This process of identity construction as a feature of movement participation is not novel and is commonplace across the progressive landscape of activism and community organizing networks. For example, Valocchi (2013) studied the life histories of progressive activists in Massachusetts and found that many activists and organizers regard their work as a way of life, combining stories of economic hardship with tales of collective action and social disruption (173).

While remaining focused on the local, Faith in Action and its affiliates regularly take part in national or state level actions. Federations of Faith in Action have been involved in youth organizing projects, immigration reform work, criminal justice reform, and much more (Speer and Christens 2012). However, at the core of their organizing model is a belief that all politics are local, and "small is beautiful" (PICO Staff Guide). As federations attempt to broaden their influence over statewide and federal level policy, having a centralized state and national network is critical to the success of these large-scale efforts. Some examples include PICO California's (Faith in Action's state federation) push for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) regardless of citizenship documentation status, and work on changing state and federal-level housing policy. Both issues exemplify efforts to unite smaller federations around larger issue areas, and to move away from "reactionary" organizing work that is generally characteristic of Alinsky-style community organizing groups (Andrews et al 2010; Christens and Collura 2012).

Indeed, many of the core issues that Faith in Action and its affiliates hope to address through their organizing efforts require coordination and power-building efforts that extend far beyond the reaches of local federations. One such core issue that Faith in Action and its federations have worked on for over two decades is immigration reform – specifically encouraging the United States federal government to pursue legislation that would open the doors for undocumented community members to a clear pathway to citizenship or permanent residency. While most of the victories won by local federations are focused on changing local enforcement policies that disparately impact undocumented families, Faith in Action's state and national networks continue their efforts to build relationships with politicians and other decision-makers who may be able to change legislation and impact the lives of millions of undocumented people in the United States (Gupta 2021).

Faith in Action and its affiliate federations are not entirely unique in their organizing methodology but have a long and proven history of sustained organizing efforts throughout the United States. Mostly operating in urban areas with a focus on racial justice and personal narrative, Faith in Action's federations continue to operate through leadership identification, development, and structured support for communities. Although there is a substantial body of literature that documents Faith in Action and its federations, there are significant gaps analyzing the efficacy of Faith in Action's work in rural areas, and the organization's work on developing regional power. Additionally, there is a complex dynamic between federations and the larger organization that could stand to be further assessed and considered within a social movement framework. As

Faith in Action moves towards establishing a discursive position of being multi-race, multi-faith and generally more inclusive, there is increasingly an opportunity for an intersectional framework to be applied to both the collective actions that the organization is working to build upon, and the inclusivity and efficacy of leadership development practices as a tool for building social power.

THEORY

Introduction

There are several frameworks of thought that offer tools to conceptually understand and decipher the dynamics and flow of power in the public square and helped to shape my thinking for this project. Some of these milieus of thought include but are not limited to, dominating power or *power over* (hereafter used interchangeably), the spatial and temporal dynamics of power, and power built together in community or *power with*. Each form or expression of power explored in this section fundamentally represent ideal types (Swedberg 2018: 188) but in practice are constantly informed and shaped through dialectic processes and interactions with each other, and with other forms and systems of power. It is therefore important to recognize that individual experiences with power and powerlessness must be understood as highly personal and contextual but are not separate or distinct from their relationship to larger systems of power and oppression.

Frequently colored by understandings and direct interactions that intersect with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, experiences with power and powerlessness can be painful to explore for those most impacted by processes and relations of domination. Indeed, the word power itself is nebulous and can be construed in a variety of ways that are highly contextual, often traumatic, and constantly evolving. My initial interest in this project was driven by my intent and desire to understand what distinguishes *power over* from *power with.* However, it necessarily required a consideration of other forms of power that exist as commonplace in lived experiences of True North's community leaders and in the literature. A key intersection that I sought to explore in this project was

marginalized people's experiences with power both as an individual and a plurality, and how those interactions may be shaped when contesting for collective power.

In True North and the organization's national network Faith in Action, the word power is understood to mean "the ability to achieve purpose." Core tenants of organizing philosophy are built around a shared belief that in this interpretation, power is neither good nor evil; it is simply a means of attaining change. Building on this definition of power as "the ability to achieve purpose", Faith in Action draws on Alinsky, positing that in the context of organizing "power is taken, never given" (Alinsky 2010[1972]). Alinsky, the architect of the model used by the Faith in Action network and many other national organizing efforts today, argued that power is not something idly accessed or wielded by the oppressed, rather, it is up to those interested in creating change to reorganize and solidify their sets of social, political and economic relationships to take power from the individuals and systems that attempt to exercise their authority and power to silence or oppress them (Walls 2015).

This is not to imply that power is an object held by individuals or systems, nor does this suggest that contesting for power is a zero-sum game. Rather, Alinsky (2010[1972]) is asserting that the sets of relationships that grant authority and *power over* to states, individuals, and polities are unlikely to give it up idly. It is therefore the goal of community organizing to reweave and create strong power relationships within communities that can compel those with *power over* to concede or transition some of power to organized pluralities. Alinsky believed that the only reason for people to organize to begin with was to respond and react to injustices and domination (Anon

2017). This point is especially important to how I understood and contextualized individual experiences with power and attempted to explore how power operates in communities that are either presently or historically marginalized and oppressed.

Similarly, Brazilian scholar Paolo Freire argues that in the initial stages of a struggle, the oppressed can, instead of liberating themselves and others, become oppressive (Freire 1970: 45). Freire's observation is indeed a key dynamic of interactions with dominating power in communities – those who are oppressed, when given an opportunity, may try to seize power only to redirect and restructure it into a reformed means of oppression. This is not what is meant by Alinsky's assertion that power can only be taken. Instead, Alinsky (2010 [1972]) implies that power is not an idle force that is offered freely. When groups become organized around shared values and issues, they are seizing power that would otherwise be left untapped or held by dominant systems. In fact, True North's theory of change is oriented around the belief that without a society organized around the premise of democracy and civic participation, the oppressed have no ability to act. Therefore, seizing power in this context can be understood as a means of tapping into those sets of relations necessary to create change and to act, rather than a loosely composed monolithic social object that is held or contained within a single locus.

Nonetheless, the action of organizing and reweaving the webs of social relations in communities is not a passive process: rather, it is ambitious, historically dangerous, and threatens the status quo. To be truly liberative, organizing must capture the stories and lived experiences of the leaders involved in the organization or movement; the world is fundamentally understood through powerful stories or encounters with grief, and

trauma. These stories and experiences deepen our relationships to social justice and liberation and are sites of knowledge that have intrinsic value to organizing efforts and social cohesion (Ganz 2010: 16). Crafting a story of self is a necessary part of leadership development in social movements and helps to build a culture of understanding and belonging within an organization, centered on values, and grounded in collective knowledge production creating a process that is itself inherently liberating and shaped by experiences of power and powerlessness. This part of the organizing process was expressed throughout my interviews and informed the ways I approached constructing the theoretical framework for this project.

This theory section attempts to address some of the more common understandings of power, and to provide a structure for determining the origins or *loci* of power within the experiences of those seeking liberation and *power with* through community organizing methodology. It is by no means comprehensive and may be characteristic of the physical region in which True North and its community leaders reside. While informed by a robust body of philosophy and social theory, understandings of what power is and how it can be channeled in community are necessarily constrained to the locations and structures for which the power is built to influence, shift, or dominate.

