Staying off the Megaphone and in the Movement: Cultivating Solidarity and Contesting Authority Among White Antiracist Activists

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Abstract

In the last two years, Black Lives Matter (BLM) emerged as a multiracial movement which foregrounds the experience, leadership, and values of Black people in the United States while suggesting distinct roles for White people to participate. Among these suggestions is the compellingly illustrative to "stay off the megaphone." This exploratory, participatory case study traces how a group of White activists grapple with the literal and figurative megaphone in their antiracist activism. We focus on three key dimensions of engagement: content (how do White activists engage the megaphone—literally and figuratively?), subject positions (how are White activists positioning themselves within the BLM movement?), and social relations (how are White activists positioning their relationships with the movement's values and leaders?). Grounded theory analysis reveals three distinct activist profiles, each bringing particular strengths—as well as limitations—to antiracist organizing. We explore these profiles in depth, and conclude with recommendations for White activists engaged in BLM.

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. . . but then there's also a reason we continued to meet, because I think for some of us, it was that there's this community that's needed . . . to have a loose association of folk together who can hold each other accountable during actions and also figure out how we can begin to create a new culture in our individual lives, to do that consciousness raising.

—Sean

I don't need like another space with White people to talk about my feelings and my interactions. ... I'm really just interested in, are we gonna organize, how are we gonna do it. . . .

—Maddie

In response to hegemonic White supremacy, Black Lives Matter (BLM) foregrounds the experience, leadership, and values of Black people in the United States (www.blacklivesmatter.com). At the same time, BLM has emerged as a multiracial movement, engaging a wide diversity of people concerned for and committed to the struggle for racial justice. While requisite to the success of any social movement (McAdam, 1999), this diverse base has raised a particular set of ideological and practical challenges. The sustained, national attention garnered by the antiracist activism of the BLM movement has refocused attention on who should serve in a leadership capacity in movement work that intentionally centers the leadership, experience, and values of a particular social group. As the movement gained national momentum, antiracist activist organizations

began to disseminate their understanding of how White people could participate in BLM and remain consistent with the intentions, values, and meaning-making power of the movement as it concretely prioritizes Black lives, including among its leadership and participants. Among these suggestions is the succinct, compellingly illustrative "stay off the megaphone."

Megaphones play a distinctive role in movement-building work. Literally and metaphorically, a megaphone concretely functions to amplify the voice of its user, broadcasting her words to those who would not hear her without it. It often demarcates a movement group's leader, its presence signaling her authority. The megaphone helps to shape the trajectory and content of a movement activity, such as the direction and chanting of a protest march. By reinforcing authority and directing movement tactics, the amplifying features of the megaphone play an important role in casting particular individuals as leaders and anchoring movement content in particular values and goals. In this paper, we focus our attention on how the megaphone is utilized, literally and figuratively, by White antiracist activists working to enact the cultural values and goals of the BLM movement. Their attention to the cultural mores of the movement and desire to act accordingly demonstrates the importance of the BML movement's internal dynamics in building towards cultural, as well as institutional, change.

The directive to White activists to stay off the megaphone proscribes certain modes of White activists' movement activity, suggesting that White activists might take part in movement work most effectively by actively relinquishing the literal and figurative megaphone. Critically,

BLM's injunction against White activists' use of "the megaphone" also cuts to the quick of White supremacy, as White activists are forced to contend with how they have been socialized into White dominance and internalized its locations, standpoints, and practices (Frankenberg, 1993). By relinquishing overt leadership roles, White activists must grapple with how they feel accustomed, if not entitled, to the presumption of competence, intelligence, and authority in and beyond movement work.

Though this is certainly not the first historical movement in which White activists have grappled with their role (see Michel, 2004; Warren, 2010), the intentional de-centering of Whiteness illustrated in this BLM directive has distinct implications for how BLM builds a mass movement. Social movement theory suggests that the ability to mobilize a broad base is vital to the success of any social movement, and that doing so successfully and over time often requires two elements: To keep activists engaged, a movement must turn them into leaders; to cultivate a leader among the mobilized, one must imbue her with responsibility (Alinsky, 1989/1971; Han 2014). In the context of BLM's request that White activists stay off the megaphone, implementing the apparent lessons of such findings becomes complicated. Given the express purpose of BLM, the forms of leadership and responsibility engaged by White activists must be thoughtful, strategic, and distinctive.

This paper explores how a group of White antiracist activists, allied with a local BLM movement group, grapple with the literal and metaphorical megaphone in their local BLM work. We see a potential distinction between the needs and strategies of White solidarity and action within BLM organizing, and within a broader movement to end racial injustice. To that end, our analysis and implications point specifically to the role of White people in BLM organizing. Given the emergent nature of the BLM movement, understanding more about how the current era of antiracist activism is developing in a particular context may increase the effectiveness of the local movement group and extend its effects both locally and in other sites nationwide. Undoubtedly, for BLM to reach its fullest potential as a movement, many more White people must commit themselves to the struggle to end White supremacy and build more just and equitable communities, institutions and governments. And yet, they must do so while responding to BLM's clarion call to center Black leadership and experience. This begs the question: Can White people stay off the megaphone and stay in the movement?

