“We’re Constantly Learning”: Identifying and Disrupting White Supremacy Within a Victim Services Organization

Shanti J. Kulkarni, PhD¹, Michelle Lawrence, BA, and Elizabeth Roberts, MSW²

Abstract
Many victim service organizations are seeking to realign service delivery around principles of racial equity. Dismantling institutional racism is a complex, intensive, and long-term process. Therefore, despite this imperative from the field, our knowledge about how social service organizations can effectively advance anti-oppressive practice is limited. This study examined victim advocate perspectives on the role institutional racism played within their work and the supports needed to undo institutional racism within their organization. Six focus groups were conducted with a meaningful cross section of staff members (n = 53) across the organization. Semi-structured interview guides included questions in four domains: (1) racism within client work, (2) challenges to addressing racism, (3) effective solutions, and (4) helpful organizational supports. Transcripts were thematically analyzed using modified constructivist grounded theory methods. Two overarching themes, Identifying Institutional Racism in the Workplace and

¹School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA
²Safe Horizon, New York, NY, US

Corresponding Author:
Shanti J. Kulkarni, PhD, School of Social Work at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Health and Human Services, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223, USA.
Email: skulkar4@uncc.edu
Advancing Anti-racist Practice, and six subthemes emerged from the analysis. Advocates identified that naming and becoming comfortable talking about race was essential. Further, they believed it was important to acknowledge the ways in which that racism was implicitly built into helping systems at large. Advocates explored how internalized racial stereotypes influenced interactions between black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and white advocates and their clients in complex ways. Advocates highlighted organizational efforts that supported ongoing personal reflection, the creation of an accountable community, and staff empowerment within the organization as being critical to advancing anti-racist practice. Some advocates also wanted to see the organization move further in the direction of standing with BIPOC communities, particularly around criminal justice concerns. Findings provide important timely insights into how institutional racism manifests within victim service organizations and what organizational actions encourage anti-oppressive practices and culture.

Keywords
racial equity, organizational culture, anti-oppressive practice, institutional racism, victim services, victim advocates

Background
In June 2020, 47 statewide and tribal domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions jointly released a statement entitled the Moment of Truth Letter (Moment of Truth Letter, 2020). This statement acknowledged the historical and current harms created by mainstream victim services upon black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities and committed to actions to repair these harms and chart a new path forward. Many victim service organizations are seeking to realign service delivery around principles of racial equity. Dismantling institutional racism is a complex, intensive, and long-term process. Organizations must navigate unfamiliar terrain associated with implicit and explicit manifestations of white supremacy and support staff commitment to becoming actively anti-racist (Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance, n.d.; Okun, 2020; Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017). This study examines victim advocate perspectives on the role institutional racism plays within their work and the supports needed to undo institutional racism within their organization.
Structural Racism and Violence

Those who study race have largely moved beyond an understanding of racism limited to conscious individual attitudes and behaviors. Instead, race is viewed as a social construct that organizes social interactions based on accepted assumptions about white supremacy (Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Sue, et al., 2007). In order to bring about an anti-racist society, we are called to address the more deeply rooted systems of oppression often referred to as structural racism. Structural racism has been defined as:

the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy – the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other racially oppressed people (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004, p. 1).

Structural racism shapes the context in which BIPOC people experience both violence and helping systems, and as such needs to be considered by professional helpers committed to racial equity (Hardeman et al., 2016).

Mainstream culture emphasizes the fact that anyone can be the victim of violence irrespective of race, gender, class, age, and other social categories. While these messages were intended to destigmatize victimization experiences, they also minimize the relationship between violence and structural power (Richie, 2000). Indeed, BIPOC community members experience violence at higher rates and at the same time are less likely to have access to resources that support their safety and healing when compared to white people (Richie et al., 2021). Black, indigenous, and people of color communities are also more vulnerable to experiencing violence, trauma, and surveillance from law enforcement, child protection, and public welfare systems (Richie et al., 2021). As a result, BIPOC victims of violence may fundamentally mistrust victim service organizations, viewing them as part of larger systems of state oppression.

