

Protecting Racial Justice Advocates from the Harms of Institutional Betrayal at Predominantly White Institutions

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Abstract

Racial justice advocates, especially those at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), are in a challenging position. While advocacy to dismantle racism is meaningful and may promote resilience, it may also expose people to institutional betrayal and subsequently additional harms such as racial trauma, discrimination, exclusion, and burnout. We interviewed 15 racial justice advocates (students, staff, and faculty) at a mid-Southern PWI to learn what they believe institutions can do to protect them from the harms of institutional betrayal. Using thematic analysis, we articulated five institutional strategies from these interviews: supporting mental health, engaging in action over allyship, creating spaces of genuine acceptance, building capacity and developing the workforce, and valuing lived experience. Our findings provide clear guidance for how institutions of higher education can intentionally support and protect the well-being of racial justice advocates. These strategies stand in contrast to institutional betrayal and may result in higher retention rates and less burnout among student, faculty, and staff racial justice advocates.

Racism in the United States has been defined by Wijeyasinghe and colleagues (1997) as the systemic subordination of members of specific racial groups who have relatively little power by members of a racial group who have relatively more power. This is supported by actions of institutions, individuals, and cultural norms. Racism has been associated with negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and racial trauma (Carter, 2007; Lewis et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2019). Racism also impacts economic (Losavio, 2020; Williams et al., 2016) and social status (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). Due to the devastating impacts of racism on individuals of color, some feel compelled to engage in advocacy to promote structural changes that help dismantle racism. Engaging in advocacy against racism has been theorized to promote resiliency and lower the risk of developing traumatic symptoms from race-based stressors (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019; Mosley et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2022). Higher education has been one of the spaces where people of color have engaged in advocacy and activism in response to the everyday and systemic racism that they experience. However, pushing for structural change, especially in predominantly white institutions (PWIs), can also increase experiences of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

Institutional betrayal is the damage that institutions do to those who rely on it (Freyd, 2018) which includes failing to address the concerns of a legitimate complaint that is brought forth civilly. Actions that constitute institutional betrayal invalidate the experience of the wounded and create an environment that is not safe or comfortable. Institutional betrayal manifests in various ways, including interpersonal discrimination, rejection, isolation, and it contributes to burnout, which negatively impacts mental health (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gómez, 2015; Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Knuckey et al., 2017; Mosley et al., 2021; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Wang et al., 2017). Racial justice advocates, the individuals called upon to

engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion work centered on improving experiences for people of color, are often placed in a difficult position. On the one hand, advocacy to dismantle racism is meaningful and may promote resilience (Turner et al., 2022). On the other hand, it can expose people to more burnout, institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014), discrimination, and exclusion. Using qualitative interviews with racial justice advocates at a PWI, we solicited ideas for how PWIs can support racial justice advocates and prevent burnout from occurring through institutional change efforts.

Racism at Predominantly White Institutions

Racism is built into the fabric and the foundation of the United States as a colony and as a sovereign nation. The land that this nation stands on was stolen from Indigenous peoples who were murdered and displaced. Forced labor from enslaved Africans built up the nation. Racism and settler colonialism has also continued to manifest in various ways throughout history such as lynchings, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, and police brutality (Barthé, 2019; Graff, 2015).

While higher education today is often seen as a progressive space, many universities created wealth through the slave trade and housed academics who promoted pseudoscience (Wilder, 2013). Additionally, universities waited years before admitting Black students. Harvard, for instance, graduated its first class in 1642, but it took about 230 years for them to matriculate their first Black student (Ireland, 2012; “Major Landmarks,” 2011). Integration did not occur without protests and continued advocacy by both individuals and organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“The Struggle,” n.d.; Nasheed, 2023) as well as important Supreme Court cases (Brennan & Supreme Court of the United States, 1967; Warren & Supreme Court of the United States, 1953).

Even after integration, PWIs were rarely safe or inclusive. Students of color who attended a PWI experienced acts of racism, including being targets of hate messages and symbols,

exclusion from dining and residence halls, and segregated seating in classrooms (Goldstone, 2007; Harris, 2015). Racism was often perpetuated and overlooked by white faculty and staff, leading students of color to advocate for themselves. From 1965 to 1972, Black students across the U.S. began demanding inclusivity, the creation of African American/Black Studies departments, and the hiring of Black faculty and staff (Kendi, 2012). In the following years, other students of color followed with their own protests and demands (Asian American Studies at Princeton, n.d.; Mize, 2018; Newcombe, 2022). These hard-won changes changed PWIs into places where students of color could thrive (Sleeter, 2011).