Context

This paper explores how a group of White antiracist activists, allied with a local BLM movement group in a mid-sized southern city, struggle to live in the countercultural reality demanded by BLM— that is, a reality that counters the dominant White hegemonic culture of the United States by overtly preferencing and prioritizing Black (explicitly, rather than White) lives and leadership. There are 23 reported local BLM groups nationwide (Blacklivesmatter.com). While some groups (such as Ferguson's) emerged in response to specific local acts of racial injustice, most began as solidarity efforts. As such, the chosen site could be seen as a typical case: The organizing began in solidarity with the BLM campaigns in Ferguson and other highly publicized sites of police brutality, and leveraged the values and tactics of the national movement to shine a light on local

racial injustice. As is true nationally, the local BLM organizing effort is characterized by robust, burgeoning leadership by young people of Color (POC). Between November 2014 and January 2015, local BLM activists organized eight public actions that mobilized several dozen to several hundred individuals. This case study focuses on the Anti-Racist Solidarity Network (the Network), a loosely associated group of White activists who initially came together at the request of local BLM organizers in November 2014 and who have continued meeting monthly.[1]

Local BLM leaders first asked a group of White people to take part in BLM actions and help manage any behavior from other White people that deflected from the message and mission of BLM organizing. For example, the group was tasked with asking people to refrain from carrying "All Lives Matter" signs and redirecting members of the media to BLM leadership when they approached White participants. When these tasks proved more difficult to complete than anticipated (particularly while avoiding becoming seen as playing a leadership role), the group began to meet regularly to strategize its approach to BLM actions and its relationship with the local BLM leadership collective. Although the initial goal of the Network was to provide support to the local BLM efforts, the group soon broadened its purpose to engage in a range of efforts to confront White supremacy.

The 20-person Network includes college students, pastors, professors, community activists, nonprofit professionals, and researchers varying in age from mid-twenties to mid-forties, including men, women, and queer people. Members come from working-, middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Members bring a variety of activist histories, including those with decades of activist experience and others more newly involved in activist work. All share a broad commitment to racial justice work, but bring a diversity of professional expertise and activism experience, such as prison abolition, homeless outreach, interfaith community building, queer liberation, and feminist organizing. Regardless of past experiences, through BLM organizing all members were socialized for the first time into a movement that deliberately proscribed certain forms of White activism and leadership. As such, the work undertaken by each member demonstrates a collective process of wrestling with White social dominance and provides insights toward the development of different modes of White antiracist activist engagement. Developed as a year-long study, this report includes preliminary findings drawn from observational and interview data from the first four months of inquiry. As the local BLM organizing effort and the Network were nascent during this year-long study, the terrain of movement work was at times tumultuous and precarious. Norms, expectations, roles, and group and individual needs shifted often and were reevaluated frequently. It is, in fact, these formative conversations that provide

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[1] The names of individual activists and the Network are pseudonyms, and the name of the city has been concealed.

insight regarding how White antiracist activism is shaped in concert with a movement that necessarily delimits forms of White leadership and action.

Methods

This case study utilizes a constructivist, qualitative design, which is particularly appropriate given the exploratory, emergent nature of the study. Constructivist research attends to the myriad ways meanings are constructed and contested (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given that we are members of the Network that is the subject of this study, attention to these interactions and entanglements between the knower and the known is critical (Fine, 1994).

Data for each of the five planning meetings (attended by an average of 10 Network members) include researchers' audio recordings and field notes as well as meeting minutes recorded by a nonresearch team member. Further data include interviews with four of the Network's founding members. Researchers transcribed recordings and then coded all data in the qualitative software MaxQDA. For the purposes of this paper, analysis concentrated on instances related to the literal or (more often) figurative megaphone, exploring the ways in which White activists engaged with framing and amplifying the BLM movement. We began inductively, using open coding (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As key thematic units emerged, the refined codes were evaluated using the constant comparative method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process ensured that codes were consistently applied and were not masking significant differences between similarly coded text segments.

Trustworthiness

We engaged in prolonged engagement in the research setting, and observed and recorded meetings in full, in lieu of selecting portions of the meeting for analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, by attending meetings over time and making persistent, ongoing observation, we identified overarching areas of thematic salience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We triangulated data through the collection of field notes, audio-recordings, and meeting minutes; triangulated researchers through collection and analysis across a four-person research team; and triangulated methods through the use of naturalistic observation, archival analysis, and interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To enhance the credibility of our findings, we preserved audio recordings and engaged in ongoing member checking, both within our bi-monthly research team meetings (as we are all members of the Network) and within the Network as a whole, where we raised preliminary observations and interpretations for discussion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Lincoln and Guba note, the trustworthiness of qualitative research is also determined by the degree to which sufficient contextual description is made available for readers to "to make transferability judgments possible" (1985, p. 316). Thus, while this study is not intended to be generalizable, we have sought to provide enough description for readers to discern the relevance of the findings to other settings.

Discussion

As we turn to how White activists grapple with the megaphone in their local BLM work, we focus on three key dimensions of engagement:

1. Movement Content: How do White activists engage the megaphone—literally and figuratively?

2. Subject Positions: For a given megaphone activity, how are White activists positioned—or positioning themselves—within the BLM movement?

3. Social Relations: For a given megaphone activity, how are White activists positioned in relationship with—or positioning their relationships to—the movement's values and leaders?

These dimensions are both analytically and theoretically grounded. They emerged from the data as code families, and also reflect Fairclough's (2001) typology of power in discourse. As Network members engaged in discussion and enactment of megaphone activities, three dimensions of the activist-megaphone relationship emerged: movement content, subject positions, and social relations. Our analysis considers each of these categories in turn, explicating their emergence in the data. Finally, we explore three activist profiles that engage particular forms of these dimensions in concert.

Movement Content: Framing, Amplifying, and Relinquishing

In this study, White activists engage the megaphone in three ways: framing, amplifying, and relinquishing.

