

Faith and race: how African American pastors navigate dialectical tensions in collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The African American church (AAC) is an anchor institution in disinvested communities. Retrenchment of government support has increased the need for AAC collaborative activity. Given this need, we interviewed 10 African American pastors (AAP) in Little Rock, Arkansas, a city with a long history of racial division. This purposeful sample is embedded in a longitudinal community-engaged research project that began in 2012 in order to understand and improve collaboration across congregations. This goal of this analysis was to understand the power dynamics of AAP communication in collaborative contexts. Using a critical race approach to dialectical tensions, we identified four tension framing practices: (a) dependency-independency through selection and paradox; (b) spiritual-physical through authoritative texts; (c) collaboration-non-collaboration through inclusion-exclusion; and (d) the past-present through Civil Rights icons. These findings extend theory and research by illustrating how race and faith shape collaborative processes that contribute and constrain community development praxis.

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The African American church (AAC) serves as an anchor institution facilitating personal, social, and political change (Brand & Alston, 2018). Before and after their lead role in the Civil Rights Movement, the AAC has addressed issues of health, education, and social support (Wingood et al., 2011). Retrenchment of government support to social service providers, coupled with the exodus of local resources, has increased the need for AAC collaborative activity (DeFilippis, 2008). However, despite the promise of the positive impact of collaboration it 'is also fraught with risks and prone to failure' (Liu et al., 2019, p. 303). In African American communities, collaborations may disappoint as Black neighborhoods are often ignored by government and nonprofits (Garrow, 2012). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that despite efforts at collaboration, Black Americans view the AAC as having less influence today than 50 years ago (Mohamed et al., 2021).

Given this perception of reduced influence, and in light of the historic role the AAC has played in local communities, this study sought to understand the communication experiences of African American pastors (AAP) in a context conflicted by race and faith (Dougherty & Emerson, 2018). Specifically, through a critical race approach, we explored the dialectic tensions inherent in their collaboration experiences, which are central to community development (Koschmann, 2016; Zuckerman, 2020). This focus is important, given the critical role the AAC plays in the African American community, as well as the limited empirical focus placed on AAP communication practices in a context conflicted by race and faith. As part of a longitudinal interdisciplinary project focused on collaboration between congregations and nonprofits in Little Rock, Arkansas (Glazier et al., 2020), we engaged a diverse pastor advisory board to provide insights on both research design and praxis. Through in-depth interviews with 10 APP, we address two research questions: What tensions and tension responses emerge as AAP discuss their experiences with collaboration? How are AAP responses framed by the intersecting identities of race and faith?

In the following sections, we first discuss literature tied to the AAC, collaboration, and communication. Next, we present critical race theory (CRT) as our theoretical framework in alignment with our tension-centered methodology focused on the intersection of faith and race. Our findings extend CRT in the context of AAP's lived experiences with collaboration. Finally, we present implications for community-engaged research attending to the intersection of race and faith.

Literature and context

In order to provide context and highlight the significance of this study, we explore several intertwined threads from communication research: (a) the historic shift in the AAC's community role; (b) the promise and challenge of collaboration; and (c) the value of a constitutive approach to collaboration. These threads set the stage for an application of our CRT approach to dialectical tensions, which extends theory and research of AAP's lived experiences with collaboration.

African American churches: a historic shift

The AAC is not monolithic, but rather wide ranging and incorporates multiple denominations. Billingsley (1999) notes that the AAC is a 'multifaceted religious, social, economic, educational, cultural, political institution with a broad range of social structures and social functions' (p. 9). Consistent with Lincoln and Mamiya (1990), this study acknowledges the rich theological and denominational diversity of the AAC and uses the term 'African American Church,' as 'a sociological and theological shorthand reference to the pluralism of Black Christian Churches in the United States' (p. 1).