While many outwardly racist practices have ended, institutional racism—policies and practices that result in racial inequalities—is still prominent in PWIs (Braveman et al., 2022). Victor Ray posits that “In isolation, individual prejudice and racial animus may matter little; but when these are put into practice in connection to organizational processes such as racialized tracking, job-typing, or exclusion, they help shape the larger racial order” (2019, p. 27). In addition, racialized laws, whether explicit or implicit, have trickle-down effects that create an atmosphere ripe for institutional betrayal at PWIs. The racist policies and practices at PWIs are insidious and pervasive. They are often packaged as standard operating procedures for admission, hiring, promotion, and what is considered scholarship. For example, peer reviewed publications are often considered scholarship while materials created for community dissemination are not (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). As people of color in higher education spaces identify the barriers that continue to exist at the organizational and institutional levels, they can strategize on how to address institutional racism within PWIs. Given that PWIs are institutions, change is likely to occur primarily from “the racial conflicts of constituents (faculty, staff, students) and social movements” (Ray, 2019, p. 27). In other words, change occurs when the

individuals impacted and their allies are able to identify and report conflicts with racialized policies and practices. Normalizing the identification and reporting of racialized policies and practices can lead to movement building where the onus is not solely on people of color to address institutional racism but rather a larger group of non-minoritized faculty, staff, and students are motivated to create change as well. If PWIs fail to address concerns of people of color regarding their racialized experiences, there will continue to be frustration, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings. Consequently, advocacy at PWIs remains critical.

Risks to Racial Justice Advocacy

Studies suggest that participating in advocacy can promote resiliency and lower the risk of developing traumatic symptoms from race-based stressors (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019; Mosley et al., 2021, Turner et al., 2022). Mosley and colleagues (2021) found that Black participants who acted critically against anti-Black racism were more likely to find meaning and create community than Black participants who did not act. They theorized that finding meaning and creating community may serve as protective factors against developing racial trauma symptoms (Mosley et al., 2021). However, other research shows that advocacy may expose people to additional stressors such as institutional betrayal (Freyd, 2014), physical injury, violent police interactions, social rejection, isolation, and burnout (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski, 2019; Knuckey et al., 2018). These stressors are linked to elevated symptoms of depression, PTSD, and anxiety (Knuckey et al., 2018). Thus, research at PWIs is important to further understand and highlight the risks of experiencing institutional betrayal, as this is understudied in the context of racial justice advocacy (Center for Institutional Courage, n.d).

Institutional Betrayal and Institutional Courage

As noted above, institutional betrayal is the damage that an institution inflicts on those

who rely on it (Freyd, 2018). Scholarly personal narratives by Black women administrators and Black women faculty (Baffour, 2023; Carroll, 2017; Gómez, 2023a) describe the impact of institutional betrayal at multiple levels. These experiential accounts often describe incidents with program area colleagues and upper-level administration as sources of harm. Tamaian and colleagues (2024) described the impact of institutional betrayal and ethnic discrimination on symptoms of PTSD and depression among Canadian university students. Their findings suggest that “the institutional response to ethnic discrimination matters, but the experience of ethnic discrimination itself appears to matter more” (Tamaian et al., 2024, pp. 195-196). Almost 80% of those who reported experiencing institutional betrayal identified the university as the perpetrator (Tamaian et al., 2024). Racialized institutions must therefore be intentional about learning the various ways they contribute to oppression and marginalization and work to address them, especially as they relate to supporting racial justice advocates.

Given that institutional betrayal happens at all levels (administrators, faculty, and students) against people of color, it is important to identify ways that institutions can contribute to repairing past and current harms and preventing future harm from occurring. Freyd (2018) outlines steps that institutions can take that help foster institutional courage or an institution’s dedication to pursuing truth and acting ethically, even in the face of discomfort, risk, and short-term costs. Institutional courage research has primarily focused on how institutions can support survivors of sexual assault (Center for Institutional Courage, n.d.; Freyd, 2014). However, some scholars (Gómez, 2023b; Gómez et al., 2023) have noted that institutional courage may be implemented to combat racism and support individuals of color.