Framing. If the megaphone is understood as a literal and figurative tool for framing the movement goals and values, White activists engaged the megaphone, the pen, their voices, and their feet to frame BLM to one another, other White activists, and the broader community. The most literal and explicit framing occurred during protest actions, when White activists took the megaphone at events and directed comments to White protesters about how to engage. At other times, the framing was implicitly modeled, as when White activists demonstrated expected modes of participation. Within the Network, members regularly discussed how they understood themselves and their role within the movement. This dialogue provided moments for reinforcing (or disrupting) the movement's frame, much as a megaphone might be used to remind movement participants of the group's vision. Finally, at times, members directed framing activities toward external audiences, such as by authoring pieces on behalf of the BLM movement group.

Amplifying. At other times members of the Network engaged the megaphone to amplify rather than frame BLM movement goals. This amplification occurred by participating in movement activities, joining their voices to chants and their feet to protest marches. Further, the White activists amplified the group's message through spreading the word about BLM actions in the city and encouraging those within their networks to participate. Finally, at times BLM leadership called upon Network members to fulfill particular roles or undertake certain tasks within the movement work, such as to educate other White persons at actions about how to participate in a way that upheld the values of the movement (e.g., removing masks). Such activities serve to amplify the ethos of the movement group rather than setting these White participants apart as leaders.

Relinquishing. In this study, White activists relinquished the megaphone by literally staying off it at movement actions, course-correcting when they or other activists appeared to contradict the directive

to step back from leadership activities, and pursuing movement roles that intentionally eschewed their gaining prominence within the movement. While some of these relinquishing activities took place during BLM public actions, many more were observed within the Network as some members challenged one another to live into the values of BLM by stepping out of positions in which they were framing the movement for others.

Subject Positions: Movement Follower, Movement Leader, and Autonomous Actor

Members of the Antiracist Solidarity Network frequently express a strong sense of responsibility as White people to actively engage in the struggle for racial justice. Yet how members positioned themselves as White people within the local BLM movement varied. The analysis suggested that White activists' commitment to racial justice work is manifested in three (at times concurrent) subject positions: movement follower, movement leader, and autonomous actor.

Movement follower. White activists performed or imagined themselves as movement followers by heeding the direction of the local BLM organizers. This manifested both publicly (or externally) within protest actions, and privately (or internally) within the Antiracist Solidarity Network. In protest actions, movement followers engaged the megaphone by relaying the movement leaders' message through participating, carrying signs, "dying-in," and voicing the response in the call-and-response format of the "people's mic." Movement followers also engaged the megaphone in this subject position by streamlining communication between the BLM leadership and White activists. For example, movement followers relayed

requests from BLM leaders regarding the desired role of White activists in the movement to other White activists in the Network or at protests.

Movement leader. White activists performed or imagined themselves as movement leaders by using the megaphone to actively develop movement tactics and/or frame and communicate movement goals. For example, White activists spoke at protests about why they personally were committed to the movement, wrote letters to the editor, and developed written materials on behalf of the BLM group.

Autonomous actor. All members of the Antiracist Solidarity Network came into the group with historic and present-day commitments to racial justice advocacy and activism. As such, they also engaged the megaphone to advance racial justice goals independent from the BLM movement. For example, members spoke of engaging friends and family in conversations about racism, leading community conversations about xenophobia, and developing racial justice educational materials—all independent of the BLM groups' activities.

Sometimes these different subject positions worked in concert with one another. For example, as Lia oriented new members to the Network, she describes how the Network's leadership actions embodied following BLM leadership:

> *So, I'm remembering, for people who haven't been here before, the really, start of this iteration was because organizers of one of the—was it the Eric Garner protest?—asked for a group of White people to like show up and pay attention to White people at the event, and there was a request, like a concrete request—we want a*

group of White people to be there in an unmarked way, just dealing with White people. Getting people to take their masks off, and fixing signs that are wrong ... to mean that to me that has salience, that there was a specific request.

As this example illustrates, at times the subject positions of leader (White activists "dealing with White people") and follower (BLM leaders "asked for a group of White people") at times occurred simultaneously and in mutually supportive ways. More often, as will be explored in subsequent sections, the leader, follower, and autonomous actor subject positions emerged in tension with one another.

Social Relations: Centered, Affiliated, and Independent

In addition to reflecting three distinct subject positions, how White activists engage the megaphone reflected three types of social relations with the BLM movement: centered, affiliated, and independent. Whereas the three subject positions reflect members' performed activist identities, these social relations demonstrate a relationship with and proximity to the BLM movement values and leaders.

Centered in the movement: Much of the megaphone actions and interactions of White activists reflected a commitment to center explicitly the BLM organization, its local leadership, and the movement's goals. Examples of members' centered activities included participating in events organized by the BLM leadership team, following the directions of BLM leaders, working with BLM group leaders to develop a statement of demands, and, at the request of BLM group leaders, organizing White people to play specific roles in public actions.

Affiliated with the movement: Affiliated megaphone activities were distinguished by the enacted or imagined representation of the BLM movement without broad and direct engagement with movement leaders. For example, Network members engaged in affiliated activities by publishing a statement that purported to represent the local BLM group but lacked the group's request or review, and by discussing and critiquing BLM organizing tactics in monthly meetings without having been asked for strategic thinking by—or having been in direct dialogue about such matters with—BLM leaders. That is not to say that members of the Network were not in relationship with BLM leaders; many in fact were. However, BLM had not solicited the Network as a whole for strategic thinking or advice.

Independent from the movement: Just as members of the Network at times embodied a *subject position* (a positioning of self) autonomous from the BLM movement, they also at times reflected *social relations* (a positioning of relationships) independent from BLM. Unlike affiliated actions, independent actions were not imagined to represent the BLM movement, though they were still committed to racial justice goals. These activities included creating spaces for White antiracist activists to provide support, accountability, and continued education for one another (as evidenced in the creation of the Antiracist Solidarity Network) and undertaking activities to engage other groups of White people in the struggle for racial equality beyond mobilization for local BLM group protests or actions.