The AAC has its historical roots grounded in a 'politics of liberation' (Littlefield, 2005) as an agent of social change (Du Bois, 1899; James, 2006). During the Civil Rights Movement, the AAC addressed educational, political, and economic disparities grounded in systematic racism (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Additionally, service provision has historically been ingrained in the mission of the AAC (Brand & Alston, 2018). The AAC is active in providing food distribution (Dash & Chapman, 2007), delivering community-based recidivism programs (Mowen et al., 2018), and providing educational support (Latimore, 2017).

However, from the 1950s to the present, a major shift occurred with significantly fewer AACs addressing racial inequality in a collective manner (McDaniel et al., 2018). In particular, Barber's (2011) case analysis found economics intertwined with theology such that economically prosperous AACs were more likely to focus on self-empowerment versus collective action in economically disadvantaged congregations. Indeed, social and economic disparities require the AAC to remain watchful in confronting inequality. Facing perceptions of declining influence, collaboration is one way that the AAC seeks to remain relevant and helpful to the Black community.

AAC collaboration: the promise and challenge of collaboration

We utilize a broad definition of inter-organizational collaboration as 'a process through which multi-sector organizations voluntarily form relationships with one another in order to solve problems and generate mutual benefits' (Liu et al., 2019, p. 305). The tone of this definition suggests 'that having partners address an issue is morally superior and minimizes the risk of one organization acting in an inequitable manner' (Brinkerhoff, 2002, p. 20). Thus, the promise of collaboration is that it can foster interactions among organizations creating spaces for the development of new approaches to addressing local community problems (Zuckerman, 2020). Through collaboration, the AAC can elicit participation and representation of minority voices who may have been excluded from a broader conversation about local issues (Cnaan et al., 2004).

Yet, the results remain mixed on the success of faith-based collaborative social service provision to address systemic problems within underserved communities (Brand & Alston, 2018; Schneider, 2016). These assessments focus on structural and capacity constraints. For instance, the AAC may not always have the capacity to sustain case management activities and standardized operating procedures (Persons, 2004). Additionally, limited financial resources (Boddie, 2003) and a lack of strategic planning (Cnaan et al., 2004) can hinder their ability to provide social support. Olson et al. (1988) found the AAC, although willing to expand services to reach a broader population, lacked the funding, staff, and

technical expertise. These constraints prompt AAC collaboration while limiting their ability to address systemic issues (Colvin & Burdock, 2015). However, missing in these assessments is an understanding of communicative processes impacting the quality of decisions made and the way structural or capacity issues are constituted in communication. When we listen to the lived experiences of AAP, we may learn that the challenges of collaboration, even the perceived decline in the influence of the AAC, may be about more than just resources.

A constitutive approach to collaboration

Consistent with the need to move beyond the above assessment, Koschmann (2016) notes how a lack of engagement or exploration may constitute failed collaboration by (a) an ‘over emphasis on structural elements ‘that limit dialogue and knowledge production; (b) relying on ‘discursive resources’ that perpetuate contrasting individual identities rather than shared identity; and (c) focusing on ‘organizational forms that lack capacity to exercise collective agency in a problem domain’ (p. 414). Milam and Heath (2014) concur by arguing for the value of the ‘lens of participative democracy’ by ‘rethinking collaborative communication’ (p. 367). Their analysis of inter-organizational collaboration aimed at addressing child-care and education issues, found that inclusiveness alone was insufficient. They indicate that without mechanisms in place to create deliberation, inclusiveness meant ‘only a forum of expression’ (p. 379). Indeed, Wolff (2016) and Danley (2018) assert that participation by those most affected by an issue provides the local knowledge critical to successful collaboration. Indeed, broad participation in a shared decision-making process is a fundamental tenet of community development praxis and CRT.

These studies document the need to attend to communication processes in the context of collaboration, particularly when it comes to AAP’s lived experiences with collaborative processes. Their voices flow from a rich legacy of ‘black religious leaders (who) used social Christianity to [address] issues of racism and racial uplift’ (Pinn, 2011, p. 27). The AAC holds a historic role as an anchor institution in the community, a role that in order to address endemic issues, is increasingly tied to collaboration. Utilizing CRT through a tension-centered analysis, we attend to the way structures are constituted in communication while also centering the voices of AAP who are paradoxically in positions of authority yet have had a long history of marginalization.