Dominating Power or Power Over

Perhaps the most recurrent experience with power, dominating power, encompasses the frequently violent pathways to power necessary and inherent in the power of states, polities, and many institutions. However, dominating power is by no means limited to institutions of nation- and empire-states and can be wielded by

individuals, groups, informal social structures, and businesses – especially within a capitalist society. Dominating power operates and exists within several structural *loci*: (1) dominating power is achieved through the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force (violence) as characterized by Weber (Dusza 1989: 75); (2) dominating power is derived from or legitimated through institutions (i.e. economic, military, police, education, etc); (3) those exercising dominating power control information and narrative; and (4) power is maintained through social hierarchy, norms, and systems of oppression. These loci are not intended to be viewed as mutually exclusive nor are they comprehensive; instead, they often operate simultaneously and in multiple physical and structural temporalities. For the sake of simplifying and creating a pragmatic lens to analyze my interviews with True North leaders, I focused on these four loci as stepping stones for contextualizing lived experience with *power over*.

One key means of attaining dominating power is the use of violence to realize social control and establish a false dichotomy of ruler and ruled. This is of critical importance, because dominating power is inherently oppressive and is derived from the threat of violence or the enforcement of desired social norms. However, dominating power has limitations in the ways that it interacts with the structure of society, and the dynamics of power concentration within social systems. Of importance in this context is a consideration of the degree of power diffusion or concentration in broader society, and the amount of power centralization within the state (Sharp 1980). The condition and structure of social systems directly contributes to the ability of the oppressed to fight dominating power for two main reasons. First, the decentralization of power among

multiple institutions provides the oppressed with an opportunity to limit the mechanics of dominating power in their locale, especially in circumstances of state violence or disasters. Second, the condition and structure of social systems and mediating institutions can limit the potential capacity of dominating power within a single locus and can reduce the ability of the state or other dominating forces from directly carrying out violent acts.

However, the diffusion of power across institutions and systems can favor state power over bodies, especially in relation to carceral systems and the expansion of systems of discipline and control in society. By exerting what Foucault (1975:135-137) describes as a "micro-physics of power" the state and its associated institutions create a mechanism of power and control over bodies, producing what is described as "docile bodies". In this framework of thought, minor processes of power stemming from diffuse loci are used to dominate and control the masses through a "political anatomy… [and] mechanics of power" (Foucault 1975: 139). Especially significant to the analysis that control is exerted through such an anatomy of power is the noted expansion of systems of surveillance, discipline and control into public spaces including schools, hospitals, and military organization. This systemization of control over a population and subsequent systematic disempowerment through the control of "power-knowledge (Foucault 1975)" is of critical importance to the state, its institutions, and to other structures that hope to dominate social systems across broad social and physical landscapes and the masses over time. Notably, Foucault was not seeking a reification of power as unidirectional or rooted entirely in specific social structures. Instead, this interpretation of power focuses on the means through which power penetrates and moves through society in diverse and subtle

ways, exerting control that is often difficult to interpret, whilst moving through diffuse loci. While individual conceptions of power can be simplified to unidirectional understandings of ruler-ruled, these experiences are connected to oversimplification and intentional misrepresentation that results from state coercion.

I also found it important to my framing of dominating power to consider the role of intersectional systems of oppression in individual and collective conceptions and understandings of power, especially within a framework of American pragmatism. Within a pragmatist framing, community exists as an imperative construct for theorizing the process and practice of collective behavior against dominating power. A key distinction within this framing is the notion that community is both a process and a structure (Collins 2019: 182). In other words, community is simultaneously an established social structure with defined parameters, and a constant process of creating fluid social bonds and power relations. However, this inquiry without an analysis of power fails to show the ways that power moves within and between community structures. Fundamentally, people understand structure and hierarchy based on the pragmatic application within their communities and the resistance to domination that their communities have or have not participated in. Therefore, incremental change is the application of systems change best understood by those pluralities who are most marginalized and oppressed. At its core, the theory of change interpreted by these marginalized groups is frequently rooted in deliberative and ultimately, reformist models, which are heavily informed by experiences of social inequality and their direct

experiences with community ecologies that are both physically and temporally disorganized.

Within the development of intersectionality as critical social theory, there exists a fundamental tension between structural inequalities and political projects. Neither structural nor political intersectionality can be reducible to each other, largely because political projects cannot be "read off" by structural inequalities (Walby et al 2012: 229). This notion was important to this project because it is easy to oversimplify the relation between the structural and political within the context of movement work and attempts at creating systems change. It is simultaneously easy to amplify the micro to the macro by being overly contextual in examining the complex, multi-faceted interactions between individual experience and systems of oppression. Additionally, there are pragmatic realities associated with disparate access to social capital, and hegemonic power relations that are fundamental to individuals, states, and institutions whose interest in maintaining domination is directly tied to the continuation and propagation of the status quo.

At its core, dominating power exists and operates within multiple loci simultaneously. It is sometimes visible, such as when the state exercises violence as a means of dominating the masses, but often hidden, existing diffusely within institutions and within political anatomies of power that exert a subtle form of discipline with bodies as targets. The dynamics of dominating power are expressed through its uni-directionality - moving from top to bottom within an established social-structural and political hierarchy – and based in a control over the sites and systems of knowledge production, legitimating those sources interested in maintaining the status quo, while working

actively to dismantle systems that provide a counter-system basis of thought for individuals who are excluded from reaping rewards from the oppression and marginalization of those seen as lesser than, or other.

Spatial and Temporal Dynamics of Dominating Power

Experiences with dominating power exist within physical and temporal spaces that can potentiate and project social control and domination across physical and social landscapes, amplifying the effects and structuring understandings of what it means to be dominated. While aspects of this have already been explored in the previous section, here I attempt to address and expound upon some of the spatial and temporal aspects inherent in the systematization of dominating power.

Perhaps the most characteristic example of the spatial and temporal dynamics of domination can be captured by analyzing the colonization of the Western Hemisphere. Colonization was largely accomplished through a systemization of dominating power that was fundamentally rooted in distance between the oppressor and oppressed. Such distance gave power to the oppressors because it allowed for the rationalization and dehumanization of the violence viewed as necessary to attain complete domination over peoples and cultures (Smith 2012). By maintaining a physical separation between oppressor and oppressed, it was impossible to mount substantive resistance, and the power of the oppressors was amplified through the devastation and long-term dismantling of knowledge systems, communities, and cultures. By dominating from afar, European governments were able to create structures that altered the fabric of the societies they were dominating. This was accomplished through mechanisms such as the boarding

school system which sought explicitly to undermine and subvert Indigenous cultures and languages by kidnapping and indoctrinating Native children, forcing them to learn and speak English (Spack 2000), and the Mission system, which was an overt attempt to crush Native religions and spirituality through genocide and weaponized Christianization (Craig 1997).

Another key aspect of colonization was the continuous, generational violence and oppression that endures today. This temporal dynamic of dominating power enacts and reproduces the oppression of colonization in the day-to-day lived experiences of people whose families, cultures, languages, and lands were destroyed and continue to be impacted by colonial practices and occupation. Experiences can be as blatant as the inequitable mechanisms of funding for schools whose impacts are especially noticeable in communities of color and in Tribal territories, and as subtle as academic inclinations towards positivism and the devaluation of aural and traditional forms of knowledge (Simpson 2017). Furthermore, by enforcing normative and hegemonic systems of oppression such as cis-heteropatriarchy, Tribes subsequently enacted policies like blood quantum and gendered blood which can act as barriers to obtain healthcare, access to Tribal services, and undermine core pieces of identity for individuals unable to prove sufficient genealogical and Tribal heritage.

When considering the mechanisms available to the oppressed that are effective as a means of attaining substantive social change, there is a tendency to look at short-term activism as a rapid pathway to political power. Such activism can be exemplified by efforts such as the Occupy movement, which offered a counter-system approach to

accomplishing social change but dissolved quickly in the face of dominant systems that sustain themselves by leveraging temporal domination and systemic, structural advantages. Specifically, efforts to restructure the territorial and physical relationship between workers are inherently limited by the fragments of time produced by neoliberal restructurings of labor (Sharma 2014). In other words, the temporal landscape of power harnessed by neoliberalism splinters and sections-off the accessibility of time itself, removing – or at the very least, severely limiting time as a potential locus of political power for the oppressed. When the power of oppressors can manipulate the accessibility of time itself, revolutions and resistance become difficult if not impossible to sustain for long enough to actualize the change initially sought.