The Emergence of Activist Profiles

The preceding section operationalized three dimensions of White

activists' engagement with the megaphone: content, subject positions, and social relations. Figure 1 represents these three dimensions as a matrix of movement embodiment. The subject position variables fall along the lower axis, the social relation variables on the perpendicular axis, and the column height represents the content—the number of megaphone activities coded with both of the two other intersecting variables. For example, there were 27 instances where a megaphone activity was coded as "follower" and "centered." For the purposes of this analysis, the exact counts in the matrix matter less than the patterns revealed, several of which are worth noting.

First, co-occurrences of subject position and social codes are not evenly dispersed among the possible points of intersection. In three cases there were no instances of co-occurring codes. This is perhaps intuitive: Independent actions are incongruent with either a movement leader or a movement follower, just as the autonomous subject position is incongruent with actions centered in the movement. Second, three junctions reflect particular density of coded activity. From these co-occurrences, three primary activist profiles emerge: the Centered Follower, the Affiliated Leader, and the Autonomous Independent.
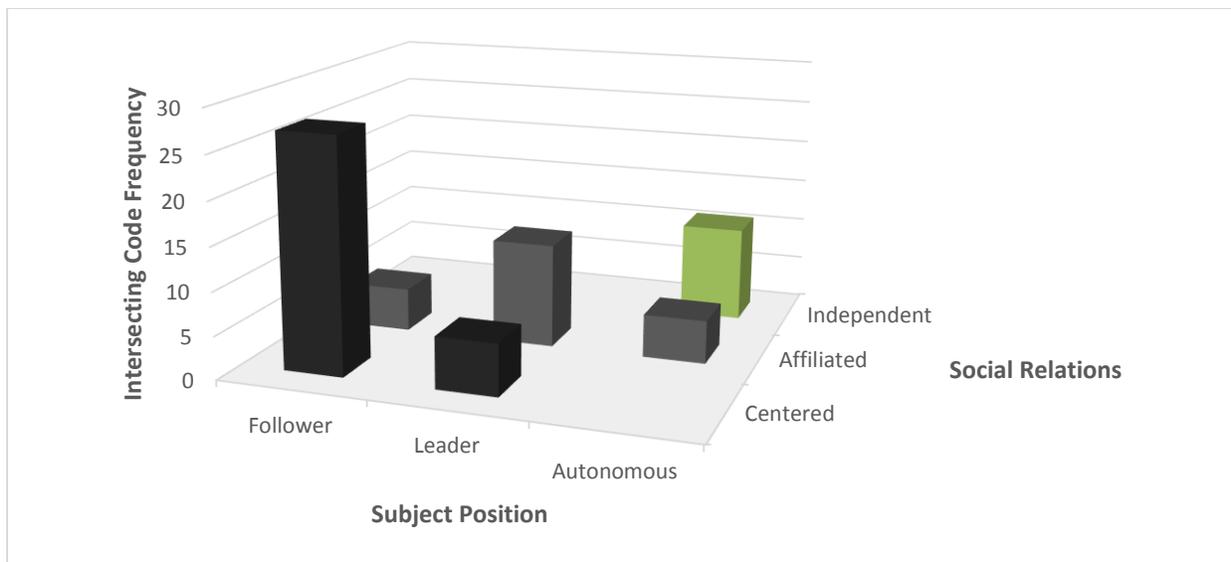

Figure 1: Matrix of Movement Embodiment.

Further analysis found distinctions in the kinds of movement content associated with each of these profiles. As reflected in Figure 2, the Centered Follower is more likely to relinquish the megaphone and/or use the megaphone to amplify BLM movement leaders, whereas the Affiliated Leader and the Independent are more likely to use the megaphone for framing the movement.
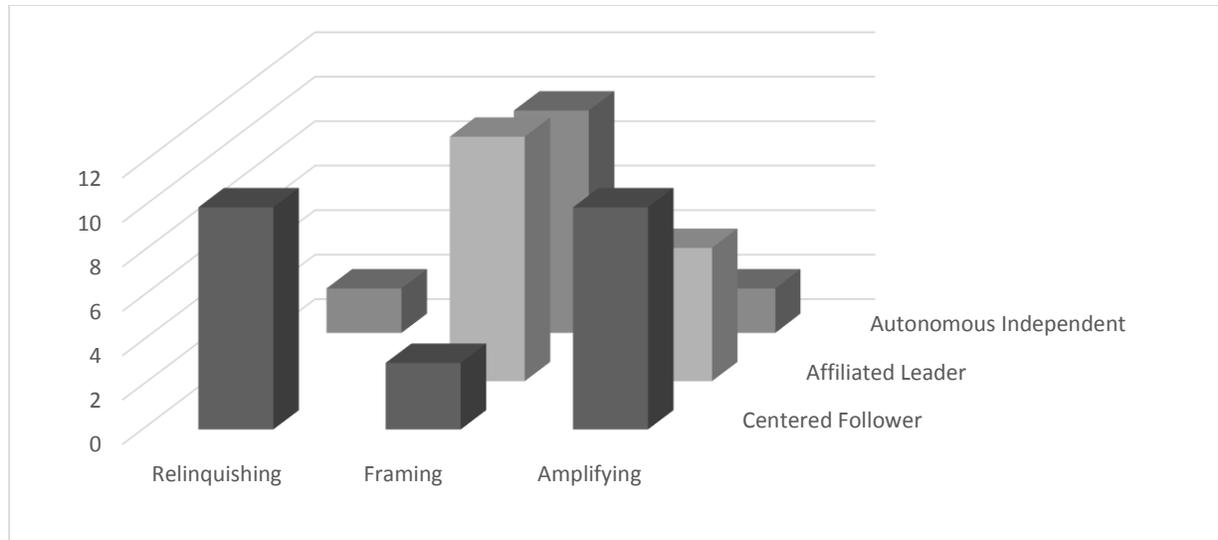
Figure 2: Movement Content by Activist Profile.