Based on the steps delineated by Freyd (2018), Gómez (2023b) proposes three classes of courage steps that institutions can engage in to benefit Black women and girl survivors of

intersectional oppression. These three classes are: (1) Operations, (2) Assessments, and (3) Reparations. Within the Operations class, Gómez (2023b) proposes multiple steps that will provide a foundation for an institution to be courageous in its support. Some of these steps include operating with transparency, educating individuals, incorporating social justice throughout, and committing resources (Gómez, 2023b). Within the Assessments class, Gómez (2023b) proposes that continuous assessments should be conducted to identify problem areas. Finally, within the Reparations class, they suggest steps that institutions can take to engender healing including bearing witness to the harm caused, understanding problems from the point of view of the people harmed, acknowledging wrongdoing, and apologizing (Gómez 2023b). While these steps and classes were specifically created within the context of addressing institutional betrayal toward Black women and girls who experience intersectional oppression, these steps may also benefit individuals engaged in racial justice advocacy. However, the needs and methods of support preferred by racial justice advocates within PWIs remains understudied.

Purpose

To further understand the needs of racial justice advocates, we conducted a qualitative case study of students, faculty, and staff at a mid-Southern PWI who were actively working to dismantle their institution's racist structures and policies. Our study focused on both (a) understanding how racial justice advocates remain resilient, and (b) learning what participants believed could be done to best support their work and their well-being. Due to limited space, this article focuses solely on strategies related to institutional efforts and does not include personal strategies.

Method

Participants

We conducted a purposive sampling of faculty, students, and staff who were actively engaged in racial justice advocacy at a PWI. We defined racial justice advocacy as engaging in activities that were related to improving the lives of people of color within the university (e.g., involvement in diversity, equity, and inclusion). Participants also needed to be at least 18 years old. Our goal was to complete 12 interviews as this number has been suggested by previous researchers as an adequate sample size to arrive at all the themes and large majority of codes (Ando et al., 2014; Guest et al., 2006). Fifteen faculty, staff, and students who self-identified as racial justice advocates participated in the study. Eleven (73.3%) participants were women and four were men. In terms of race/ethnicity, seven were Black, two were Native American, two were Latine, two were multiracial, one was Middle Eastern, and one was white. Seven held staff positions, four were graduate students, three were faculty, and one was an undergraduate student. Ages ranged from 22 to 54 years.

Setting and Context

The study was conducted at a high research activity (R1) PWI. This institution has a history of racism as indicated through the late integration of students of color and the honoring of famous segregationists (e.g., through names of university buildings). Additionally, the interviews occurred in the Spring of 2021, the year immediately following the “double pandemic” of COVID-19 and the escalation of racism (Addo, 2020; Niwa et al., 2024). Like other institutions around this time period, this institution was undergoing a racial reckoning. Personal experiences of Black students and faculty had been published on Twitter (now known as X) via the hashtag #Blackat[Institution], highlighting that racism on campus is rampant and systemic. As of March

2020, when the study was initially proposed, the university reported over 73% of students enrolled in the Spring 2020 semester identified as white (Office of Strategic Analytics & Insights, 2020). The institution's diversity office had been recently established and was actively creating programming (e.g., "Let's talk diversity: Moving from inequity and exclusion to action; DEI Month, Black student welcome, and a culture fair) and fighting for systemic changes by advocating directly with the chancellor of the university.

Interview

The first and second authors developed a semi-structured interview for this study. Questions were first developed by the primary investigator and then reviewed and edited with the help of a content expert. The interview began with questions about the participant's experience with racial justice advocacy. Then questions focused on what they believed are the benefits and costs of engaging in racial justice advocacy. For instance, "Tell me about some of the pros (benefits) of your racial justice advocacy" and "Tell me about some of the cons (costs) of your advocacy." They were also asked how they are able to continue to engage in the work in the face of challenges. For example, "When things get difficult (costs they mentioned), how do you find the fortitude to continue this work? How do you keep going?" Finally, participants were asked what they believed burnout was and what individual and institutional strategies they believed would be beneficial to supporting their role and their well-being. The question asked of participants was "What are some institutional strategies that you have seen implemented/or would like to see implemented to protect and support racial justice advocates?" Given space limitations, we focus only on institutional strategies in this paper.

Procedure

The study procedures were approved by the Arkansas Institutional Review Board.

