

# Addressing Engagement Suppression in Black and Brown Racialized Communities

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*Across the United States, the politics of power, voice, and funding continues to disparately impact the health and life outcomes of most of the Black and Brown residents. At the root of the disparities can often be found a conscious and unconscious cross-sector collaboration of historically White institutions to silence, exclude, and suppress the voices and engagement of communities of color in leadership, decision making, and community and economic development. This conceptual article is based on the work of Promise Neighborhoods of the Lehigh Valley (PNLV), introduces the Radical Welcome and Engagement Restoration Model (RWERM), a community practice framework that challenges structural and/or oppressive conditions and forces that suppress minority engagement. This article provides a complete description of the RWERM, highlights its theoretical assumptions, and explains how it can be implemented across the country. The potential impact of the program in Allentown, Pennsylvania, is discussed.*

**Keywords:** *engagement suppression, people of color, pedagogy of the oppressed, critical race theory, critical mass, RWERM, PNLV*

## Background

A strong community requires residents that are vibrant, engaged, connected, and feel a sense of welcome. Yet, Black and Brown racialized communities routinely encounter structural barriers that impede their full participation in all facets of community decision-making (Stoeffler, 2018; Wilson, 2009). This barrier is a

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condition that we term engagement suppression. The driving force behind engagement suppression is what Young (1990) refers to as the five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, from historically White institutions. Historically White institutions are those whose origins and current practices are based on race and racism. They necessarily need to be composed of a White majority but are routine, as Whiteness is embedded in institutional practices (Bourke, 2016). Structural racism impedes one's health, contributes to health disparities, and correlates with a higher burden of disease on marginalized groups (Gee & Ford, 2011). Education, health care, and municipalities must engage citizens to gain legitimacy, solicit buy-in and co-create solutions that are relevant to the circumstances the community members experience. As this has not been a widespread practice beyond tokenism, community empowerment and engagement will build a community's capacity in contributing to problem-solving and have shown to have positive outcomes on health and life indicators (Laverack, 2006; Rissel, 1994).

Community engagement can take many forms. It can be formal actions intended to influence organizational, governmental, or political outcomes or informal networks and actions to contribute one's thoughts to the discourse (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Community engagement is defined throughout this article as the interrogation of power and the practice of relinquishing and sharing power, resources, and decision-making with those least consulted but most impacted by the community-made decisions. Regardless of one's definition of community engagement or civic participation, discriminatory policies and historically White institutions will not change without full participation from racialized groups. The voices of those most impacted by the discriminatory engagement suppression must be a critical part of the conversation.

The literature is full of theoretical and practice models related to community development (Boehm & Cnaan, 2012; Fawcett et al., 1995; Fisher, 1994; Laverack & Wallerstein, 2001; Rothman, 1968). However, the most popular and highly cited community practice model is Rothman's (1968) three models of community intervention (Hardcastle, Wenocur, & Powers, 2011). The three models are locality development, social planning/policy, and social action, within which there are several variations modified over time (Rothman, Erlich, & Tropman, 2001).

Locality development is an approach that "presupposes that community change should be pursued through broad participation by a wide spectrum of people at the local community level in determining goals and taking civic action" and has become synonymous with community development and (Rothman et al., 2001, p. 29). Social planning/policy is a rational data-driven process that "emphasizes a technical process of problem solving regarding substantial social problems" (Rothman et al., 2001, p. 31). This model relies on experts and analysts, and as such, community participation is not fundamental to the process, although it is not excluded either. Social action "aims at making fundamental changes in the community, including the redistribution of power and resources and gaining access to decision making for marginal groups" and includes "seeking to change

legislative mandates...and policies and practices of institutions" (Rothman et al., 2001 as cited in Stoeffler, 2018, p. 274).