Over five months, members continually wrestled with the appropriate role for a group of White activists in the BLM movement—at times to the point of threatening the continued existence of the group. Such wrestling most often emerged as tension within and among the performance of these three activist profiles. As such, the remaining discussion will explore how the three profiles were embodied and contested within the group. For rhetorical purposes, we describe the Centered Follower, the Affiliated Leader, and the Autonomous Independent as discrete forms. We note, however, that some members embodied different profiles at different points in the study, while others embodied the same profile over time.

The Centered Follower.

There's a reason, there's a reason we've been told twice to wait. And I think it has to do with the moment, I think it has to do with finding new answers.

—Sean

Over the course of several months of meetings, members of the Antiracist Solidarity Network wrestled with their potential roles in the movement. One member, Chloe, was invited to attend a meeting of the emergent BLM leadership team as they reflected on the actions of the group's first two months and considered next steps. Chloe had been the only White person invited to and present at that meeting, and at the next Network gathering, she recounted:

I said ... we have this really mobile group of White people that want to be in this with you, with their bodies, with their hearts, with their souls, like, we, we want to be in this, and we don't know how, and we want to, like, we've seen White people take over Black and people of Color spaces and don't want that to happen, and think it's, I said, I think it's great to have something structured and in place so that can't happen, and I will go, and, like hold up the back of the line, or make revolutionary lotion bars, or whatever you say, but give us

guidance, on what our role is right now.

This quote illustrates a number of key dimensions of—and tensions within—the Centered Follower profile. The Centered Follower recognizes the ways White leadership has historically functioned to "take over Black and people of Color spaces," and demonstrates a desire to embody a different subject position. In asking for direction and evoking the "back of the line," Chloe clearly embodies the position of follower, overtly relinquishing prominence and seeking to center herself within guidance from the people of Color in leadership. When interpreted with the metaphorical megaphone, Chloe's words suggest an intentional effort to make no claim to the megaphone and to listen for its use by the people of Color BLM leadership group. Further, in relaying this story back to other White activists in the Network, Chloe acts as megaphone for the movement leaders. As reflected in Figure 2 these two forms of movement content—relinquishing the megaphone and using the megaphone to amplify movement leaders—are most often associated with the Centered Follower. Chloe continued:

> *And Toni was the first to speak, and she just said, we need patience. Like, we've never had this space to figure this out. She's like, you all are more mobilized and organized in your White solidarity or whatever group than we are, and we need that space and time right now … and then another friend repeated that, she's like, we need space and time and patience. … Even if that means, I feel more strongly with the people who think we do need to come up with some demands, but I just held that in because I heard, heard, with*

> *everything I had, I heard them say we need patience.*

In this retelling, Chloe explicitly centered the concerns of the people of Color leaders, and de-centered her own belief that that perhaps the BLM group should publish formal demands. Ceding the ability to play a consistent leadership role or to influence the direction and tactics of the movement group entailed understanding and embodying the values of the movement. Relinquishing the megaphone so that the movement's POC leadership group might foreground its goals, tactics, and leadership development allowed White activists to participate in enacting the BLM movement's cultural goals.

While the Centered Follower position clearly seeks to counter the hegemony of White dominance, Chloe's plea to BLM leaders to "give us guidance" reveals two tensions White activists faced when understanding their roles in the BLM movement. First, it reveals the complicated dialectic of relinquishing supremacy without abdicating responsibility. This dynamic caused some members of the Antiracist Solidarity Network to push for self-defined action, as evidenced by Isaac's later comment: "I just don't know that it serves us or BLM or others if we don't have an actual, some ideas about how we can contribute other than just coming to events that they plan." Second, the hesitance to act until BLM can "give us guidance" reveals a vulnerability of the Centered Follower—one can be at times immobilized by the fear of making mistakes—and this created conflict within the Network as some felt that collective efforts were forestalled. Clearly, "stay off the megaphone" is only one of the movement's directives. "White silence is compliance" is a direct call for White voices in ending racial oppression, and many in the group were eager to answer that

call. Chloe's account of her exchange with BLM was affectively charged, her voice passionate, the 12 people in the room paying rapt attention. And yet, moments after this relayed request for patience and deferred action, members brought forward proposals for the Network to develop educational materials and a website. This tension between relinquishing and responsibility, between patience and action, has been a defining feature of the Antiracist Solidarity Network.

The Affiliated Leader.

… We'd want to run it by leadership.