Racism within Victim Service Organizations

The term institutional racism describes race-based inequities in treatment, policies, opportunities, and impacts that are produced and perpetuated by institutions (Lawrence & Kehler, 2004). Institutional racism occurs as “societal, governmental, educational, and political structures interact within and between each other” creating the “systemic force for maintaining the scaffolding of racism” (Tourse, et al., 2018, p. 79).
In other words, institutions, such as mainstream victim services organizations, tend to operate, often unconsciously, in ways that support white supremacy as the status quo. This tendency has been noted in the victim services literature. Nnawulezi and Sullivan (2014) documented the racial microaggressions experienced by Black women within domestic violence shelters. These microaggressions were both interpersonal (e.g., racially based insults or differential treatment) and environmental (e.g., lack of staff diversity and inclusive hair care products). Other examples of institutional racism include program rules that reflect norms of whiteness and therefore differentially impact BIPOC victims. In fact, Koyoma and Martin (2002) created a power and control wheel diagram to illustrate the ways in which domestic violence shelters can unintentionally create environments that exert power and control over shelter residents. When programs operate in ways that undermine employment, threaten child welfare involvement, and disrupt existing social networks, BIPOC victims are disproportionately impacted.

Within the context of the United States, both structural and institutional racism should be considered as functioning to maintain white supremacy culture. White supremacy assigns “human value and worth against a hierarchy that privileges and rewards proximity to Whiteness at the top and disadvantages and punishes distance from Whiteness at the bottom (Whitaker et al., 2021).” Okun (2020) enumerates some of the qualities of white supremacy culture that are frequently expressed within mainstream organizations, which include: perfectionism; sense of urgency; defensiveness to criticism/change; valuing quantity over quality; individualism; objectivity; hierarchy; and conflict avoidance. These organizational qualities work against more inclusive, equitable practices that encourage openness to multiple perspectives, collective decision-making, and valuing of difference. Vicarious trauma, which impacts victim service professionals and organizations through ongoing direct contact with traumatic stories, may exacerbate the qualities of white supremacy culture (Bell et al., 2003). For example, victim service professionals experiencing vicarious trauma may become more fearful, less trusting of others; while trauma-impacted organizations may function in a more reactive and crisis driven manner. Unfortunately, these white supremacy cultural values reinforced by vicarious trauma encourage organizations to operate in ways that disproportionately undermine and marginalize BIPOC staff and clients.

The goals of racial equity expressed in the Moment of Truth Letter will only be achieved through intentional action to root out the manifestations of structural and institutional racism within victim service organizations. A recent systemic review on anti-oppression within social service organizations identified a critical empirical knowledge gap centered on better understanding the social service organizational change efforts to advance anti-oppressive practice (Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017). This study examines victim
advocate perspectives about how institutional racism affected their daily work, interactions with clients, and the ways in which they navigated broader systems. In addition, advocates explore how organizational efforts supported their efforts to engage in anti-racist service delivery.

Method

This study analyzed secondary qualitative data to describe victim advocate perspectives about how institutional racism was experienced within their organization and how staff and leadership were attempting to advance anti-racist practices. Evaluation data were collected by a large urban victim service provider actively working towards the goal of becoming an anti-racist organization. Over the past few years, the organization has dedicated resources and taken key actions towards this goal including, creating an Anti-Racism Organizational Development Director position; an Anti-Racism Steering Committee; ongoing racial affinity groups; learning environments that center anti-racism efforts; internal policy reviews, and system change opportunities. Efforts were guided by anti-oppressive frameworks that supported both individual (Hardy, 2016) and organizational level transformation (Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance, n.d.). Eight focus groups were held with organization staff about institutional racism within their work with the goals of heightening awareness, increasing dialog about institutional racism, and identifying core anti-racist practices. Groups were facilitated by staff members active in the organization’s Anti-Racism Steering Committee. Groups were digitally recorded and transcribed by a master’s level social work intern. De-identified transcripts were later thematically coded by a team of researchers and practitioners with the organization’s research and evaluation team.

Focus group participants had been recruited using both simple random sampling ($n = 15$) and purposeful sampling ($n = 28$) in order to obtain meaningful variation across the organization in terms of race/ethnicity, position in and time employed at the organization. Simple random sampling was conducted from a list of staff employed at the victim service organization. Purposeful sampling occurred by asking organizational leaders to identify staff that have voiced a willingness to engage in anti-racism or cross-racial discussions ($n = 15$), by recruiting program leaders at the organization ($n = 5$), and by recruiting members of the organization’s Anti-Racism Practice Committee to participate ($n = 8$). While participant demographic data was not collected, all groups were racially mixed with black, Latinx, white, and AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islanders) participants. Demographics are included in quotes when participants verbally disclosed their racial identities.