While temporal dynamics of dominating power are themselves formidable in limiting the masses' ability to contest for political power, examining the role of local governmental structures and their coercive control adds another dimension to analyses of spatial power. Although generally viewed as primary loci for contestations of neoliberalism through experimental policy, struggle, and citizen acculturation, cities have increasingly incorporated structural means of coercive control, centering the local state as a key site of coercive power. Some of these practices of coercion exist in plain view: the design and administration of housing policy, specifically related to the concentration of poverty and the divide between urban and rural. However, less obvious means of coercion exist in multiple loci, including increasingly technocratic managerialism of the local state, and the quasi-markets utilized as a means of coercive micro-management of public services. Elisions around the conceptual specification of coercion within matrices

of domination have been pervasive, potentially rooted in the ontological conception of power and violence as opposites (Davies 2013). However, these gaps can be explored further and better conceived through a neo-Gramscian coercion-consent, or hegemony-domination framework that centers the local state as a mechanism for social control.

Localized institutions are heavily involved in the dissemination of state power and resources and yet are generally the most common sites for leveraging and exercising *power with*. Nonetheless, inherent in any aspect of State governmental structure is an integrated coercion-control mechanism that operates overtly and covertly simultaneously. As Gramsci described it:

> “The State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its domination but is also able to obtain the active consent of those over whom it rules. (Gramsci 1971: 244)”

Thus, through coercion the state builds its capacity to exert the very micro-physics of power referred to by Foucault (1975) and can maintain a hegemonic system of domination over its populace. These mechanisms or political anatomies of power are expressly located within spatial and temporal limits imposed upon pluralities at the local level, and scaling to national and even international levels of governance. This is not to conflate Foucault’s micro-physics of power with Gramsci’s coercion-control, but rather to identify a similarity in their understandings of the diffuse loci of power relations and the subtle means of control that increasingly pervade social and political systems.

As people attempt to understand and contextualize their experiences with power and powerlessness, they are often driven to make assumptions about their place within spatial and temporal landscapes. Such observations can be difficult to identify from a

researcher perspective and even more difficult to understand within frameworks of coercion-consent, and, more broadly, social, political, and cultural hegemony. Viewing loci of power as existing not just within individuals and institutions, but also within spatial and temporal landscapes can provide a useful lens for identifying underlying themes in the oppressor-oppressed and dominating-dominated power relations experienced by those who engage with systems change work. Especially pertinent in this research project are the ways that individuals understand and engage with generational domination and the impacts of settler-colonialism, and the elements of distance in the construction and structure of systems of power especially at the community level.

Enmeshed within the stories and experiences of those interviewed is a system of values that is informed by elements and structure of power, domination, and control. While each individual interviewee entered the research process from their own specific positionality and lived experiences - including the researcher - those frameworks are dynamic and responsive to the ways individuals involve themselves with organizations and attempt to connect across social and political differences. It is also impossible to rule out the role of coercion-consent in the ways interviewees were or were not respondent to questions relating to power in their communities, whose spatial and temporal composition is largely a product of the same systems of domination I sought to examine.

Power with

While dominating power is a common association for people who have experienced oppression, it is by no means the only form of power nor are States, polities, and governments the only, or even the primary loci of power. However, partially due to

the formative nature of direct experiences with domination, it can be easy for people - even those involved with organizing efforts - to forget about *power with*, or to misunderstand what is meant when organizations say they are seeking out power. During my participant observations with True North, I experienced organizers asking a room full of leaders "who in this room wants power?" Frequently, this was met with uncomfortable looks, as people searched the room for anyone brave enough to raise their hand. What does this say about *power with*? Are we all so disempowered that the very notion of seizing power is fundamentally intimidating? While the scope of this thesis project is too narrow to sufficiently capture what *power with* can be across broad social landscapes, this section is an attempt to flesh out and explore some of the characteristics of power held by the oppressed rather than oppressors. It is by no means intended to be comprehensive, but instead is meant to highlight some of the ways that *power with* can be interpreted within the lived experience of those involved in sustained, strategic social movements, especially community organizing.

Fundamentally dissimilar to dominating power, *power with,* for the purposes of this project, can be broadly characterized by a combination of the following: (1) decision-making channeled through horizontal power structures with shared or rotating authority; (2) nonviolent means of attainment; (3) structured around a dialogical process and the generation of collective knowledge; and (4) built around the concerns of many. While the distinction between *power with* and *power over* may seem intuitive, it can be difficult to reify when examining processes of systems change within contemporary power structures whose very existences are rooted in dominating power.

A key component of *power with* is the process through which it is shaped and structured within communities. That is, *power with* is defined by a relatively flat and horizontal set of power relations existing between members of organizations and their communities. In this model, leadership is a choice made by the oppressed to uplift each other and push for the changes necessary to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. Inviting everyday people to step into their own power and to empower others around them is central to the success of community organizing (Ganz 2002). The goal of organizing processes like the model utilized by True North is to re-weave the fabric of social relations and to remedy social disorganization stemming from the conditions of domination experienced by the masses. To do this, organizers attempt to motivate everyday people through exploration of their lived experience and help to shape and make public a collective values framework oriented around leaders' self-interests. Essential to the success of this process is the inclusion of stories from those who traditionally do not have a seat at the decision-making table, especially those who are closest to the most extreme forms of marginalization, othering, and oppression. This process is indispensable to harnessing collective power and to pushing back against dominating forces in a systematized, organized, and disciplined way.

One means of creating an atmosphere conducive to the development of community leaders, is to have shared authority over group decisions and a rotating structure of meeting facilitation. In this model, paid organizing staff help leaders by assisting in the creation of meeting agendas, gathering direct input from leaders, and preparing leaders to facilitate, chair or occupy other meeting roles. Additionally, leaders

are encouraged to write and present a "public story", sometimes referred to as a "power autobiography" (Ganz 2002) so they can examine their motivations and intentions in creating a powerful community organization. This step is key; understanding how and why one has ended up embracing leadership and owning it publicly helps to build organizational values and can be empowering for all involved – especially the leader who writes and shares their story.

Another key distinction between dominating power and *power with* is the exercise of power through non-violence. Despite a false dichotomy that is frequently expressed in contemporary Foucauldian social theory between violent domination and coercion, dominating power can exist in multiple diffuse loci of control simultaneously, acting to coerce through discipline and control and oppress through overt violence. Antithetically, *power with* is built through non-violence and a culture of collective consent which drives groups involved with organizing and systems-change work towards solving issues and concerns based on shared self-interest. In an organizing context, self-interest can be understood as "what's important to me" rather than the connotative understanding relating to selfishness. This is yet another nod to Alinsky, who believed that helping leaders understand their own self-interest is the most effective means of motivation for engaging with social movements, especially organizing (Alinsky 2010 [1972]).

While a dialectic process is inherent in almost all policy construction and governance, it is especially important to constructing functional organizing teams. Constant dialogical cycles of feedback, defined in the organizing model through the moniker of "listen, learn, act, reflect" are key to the success and cohesion of sustained

social movements, and have the potential to impact individuals' conceptions and understandings of their collective power to create change. The organizing model employed by True North consists of broad listening campaigns, targeted and disciplined research with decision-makers, specific action with clear objectives stemming directly from research meetings and mutually led power analysis, and the creation of intentional space for reflection and feedback. The model is itself a dialectic process that builds *power with*. Every step of the process teaches leadership, empowers marginalized voices, and is open to feedback and reform as identified by leaders and staff. The disciplined model is largely effective because it is in constant dialogical cycles that encourage smart, decisive action rather than diffuse activism seen so frequently in social change movements. Importantly, it also demonstrates a clear pathway to scale power up from micro to macro, building slowly and intentionally through developing relationships, shared values and defining what a win looks like.