Participants were recruited through directly contacting individuals considered leaders in diversity and inclusion efforts, with a specific focus on racial justice advocacy, at the university. We seeded the list with staff from the institution's Office for Diversity and Inclusion. We also used snowball sampling to expand recruitment, asking participants to provide the names of other individuals who may be eligible to participate. Participants completed an initial online eligibility questionnaire assessing basic demographic information, including age and position within the university, and consent to participate in the study. Eligible participants were scheduled for a Zoom interview with the principal investigator. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. After obtaining verbal consent and completing the semi-structured interview, participants were debriefed and compensated \$40 with an electronic gift card. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with identifying information removed from transcriptions.

Analytic Approach

Four co-authors, including the primary investigator who conducted the interviews, were involved in coding and analyzing the qualitative data. We used thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012). First, we familiarized ourselves with the data. Interviews were auto-transcribed by Zoom, then transcriptions were edited and reviewed by the authors. Second, we generated initial codes by reviewing the first three interviews as a team. A split coding approach was used for remaining interviews. Afterwards, all interview codes were reviewed as a team and coding disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Each data segment or quote was tagged with the relevant code using NVivo software. Third, we collated codes into themes. Fourth, we verified that the themes were representative of the coded quotes and of the data set as a whole. Fifth, we refined, defined, and named the themes so that the analyses told a cohesive story.

Positionality Statement

The authors of this study identify as racial justice advocates who are actively engaged in dismantling institutional racism and changing the climate for people of color at PWIs. Three of the authors have administrative experience working in diversity, equity, and inclusion (no authors served as participants in this study). The authors are of varying racial backgrounds with two identifying as Latina, one as a Black man, one as a white man, and another as a Native American woman. The experiences of the authors as racial justice advocates and with their lived experiences as members of various racial/ethnic groups influenced both the way the interview questions were generated and how the themes were defined.

Results

The following section discusses the themes extracted from the data. The themes were divided into two categories: individual practices and institutional practices. We report only the second set of themes in this paper. Institutional practices were strategies and policies that participants indicated may be useful for institutions to use to help support the well-being of racial justice advocates and their work. There were five overarching institutional practice themes: (1) supporting mental health, (2) engaging in action over allyship, (3) creating spaces of genuine acceptance, (4) building capacity and workforce development, and (5) valuing lived experiences.

Theme 1: Supporting Mental Health

Given the overwhelming and demanding nature of engaging in racial justice advocacy within PWIs, participants suggested that there is a need for institutions to provide a rich, diverse, and affordable network of mental health care services to support their well-being. Many participants indicated that they seek out therapy as a personal strategy but that the access to therapy is limited by institutions due to insurance coverage or limited personnel on campus. One

participant, a Black staff member, indicated that campus resources need to be better financed and expanded:

Mental health care on campus is appalling and that [clinic on campus], without a doubt, needs to be financed to expand. I think that the clinics that do trainings on campus, especially for students, undergraduate and graduate, need to have more colleagues who are credentialed, who can do support services around the intersection of race and gender.

Another participant, a Multiracial student, highlighted how current insurance options are not able to compensate therapists as they need them to: “Finding therapists who are not burned out themselves and who share identities that I hold is nearly impossible. And... I know that my insurance is never going to compensate you in a way that I need it to.” Furthermore, one participant, a Latina staff member, indicated that since therapy is a necessity for engaging in racial justice work, institutions need to provide it. She said, “Anybody who’s working in racial justice work should be getting therapy, like continuously. I think that’s like the bare minimum of what an organization could provide.” In sum, mental health support is needed and institutions who care about their advocates need to evaluate and ensure that mental health care is available for all.

Theme 2: Engaging in Action Over Allyship

Participants indicated that institutions can better support racial justice advocates by implementing systemic changes and moving beyond performative efforts. Some of this action can also take on the form of engaging in advocacy for equitable policies and laws at the municipal, state, and federal levels. Some participants found that the university engaged in some efforts that were exemplary in moving beyond performative action. For instance, one participant, a Black staff member, indicated that they appreciated the university’s support of a strategic plan

for diversity across campus as it shows that this is something that is important to the university:

Agreeing that every department have its own diversity strategic plan is a positive step, right...That's a good thing. So that means it takes this whole conversation out of the [diversity office] and makes it a university conversation. That's smart. That's helpful. That's a good start.