Theoretical framing

We use a CRT approach to dialectical tensions as our conceptual scaffolding. CRT draws its intellectual tradition primarily from law and education (Tate IV, 1997) in order to understand the relationship between constructions of race, and systems of power. CRT foregrounds race as the primary analytical lens. Consistent with our participants’ sense of place and history, we attend to the intersection of race and faith. In doing so, we draw on Martin and Nakayama’s (2015) claim that a Critical Theory approach to dialectics leads to a ‘less western, ethnocentric bias’ (p. 18). This approach attends to the ‘political power implications’ of intertwined dialectical tensions such as differences-similarities; privilege-disadvantage, and present-past (p. 16). In particular, five tenets of CRT are useful in this dialectical tension analysis of the lived experiences of AAP collaboration.

First, CRT attends to the historical and contemporary situatedness of our participants (Crenshaw, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study takes place in Little Rock, Arkansas, and thus we situate participant voices within historical events such as the Central High School Crisis and the efforts of ‘The Little Rock Nine’ to desegregate public schools. As Central High School became the testbed for the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the AAC in Little Rock developed close relationships with the NAACP (Jenkins et al., 2003). Indeed, the durability of these relationships impacts partnership structures today. As such the AAC has to navigate a collaborative strategy that on the one hand recognizes the relevance of these historical events, and, on the other, creates pressure to partner with organizations they once opposed (DeFilippis, 2008). Locating the lived experiences of AAP participants within its historical and contemporary contexts attends to Martin and Nakayama’s (1999) present/future – history/past dialectic, which stresses the importance of placing contemporary practices within the historical context, particularly when it comes to the African American experience.

Second, CRT provides an analytic lens to amplify AAP voices and lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT legitimizes minority narratives often missing from research on collaborative practices (Parker & Lynn, 2002). These personal accounts and local knowledge are counter narratives – challenging the normative

acceptance bias that treats community partnerships as a panacea for solving social problems (Bryson et al., 2006). In giving attention to these counter narratives, our CRT dialectical analysis attends to communicative practices that co-create meaning through enabling and/or constraining framing responses. For instance, Jenkins and Dillon (2012) draw attention to how leadership in a multi-ethnic congregation valued visual representations of ethnicity, while marginalizing styles and structures associated with African Americans and Latinx communities.

Third, CRT attends to tensions inherent to the role of AAP as marginalized leaders. Clergy are congregational leaders yet at the same time may be representative of a marginalized community. As such, they face added challenges in working with other organizations. Danley (2018) and Harris (2016) argue that partnerships may reflect the interests of those affected by an issue; yet participation in decision making may be limited to community elites. Martin and Nakayama's (1999) cultural-individual and power-privilege dialectics illustrate this by pointing out that people are both group members and individuals; as such, 'individuals may be simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged' (p. 17). We concur, and by extending CRT in the context of AAC collaboration, illustrate participant challenges in responding to intertwined dialectics of collaboration–non-collaboration, power-privilege, past-present.

Fourth, CRT seeks to challenge the power and privilege of the dominant group and empower those whose disadvantage is grounded in racialized history (Crenshaw, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Community development scholars point to power asymmetries that challenge exclusive collaborative processes (DeFilippis, 2008). Specifically, this line of inquiry argues that local organizations – including faith-based organizations – engage in strategies that disincentivize structural change (DeFilippis, 2008) by shifting collaborative practices from 'fight the power' to 'fight for a share of the power' (Fisher, 2007, p. 191). This power-sharing approach aligns with collaborative norms related to white nonprofit power structures that inform what is considered appropriate collaborative practice (Anderson, 2015; Linabary et al., 2017). A moderate approach may 'miss the social justice core' at the heart of dismantling oppressive power structures and make it more difficult for those with little power to improve their community (Wolff, 2016, p. 4). CRT encourages attention to the power of white nonprofit philanthropy that seeks to forward a race-neutral agenda incentivizing partnership strategies at the local level.