Weil and Gamble (1995) and Weil (2013) are likewise among the canon of community practice model developers, built upon Rothman's (1968) three models by subdividing them into eight more specific practice intervention models: (1) neighborhood and community organizing, (2) organizing functional communities, (3) community social and economic development, (4) social planning, (5) program development and community liaison, (6) political and social action, (7) coalitions, and (8) social movements. Additional models, such as Mondros and Wilson's (1994) models of social action organizations and Fisher's (1994) neighborhood organizing models, extend the work of Rothman (1968), Weil and Gamble (1995), and Weil (2013). However, they are branches of the same tree (Sawyer, 2014). Other related frameworks such as Ennis and West's (2010) and Gilchrist's (2019) contributions focus on the importance of networking in community development. Meanwhile, Stoeffler, Joseph, and Creedon's (2020) model highlight principles for development within the religious world.

### Purpose and Rationale

As seen above, community development scholars and practitioners have advanced a constellation of practice models for addressing community issues. These models, although meritorious, fail to capture the depth and breadth of the problem of engagement suppression in Black and Brown communities. In other words, there are several shortcomings associated with the existing frameworks of community engagement. One of them is the lack of involvement of community members in all aspects of the processes, especially in the conceptualization phase. Hoefler and Chigbu (2015) contend, "The locality development approach is criticized, in particular, for having the potential of allowing community intervention agendas to be overtaken by politicians whose ulterior motives may lead to the exploitation of the community members, despite community members and the politicians claiming to have the same goal" (p. 54).

The above criticism is especially the case within racial minority communities (O'Donnell & Karanja, 2000; Young Laing, 2009a,b), hence another limitation. In effect, the traditional community practice models highlighted in this article are "unable to offer any strategies that build on cultural perspectives" and do not realize the oppression of Black and Brown communities (Young Laing, 2009a, p. 27). Sawyer (2014) meticulously analyzed 23 of the most cited community practice models, approaches, and perspectives across various characteristics and determined that most were lacking in utility for cross-cultural practice. Most of the current practice models are not construed in a way that fosters opportunities for minority leadership. Arguably, the two deficiencies cited above alone compromise the implementation of existing models. Their inorganic nature and lack of transformative power sometimes make them inapplicable in time and place. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature by proposing the Radical Welcome

and Engagement Restoration Model (RWERM), a community practice framework that challenges structural and/or oppressive conditions and forces that suppress minority engagement.

### **The Radical Welcome and Engagement Restoration Model**

#### Theoretical Connections to Prior Work

Embracing the premises of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Morton Grodzins' Concept of Critical Mass, and Derrick Bell's Critical Race Theory, the RWERM represents a replicable hyper-localized approach to dismantling the weaponization of voice and agency through restoring relationships, community engagement, and building community capacity. Because racism permeates all sectors of the American society, whether political, economic, religious, or judicial, minorities should make sense of life through a critical race perspective (Bell, 1995). As targets of oppression of community-controlled political systems, minority populations should be constantly educated about the impact of systemic racism on their lives (Freire, 1968) and how their involvement in politics can lead to a point where antiracism efforts can become mainstream. That is, oppressed people should learn how fulfilling their civic duties could trigger the formation of what is known as the "critical mass point," a threshold for changes within a community (Grodzins, 1958).

#### Historical Development

While most people living in Allentown, Pennsylvania are people of color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), they are under-represented in positions of power. The correlation between lack of demographic representation and trust within marginalized communities is well-known (Banducci, Donovan, & Karp, 2004; Gay, 2002). Predictably, there exists marked distrust between racialized groups and decisions makers across the city of Allentown (Alang et al., 2021). Promise Neighborhoods of the Lehigh Valley (PNLV) is a trusted community partner and bridge builder that reflects the diversity of Allentown and is the epicenter for the development of the RWERM.

Founded in 2008, PNLV functioned as a traditional charity-based nonprofit with a cradle to career focus, a niche for cross-sector collaboration, and data-driven systems change. Under new leadership, PNLV underwent a radical transformation in 2017 and committed to increasing hope, sense of belonging, and agency through relationship building, community engagement, and community capacity building. Over the last 4 years, PNLV has lifted the voices of the most ignored, overlooked, and silenced across Allentown through developing individuals, families, communities, and systems to interrogate the politics of power, decision-making, funding, knowledge, and charity. PNLV transitioned from being charity-driven to this newly developed liberation-driven model that postulates

healing, helping, and community organizing has been commodified and requires decolonization and radical transformation. PNLV believes that programs, practices, and policies will always reflect the values and best interest of those that design them.