Characteristic of the type of power-building sought in organizing is the belief that *power with* must be shaped through the concerns of many. This is critical to the success of movements for obvious reasons, but it is also an important component of how and why *power with* is fundamentally different than *power over*. Accomplished largely through one-to-ones, intentional meetings that form the base unit of community organizing and seek to build relationships to determine and engage with the self-interest of those interested in being involved, organizers learn about community concerns directly through hearing about personal encounters of domination, and the lived experiences of those closest to othering, pain and marginality. By building power in an intentional, relational

way, organizers shape the experiences of leaders and empower them to take on leadership roles and to own the power-building process. This is important to understanding the ways that *power with* is experienced and contextualized by community leaders because it has the potential to fundamentally reshape the lens through which leaders and community members view domination. Specifically, *power with* is deeply relational in nature, and should make fighting domination and working towards systems-change seem feasible, exposing the underlying workings of domination while remaining within leaders' lived experiences. At its best, this relationship building can expose elements of the "hidden transcript (Scott 1990)" and in turn, encourage the State to reveal its intentions and innerworkings. These helping to build what Scott (1990) describes as the *Arts of Resistance*.

Among the various loci of power, *power with* and the individual experiences that comprise it, are highly contextual and must be understood as intersectional, complex interactions with domination. While *power over* can operate invisibly and often must be uncovered to be contested by the masses, it cannot effectively function when pluralities are organized and restructured to represent the collective will of many. Revealing the foundation and characteristics of *power with* is complicated and counterintuitive due to its largely individualistic and spatially limited nature. But the necessity of changing the conditions experienced by so many is directly linked to understanding how community leaders involved in movement work - especially community organizing - can recontextualize and reweave their web of social relations around community values and to find their power and voice.

METHODS

Participants and Recruitment

The purpose of this study was to explore participant conceptions and understandings of power in a rural community organizing context, and to investigate whether perceptions of power drove participation in organizing efforts. Of specific interest was whether experiences with *dominating power* influenced participant worldviews and understandings of systems change work. To achieve this, a social constructionist epistemological framing was utilized. In this framework, the ways that people understand and perceive their world are viewed as equally important to how experiences can be understood from an outside perspective (Banyard and Miller 1998). This approach was coupled with a grounded theory framing which centers theory construction in the data analysis process rather than analyzing qualitative data with a preconceived theoretical understanding (Charmaz 2014).

Participants in this study were either volunteer leaders or paid, professional organizing staff for True North Organizing Network, a community- and values-based organization located in Tribal Lands, Del Norte, and Humboldt Counties in California and a part of Faith in Action National Network and People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO) California. Recruitment was conducted utilizing the researcher's insider status as a staff community organizer with True North. Due to the power dynamics between paid staff and volunteers, permission was obtained by the researcher from the organization's Executive Director and management staff before leaders were contacted about participating in the study. Outreach was done via email or

text message. Once the leader or staff member agreed to participate in the study, they were emailed a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix B) and asked to respond by clearly stating that they had read the consent form and consented to all terms.

Although consent was obtained before recording or interviewing began, many participants scheduled interviews prior to replying to the informed consent email. In this event, interviews did not begin until after the participant had returned the informed consent form. Participants were selected based on the length of their involvement in True North, with a focus on including both new leaders and those who had been involved with the organization for several years. Familiarity with organizational language and methodology was also important, because many of the questions in the example interview guide (Appendix C) intentionally include language open to interpretation by those who are unfamiliar with organizational methodology. As a multi-race, multi-faith network, it was also important to include individuals from diverse faith and racial backgrounds.

Participants (N=14) self-identified as 64% female, and 36% male; 21% Native American, 7% Black, 50% white non-Hispanic, and 21% Latinx. Nearly all participants (n=11) were over 40 years old, with 71% of interviewees employed full-time, 7% retired, and 22% working part-time. All participants in the sample had at least a high school diploma; 29% had completed some college, 36% had at least an undergraduate degree, and 21% had a graduate degree or professional certificate.

Interview Process

Interviews were scheduled using text and email. Given the researcher's insider status in the organization and the pre-existing relationships with participants, the most

significant challenge was finding time for a 30-60-minute interview that was separate from organizational and personal business. Interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom to comply with IRB requirements and risk-management protocols. Because True North is focused on interpersonal relationships, leadership development, and communication, this approach was somewhat outside of the organizational culture and common practice, but proved adequate for the purposes of this project. Interview questions were modeled after an example interview guide (Appendix C) approved by the IRB (Appendix A).

Using a semi-structured interview format, participants were asked approximately fifteen questions relating to their understandings of power as contextualized within processes of community change, community organizing work, personal lived experiences, and governmental or corporate structures. Due to power asymmetries inherent in the paid staff – volunteer relationship, questions were crafted to be focused on personal experiences and to elicit responses that were broad and re-contextualizable (Gubrium and Holstein 2002:916). Personal narrative is central to creating cohesive organizational culture and is a key piece of leadership development (Valocchi 2013). As a result, many of the personal stories shared during the interviews had already been contextualized within the individual's reason for participating in organizing, and how it fit into analyses of power and leadership. Basic demographic information was also collected at the beginning of the interviews and participants were asked an open-ended question at the end of the interview to share any thoughts about what might have been missed during the interview process relating to understandings of power, True North as

an organization, or anything else they wanted to share. Interview recordings were then uploaded to Otter.ai, an online transcription program. After being transcribed by Otter.ai, interview transcripts were then corrected and clarified to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

After transcripts were edited to correct for errors, themes and content were summarized. The summarized and edited transcripts were then uploaded to Atlas.ti for thematic coding analysis. Coding was done using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) focused on generating theoretical and thematic codes from the data, versus coding based on pre-conceived theoretical or thematic elements. Charmaz (2014) argues that this grounded approach is especially useful for projects focused on social justice, social issues, and policies (115). Because True North is a social justice organization, utilizing grounded theory seemed the most natural and honest way to analyze the transcripts while maintaining the integrity of the empirical data.

Another central theoretical framework utilized during the data analysis process was intersectionality, which was important to creating codes and themes that captured interviewees' positionality and the potential influence of that positionality on their understandings of power. This meant considering the ways that race, gender, class and ethnicity are mutually constitutive of one another and thinking about the contextual underpinnings offered by interviewees during their responses (Christensen and Jensen 2012: 117). Another consideration was the role of preconceptions of power that participants may have through organizational trainings and personal lived experience. Scholars have raised concerns that intersectional analyses of life-stories could be overly

critical of unspoken methods of knowledge production (Christensen and Jenson 2012:114). Christensen and Jensen (2012) acknowledge the validity of these concerns but argue that "producing knowledge about intersectionality from life-story narratives is not antithetical to an analytical awareness of social structures (14)." Although using an intersectional approach proved generative during the coding process, utilizing intersectionality as a theoretical grounding could be construed as contrary to the grounded theory methodology offered by Charmaz (2014).

Epistemology

Entering this project forced an examination of positionality and lived experience for both the researcher and interviewees. As a result of the commonality of highly contextual understandings of power that are based in positionality, additional questions were added to the interview guide (Appendix C) to elucidate reflexive responses from interviewees. This was especially true when discussing power and domination within a racial and gendered framework. Additionally, follow-up questions were added as needed to help participants generate robust responses to questions. As noted by Auyero and Jensen (2015:359), scientific objects frequently exist as something to be conquered. Thus, as power itself was the focus of the project, it became essential to allow the interviewees to create their own definitions of power that were oriented around their life-stories and lived experiences.