Finally, and tied to a focus on empowerment, employing CRT through a dialectical analysis, provides insight to language that is ambiguous, contradictory, and contested (Sillince & Barker, 2012). For instance, pastors engaged in collaboration may allow others to assume their interpretation is the centered one. On the other hand, the indirectness of language may marginalize certain interpretations by never mentioning them directly. In one study focused on congregational integration and segregation (Driskill & Jenkins, 2019), ambiguity was used to reframe problematic dialectics. While 'ambiguity can be used to mask and avoid racial/ethnic issues ... ambiguity can also be used to strategically bridge racial/ ethnic boundaries' (Driskill & Jenkins, 2019, p. 13). Thus, our CRT lens attends to what is said and unsaid. As described in the methods section, we investigate the tensions that emerge as AAP discuss their experiences with collaboration, as well as how their responses are framed by their intersecting identities of race and faith.

Methods

Our research team is diverse in terms of race, gender, and social science discipline. One communication researcher studies collaboration across racial and congregational divides; another, in political science, studies congregations in community engagement; a third, public administration scholar, works with nonprofits to guide race- and gender-conscious service delivery.

Data collection

This study was part of an on-going longitudinal research project focused on congregational and nonprofit community engagement and collaboration in Little Rock, AR (Glazier et al., 2020). In this phase, we focused on AAP to amplify their voices and the historically central role of the AAC in community partnerships. We sought participation from the 101 AACs in our database developed through relational networks and publicly-available information. We gained participation from four Baptist, three Missionary Baptist, two African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and one non-denominational AAP. All interviewees were male which, while consistent with our population (3 women of 101 AAPs),

is recognized as a limit, especially given the historic role of AAC recognizing the spouse of a pastor as a significant leader.

Our data is drawn from semi-structured interviews with ten AAPs (n = 10). We proceeded with this limited sample size based on several factors. First, AAPs hold a unique epistemic advantage as situated knowledge holders that we as researchers have a moral responsibility to highlight (McKinnon, 2017). While not encompassing the full diversity of the AAC as a representative sample, their perspectives are relevant, given that 41% of Little Rock's population is African American. Second, we purposefully sampled AACs as 'information rich cases' (Patton, 2014, p. 308) or as key informants (Kumar et al., 1993). Since churches are not required to file IRS 990s, and many of these organizations remain invisible, a systematic, representative sample was not possible (McDougle, 2015), so a purposeful sample was warranted. We are not seeking generalizability with this sample, but rather to glean insights from the particular experiences of these 10 AAP. Third, McCall (2019) points out that racial identity is detected before spiritual identity, making the intersection of race and faith of AAP particularly challenging and salient. Therefore, we attend to the overlapping identities of our AAP whose social location is grounded not only in race and gender, but also shared religion, history, and geographic location in Little Rock. For this study, we focus primarily on race, given the CRT lens we apply, and faith, given the context of the broader research project and our questions of interest regarding the influence of AACs in particular. Thus, our goal was not to analyze the interview data based on differences across denominational or other identities, but rather as AAP in a city with a long history of racial division.

Table 1 provides pseudonyms of the AAP we interviewed with descriptions of their congregations to protect anonymity while still providing contextual information.

Table 1. AAP pseudonyms and congregation descriptions. (Table view)

Pseudonym	Region of the City	Founding Date	Size
Pastor Jones	Historic District	1845	Small
Pastor Hill	Historic District	1865	Mid-sized
Pastor Jeremiah	Historic District	1877	Small
Pastor Glenn	Midtown	1892	Large
Pastor Smith	Urban	1906	Mid-sized
Pastor Peter	Urban	1910	Small
Pastor David	Downtown	1984	Mid-sized
Pastor Rick	Downtown	1987	Mid-sized
Pastor George	Southwest	2012	Small
Pastor Logan	Urban	2013	Small

The semi-structured interviews ranged from 40 to 65 min in length and explored AAP experiences with collaboration. While part of a broader study, questions from the protocol included probes into interactions relevant to collaboration. For example: (a) What role does faith and religion play in your organization's community engagement? If so, in what ways? (b) How do you determine if partnering is the right approach or decision for your congregation? (c) How have you learned about opportunities to partner with other local organizations? (d) Tell me about the barriers you might encounter when selecting a local congregation or nonprofit as a partner? The full interview protocol is available from the authors upon request.