The process began with developing mastery in the staff and core volunteers on the power of narrative to engage and shift communities. Individual and collective stories were the focus of this earlier work. Grounded in vulnerability and interdependence, PNLV focused on mantras such as “Yo soy porque nosotros somos.” A loose translation and abbreviation of the Ubuntu principle, “I am because we are.” Ubuntu is part of an African-centered worldview that recognizes connectedness and embraces values such as care, humility, thoughtfulness, consideration, understanding, wisdom, generosity, hospitality, and social maturity (Mabovula, 2011).

PNLV embraced these core African practices across the organization and worked to amplify them across the community as an organizing tool to restore the village as they endearingly coined it. Through modeling the power of vulnerability, strength-based and collaborative leadership across social media platforms, at events, and one-on-one during neighborhood canvassing, PNLV staff began developing trust and attracting interest from community members in response to their social media campaign entitled #jointthemovement. As neighbors responded to the call, PNLV staff and volunteers intentionally adhered to the RWERM practice of greeting people with and maintaining a radical welcome evidenced by a large smile, genuine interest, active listening, and remembering residents’ names and pertinent information. To further spread the model and development of the model, PNLV focused its recruitment on hyper-local attractors, connectors, and influencers across Allentown. PNLV began by recruiting based on social media connectivity and influence. Early adopters with 5,000 predominantly local Facebook friends and significant activity per post were engaged to spread the message of wellness, liberation, and engagement. Furthermore, early adopters received encouragement and basic education on social media algorithms, storytelling, retelling, and the power of voice.

These early ambassadors, coupled with an informal social network analysis and an early focus on lively social and networking events, continued to increase the visibility of PNLV. The early adopters of the PNLV consisted of folks in their late 30s early 40s. These generation Xers developed a first-stage marketing and promotional strategy reminiscent of a 90s record label to gain the community’s attention. PNLV quickly developed stardom for having lively community events reminiscent of parties and block parties of the 80s and 90s. Furthermore, the organization’s leadership developed a long-term plan for a decentralized leadership model that used a traditional centralized charismatic leadership model to garner the attention of the community, funders, and the traditional print media.

The organization began to adopt liberation and resistance boldly and publicly-charged language as its community organizing style. PNLV would hold events and

bring in a local videographer to document the large crowds with an expert who would charismatically speak to the power of the people, goals of liberation, and elucidate that the days of begging are over. PNLV events and videos began being carried throughout the city like folklore, and the stories of a tribe of forgotten and rejected people who were taking back the city and organizing the majority are said to have begun to restore hope in the people. Absence of support and recognition from traditional media outlets, PNLV depended heavily on informal communications networks, grassroots organizing principles, and social media marketing strategies. Ultimately PNLV designed a program called Media Without Limits to promote the work and build the movement.

PNLV staff and volunteers harness the power of narrative and continue to tell their individual stories of resilience and recovery while highlighting their and organizational commitments to restorative practices through adages such as “if you break it you fix it.” PNLV staff is content and context experts, prison survivors, survivors of childhood trauma, were pushed out of the public-school system, and at some point, along their journeys failed by the underfunded substance abuse and mental health systems. RWERM encourages one to use their work as a form of resistance and atonement. They are transparent about their transgressions and deliberately work to repair the specific community they harmed in part through modeling and demonstrating the power of redemption.

### Description

The RWERM is a multitiered approach designed to develop, activate, engage, organize, and mobilize a critical mass of community change agents. This model emphasizes individual and community development, storytelling, research, and advocacy led by those closest to the pain of exclusion, engagement suppression, and civic disinvestment. The RWERM also embraces the idea that healing occurs in relationships and within the community. The implementation of the model requires a year-long commitment and consists of three phases: data gathering, asset mapping, and collaborative visioning.

During the data gathering segment of the project, PNLV leadership focus on listening sessions, one-on-one engagement through community canvassing, and focus groups. Conversations affirm that across Allentown, Pennsylvania, exist institutional issues of exclusion and the weaponization of inclusion. Leaders encounter story after story of exclusion, rejection, and discrimination inflicted by municipalities, school districts, and historically White institutions. It was found that often, the historically White institutions that are founded and funded to support healing, helping, upliftment, safety, and education are further harming those they were created to serve.