Using this method allowed for theoretically rich analysis and thematic coding, as it gave participants the opportunity to elucidate and explore their own experiences through their own self-described lens. Moreover, this allowed for non-evaluative

interviews, wherein the interviewees were hyper-aware of the internally focused and self-reflective nature of the interview questions. Asking questions that were centered in personal story and lived experience was important for generating a sense of contextualized participation in a sustained community organizing group, also known as "identity talk" (Valocchi 2013: 171). This form of discursive presentation of one's individual identity to collective action is critical to establishing an activist identity that sustains community organizing and social movements. Further, fleshing out leaders' identities within a social movements and community organizing context is at the core of understanding the way that social power is created and how organizing helps to empower members of systematically disadvantaged communities.

DATA ANALYSIS

Participant Observation

As an employee of True North for over two years at the time of this writing, my exploration of this topic was informed through participating in and leading organizing efforts throughout Humboldt County. During the field observations and research for this project, I was directly involved in organizing work addressing COVID-19 vaccine outreach, immigration rights, housing, public education, environment and climate, and the renaming of Su-meg State Park. Additionally, I was given opportunities to participate in two statewide training events coordinated by PICO California, the statewide federation of Faith in Action that True North belongs to. Many of these experiences directly confronted the topic of power, often through a pragmatic framework developed to help community leaders and organizing staff better understand the power ecosystem they were operating in, and to empower leaders to step into their own voice. A portion of my research for this project was done through directly observing, participating in, and leading organizing teams. While it would be impossible to sufficiently capture several years of experience here, I thought it was important to share some tools and resources I found useful in shaping my understanding of power for this project.

The organizing model utilized by True North, and more broadly, the Faith in Action National Network, is called the "Arc of Organizing". It is a dialectical and dialogical process through which all organizing work is modeled. A common visual is used (Figure 1) to visualize the mechanisms through which *power with* can be constructed and targeted towards specific issues. This model is functionally a product of

Saul Alinsky's interpretation of power, and provides structure for organizing work, while also clearly asserting an understanding of power rooted in grassroots organizing, one-to-one relationship building, and structured listening processes. The cycle through which all organizing based on this model operates is fundamentally constructed around an understanding of power that exists relationally, within and between communities.

Figure 1. A diagram of the Faith in Action organizing model

Throughout my time at True North, I took field notes relating to the ways the organization addressed the topic of power with leaders and staff. Organizational culture is built around organizing "principles" – phrases that help to frame individual and group thinking while working through the Faith in Action organizing model. Many of these phrases express core values of the organization, and are pragmatic tools presented to leaders by paid organizing staff at Local Organizing Committee (LOC) meetings. An entire category of principles relates to power, but of particular interest for this project is a conceptualization of power in the public square, and how it relates to LOCs ability to create change in their communities. The graphic I created (Figure 2) came from hearing about organizing efforts from longtime organizers, and through my own understandings shaped through pragmatic application. Graphics like this became useful ways to engage community members in interpreting and understanding their impressions of power in their communities and to work through specific issues LOCs wanted to address.

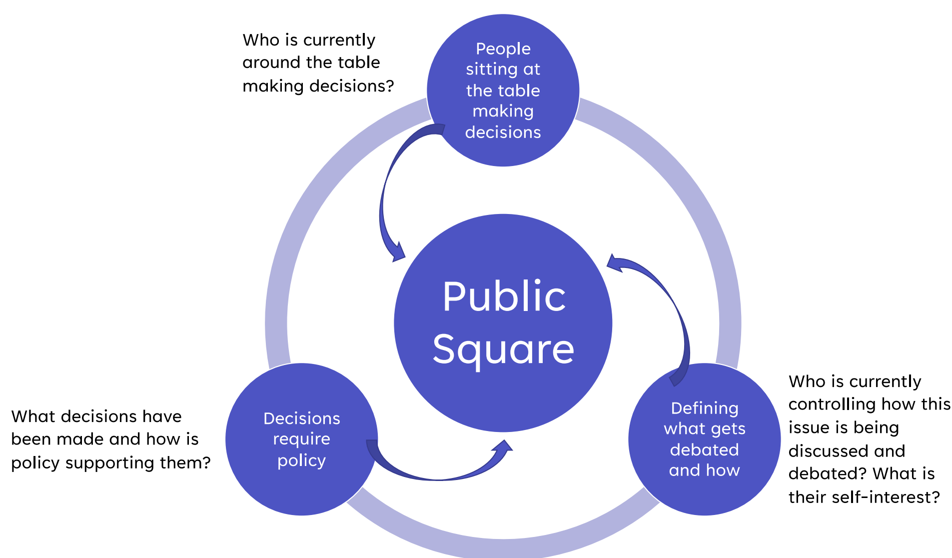

Figure 2. A diagram for understanding power in the public square

This pragmatic application of how to use *power with* is helpful for visualizing and breaking down issues into small steps towards action and begins to construct an organic "power analysis." I included this figure for two main reasons. First, as an organizer, it provided an incredibly valuable tool for leaders to think through complex campaigns and to construct strategies for how to move forward with clear, actionable next steps. Finding opportunities within a public process that is fundamentally constructed around coercion even at the local level (Davies 2014) can be challenging at best and seemingly impossible at times. Identifying and creating tools to break down complex policy cycles, public narratives, and otherwise convoluted local elections are incredibly valuable to moving strategically and deliberately as an organization. Second, both figures 1 and 2 are demonstrative of an explicit understanding of how to create change utilizing *power with*, while leaving large, while allowing space for leaders and community to give direct input. Specifically, both diagrams demonstrate a dialectical process for deliberately attaining bridging social capital (Putnam 2000) and show a clear path for creating organized, responsive, and diverse organizing teams able to achieve collectively determined social change.

Despite clear tools to build *power with,* anecdotal conversations with staff, leaders and members were frequently about dominating power and other forms of power over. This seemingly common understanding of power was also evident in interviews, where 100% of interviewees described experiences with domination when asked what power meant to them. The frequency of encounters with dominating power and the lasting impressions those experiences generated suggests that thinking about power as a path to

liberation is counterintuitive, non-normative, and sometimes contentious. Thus, it is up to organizers and organizing teams to assist in shifting that paradigm to one that views power as something that can flow through community and ne the building blocks for successful grassroots systems-change work.

Dominating Power

A consistent theme presents in all interviews and during participant observations were participant conceptions and descriptions of power as a dominating and hierarchical force with gendered, racialized, and capitalistic roots. While nuances of this experience of power differed in presentation during interviews and in participant observations, this was almost certainly the result of participant positionality and in some cases may have been skewed by interviewee reactions to my own identity as a white, cis-gendered male. Stories of *power over* or dominating power are often painful and traumatic, linked to the conditions under which individuals and pluralities experience and navigate in their day-to-day lives. The complex ways these interactions with power play out are influenced by positionality, geographic location, and dispositions towards authority that can be spatially or temporally limited. Thus, the exploration of this topic may have limited applicability outside of the physical and social geographies represented by the interviewees and by the locations where I conducted my participant observations.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to describe what their perception of the word “power” was, with no specific parameters around what I meant by it, and with no context as to where the interview was headed. In response to this question, Mike, a white male in his mid-50s and a core leader in True North succinctly described

what I subsequently termed as *dominating power*. Mike said "…power is who's in charge, and who's got the money." Based on my observations and interviews for this project, *dominating power* may be the most common conception of power for most people – that is, a set of power relations that are exercised only by those who are in positions of influence or control over economic, social, or political institutions. In this context, power is frequently used in reference to state power or oppressive power. Two interview participants also described this form of power over others as "traditional power" – that is, power that is biased in favor of white, male, upper-class interests and usually directed towards women, ethnic and racial minorities, and those who do not fit into the dominant cultural norms. This interpretation of power was explicitly rooted in westernized, ethnocentric understandings of the state and of the role of capital in determining and delineating authority. However, because of its more blatant association with systems of domination, participant interpretations of this form of power were largely absent of the nuance associated with more subtle forms of control and diffuse loci of power.