Nine CITI-certified students conducted the interviews as part of a graduate nonprofit management course (IRB #18-095-R2). The students were diverse in terms of race, gender, and religious tradition and received training on interview techniques, writing field notes, and data reporting. All interviews were conducted either at the congregation or at a location convenient to the pastor. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Descript and checked for accuracy, resulting in 131 pages.

Data analysis

We used a CRT framework to analyze how AAP communicatively framed dialectical tensions. Consistent with Mitra and Fyke (2017), we view ‘tensions (in the form of paradoxes, ironies, and contradictions)’ as an integral element of organizational life (p. 142). This approach assumes that dialectics such as collaboration and non-collaboration are inherent in language (Bakhtin, 1990). As such, meaning-making processes flow from how dialectics are framed (McClellan & Nadesan, 2015). For instance, a pastor might frame by privileging collaboration over non-collaboration (Hoelscher, 2019; Norander & Galanes, 2014).

Our three-step analytic process captured key dialectic tensions in AAP communication. First, each researcher independently analyzed the transcripts to identify tensions and framing practices related to collaboration vs. non-collaboration, allowing meaning-making practices to emerge from the data (Putnam et al., 2010). Second, in an iterative process, we discussed areas of agreement and disagreement until we reached consensus. Third, we made notes relevant to CRT. For instance, pastors might reference race relations, issues of power in decision making, or historic narratives tied to faith that functioned to frame collaborative practices. This exploration attended to ‘manifest and latent’ meanings (Baxter, 2010, p. 158). A manifest meaning refers to direct statements on how a tension is framed (e.g. ‘you should focus on relationships not tasks’). Latent statements are indirect and assume a larger utterance chain (e.g. ‘our people have always joined hands’). Thus, in this third CRT analytic step, we asked, ‘What social-cultural and interpersonal discourses need to be invoked to understand what each textual segment means?’ (Baxter, 2010, p. 159).

Throughout, our analysis was guided by our research questions: What tensions and tension responses emerge as AAP discusses experiences with collaboration? How are AAP responses framed by their intersecting identities of race and faith?

Findings

Four key themes emerged from our analysis. Each theme highlights intertwined dialectics and intersecting identities of race and faith that add to our understanding of AAP’s experiences with collaboration. Additionally, these findings inform tension-centered research in collaborative contexts conflicted by race.

Framing dependency-independency through selection and paradox

Our first theme captures how AAP framed the collaboration–non-collaboration tension intertwined with the dialectics of dependence-independence. For instance, Pastor Jones, serving a small congregation in the historic district of Little Rock, focuses on the AAP’s role in their community by seeing a tension with Black self-empowerment and the need to collaborate.

... (the) African-American community ... look(s) up to the clergy for leadership ... clergy need to see how much of an influence they have [They need] to come together ... to stop ... crimes and violence ... race is a big barrier ... people that say that it is not there, but it is ... some Blacks feel that the only ones they will help is their own and that shouldn't be.

In framing the dependence-independence tension, Pastor Jones advises pastors to ‘communicate’ to break down barriers and ‘to make it last.’ He stresses the need to be open-minded ‘because when you’re close minded, you’ll miss out ... on a partnership’ Consistent with our CRT framing of dialectical tensions, Pastor Jones’ narrative legitimizes the tension between the acceptance bias that treats collaboration as a panacea, with the need for marginalized people to have agency in addressing community problems.