The asset mapping component is an asset-rich and not deficit-based approach centered on healing occurring in relationships and within the community. PNLV believes that individuals, families, and communities are perfect, whole and complete, and possess the capacity to heal and thrive. The skills, talents, and interests

of volunteers and community members are noted throughout the asset mapping process. PNLV hosts networking events that formed the Leadership without Limits (LWL), the organization's flagship program.

LWL consists of 8 weeks of classroom development, 3 months of mentoring from an executive of color, a monthly community of practice, and individual and group personal and professional development opportunities. It underscores that community members of color have historically experienced White institutions as toxic and emphasizes the need for authenticity, self-care, reflective practices, and a strong social support system to survive and thrive in such settings. LWL begins with an initiation to leadership journey consisting of an 8-hour self-reflective story-healing session that develops leaders to articulate their "why" from a place of strength and vulnerability and culminates with a showcase video and social media promotion introducing the leaders. To date, PNLV has completed three cohorts of leaders totaling 78 community members.

The collaborative visioning process is a testament to PNLV's dedication to responsive programming. The process consists of community stakeholders prioritizing social issues for PNLV to focus on through online and neighborhood surveys, focus groups, facilitated collaborative decision-making groups, and feedback loops. They are driven by the voices of leaders and decision-makers reflective of the community being served.

### Key Principles

The RWERM centers around six fundamental principles: (1) passionate invitation, (2) radical welcome, (3) authentic sense of belonging, (4) co-created roles, (5) prioritization of social issues, and (6) individual and collective action. Each of these principles is described below.

#### Passionate Invitation

The work is transformative and justice-centered in relationships versus being transactional and oppression-centered in charity. PNLV makes an individual invitation that exhumes excitement, using methods such as direct phone calls, texts, or face-to-face invites from people who are either in a relationship with or have been building a relationship with the target. PNLV promotes generalized invitations for those who are a part of their broader community through social media, mass texts, door-to-door flyers, community canvassing, constant contact, mass emailing, billboards, and traditional media outlets. These are presided by community trusted connectors, attractors, and innovators and the goal is for community members to encounter the invitation seven times.

#### *Radical welcome*

Recognizes that exclusion and rejection are violence and disrupt the healing process and that welcome is the cure. Radical welcome consists of two parts

(1) presume welcome, which speaks to internalized feelings of rejection, distrust, unworthiness, and replaces negative self-talk or aloofness with positive self-talk and encouraging reminders of the value one brings. Students are taught to recognize the value of their unique lived experiences and to remind themselves that even if those occupying the space of power are yet to realize their value that it exists, nevertheless. (2) The second part speaks to the extended welcome; how community members are greeted and engaged by staff and volunteers. Radical welcome recognizes that people are healing and carry pain and that a warm, patient, personable, and trauma-informed approach allows community members to create the rules of engagement. It seeks to learn people's names, identities, and embrace and exude acceptance, nonjudgement and practice restorative practices as a form of welcome in those moments when individuals don't show up as their best selves.

#### *Authentic sense of belonging*

This principle is about knowing the community members and establishing authentic relationships. Early on, a sense of belonging is about conveying that community members made the right choice to engage with the organization and that they are with their tribe. PNLV spends time with people, listening and learning about their lives and community, knowing the things that matter to them, and amplifying their voices. The idea is that everyone familiar with them will welcome them and introduce them to others with a sense of warmth and excitement so long as they are comfortable.

#### *Co-created roles*

PNLV believes that clear roles build trust, predictability, maintain dignity, support individual growth, organizational and community sustainability, and succession planning. As individuals and their strengths come to be known, they are invited to support the organization, community, and to develop mastery. Community members, in turn, learn the needs of the organization and begin to communicate their talents, preferences, and skills. PNLV creates a safe place and constantly reminds community members that their job is to be courageous, take risks, and fail forward. PNLV is proud to be a place where mistakes are forgiven and allowed to be made.