Jade, a True North core leader who is a white female in her mid-30s and a Pastor in the United Methodist Church described her experiences with dominating power as:

> very patriarchal, and authoritarian. Like, you have the head of the household or the head of the community, and whatever they say goes, and you don't question it because they're the one in authority. I feel like that's just the traditional white family model.

Conceptions of dominating power as white, patriarchal, and inextricably tied to access to large sums of money implies the presence of what Collins (2019: 238) describes as

"saturated site(s) of power relations". Saturated sites are physical or symbolically constructed places and sites wherein the flow of power is integrally enmeshed and rooted across economic and political systems including capitalism, colonialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy (Collins 2019).

As a result of its deep roots in oppressive systems and institutions, dominating power was typically conceived of as inherently violent and repressive or deeply coercive. Many participants understood that oppressive systems are only possible to maintain and reproduce through violence and coercion, thus, whether violence is utilized directly in every experience of dominating power is largely irrelevant. This is also because subtle mechanisms or "micro-physics" of power (Foucault 1975) are easily overlooked in everyday lived experience. Instead, it is much easier to conceive of personal interactions with dominating systems that operate more visibly in the ways that they exercise power. This was best illustrated by Hope, a white, female True North leader in her mid-60s. In response to a follow up question aimed at clarifying her understandings of power as oppression, Hope said she understood power to be "a` lot of times money, or sometimes anger and bullying and such things. But a lot of times I think within this community, it's often been the people with the most money made the decisions of how they wanted things to be run in this city or this county."

Participants described power in a negative framing repeatedly, but sometimes expressed dichotomous viewpoints about loci of power and the ways power is exercised in different spaces and temporalities. Margie, a member of a local Tribe and True North leader was pensive when asked about power, saying

> In general, power is usually not used for good. You know, it's not deployed in positive ways that benefit society for critters or land or water or air… So that's why I had to write down what you're asking me because in a utopian world, where power is used in organizing and activism, that's a very different look. It's a very different outcome in my mind.

By acknowledging differences in the loci of power and the diverse forms and dynamics of power, Margie demonstrated a complex understanding of how domination affects physical and temporal landscapes when applied in divergent contexts. This disparate capacity of power ties in to Alinsky's (2010[1972]) notion of power as "the ability to achieve purpose." In this framing, power is inherently neither good nor evil and instead represents a capacity for individuals, pluralities, institutions, and states to act and create change. However, as Margie recognized, the individuals in positions of authority and their interests are critically important to understanding how power will be exercised and through what mechanisms it will move. "I think more often than not power is given to people that in my opinion, oftentimes should not have power. So, I think there are many instances where it's misplaced. And that, to me, brings about detrimental effects to communities."

This conception of power as dominating, hierarchical, authoritative, and repressive was repeated in some form in every interview conducted for this project. Four participants did not discuss power as coming from communities in any form, and all other participants only conceived of power as a means of attaining systems change favorable to communities when prompted. Thus, dominating power was by far the most common understanding of power in all interviews, implying its normativity and pervasiveness, despite all participants being actively engaged in organizing work at the time of their

participation. This suggests that common understandings of dominating power are not only deeply engrained in all interviewees' experiences, but also implies the difficulty inherent in changing perceptions of dominating power to include the ways power can be built within communities.

Spatial, Geographical, and Temporal Power

An observation that stood out in interviews was the role of rurality in participant conceptions of *dominating power*. Specifically, several interviewees pointed out the role of "good old boys" culture and how relatively small, insulated groups of people make most of the decisions for small communities. Frequently, interviewees argued that the lack of rotation in local politics, specifically in city and county governance, was largely to blame for maintaining an inequitable status quo. This was of particular interest to me, because it was a demonstration of the role of rurality in participant conceptions of power and showed nuances of social and political intersectional domination unique to the region. While the object of this project was not to create a comparative analysis, this observation does open possibilities for future research into how insular social and political groups are implicated in decision-making and the flow of social power in urban vs. rural spaces. One participant in particular, Jade, mentioned this form of power explicitly at several points in her interview saying "the power that preexists here is like the good old boys' club, which is, you know, it's a very traditional form of power. They're in power because they've been in power. And that's just the way it is." This sentiment was expressed in other interviews as well. Another interviewee, Alexis, a Latina woman in her 50s said

> The people who have had influence in Humboldt County for so long are the good old boys. They make decisions based on, you know, 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine' assumption and nothing ever changes. I've been here for over twenty years and it's always the same thing, over and over again.

To some extent, the so-called "good old boys" culture can be understood as a narrative on power as something that is only accessible to certain individuals in decision-making positions. However, I also interpreted these observations of dominating power as relating to intersectionality and positionality. The implications of this form of dominating power are evident in the use of the terms "good old boys" and Jade's characterization of "traditional power". Both terms relate directly to gendered power relations and the role of patriarchy in maintaining and reproducing systems of domination and oppression and imply that power relations have temporally deep roots.

Experiences with *dominating power* expressed in interviews for this project captured the role of participant positionality and intersectional systems of domination and oppression but did not directly connect with more subtle expressions of *power over.* Some of the mechanisms that were identified by participants as primary loci of domination centered the role of money, a pattern of patriarchy and white supremacy in politics expressed through the identification of a "good old boys" culture, and a sense of disconnection and community disorganization. Despite this, interviewees indicated that power is multifaceted, and encompasses a variety of experiences that can best be understood through a geographically and temporally limited framework. While experiences with *dominating power* and powerlessness are most likely the easiest for

interviewees to identify, there was a noted depth of understanding depending on the context of the question asked, and the positionality of the interviewee.

One facet of power prevalent in interviews was the importance of approaching power building with a clear, well-established process, attention to timeliness and organization. Eight interviewees expressed the importance of using a disciplined and organized approach in the ways organizations build power in their communities. True North's model – Faith in Action's (formerly PICO's) "Arc of Organizing" – utilizes a dialectical process that focuses on well-organized and heavily structured meeting formats, especially for research meetings with public officials. By using a disciplined and regimented approach, participants expressed that it helped the organization gain new members and get the organization's name out in the community in a positive way. In reference to a research meeting with a Humboldt County Supervisor, Hope, a white leader in her mid-60s explained

> I think as we have more meetings, and we talk with more people, that they're becoming more aware of the group and the way that we conduct ourselves... we're so good about starting and ending on time, you know, really respecting everyone's time and opinion.

This quote concisely describes a core goal of True North's meetings – to always begin and end on schedule and to respect the time given by all in attendance. By using a disciplined approach, the organization can shift the control of the meeting out of the hands of the target of the research and into the hands of leaders. Also, meeting timeliness and organization builds power by projecting the image of a well-organized, highly disciplined group of community leaders. Although discipline and organization are core

components of the organizing approach for True North, perhaps the most clearly defined symbolic boundary that was encountered during interviews was with Hope. Hope described the reasons she felt other groups that operated with less discipline and organization were unable to build power, saying:

> I struggle sometimes with the word power because it's just like this hoarding over somebody or, you know, dictating a certain way of things being, and I don't feel that that's the way we conduct ourselves at all, which is what I love. I think it builds a different form of power.

This part of the interview clearly illustrated interactions with dominating power, and contextualized the methodology utilized by people in positions of authority to control power and quell any dissent before it begins. By not feeling heard, and not feeling like an active participant when engaging with authority figures outside of her work with True North, Hope described feelings of powerlessness, and shared her belief that focusing on being inclusive and making time for peoples' opinions to be heard is disruptive to power rooted in systems of oppression, namely dominating power.