Focus groups were approximately 90 minutes in length and ranged in size from five to 10 members. A semi-structured focus group guide included
questions focused on understanding how institutional racism is expressed and experienced within the victim service organization. Focus groups began with an icebreaker to build trust and cohesiveness. Facilitators also presented ground rules for creating a safe space to discuss racism, and emphasize that there were no “right or wrong answers” to the discussion questions. Groups ended with a closing mindfulness activity. The following questions were included in the focus group guide:

Introduction: We are working to gain a better understanding of the ways race and racism comes up in a person’s whole experience. We are hoping to hear stories and experiences from your work, as well as learn how you process and move through identifying and dismantling privilege in your work.

1. How does racism emerge in your work with clients?
2. What has been most challenging about addressing racism when it emerges in interactions with clients?
3. What has been most effective in addressing these challenges?
4. What organizational supports would be helpful in continuing this work?

Focus groups were co-led by two facilitators—a white, cis-gender, female working as an executive leader within the organization and an African American, cis-gender, female working as a senior leader within the organization. The two facilitators worked to model equality in their relationship while facilitating the discussion. They emphasized that their role was to learn from participants, not to evaluate them. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential and were asked if they were comfortable proceeding.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were de-identified and entered into the NVivo software program for analysis. Data analysis was conducted using modified constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory is an inductive approach that utilizes an iterative coding to explore the meanings behind social processes by developing a data-driven framework for understanding the phenomenon in question. Data were systematically reviewed and emerging themes were noted from each focus group (open coding). Next, the data was analyzed to examine relationships between codes and evaluate overlap of themes (axial coding). Finally, the data was coded for identifying patterns and themes (selective coding). At each stage of the analysis, the research team (composed of researchers and practitioners) met to discuss the findings and guide the next steps in the analysis process.
Findings

Identifying Institutional Racism in the Workplace

Advocates shared that identifying institutional racism required them to name and talk about the racism that occurred in their work. Advocates also described the necessity of locating their work within the larger context of pervasive institutional racism endemic to social service systems at large.

Talking about race is hard. Institutional racism is frequently invisible especially to white people not yet conscious of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which racism operates. These underlying dynamics collude so that service providers are less likely to identify racism, engage in thoughtful discussion, and take appropriate action. Respondents described their challenges in naming race within victim service delivery in a number of ways, including: not talking about it, minimizing the presence of racism, and avoiding direct conversations about race.

One service provider noted that race was rarely addressed among staff: “it’s kind of weird but the conversation does not come up a lot. I don’t know if it’s because we’re so focused on doing other things but just never.” Another service provider described how silence about race extended to client-staff interactions even though she felt it was an important issue: “I haven’t personally seen racism with a client come up. I’m aware that it’s present under the surface which makes it very dangerous if it’s not spoken on.” Another service provider contrasted the silence on race with the ability to talk about other oppressions.

We’re willing to call it poverty. We’re willing to call it classism. We’re willing to call it ageism and we’re literally ready to describe it as so many other things because we’ve been conditioned…I don’t think we people recognize issues of race because we can explain it away in other ways very easily. And it’s easier to do so.

Finally, service providers acknowledged their own reluctance to broach race was connected to the discomfort these conversations might bring.

Part of the challenge is talking about race in any context is hard and doing it with someone that you don’t know is even harder because you don’t know where it’s going to go, and so along the same lines of why our staff don’t ask more in depth questions about what’s happening in someone’s life because you don’t know where it’s going to go and you might not be able to get back from there, and you don’t want someone leaving an interaction calling you a racist or having experienced racism yourself and so it’s like “I’m just not even going to touch it” let
whatever happen, happen, because if you don’t know how to re-right the train if it does go off the rails and most people don’t in instances of conversations around race especially if it’s cross-racial then we’re not going to touch it.

In some cases, fears might be associated with feeling ill equipped to have conversations. However, even staff who are willing to talk about race risk negative consequences as described by a supervisor of color who raised the issue of race with her white peers.

I feel like there is a huge conspiracy of silence here where I’ve spoken to other supervisors who kind of look down at me because I brought something up and then moving forward they treat me differently and so now that this discourages me from having these conversations.