—Ben

The Affiliated Leader profile is characterized by a strong impetus toward action that intends to represent BLM but fails to fully engage movement values and/or leaders. For example, at every planning meeting, members identified suggestions to bring back to the broader BLM group, such as workshops, film screenings, websites, and community organizing initiatives. Considering ways to mobilize White people attending BLM events, Ben suggested, "Something that I've thought about … we'd want to run it by leadership, is getting these folks' phone numbers and asking to do one-on-ones with them. You know, like actually using these [BLM sponsored public actions] as direct organizing spaces for us. …" At another meeting, Isaac suggested, "It may be worth just kind of parking-lotting the idea of some kind of teach-in for folks about you know, issues of race, and the White role in perpetuating it." While in each case these actions were imagined to connect with the local BLM group and seek their guidance, it is notable that none of these ideas emerged from that group, nor were the ideas ever

brought to the BLM group for consideration over the four-month study period. The reasons for this are multiple, including, as described elsewhere, pressure from other Network members to back away from bringing specific recommendations forward, and—given that during this period the BLM group was developing its own organizational structure and decision-making process—the lack of an established BLM organizational process through which to bring recommendations. Nonetheless, members continued to imagine leadership actions in which members of the all-White Antiracist Solidarity Network played central roles in framing the movement for others and, to a lesser degree, amplifying the BLM goals (see Figure 2 for distribution of megaphone activity content for Affiliated Leader).

The motivating forces behind the Affiliated Leaders' action orientation were multiple. Many expressed a sense of urgency to capitalize on the political opportunity associated with the period of acute national attention on Ferguson and other BLM activities. In addition, many described a fierce sense of personal responsibility to respond to the explicit call for White action in the face of White supremacy. As observed by Lia, "Even if you just look at the signposts of this movement, you know 'White silence is compliance,' which is a call for speaking, and 'stay of the megaphone,' which is a calling for silence … these are in tension." The seeming incompatibility of these twin narratives is reflected by Isaac:

> *One of the things that has been weighing on me that I've been grappling with is this idea of collective liberation. … I say this with a little bit of caution, but still, it's the honest feeling there for me, of, uh, that, I have a stake in that*

regardless of what any anyone, White or Black or anyone else has to say about it, um, and I say that in the sense that, um, I think that, I hope that we can have very honest conversations with [BLM] folks, and other people of Color-led groups, of like what does it mean to have, to own our autonomous stake in our own liberation as well.

For Isaac, taking leadership in the struggle for racial equality is a way of claiming a "stake in his own liberation." Yet for those members operating from the position of the Centered Follower, actions that were not clearly in response to a request from the BLM group were seen to re-center Whiteness and fail to heed the calls for patience from local BLM movement leaders. After Isaac went on to identify a number of possible ways to engage other White people in antiracist work, the following exchange occurred:

Rose: How do you square your desire for wanting to do those kinds of things with that request by people to slow down, how do you, how are you—

Isaac: Well, so the way we talked about it last time we met was, that, it's, I think there's an important and a reasonable distinction between saying, "Here's a bunch of stuff we're gonna start doing" versus "Here are some actual ideas of things we think we might be able to do that could be supportive." Um, but maybe there's a step even short of that, saying, you know, I don't

know, maybe there's a step short of that.

This exchange reflects the prevalent tug between those evoking a call to relinquish and those embracing the call to act. Even while claiming the space to imagine a leadership role for White activists in the movement, Isaac clearly situates himself in affiliation with BLM. However, the positioning of the Affiliated Leader is tenuous. The Affiliated Leader intellectually aligns with the values and tactics of BLM, which explicitly centers Black leadership. As such, participating in the liberating work of the movement often requires White activists to participate as followers without authority, which often does not correspond with their desire to act. This disparity, compounded by the positioning as *affiliated* rather than *centered* in the movement goals, makes the White Affiliated Leader susceptible to reproducing dominance and taking action for, or on behalf of, others, rather than in partnership with them.

A final example is illustrative of this vulnerability within the Affiliated Leader position. Concerned by skewed media reporting of the BLM actions in the city, Jacob penned a blog post intended to reframe the news reporting of law enforcement response to BLM actions in the city. He reflects:

I had some reservations about how I went about writing and using language in that thing I wrote. ... I debated about what, um, what person of speech to use…. It was a "we." And, uh, that, was, yeah, the "we" was the heart of my tension with that. I felt fine about, I felt qualified to say what I was saying. ... I wasn't worried about that, what I was worried about was how to name,

from where in the crowd should this critique come, um, like literally and figuratively, where should it come from? And so, I talked to some different people … they said it was a no brainer and that I should say we. … And so it seemed like the window was closing for it to be relevant to say in the tone I was saying it, so I asked [a local BLM leader] and he gave an enthusiastic "yes" to it and some others did too, and I did it.

In this instance, Jacob strategically chose affiliated rather than centered activity, selectively engaging with members of the BLM leadership rather than seeking the group's full support. While he certainly could have published the piece from an independent position, he chose to evoke the "we" represented by BLM to legitimate his position, yet without *robustly and collectively* engaging with the BLM group. While coalitional leadership has played a critical role in past antiracist movements, the explicit shift of the BLM movement towards a concrete centering of *Black* leadership and public representation for the movement meant that Jacob's appeal to a collective identity as a White man might, in this instance, potentially subvert BLM's movement values and aims. The post was widely distributed, and members of the Network expressed overwhelmingly strong support for the content of Jacob's article. However, several also wondered about the impact of such megaphone activities that, like this one, represent and frame the movement to the public without being asked to do so. That members heard repeated calls from POC leaders for White activists to step back particularly reinforced this ambivalence. Such concerns were expressed by Sage, as she reflected on these requests from BLM leaders that White allies be patient:

Part of my impression … just from hearing, from hearing it filtered from several different sources it also feels like it's generally in response to certain things that have happened, in response to the production of something, or organization of someth— sort of like, you know, Jacob's letter was awesome, but stop doing stuff that makes it look like it's just White people who are doing stuff when we're trying to figure out what we want to do, let's just calm down for a minute. …

As Sage makes evident, the function of a(nother) publication by a White person framing the message of BLM discursively centers White authority and suggests the presence of White leadership in the movement, which is in direct contradiction to the movement's goals. There were multiple instances of White activists independently creating movement-framing materials, because, in the words of one member, "I don't know if we have to get everything signed off." Yet, as White activists authored pieces that spoke for the movement group, refining and furthering its framing message for a wider audience, these actions were increasingly contested. Other members echoed Sage's concern: Authorship suggests that the writer's words hold legitimacy and authority in speaking on behalf of BLM, and that such positioning might underscore White leadership in the group's internal dynamics and public portrayal. Producing materials—even those rhetorically aligned with the frame of the BLM movement—might undermine its values if they bolster White voices at the expense of POC voices and leadership.