Another theme that frequently presented itself was the aspect of space and temporality in participant conceptions of power. Beth, a female community organizer in her mid-30s clearly illustrated how scale and zooming in/zooming out affected her understandings of power. Beth said

> I think about power in a lot of ways… I think about it in terms of the organization, I also think about it in the context of like, my own personal and professional development, and then I also think about it in the context of leaders I work with.

This was the first time an interviewee had clearly broken down the structure of power into personal, individual, institutional, and system levels and led to an understanding of

power as something that is broken down into parts; whose invisibility or visibility is determined by the scale it is viewed in. This was particularly intriguing to me because it added a layer of complexity to thinking about how power moves and is exchanged in the public square. As interviews progressed, this understanding of how power and scale were mutually constitutive allowed for questions that more clearly explicated the way power flows through a complex set of relational pathways, from individuals into systems. Later in her interview, Beth described a tree with a rainbow of different apples with similar-color ones clustered together as illustrative of the way power is clustered and stratified within polities. She said:

> If you just like zero in really close… and you just happen to find the patch where it's like just red apples, you might think there's only red apples on this tree. But if you zoom out - it might feel really overwhelming because there like so many apples - but then you can see oh, wait there's actually, like, blue apples, and red apples, and purple apples… what's been like, really transformative in my thinking about power…it's not just about transforming individual relationships.

This description helped when considering the many ways power structures may be stratified within different socio-political contexts and scales. For example, in rural communities such as those True North primarily operates in, the power of an individual could be conceived of as more powerful than the power of an individual in an urban area. However, such a linear conception of power is overly simplistic and ignores the ways power is gendered and racialized as well as the influence of both social and monetary capital on systems-level change. Nonetheless, this metaphor was helpful in beginning to deconstruct the dynamics of power at different socio-political and socio-cultural scales, and in determining the flow of power generated by community organizing processes

which begins at the micro level and terminates at the macro level. This is not to say that power should necessarily be conceived of as flowing only in a single direction but does imply a natural scalar flow that can be operationalized to better contextualize and understand community change dynamics within social and political power relations.

Forms of Relational Power and Power With

Due in part to the nature of True North's work as a faith- and values-based organization, three participants located power as coming from God. This interpretation was particularly intriguing to me, largely because God is construed in such a wide variety of contexts, and relationships with faith and spirituality are dependent on physical location and temporality as well as denomination and community. Tarrow (2011) argues that the influence of religiosity on generating activist identities is a powerful tool for maintaining and building multi-race, multi-faith organizations. Throughout my experience at True North, I found faith to be a key driver for the organization's leaders with many clearly expressing their interest in organizing in faith-based terms. This tied in with several interviewee's statements on how and why they became involved in organizing work. Mike characterized his understanding of where power comes from by saying "as a Christian, power comes from God, in us believing in Him, putting our faith and trust in him." Another interviewee, Travis, a white man in his 50's and a True North leader said "God gives us power. Our relationship with Him is what gives us life and grants us the ability to act on behalf of others."

Power fundamentally derived from faith has implications for the relationality of power. Power stemming from a Judeo-Christian God can be understood as existing in a

relationship, in this case a relationship with the divine. Further, it implies connections to God's other creations; an interpretation of power that is free from spatial or temporal limits and broadly applicable. When scaled up from individuals, an understanding of power as rooted in a relationship with God is antithetical to normative conceptions of power stemming from domination or oppression. Instead, this form of power is liberative, existing outside of the constraints of social or political structures, and located within pluralities of faithful individuals. This premise is the core belief of faith- and values-based community organizing networks like True North – if power comes from God rather than positions within political or social structures, then it cannot be unidirectional, nor can it be hierarchical. Rather, power is something attained by anyone who maintains a relationship with God and with His creations. Beth identified this sentiment by saying:

> I really believe that if people were connected to themselves, if they were connected to other people, if they were connected to their natural environment in like a more authentic way, there's just a lot of things that would spiral out from that. And so I think that the more that people get connected to those themes, right, that's what can build personal power. I think that that's what can lead people to know how to share power.

While relationships with God cannot be viewed as monolithic within a Christian faith that is itself highly complex, and highly differential across a variety of spatial and temporal landscapes, interviews with True North leaders who self-identified as Christians had core commonalities around their faith's role in conceptions of power and how it related to social and political change. Jade, a Methodist pastor characterized this understanding of power as "true power" saying:

> I truly believe that God's Kingdom is created out of equity, where everyone is given what they need to succeed. But that requires that we not be selfish. And

> that's what I think of as true power. We just don't see true power, exemplified in our culture very often.

Conceptions of power as existing in relationships was another theme that stood out in interviews. This form of power – *power with* – was only considered by a small number of interviewees in their initial responses. *Power with* was almost always a contextualized experience that interviewees only considered when asked about how power appears in community organizing. However, when asked, most participants tended to characterize power originating from community relationships as more valid or real than power attained through domination or coercion. For instance, Margie said:

> Power, when utilized to organize or do any kind of activism work is the ability to engage people at all levels of society, education, employment, whether you're wealthier or in poverty, no matter your gender, no matter your political stance, no matter your religious beliefs, right, to me, that kind of work. Deploying that power is using it to engage people at all levels to educate and inform, to make positive changes for the community as a whole. I think that power in that sense is more valid, more useful than other forms of power.

Similarly, James, a Native man and organizing staff member for True North described relational power as "real power". Conceptions of power in this framing were overwhelmingly positive, but frequently required explaining to get participants to think of power in a non-dominating or oppressive way. This was significant because *power with* is a frequent topic of discussion in organizing work, yet leaders and staff did not immediately conceive of power as a relational, community driven process or structure. Additionally, this hesitation to think of power as empowering has implications for how power moves through communities. All interviewees could think of concrete examples of domination and oppression, but many struggled to think of expressions of *power with*.

Despite a general conception of power focused on experiences with oppression, marginalization, and domination, all interviewees shared ways that participating in True North had changed or shaped their perceptions of what power is, and how communities can come together. I interpreted and coded many of these responses as experiences of *power with*, even though many participants did not expressly contextualize these interactions as experiences with power. Regardless, these experiences were often understood or framed as formative community- or leadership-building, with some participants equating their interactions with True North to their church communities or families. For example, Mike said his experience participating in True North created "deeper commitment to community. deeper appreciation of community and a deeper sense of respect for different faith traditions." Jade echoed those feelings, saying:

> I think the most rewarding thing has just been knowing that I'm not alone. Because in this rural community, as progressive as I am, it can feel very isolating. It can feel like this is just the way it is, it's never going to change. It makes me want to say, 'fuck it, I give up.' And True North is like my beacon of hope.

Responses like this suggest that building relationships helps community members feel a stronger sense of social cohesion and reminds individuals of the presence of relational power around them. According to interviewees for this project, creating connections and working through the organizing model helped them feel they had the ability to create change – an interpretation that is nearly identical to Alinsky's (2010 [1971]) definition of power as "the ability to achieve purpose." This finding is significant because it clearly demonstrates the importance of community involvement in the development of bridging and bonding social capital. All interviewees expressed that their participation in True

North organizing work helped push them to empower other community members to become more engaged in systems-change work, and even indicated that their involvement in True North helped them find hope for their families and communities. This suggests that empowerment and changed interpretations of power developed through community organizing may have a direct impact on the way that power flows through communities.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There were several limitations to this research project and the methods used. These included having a small sample size (*N*=14) which is typical for qualitative research but limits the generalizability of my findings; having interviews and participant observations limited by the social and physical geographies the research was conducted in; and the power dynamics inherent in organization staff-leader relationships. While all these limitations are relatively minor, they are also potentially rich areas for future research or theory construction around the ways that power moves through communities, and how conceptions of power are contextualized within movements, organizing, or activism work.