We are a program steeped in racism. Both service providers and those receiving services have relationships within formal helping systems deeply rooted in white supremacy and racial stereotypes. Participants described their experiences working within larger systems that reinforced racial oppression. Service providers shared how race affected their interactions with clients of color and how they attempted to understand racial differences within these contexts.

Racism appeared to have impacts on how the organization delivered services within its programs, as well as how the organization interfaced with other systems. One participant discussed the influence of racism on the founding and evolution of the organization.

We are a program steeped in racism… the movement started with middle-class white women starting it and as we’ve got funded and institutionalized, we’ve been sort of absorbed by racist systems.

Thus, not only had the organization been established and led by white people, without an explicit commitment to be accountable to BIPOC communities, but over time it had evolved to become even more embedded in oppressive systems. Participants called specific attention to racial inequities within key systems that many survivors of violence encountered, including child welfare, law enforcement, and public assistance. A participant working at a Child Advocacy Center shared

A lot of our clients happen to be of African American or Latino, not a lot of Caucasians that come in. There’s a big difference when we do our stats and the numbers for Caucasians, like “wait a minute…there’s no child abuse there?”

Another participant observed:
A White person comes in asking for help there’s like a sense of urgency that we see in police officers.

White advocates explored the contours of their own white privilege and its manifestation in their roles within the organization. For example, in the face of pervasive racial bias from law enforcement white staff might be called upon to use their whiteness to increase safety for clients and co-workers of color.

We have had times where we’ve had to call the police to the space and we’ve actually had to strategize and have white colleagues go and talk to the police because sometimes the police will speak differently to them and I think our clients can sometimes see those types of interactions. It doesn’t even necessarily have to be a supervisor who’s speaking to them as long as they’re white you know, just find the white person and send them out. Our clients pick up on that and it’s just kind of messed up. It kind of reinforces what power looks like which can impact the work that we do. Yeah, it’s intense.

In other situations, white advocates questioned the differences between their perceived and actual power to effect change. One white service provider described the sense of isolation associated with this role.

You’re like “I can’t do anything about this.” They have certain expectations like “I need you to speak to [funding agency]…I know that you can get this done for me”…So it’s like you’re the bad guy on some days or the good guy on some days. It’s just sometimes being that gatekeeper, you’re in a lonely place by yourself. You feel like you’re an island alone handling everything.

Black, indigenous, and people of color advocates often approached their work with clients of color differently than white advocates. A white advocate described being less demanding with BIPOC clients than her African American co-worker, but not initially connecting this with her race.

She (Black co-worker) used to always tell me that I needed to take off my white rose colored glasses and look at the world the way it really is and I’m too soft on people, I’m too easy going. And we would joke about it and at the time I never thought about it in terms of any(thing) racial it was just cause she was tougher than me, and we were just on different ends of the spectrum in how we interacted with clients.

Another advocate echoed the tendency of white advocates to be more permissive in this case with African American and Latino male youth. In contrast, staff of color viewed their strictness as being more aligned with youth needs given the oppressive realities of these youth’s lives.
White staff tend to be more lenient in some ways than the staff of color and they’ve had conversations (with) folks of color who are staff when they’re providing support to young people of color they have to be harsh because the world is not going to use these kid gloves with them and so it’s in an effort to be keeping people safe.

However, the same participant noted white advocates often adopted more punitive attitudes when youth of color posed a perceived threat to “on-site” safety.

It’s been an interesting conversation to see how we think about consequences (for youth of color) when it’s this external thing versus my personal safety feels at risk and how I’m going to then respond.

White advocates were seen as in some ways reacting with discomfort about their own whiteness or participation in white supremacy culture. An advocate described how “white guilt” can interfere with providing what clients actually want and need.

(it’s) like a savior complex, when you were talking jumping over hurdles and doing all these flips and cartwheels to like get things done for clients and sometimes the client hasn’t even asked for that yet, and somebody might step in and say I see this young man of color I’m gonna do all these, and he’s just walked in and is like “can I get a glass of water?”

Another participant noticed that “the directors of color tend to have more hoops that clients seem to jump through than our white directors, they tend to be more loose with the resources.” In response, a participant suggested white advocates’ tendency to overperform for clients of color might in fact be racist if they underestimate clients’ true abilities: “I think that there’s some racism involved with providers almost kind of assuming that a client can’t do something, that can be racist.”