Undoubtedly, the strong impetus to act, paired with a commitment to communicate with BLM leadership, could

foster relationships and parallel movements that sustain antiracist work. Yet, the terrain beneath the feet of the Affiliated Leader is particularly tenuous. Often motivated by a strong sense of personal responsibility and justice, actions from this position are vulnerable to both White activists' sense of urgency and their internalized dominance. The decisions of the Affiliated Leader are complicated by a desire to be *in* the BLM movement even as they resist their socialization to take leadership roles. It is in part this tension that leads some to seek action outside the movement.

The Autonomous Independent.

… sometimes I think that White people know best what other White people need to hear and how.

—Penna

The final profile to emerge from this analysis is the Autonomous Independent. The Autonomous Independent shares the Affiliated Leader's impulse toward action, but is most concerned with framing activities (see Figure 2 for distribution of megaphone activities)—in this case aimed at engaging White people in racial justice work. The Autonomous Independent is characterized by a belief in the existence of "White work," antiracist work that is both appropriate for and the responsibility of White people to lead. The existence of the Antiracist Solidarity Network in itself serves as a testament to this shared belief. However, members' conception of "White work" varied, as did their understanding of what activities were appropriate to pursue independently.

All members shared a commitment to engaging in antiracist consciousness raising for themselves and the people in

their daily life. As one member encouraged, "Just being secret agents in the world, going to our neighborhood association meetings, you know, talking to people, just doing the work." Many found value in the Antiracist Solidarity Network as a space for teaching and learning, reflection and accountability. Sean reflected on the development of the group:

But then there's also a reason we continued to meet, because I think for some of us, it was that there's this community that's needed, but then also that we know the work is so much more, or we have a sense that the work is more than just at the actions. And so to be any—but without any sort of policy or organization or anything like that—I don't think that any of us or I haven't gotten the sense that any of us want to form any institutional body or something, but rather to have a loose association of folk together who can hold each other accountable during actions and also figure out how we can begin to create a new culture in our individual lives, to do that consciousness raising….

This version of the Autonomous Independent profile sees value in small groups of White people coming together and using the figurative megaphone to provide internal support and accountability toward shared racial-justice goals. Yet for others, this sense of community was not the motivation for being involved. As Maddie clearly states,

I don't need like another space with White people to talk about my feelings and my interactions with. … I'm really just interested in, are we gonna organize, how are we gonna

do it, in a way that doesn't overlap with the leadership of the BLM … in like predominantly White communities in rural areas where maybe people of color wouldn't go, or want to go anyway, or wouldn't feel safe….

Several members shared a hunger for a more strategic approach to mobilizing White people. These activists felt a desire to hold their own megaphone, broadcasting their work beyond the existing group to reach those White people who might not otherwise be engaged. As reflected by Maddie's caution that this organizing not "overlap" with the BLM group, some expressed that White activists are uniquely positioned and qualified for this work. Penna shared, "… sometimes I think that White people know best what other White people need to hear and how." Yet, while these members diligently raised suggestions that the Antiracist Solidarity Network plan and scale up independent actions, the recommendations were not widely endorsed by the group. Rather, as described previously, other members consistently responded to these calls for independent action by evoking the position of the Centered Follower. In response to Maddie, Lia said:

So when you said, "I want to start organizing and go out and do it," I actually want to, if there's an opportunity to be involved in multiracial organizing around racial justice, that's what I want to do, and I still think there's a role for White people to come together, personally, but I don't know if it's a separate organizing strategy, and I'm willing to wait, personally, until I see, to see what emerges.

Like the Affiliated Leader, the Autonomous Independent position embodies an ethic of social responsibility. Activists operating from this profile believe White people have, in the words of one Network member, "an autonomous stake in our own liberation." This moment is not just about liberating Black people and other POC from White supremacy, it is about liberating White people from ideologies and systems that also damage White people's lives. To the degree that the Autonomous Independent does not claim to be centered or affiliated with BLM, she does not face the same risk as the Affiliated Leader of reproducing dominance by speaking for BLM. Yet the nature of this distal relationship to POC-led racial justice work makes the Autonomous Independent vulnerable to reiterating other forms of White dominance. In contrast to the value-laden politics of BLM (which both embodies and strives towards a centering of Black lives), the politics of the Autonomous Independent re-centers White lives as expert and authoritative. Choosing an independent, White-led movement-building strategy may also reinforce White supremacist comfort and preference for living racially segregated (or shallowly integrated) lives. Actions designed by the Autonomous Independent may problematically re-inscribe—or, to use megaphoning imagery, amplify—a White supremacist notion that White people have nothing substantive to gain from people of color nor anything to lose—in terms of knowledge, growth, or relationships—in their absence. Again, there was tension within the group: Should we be working independently, and what work is "White work"?