#### *Prioritization of social issues*

The community sets the agenda, selects trusted leadership, and identifies practices and solutions that are best for their unique needs. The role of the organization is to support the leadership and emergence of the ideas of community members. Through relationship, inquiry, and community-based participatory research methods, community priorities begin to emerge. The organizational role is clear and is not to lead but to support individuals and build community capacity to resist and disrupt White supremacy and work to achieve wellness and liberation.



*Individual and collective action*

Once social issues are identified and prioritized, the idea is that you have to do something. PNLV programming is designed to solicit action through increased hope, sense of belonging, and agency, allowing one to make purposeful decisions in their lives and within their communities. Individuals are encouraged and supported to act, such as writing op-eds, scheduling one-on-one meetings with stakeholders, employing social media as a tool for social activism, teaching a course, or organizing an action. PNLV works to provide support, development, and resources to help community members actualize their action plans.

The following five assumptions are formed based on the listed principles: (1) Rejection and exclusion are forms of violence, and radical welcome is their cure. (2) When people tell you they are in pain, believe them. This is the art of believing. (3) Complex systemic issues require complex systemic responses (structural responsiveness). (4) White supremacy often manifests as a cross-sector collaboration that infects the nonprofit and criminal justice industrial complexes, healthcare, education, and for-profit sectors (collective impact). (5) Multi-tiered approach including direct services, collaboration, advocacy, policy change, and research is required.

*Challenges*

PNLV staff, board members, and volunteers are from the Allentown community and share the systematic experiences of exclusion community members articulated. Volunteers consistently share the discouragement and barriers to inclusion they experience as they attempt to engage and have a voice in their community. In developing the RWERM, PNLV heard local historically White institutions share that despite their best efforts, they experienced challenges recruiting community members of color for executive positions, boards of directors, and governmental and political positions. There exists a disconnection between the desire of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) across Allentown to be involved and the espoused values of historically White institutions to welcome the voices and leadership of these community members. Additionally, as one of the only Black-led, grassroots liberation-based organizations in Allentown, PNLV experiences inequities in funding, decision-making, power, and hyper-criticism relative to historically White organizations across the city. Despite the espoused values of equity and inclusion from local municipalities and historically white institutions, PNLV experienced significant obstacles and resistance from these traditional decision-makers as community members were being activated and engaged. Routine barriers to engagement included decentering community members as context experts, scheduling meetings at times and locations that were inconvenient for community members, refusing to compensate community members for their contributions when other decision-makers received compensation, neglecting to follow through on recommendations of community context experts, microaggressions and not sharing power and decision making with community stakeholders.

## Conclusion

This article looked at the phenomenon of engagement suppression and its remedy. Engagement suppression is promoted by a vicious cycle of ignoring the voices of the people and then criticizing their lack of participation while ignoring the extreme distrust that exists due to historical and contemporary harms inflicted by lack of representation. The RWERM is a PNLV initiative located in Allentown, Pennsylvania, that seeks to address engagement suppression. Through active listening, responsive programming, and fostering authentic relationships, PNLV has played a critical role in activating and engaging those closest to the pain of the issues plaguing their communities. During the RWERM model implementation, Allentown experienced a significant increase in the engagement of BIPOC in decision-making circles, political candidates, leaders of nonprofit organizations and as founders of new grassroots organizations. With an explicit commitment to its RWERM that strives to decolonize community organizing and center community priorities and leadership in the stories and experiences of local context experts, the PNLV believes communities can increase a sense of hope, belonging, and individual and collective agency. This is a major contribution to the literature as Black and Brown efforts to organize their communities through model development has infrequently featured in academic literature (Carlton-LaNey & Burwell, 1995; O'Donnell, 1996; O'Donnell & Karanja, 2000; Pople, 1996; Young Laing, 2009a, b).

Despite some challenges associated with the recruitment of minorities in parts of the city of interest, the proposed model draws the attention of a broad range of stakeholders. This includes minority youth and adults, community leaders, social service organizations, and the media. This present article only introduces the public to the RWERM but does not address the model's effectiveness which should be a crucial goal of future work. Future work could use qualitative methodologies to establish, among other things, participants' perceptions of the model and/or its impact on their daily routines.

## Acknowledgments

The authors obtained permission to use the insights gathered from Promise Neighborhoods of Lehigh Valley community discussions.

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