The fact that whiteness was so interwoven with power itself influenced client-advocate interactions in complicated ways. Some participants noted that some BIPOC clients appeared to feel more understood when served by staff of color. At the same time, clients may also view BIPOC advocates as having less power than their white peers.

It can also be an easier thing for a client to get that service from a white provider. We have lot of women supervisors and a lot of women of color who are supervisors so for instance if somebody speak to me and they want to speak to my supervisor they’re going to find a woman of color, and if they want to speak to her supervisor, they’re going to find another woman of color.
These underlying racial dynamics create unique dilemmas for staff of color whose authority may be undermined by clients and co-workers in subtle and obvious ways. In addition to racial dynamics, advocates are also impacted by vicarious trauma, which might heighten their responses to “racially charged” situations (Bell et al., 2003).

A staff was really frustrated with a client and the client left and the staff made kind of a side comment to another staff about like “well you know if she wasn’t sleeping with a married man maybe she wouldn’t get hit,” and that, it’s so racially charged and it’s so, I think it was so rooted in like “I’m frustrated and I’m trying to manage my frustration and so you know, like that’s how I get power and privilege back is using this kind of racial (stereotype)...It’s not about bad staff but more about that’s how people are managing a lot of this vicarious trauma in a system that’s racist that they’ve been taught that that’s how you do it.”

Advancing Anti-Racist Practice

Advocates described the process of undoing racism within their work and reflected on the organization’s anti-racist transformation process. While agreeing that things were “far from perfect,” participants felt positive and hopeful about changes that were happening, particularly in the areas of ongoing reflection about service delivery; staff assuming accountability for themselves and their co-workers’ actions; increasing opportunities for staff to have power and autonomy; and scrutinizing the organization’s partnerships and role within systems, such as law enforcement, which serve to reinforce white supremacy.

Support for ongoing reflection. Participants valued white affinity groups for offering white staff opportunities to reflect on “what they bring to the relationship with their client” and “how we interact with each other.” These groups provide support to take individual risks and to work on racial issues as a group. Staff referred to themselves as engaging in “an ongoing process” and working “to feel safe to talk about your process in a way where it’s about learning as opposed to being punitive.” Staff of color also appreciated opportunities both formal and informal to share their experiences. As one staff of color noted: “just acknowledging [racism] that I have gone through is eye opening.”

Creating an accountable community. In addition to supporting each other, staff expressed the importance of checking their co-workers’ assumptions and behaviors. One staff shares how she approached a white peer who used racially stereotypical language when describing a youth of color.
(she) said and I quote: “this person was just being menacing and aggressive.” And I asked the question “how come you chose to use those words,” so being able to kind of create that space to kind of figure out where it’s coming from, but also for it not to be perceived as a woman of color that now, I’m wanting to ask a question, a personal response, “you seem like you’re mad,” “no, I’m just asking a question.” Being able to unpack makes you need to have a space where you can have the conversation with an ally who identifies like you to be able to unpack it because it’s coming up.

This participant emphasized the importance of normalizing conversations from a place of curiosity that will hopefully lead to growth. A Black staff member reinforced why the basic recognition of the lingering and pernicious effects of slavery was so important for her.

I would love for people to have accountability from understanding that your ancestors put our ancestors in slavery, and you’re reaping the benefits of that to this day because again this country was built off of slavery and that’s something that you can’t separate. It was built off of a broken foundation.

Staff also reported carrying this accountability into their relationships with clients. Staff were more comfortable raising the issue of race with clients directly and transparently. A white counselor illustrated this through a conversation she had with a Black therapy client. She said

“I see that you prefer having a Black therapist and I just want you to know that I am aware that I am a white woman, and I am aware of where I stand in race relations to you, so if it, if there is anything you need me to know about you culturally or personally that I don’t know, that will help our interactions, then we can feel free to talk on it and every so often we’ll check in about how you’re feeling in regards to me being white and you being a Black person.”

Another staff member reinforced her willingness not just to talk but to engage deeply in racial dialog.

Something what works for me is being transparent…I’m gonna talk about it. If you bring it up, we’re gonna talk about it and I’m gonna make sure we really talk about it.