Conclusions

Given the movement's injunction for White activists to "stay off the megaphone" and the deeply ingrained patterns of White

supremacy among all White people (including White antiracist activists), we expected to see tensions related to leading and following, and between White activists megaphoning the movement frame themselves and relinquishing the megaphone to others. Our findings were more complex, broadening our conceptualization of the megaphone and our understanding of how White activists both amplify and disrupt the BLM movement. Our exploration of the three activist profiles—the Centered Follower, the Affiliated Leader, and the Autonomous Independent—reveal that none is uniformly uncomplicated, that all bring particular strengths—as well as distinct limitations—to antiracist organizing. It is important to reiterate that although these emerged as the primary profiles within our group, they are not the only possible profiles that White activists could embody. Additionally, these profiles are not mutually exclusive. Several members evoked different profiles at different times. We find, however, that literal and figurative megaphoning actions taken from the position of Centered Follower are more likely to embody and constructively amplify the BLM movement goals and tactics. By committing oneself to the movement while relinquishing positions of authority, actions from the Centered Follower position demonstrate the counterhegemonic possibility of BLM and its disruption of White supremacy. In contrast, actions taken from the position of the Affiliated Leader and the Autonomous Independent are less likely to support the BLM movement goals and uphold its values, and are more likely to reproduce relationships of inequality and protect the hegemony of White supremacy. That does not mean they are never appropriate, only that that they should be interrogated to determine if there are ways to bring the actions into greater alignment with BLM. Further, this study sought to examine the dynamics between White activists and a local Black Lives Matter movement. It is possible that the other activist profiles are more effective in other, perhaps broader, instantiations of White peoples' engagement with racial justice work.

Implications for White Activists

Interrogate the pull toward action. As seen in this case study, despite efforts by the White activists to set aside the megaphone, it sometimes (metaphorically) reappears in White hands. Visible, public leadership of White activists can at times undermine the values and vision of the BLM movement. White activists must assume that the lure of taking action within BLM will always be influenced by both a desire for tangible results and operative White dominance (which may include a proclivity to being in charge, a lack of racial awareness, a propensity to forget—if not willfully disregard—critical feedback from people of Color). As such, White activists in antiracist work must remain willing to interrogate any desire to take leadership or initiate an action without authentic engagement with POC leadership.

Furthermore, that engagement must be ongoing and adaptive to changes in the social context. Many long-time White activists—from local members of the Network in this study to presidential candidate Bernie Sanders—have been challenged by BLM leaders to live more fully into the counterhegemonic values of this movement. This can be disorienting for White activists who have been part of longstanding multiracial coalitional efforts in their communities, as it requires a distinct shift in roles. Reflecting on his blog post, in which he wrote from the subject position of "we" with the encouragement of long-time

Black activist colleagues but without having fully engaged the BLM leadership, Jacob offers:

> *… These shifts towards centering Black experience, voice, and leadership are absolutely essential. And if I knew then what I know now about these shifting dynamics, I would have used my voice differently than I did. … I see now that the important shifts that the BLM movement was birthing created a situation in which my previous assumptions about speaking in certain ways and spaces no longer made the same sense they did before.*

White activists must remain attuned to internal motivations as well as the shifting social contexts in which different modes of engagement may be required. By noticing what end is served by working independently, and by a fully centered relationship with the POC movement leadership, White activists can ground their decisions in more than just activist instinct.

Reconceptualize action—and take it. Staying off the megaphone is not synonymous with inaction or silence. Relinquishing the megaphone can enact powerful movement-building work, particularly when it creates space for the values, goals, and tactics of the movement to flourish. Thus the power of relinquishing the megaphone should not be underestimated or understood as merely passive, but as an opportunity to engage in rich movement building. Moreover, the megaphone *does* find productive use in the hands of White activists, particularly when used to perform an amplifying role that grows out of centered relationship with POC leadership and movement values. Clearly, many more White people are needed in the movement to

end White supremacy, and the tactics and strategies to achieve this are infinite. Cultivating a dynamic antiracist movement requires more than an organizer's handbook and a hand on the megaphone. The instruction to "stay off the megaphone" seeks to further a larger set of cultural values, one that moves beyond a blanket silencing and cessation of leadership and demands a more intentional, more relational, and less ego-driven notion of movement participation.

Further, while we focus here on three activist profiles that were most common in our group, these are not the only possible ways of engaging. We find particularly compelling the possibilities of acting from the position of the Centered Leader. While not one of the most dominant profiles to emerge in this case, we did find a number of incidents where White activists simultaneously followed Black Lives Matter leadership and took leadership themselves. This clearly requires establishing accountable relationships with BLM leaders and demonstrating a willingness to follow direction when offered.

Prepare to be challenged. Tensions between White activists operating from different profiles can be generative, serving to clarify roles and purposes, or can be threatening, undermining the stability and sustainability of the group. In response, some White activists engaged in antiracist actions may choose to align explicitly with one of the three profiles, joining forces with others of like mind about the scope and purpose of White people's engagement in racial justice work. Others may intentionally call on different types of activists to challenge one another and the movement.

Subsequent to the study period, the Antiracist Solidarity Network formed a local

affiliate of SURJ (Showing Up For Racial Justice, a national network organizing White people for racial justice). The different orientations towards action within the group, while still present, have been a source of mutual accountability: We find that the commitment to act among Affiliated Leaders and Autonomous Independents can challenge the Centered Followers' vulnerability to abdicate responsibility when action is needed. Likewise, the commitment of the Centered Follower to relinquish

supremacy can guide Affiliated Leaders and Autonomous Independents to better align movement actions with BLM goals. What is clear is that the movement for Black lives calls on *all of us,* and particularly White people, to commit to the struggle to end White supremacy, including by living into a movement that keeps the wisdom, expertise, and leadership of Black and POC activists central. We *can* stay off the megaphone and stay in the movement.

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