There are also many other potential areas for future research that would have assisted in this research project and could be useful in future examinations of power in community organizing. One area to further explore could be an analysis comparing the ways conceptions of power are shaped by geography - specifically rurality versus urbanity - which would be useful in understanding how physical environment shapes conceptions of domination and grassroots power. Further, this project reveals opportunities for research that examines movement efficacy through a qualitative lens instead of the strong focus on positivism that is pervasive in most of the literature.

In the sociology of social movements, there is a tendency towards judging a movement or organization’s success through a positivistic lens or by examining the movement’s ability to achieve statutory policy goals (Feagin, Vera and Ducey 2015). I find this framework to be limiting for two main reasons. First, while there is great

importance in understanding how movements and organizations impact pluralities, an emphasis on quantifying membership and leadership ignores the quality and impact of individual leaders and does not necessarily suggest a higher level of movement efficacy. Second, policy outcomes are crucial and can be understood as lasting legal and political capital for movements but focusing only on policy turns a blind eye towards the significant cultural impacts that organizing can and should create. Instead, I assert that research focused on movement or organizational culture based in qualitative methodology rather than quantitative would provide a framework that more equitably and thoroughly examines how movements and organizations build power and create change in their communities. I strongly advocate for this framework to be explored further and applied in more broad and diverse ways across social and physical geographies.

This project has helped frame and contextualize the organizing work that I have been engaged in with True North and plan to continue doing moving forward. It has challenged me emotionally, intellectually, and forced me to step out of my comfort zone and into new spaces and hard conversations. I am endlessly grateful for the participation of my interviewees, and for the support and guidance of the entire True North Organizing Network and PICO California staff. This project and the experiences I have been able to participate in have shifted the way I look at and understand what it means to be in community with others and forced deep introspection on my privileges and positionality.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - IRB Approval Memorandum

Appendix A. 1: 10/14/2021 IRB Approval Memorandum

MEMORANDUM

Date: 10/14/2021

To: Michihiro C Sugata
Evan Morden

From: Susan Brater
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

IRB #: IRB 21-038

Subject: Organizing for Power: The Flow of Social Power in Community-Level Changes and Rural Community Organizing in Northern California

Thank you for submitting your application to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research. After reviewing your proposal I have determined that your research can be categorized as Exempt by Federal Regulation 45 CFR 46.104(d) because of the following:

Your research will only include interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information is recorded in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained; (ii) Disclosure of the subjects' responses outside the research would not place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded in such a manner that the identity of the subjects can be ascertained, and the IRB conducts a limited review.

The anniversary date of this proposal is **10/14/2022** . By HSU policy, all data collection related to this protocol must stop on the anniversary date, unless a renewal/annual report is submitted. In order to prevent any interruption in your research, please submit a renewal/annual report in time for the IRB to process, review, and extend the Exempt designation (at least one month).

Important Notes:

- Any alterations to your research plan must be reviewed and designated as Exempt by the IRB prior to implementation.
  - Change to survey questions
  - Number of subjects
  - Location of data collection,
  - Any other pertinent information
- If Exempt designation is not extended prior to the anniversary date, investigators must stop all data collection related to this proposal.
- Any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported immediately to the IRB (irb@humboldt.edu).

cc: Faculty Adviser (if applicable)
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

The California State University
Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Dominguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach • Los Angeles • Maritime Academy • Monterey Bay • Northridge • Pomona • Sacramento • San Bernardino • San Diego • San Francisco • San Jose • San Luis Obispo • San Marcos • Sonoma • Stanislaus

Appendix B - Informed Consent Form

Appendix B. 1: 9/14/21 Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT
Organizing for Power: The Flow of Social Power in Community-Level Changes and Rural Community Organizing in Northern California

My name is Evan Morden, and I am a graduate student at the Humboldt State University Department of Sociology. I am conducting this research study to explore the ways social power is exercised and contextualized in rural community organizing. If you volunteer to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 30–60-minute semi-structured interview.

Your participation in this study will take place once by appointment on Zoom, with a *possible* follow-up interview at the end of the year. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty. There are no foreseeable risks involved for participants. The benefit of this study will be contextualizing the work True North and its state and national partners do within systems of social power. All participants will have the right to have any/all of their statements removed or redacted at any time before the study is published. All participants will be asked to choose a pseudonym to protect confidentiality and to ensure identities are protected when quotes are used. Audio and video recordings will be recorded using a screen recorder, and will be stored in a password protected and encrypted folder. Within 30 days, the recordings will be transcribed and deleted. The interview transcripts will be kept for a period of three years after study completion

It is anticipated that study results will be shared with the public through presentations and/or publications. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to ensure your confidentiality are: (1) Names will not be used in interview transcripts or in records of interviews; and (2) recordings of interviews, interview transcripts, and informed consent forms will be stored digitally in locked folders only accessible by the researcher, and all paper copies will be kept in a locked cabinet. Interview recordings and transcripts containing information that can identify you will be destroyed after a period of three years after study completion. This consent form will be maintained digitally in a locked folder and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

If you have any questions about this research at any time, please call or email me at erm422@humboldt.edu or (707) 296-5703, or contact my supervisor, Dr. Michihiro Sugata at 7078263148 or michihiro.sugata@humboldt.edu. If you have any concerns with this study or questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at irb@humboldt.edu or (707) 826-5165.

Your signature below indicates that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, and that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty

Signature **Date**

_________________________ _________________

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix C - Example Interview Guide

Appendix C. 1: 9/14/21 Example Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Guide Example Questions

"Organizing for Power: The Flow of Social Power in Community-Level Changes and Rural Community Organizing in Northern California"

Research Question(s): How does True North Organizing Network organize communities to exercise and contextualize social power within complex and multi-faceted community change dynamics? How does faith/spirituality play a role in community-building in rural communities?

Disclaimer: These are examples of questions that may be asked during interviews.

1. Demographics: gender/racial identity/race: Would you please state your gender, preferred pronouns and your racial identity?
2. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Have you ever been involved in activism other than your work with True North?
3. How long have you been involved with True North?
4. Have you ever attended statewide PICO leadership training?
5. What led up to your decision to be involved with True North?
6. How are you involved with True North?
7. Have you been involved in the past? How so?
8. How do you talk about your work with True North with friends/family/coworkers?
9. When talking about community organizing such as the work you do with True North, what does the word "power" mean to you?
10. How have you seen power exercised in your community?
11. How do you think that your understanding of power influences the way you choose to participate in your community?
12. Where do you feel power comes from?
13. How have you seen the PICO organizing model used to build power in your community?
14. Do you think True North is actively building power? If so, how?
15. What could True North do differently to gain power?
16. Do you have a faith/spirituality tradition you identify with? How would you characterize it?
17. How do you feel your faith/spirituality affects your understanding of power?
18. What role do you see faith/spirituality playing in community organizing?
19. In an ideal organizing model, how do you see faith/spirituality contributing?
20. How do you see faith/spirituality in the context of rural organizing?
21. How can individuals create change in their communities?

22. How can individuals create change beyond/outside of their communities (state-level/national/international)?
23. Have you participated in any "actions" since you have been involved with True North? If so, which ones, and do you feel that those actions affected the way you see power?
24. What have been some of the challenges that you have experienced while working with True North? PROBE: (Emotionally, politically, relationships, etc.)
25. What have been some of the rewards? PROBE: (Emotionally, politically, relationships, etc.)
26. How do you feel True North is doing overall? Are there any changes you would suggest?
27. Is there anything we missed that you think is important to know about your work with True North, the organization itself, or how you see power in your community?