**Empowerment within the organization.** The organization reviewed and revised internal policies to better meet the needs of survivors of color and staff. Power is often unevenly distributed within organizations typically concentrated hierarchically so that whites in leadership have more authority than front-line staff who are disproportionately staff of color. When front-line staff has
discretion to make decisions, they can respond to clients’ unique needs and situations rather than having to follow rigid rules. A supervisor reflected on her staff’s experiences

I was trying to check in with myself and thinking how helpless that must feel for some of our staff and so just finding ways to give staff power back, right? I’m existing in this environment where I can’t always burn it down, and I’ve got to enforce like, are there ways that we can help protect against the helpless feeling?

Another participant talked about the ways in which staff can share power with clients in situations where rules cannot be changed. Her imagined conversation with client acknowledges that racism exists within service delivery.

“It’s not fair that you have to be in by 10:00 because you’re an adult and that’s ridiculous that this is what the system requires. I can’t control that so how can we work together…yeah this system is racist and it’s not fair and I don’t agree with it and this is the system I have to work in and so how can we work together?”

Taking stands. Finally, participants struggled with the trade-offs made in order to collaborate with other systems perpetuating structural racism, such as law enforcement or child welfare systems. One participant challenged the tendency to shy away from conflict in order to maintain services.

The idea of justice over peace as a priority...Not that peace is wrong but I think when we’re talking about anti-racism, we’re talking about an understanding of the world that there are people who have not received justice and the work of bringing justice to those people is a higher priority than people feeling comfortable and content in the work that they do.

Discussion

Many leaders are expressing an urgent commitment to addressing structural and institutional racism within victim advocacy and services (Kulkarni, 2019; Tajima, 2021). White supremacy is a world-view that is deeply embedded into our mainstream cultural norms and perceptions about worthiness (Okun, 2020). This study contributes the perspectives of white and BIPOC victim advocates to current conversations about advancing racial equity within victim services organizations.

Victim advocates described shared unique challenges in identifying and discussing racism with their clients and colleagues. BIPOC advocates described different dynamics in working with BIPOC clients as compared to white advocates. In particular, they appeared to more directly engage their
BIPOC clients’ strengths and resilience in solving problems without the support of helping systems. We speculate that BIPOC advocates may appreciate the potential negative impact of helping systems on the dignity, privacy, and autonomy of BIPOC clients in ways that white advocates do not. White advocates voiced their own struggles with guilt associated with white privilege, which might cause them to extend themselves as helpers perhaps at times even beyond the BIPOC clients’ wishes. White advocates also reflected on their responsibility to appropriately leverage their white privilege on behalf of their clients and colleagues in situations where institutional racism was operating.

Advocates highlighted the organizational progress that had been achieved towards addressing institutional racism and eliminating white supremacist practices. Importantly, as staff, advocates were invested in working with leadership to create an anti-racist organizational culture. Advocates emphasized the importance of engaging in ongoing reflection to unlearn internalized racism and become comfortable talking about issues of race within their daily work. Many advocates experienced enough emotional safety from their colleagues to take risks in holding themselves and other people accountable for the use of anti-racist language, stereotypes, and practices. Advocates also noted that the organization had changed some policies and procedures to increase empowerment for front-line staff, which is an example of shifting away from more traditional white supremacist organizational hierarchies, and facilitating greater responsiveness to the needs of BIPOC clients. At least one advocate did allude to the tension anti-racist organizations face in pursuing collaborations with systems that have historically caused harm to BIPOC individuals, families, and communities. This tension is also mentioned in the Moment of Truth Letter, which calls for the field as a whole to re-evaluate these collaborative relationships while renewing support for culturally specific organizations led by BIPOC people (Moment of Truth Letter, 2020).

Longitudinal research can help demonstrate whether and how organizational changes are sustained over time. In addition, research focused on client perspectives and outcomes is also critical, particularly in terms of how BIPOC clients experience and engage with services and whether their outcomes are similar to white clients. Findings should be generalized with caution as they are based on a small sample from a specific organization. Participation may have also been affected by the fact the group facilitators were also organizational leaders. Although participants appeared forthcoming it is also possible some opinions may have been difficult to share in a group setting or with leader facilitators. Despite limitations, this study provides important and timely information about how victim advocates perceive institutional racism in their work and organizational efforts to become more intentionally anti-racist.
Conclusion

Racial equity has become a priority for many victim service organizations. However, to date literature that examines effective strategies to reduce institutional racism has been limited. Black, indigenous, and people of color and white victim advocate in this study described the subtle and overt ways in which institutional racism impacted their work. Advocates also described how organizational efforts were producing important shifts towards anti-oppressive practice. More research is needed to understand how these changes impact the experiences and outcomes for BIPOC clients, as well as how changes can be sustained within organizations over time.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Shanti J. Kulkarni https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2738-3227

References

Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (n.d.). Continuum on becoming a transformative anti-oppression organization.