Another participant, a Black staff member, indicated that instead of saying diversity is important, it was a show of action over allyship for their university to create “a [diversity] division [upper-administrative] position.” Other participants highlighted negative aspects of performative efforts related to racial justice and how institutions need to show more of a movement toward action and systemic change. One example of this was related to the importance of acknowledging and actively attacking the racist history and structures of an institution rather than glorifying their past. A Multiracial staff member stated:

I think they need to address the skeletons in their closet. With that, I mean, like all the racist like...tendencies. Like they tend to be selective on their history, so yeah, they like love to preach about how they let this one Black man in their school before desegregation was mandatory but don't talk about the fact that he had to attend classes in the basement. Or that he wasn't allowed to use any of the restrooms on campus. And he was most likely terrorized by the entire student body, just for the color of his skin. But because we let him in the door, they think that's enough....in order to [mention this part of the history], they would have to acknowledge their racist past and then actively attack racism and racist structures, and that means attacking their own community members. And so that is maybe a farfetched one but still I think the university should do it.

Participants also indicated that action over allyship can be demonstrated through

reparations, especially for land-grant PWIs. A Native American faculty member noted need for reparations:

There really needs to be acknowledgement about this institution. It's a land grant institution, so that means they stole a bunch of land out West from native people by force, coercion, or outright murder, and sold that land for money to buy the plot of land that the university is on. People don't know that which is shocking to me. And they really need to be doing some like reparation-based action. They need to be working with regional native tribes. And thinking about what reparations look like, I know that they offer in-state tuition to a lot of native tribes, but they need to go beyond that, because they're on our fucking land and we died so that this institution could exist.

Theme 3: Creating Spaces of Genuine Acceptance

Participants indicated that institutions should provide an environment that allows individuals to express and embody their culture without the expectation of assimilation. A Black staff member stated:

We are a primarily white institution; there's other institutions that specifically create spaces for minoritized folks to go into and be able to remove that kind of like white gaze and that feeling of having to perform all the time around white spaces. I think that's definitely something that alleviates burnout when you are able to be in a space that's not continuously expecting you to perform whiteness.

Another participant, a Black graduate student, indicated that sometimes institutions expect individuals to separate their identities, and this can feel insulting to racial justice advocates.

I think sometimes the university acts like we can separate our identities from the work that we're doing and they're like—"well, just do this as like as a PhD student." Well, I'm

not going to set my identity at the door, like I can't just do that. I can't walk into a space and not recognize that there are no people of color in that space...that there are all these decision makers that are not paying any mind to folks and they're like "well, just like take your activists hat off for a moment." No. Fuck no! That hat is my whole fucking head; not going to separate it out for your convenience. And being asked to do that is insulting.

Theme 4: Building Capacity and Developing the Workforce

According to participants, institutions can help support the well-being of racial justice advocates by hiring and promoting the development of people of color within the institution and by encouraging white people to become actively involved in racial justice advocacy. A Black student stated the following:

Hire more Black folks, that would definitely make things easier, we [students] wouldn't have to search so hard, wouldn't have as many stressors...and then faculty can speak up and be like, "Hey, actually I don't know that that's a great idea" before it even gets to us all the way down to [us], the lowest on the totem pole, trying to be like—"Excuse me, Chancellor, actually I think that's racist."

Participants also suggested that institutions can provide monetary resources to support racial justice advocates. A Middle Eastern graduate student highlighted the need for monetary compensation in their response:

Pay people for their work...we don't get paid anything but you want us to advise the deans and sit on grad council and sit on university courses and programs committee and be part of the appeals committee and, like, the laundry list of things that they expect us to do is astronomical but then we're supposed to do it for free.

In addition to hiring and providing resources, participants noted that institutions can

create community among people of color through mentorship programs and cluster hiring. A white faculty member stated the following about issues with the hiring process:

If you're just hiring random people of color in random departments, with no institutional connections to other people of color who can scaffold power with them, you're doing them a disservice, right? Because they're just getting sandbagged with white supremacy all the time casually and formally so. Cluster hires are really important, I mean in the professoriate for sure, and they have to be tenure track.

Additionally, participants indicated that providing spaces at the institution for community and coalition building may promote well-being. A Latina staff member stated, "Opportunities to like get together and have fellowship with people who are doing the same work, like a supportive community that we have an opportunity to just like celebrate our successes or complain about what's going wrong."

Some participants highlighted the need for a shift of responsibilities from people of color exclusively to include white faculty and staff. Sharing responsibility for building a culture of inclusion and belonging reduces the emotional labor of racial justice advocates, especially advocates of color, as expressed by one Multiracial staff member: "Begin by shifting the labor, to white people...To say that we (people of color) are not responsible for your learning. Do your own work, start dealing with your stuff, and start unpacking your whiteness."

Shifting labor also means institutions can offer courses or trainings broadly, rather than relying on individual employees seeking this out. A Native American student stated:

All across America there's a lack of awareness. So, if there was like a higher level of just general knowledge on campus for our like communities, then that would be better, because I feel like right now with every person I meet basically I'm starting at almost

zero awareness and having to educate them up to be able to be an ally, or you know, whatever...Like a sensitivity, training or like some kind of cultural awareness training.

Another participant, a Multiracial student, suggested a general course that everyone is required to take at the institution could be helpful so that white people can approach people of color with some level of empathy and understanding. They said, “Why don't we, you know, put a class in the curriculum about being a better human...or like this is the experiences of like disadvantaged communities.” Overall, a commitment from institutions to ensure that the workforce is diverse and prepared to discuss issues of race can better guarantee that racial justice advocates are not solely relied on to do the work.

Theme 5: Valuing Lived Experience

Participants reported that, while they were often called upon to voice concerns and share strategies for change, their lived experiences were not always valued over the comfort of white people. Many of the racial justice advocates said institutions should center the voices of people of color when it comes to articulating problems and generating solutions. A Black graduate student noted:

Yeah, I get so mad when they asked me on these friggin' committees and then they're like—Hey, we want to make...things better for Black students on this campus, what can you do? And then I give them a list of like eight things that I think they could do, and then they go—Oh my gosh. Thank you so much that's so helpful and then give me something I didn't even ask for and they say—you're welcome.

The same sentiment was highlighted by another participant, a Multiracial student, who indicated that they no longer wanted to be on committees:

I don't want to be on these committees because we're not getting anything done. We're

talking in circles, they're going to do what they want anyway, so it's kind of like...it's no reason for me to be on these committees.

Another participant, a Black graduate student echoed these sentiments in their response, “It just seemed like everybody was jumping on this train of diversity, equity, inclusion, but they really weren't doing the work to figure out what people of color actually want.”

Participants also reported wanting institutions to credit and recognize the excellent work of people of color. One Black staff member put their frustrations about lack of recognition in this way:

The folks that are doing this type of work and I don't think that this has always got to be the case, but I'm thinking about our campus right now.... These folks could come together and be celebrated and recognized and from very senior leadership. I think that that would be important, just so we know it's not fallen...And it's not being unheard right. But celebration and recognition that is true and authentic... not just to check the box, but an authentic thing.... That might pull back some of the stress.

Discussion

Racial justice advocacy in a PWI of higher education is both important and can exert a significant mental and physical toll on people engaged in this work. At this time and in this current political climate, efforts to enhance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice at universities are under increased scrutiny and criticism (Asmelash, 2023; Diaz, 2023; Knox, 2023). Laws enacted in some states now prohibit racial justice activities (Gross, 2022; Sanders, 2023). Institutional actions dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (Betts, 2024; Knox, 2023) as well as potential inaction from institutions to advocate on behalf of people of color can lead to institutional betrayal, harming the people who rely on these institutions most (Smith & Freyd,

2014). There is an abundance of research demonstrating that efforts to teach about racial history, to create more inclusive campus environments, and to diversify the faculty, staff, and students at PWIs are beneficial for both majority and minoritized people (American Council on Education, 2012; Bollinger, 2007; Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2013). However, people who engage in racial justice advocacy on campus are at elevated risk of negative mental health outcomes (Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015). Protecting their well-being, particularly at this moment in history, is critical.

Across 15 interviews, we found five major strategies that racial justice advocates said their institutions could use to support their well-being: supporting mental health (Theme 1), engaging in action over allyship (Theme 2), creating spaces of genuine acceptance (Theme 3), building capacity and developing the workforce (Theme 4), and valuing lived experience (Theme 5). All of these themes are consistent with research on the benefits of institutional courage (Freyd, 2014, 2018; Gómez, 2023b), which stands in contrast to institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Gómez's (2023b) classes of institutional courage were specific to supporting Black women and girl survivors of intersectional oppression; however, these have the potential to benefit other groups from marginalized backgrounds. For instance, institutional courage strategies related to operations suggest that organizations can lay the groundwork for institutional courage by addressing societal problems, committing resources to every step, and integrating social justice (Gómez, 2023b). Participants in this study echoed these strategies, calling for institutions to prioritize action over mere allyship (Theme 2) and to build capacity by developing the workforce (Theme 4). They emphasized that taking concrete actions and advocating for change in racist structures would create a better environment for those racial justice advocates who aim to serve. Additionally, by expanding the workforce and fostering connections among