Bell, H., Kulkarni, S., & Dalton, L. (2003). Organizational prevention of vicarious trauma. *Families in Society, 84*(4), 463–470. https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.131

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage Publications.

Hardeman, R. R., Medina, E. M., & Kozhimannil, K. B. (2016). Structural racism and supporting, black lives—the role of health professionals. *New England Journal of Medicine, 375*(22), 2113–2115. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp1609535

Hardy, K. V. (2016). Anti-racist approaches for shaping theoretical and practice paradigms. In M. Pender-Greene & A. Siskin (Eds), *Anti-racist strategies for the health and human services*. Oxford University Press.

Koyoma, E., & Martin, L. (2002). Abusive power and control within the domestic violence shelter. Available for download at: http://eminism.org/readings/pdf-rdg/wheel-sheet.pdf

Kulkarni, S. J. (2019). Intersectional trauma-informed intimate partner violence (IPV) services: Narrowing the gap between IPV service delivery and survivor needs. *Journal of Family Violence, 34*(1), 55–64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-0001-5
Lawrence, K., & Keleher, T. (2004, November). Structural racism. In Race and Public Policy Conference, Berkley, 2004. http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Definitions%20of%20Racism.pdf

Moment of Truth Letter. (2020). Available for download at: https://vawnet.org/events/moment-truth-movement-reckoning-and-renewal

Nnawulezi, N. A., & Sullivan, C. M. (2014). Oppression within safe spaces: Exploring racial microagressions within domestic violence shelters. Journal of Black Psychology, 40(6), 563–591. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798413500072

Okun, T. (2020). White supremacy culture. Available at: https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture_2020.pdf

Ortiz, L., & Jani, J. (2010). Critical race theory: A transformational model for teaching diversity. Journal of Social Work Education, 46(2), 175–193. https://doi.org/10.5175/jsw.2010.200900070

Ramsundarsingh, S., & Shier, M. L. (2017). Anti-oppressive organisational dynamics in the social services: A literature review. British Journal of Social Work, 47(8), 2308–2327. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw174

Richie, B. E. (2000). A Black feminist reflection on the anti-violence movement. Signs, 25(4), 1133–1137. https://doi.org/10.1086/495533

Richie, B. E., Kanuha, V. K., & Martensen, K. M. (2021). Colluding with and resisting the state: Organizing against gender violence in the US. Feminist Criminology. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085120987607

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. American Psychologist, 62(4), 271–286. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271

Tajima, E. A. (2021). First, do no harm: from diversity and inclusion to equity and anti-racism in interpersonal violence research and scholarship. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36(11–12), 4953–4987. https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211012999

Tourse, R. W. C., Hamilton-Mason, J., & Wewiorski, N. J. (2018). The infrastructure of racism: The institutional dimensions. In Systemic racism in the United States (pp. 79–99). Springer Publishing International. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72233-7_6

Whitaker, T., Alfrey, L., Gates, A., & Gooding, A. (2021). White supremacy. Encyclopedia of social work. https://oxfordre.com/socialwork/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.001.0001/acrefore-9780199975839-e-1586

Author Biographies

Shanti J. Kulkarni is currently Professor of Social Work at UNC Charlotte. Her research utilizes community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods to advance intimate partner violence service delivery at local, state, and national
levels. She has been a clinician, program developer, advocate, and researcher in the field of gender-based violence for over 20 years.

**Michelle M. Lawrence** has been the Director of Anti-Racism Organizational Development at Safe Horizon since 2018. She helps lead Safe Horizon’s work to address systemic racism and create a more racially equitable and inclusive workplace and organization. Michelle has a BA in Human Services and over 18 years in the domestic violence field.

**Liz Roberts** is the CEO of Safe Horizon. She is an MSW with more than 30 years of experience addressing the needs of survivors of violence. Previously, Liz served as a Deputy Commissioner for the New York City Administration for Children’s Services and was the founding chair of the agency’s first Task Force on Racial Equity and Cultural Competence.