people with shared experiences and goals, racial justice advocates gain critical social and instrumental support, helping to distribute the workload. These efforts align with those proposed by Gómez (2023b) and have increasingly become part of universities' diversity strategies, demonstrating clear benefits (Flaherty, 2015; Freeman, 2019; Sgoutas-Emch et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the themes related to mental health support (Theme 1) and creating spaces of genuine acceptance (Theme 3) can be compared to those strategies in the Operations and Reparations classes proposed by Gómez (2023b). The Reparations class contains strategies to engender healing but also serves as secondary prevention of institutional betrayal. While mental health support (Theme 1) is not necessarily suggested by Gómez (2023b) in the Reparations class, it provides resources to promote healing for those affected by the institutional betrayal perpetrated by the PWI. Additionally, mental health support (Theme 1) can also fit into the Operations class as it is a way for institutions to commit resources. Moreover, creating spaces of genuine acceptance (Theme 3; i.e., creating physical and psychological space for people to be themselves) aligns with the Operations class strategy of educating individuals, communities, and organizations. Creating spaces of genuine acceptance may promote education by their very existence and by the conversations and issues that may be discussed in such spaces.

Finally, Theme 5, valuing lived experience, also fits within the strategies proposed by Gómez (2023b) in the Reparations class. Specifically, participants in the present study suggested that institutions should listen to and value individuals who are being consulted on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, especially when these individuals may themselves have first-hand experience with racism and discrimination. This theme mirrors the strategies related to bearing witness to the victim's harm, understanding the problem, and finally correcting wrongdoings. With this theme and the strategies proposed by Gómez (2023b), we highlight the need for

institutions to protect those individuals whom they have harmed and make amends to move towards healing as methods of protecting racial justice advocates.

Taken together, participants in our study spontaneously proposed institutional strategies to support racial justice advocates that are theoretically linked to institutional courage in the face of racism and oppression (Freyd, 2014, 2018). The institutional strategies suggested by participants of this study have the potential to help prevent institutional betrayal by transforming institutional policies and practices to include more support and enhance the environment of PWIs for racial justice advocates and people of color. Additionally, as many racial justice advocates identify as people of color (Trejo, 2020), and particularly Black women, it is possible that other strategies for institutional courage proposed by Gómez (2023b) but that did not emerge from participant responses may be indicated. We recommend that the institutional courage strategies proposed by Gómez (2023b) be further explored in other contexts, such as reducing institutional betrayal experienced by all people of color and racial justice advocates in higher education spaces. Building institutional courage across PWIs is likely to improve the institution for everyone.

Practical Implications

The implications of our study are clear: at the institutional level, our findings suggest it is important for institutions to take a clear stand on racial justice. An attempt to appease “all sides” was seen as harmful to our participants’ well-being and contributed as a source of institutional betrayal. Upper administration and institutional leaders (deans, department heads/chairs, full/associate professors) need to accept responsibility for their roles and set the tone for the institution, pertaining to the environment and culture of the campus community. This can include incentives for individuals and groups to come forth and share about their experiences of

discrimination, demonstrating that their concerns are relevant and deserve attention (Freyd, 2014). Participants also recognized that taking a stand could be difficult, especially for publicly funded universities in states with more conservative legislatures. But speaking to the mission of an institution of higher education requires a commitment to scientific evidence, and the evidence suggests that exclusive environments are not beneficial to learning, growth, or creativity for anyone (Antonio et al., 2004; Gurin et al., 2004; Leung et al., 2008; Sommers et al., 2008). Institutional courage (Freyd, 2014) seems to be a key part of improving the institution for people of color and racial justice advocates.

Another note of caution for institutions—while it is important to grow the number of diverse faculty, staff, and students (Stanley, 2023), doing so without committing adequate support and resources can be harmful. Salaries, wages, benefits, scholarships, and other sources of support must be devoted to the success of this increasingly diverse workforce. Sequencing (first bringing in diverse people, then finding funding) was seen as problematic and a reason why many institutions struggle to retain diverse faculty and students (Milem et al., 2005). Instead, these efforts to diversify and properly fund or support people should occur in parallel, as part of a multi-pronged approach. In addition, institutions should provide support and incentives to engage in research and service work that involves the diverse surrounding community. This way, individuals within the institution are encouraged to identify spaces in the community that are welcoming and supportive of racially and ethnically diverse faculty, staff, and students.

Finally, institutions would benefit from developing workplace policies and practices that promote transparency in decision-making and “close the loop,” so to speak. Institutional transparency is seen as key to engendering trust and combatting oppression (Rawlins, 2008; Roberson et al., 2020; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Transparency is also noted as a

strategy of institutional courage (Gómez, 2023b). Asking for input, creating task forces, studying a problem, and forming a committee to address racial justice on campus is great, but our participants reminded us that if institutions seek input, they should ensure they provide clarity for how that input was considered. Additionally, institutions should be clear about how they plan to incorporate solicited feedback to create institutional change. Feedback and transparency are especially important if an action taken by an institution appears to ignore or fails to comport with a recommendation given by a racial justice task force, committee, or group.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Our study provided rich data from racial justice advocates at a time of high need and high demand for this work. Around the time data were collected, universities across the country were engaging in remote instruction because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, a racial reckoning was occurring following the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. While universities are largely back to in-person instruction, there are continued attacks on racial justice advocacy on campuses. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice initiatives that began or ramped up during the early 2020's are in need of bolstering or sustaining (Bunn, 2023; Diaz, 2023; Knox, 2023; Betts, 2024). Many racial justice and advocacy positions that were created or expanded at that time have been vacated quickly as turnover remains a concern (Bunn, 2023; Diaz, 2023; Knox, 2023; Betts, 2024). There are real costs both in terms of money and in furthering the goal of racial justice and equity when rich talent cannot be retained. However, even while these formal positions are being vacated or terminated, racial justice advocacy continues to exist in informal ways, as it always has. Therefore, the need for institutional courage remains just as, perhaps even more, important in the current anti-diversity climate.

Our study contributes to understanding how to sustain and support racial justice work at

PWIs, but we were limited by the following. First, data were from racial justice advocates at one PWI and one particular and unique moment in history. While qualitative data is inherently unique to the experiences of the group interviewed, the context of our data collection can further make these experiences ungeneralizable. Furthermore, our qualitative interviews asked about strategies that had been or should be implemented at the institution that may be helpful. It did not include a thorough examination of whether and how institutional strategies were implemented. In other words, these results are a mix of proposed strategies and strategies that have been implemented. It is not evident if these strategies, particularly institutional strategies, would in fact work to promote well-being in the ways our participants anticipated. There is theory to suggest that this form of institutional courage may be effective (Smith & Freyd, 2014; Gómez, 2023b). However, it will be important to examine these strategies in a larger group of advocates at a variety of PWIs, including smaller institutions, private institutions, and schools in geographically diverse regions. It would also be helpful to see whether being at institutions that implement a greater number of wellness-promoting strategies/policies is associated with increased job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and retention. Furthermore, our sample included students, faculty, and staff. While this ensures we are addressing the needs of many members of PWIs, it does not allow for nuanced conversation on how needs differ. Future studies should focus on students and staff/faculty separately to better assess how needs may differ and how support can be tailored to each group's specific needs. Additionally, while our sample size was large enough for thematic saturation, 12 people cannot address the needs of all racial justice advocates. Ideally, future studies will include a larger sample size to ensure that racial justice advocates in different types of institutions are well-represented.

Our study focused on racial justice advocates specifically; however, it would also be

useful to examine through an intersectional lens what forms of institutional support to students, staff and faculty at large may lead to a real expansion of diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and justice in PWIs and other higher education spaces. Examining intersecting identities among racial justice advocates themselves would be important. For instance, might some strategies or forms of support be more effective for some groups versus other groups? Would policies that are intended to promote racial justice result in further marginalization of some groups? How might the geographic location of a PWI influence how policies and practices benefit racial justice advocates given that doing racial justice advocacy at a PWI in an urban, diverse city would be different than in a rural and largely white town. Advocacy in states where DEI is being targeted for elimination might also be more difficult and require more commitment of institutional and individual resources than advocacy in a state where such racial justice and advocacy efforts are not currently threatened.

Conclusion

The American Psychological Association has articulated that racism is multi-layered and includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional/structural levels (APA, 2019). Consequently, racial justice advocacy work, its risks and benefits should also be considered multi-level. The findings of this qualitative study highlight that racial justice advocates at a PWI see personal strategies as important but insufficient to sustain well-being. Findings also provide clear guidance for how institutions can intentionally support racial justice advocates and promote well-being. These strategies may lead to fewer experiences of institutional betrayal as well as higher retention of, and higher well-being in advocate students, faculty, and staff.

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