We contrast Pastor Jones’ approach with Pastor Peter, who leads a small urban church and references the idea of ‘not hindering someone else’s responsibility’ or having ‘somebody else out to do it for us.’ Pastor Peter’s framing of collaboration–non-collaboration centers Black agency, in contrast to Pastor Jones’s assertion that it shouldn’t be the case that Blacks are the only ones who will ‘help their own.’ Thus, for these pastors, both collaboration and non-collaboration are discussed in racial terms. Being responsible and not having someone ‘else do it for us’ paradoxically essentializes and makes certain problems ‘Black issues.’ Similarly, putting the impetus on AAP to find partners because the issues should not be theirs alone further burdens AAP and excuses potential white collaboration partners.

We see these dynamics further in another response from Pastor Peter. While exploring barriers to partnering, he stated that he would say ‘no’ if ‘partnership is not about Kingdom building.’ He went on to talk about reasons for not engaging. ‘If it’s about ... how to get money, grants, ... I’m not going to be involved.’ This barrier contains a paradox in

that partnerships involving external funding are off the table for this pastor. This decision to view grants as a barrier means not accessing resources that could aid the community. Yet, paradoxically, Pastor Peter frames this reason for not partnering as one of empowerment,

[In order] to help kids to grow up in an environment where drugs and all the crime are not so relevant ... this is what we are going to do [in] our community [by] not ... [expecting] somebody else out [there] to do it for us.

His focus on how ‘we fix it’ reflects a position of independence in terms of self-empowerment with the framing of partnerships with white congregations or nonprofits, as potentially disempowering ‘our community.’

Pastor Smith, the leader of an urban, mid-sized congregation, shared a similar concern about the problematic role of power and greed ‘getting in the way’ of collaboration. This language, combined with the need for the Black community to be the ones to ‘fix it’ may make it challenging for some AAP to see collaboration in terms of collective identity and interdependency.

Framing spiritual-physical: connection with authoritative texts

Our second theme looks at how AAPs use authoritative texts, often scripture, to address dialectic tensions between the spiritual and physical. Consistent with prior research (Driskill & Camp, 2006), AAP referenced addressing physical needs, such as clothing and food, as a primary rationale for serving and collaborating. They also referenced authoritative texts that framed the physical-spiritual tension as connected instead of zero-sum. Thus, the tension is preserved, even embraced, with both given each equal attention (Baxter, 2010). For instance, speaking of spiritual and physical needs, Pastor Rick stated, ‘they go hand and hand.’ Pastor David, serving a downtown church, noted, ‘I am very serious about a person's spirituality; but I can never get to your heart if your stomach is growling.’ Pastor George, from a southwest church in an impoverished area of the city, echoed this idea by stating ‘it's incarnational ministry; we're playing out our faith by meeting the needs in the Community, you know ... food and clothes.’ Pastor Jeremiah noted that ‘you cannot feed somebody spiritually if their stomach is hungry.’ Pastor Hill similarly noted that ‘our primary concern and focus is on the spiritual ... , but you also have to be concerned about physical well-being.’

Serving both spiritual and physical needs is sometimes done through collaboration – authoritative texts also served as the raw material for AAPs framing barriers to such collaboration. Pastor Hill referenced Paul's letter to the Ephesian church by stating that ‘there should be no racial boundaries ... there's neither Greek nor Jew, rich, poor, Black, or White.’ He continued this thought by stressing the need to be intentional: ‘there has to be a deliberate approach to break[ing] down those walls, especially [between] the traditional Black churches with the traditional white churches.’ Pastor George, in discussing his experience with collaboration to provide food and clothing, talked about building trust rather than focusing on funding as central to their successful collaboration across racial lines. ‘But because race is involved ... we work very hard, ... we focus on the relationship and not try to get the stuff, because when the check is cashed, what do you have left?’

The desire of the AAP to serve both spiritual and material needs was clear as they drew on scripture to articulate how that tension was framed through connection. Yet many also drew on scripture to identify racial barriers to collaboration that hinder this service. Further evidence of these barriers is seen in our third theme.

Framing collaboration–non-collaboration as inclusion-exclusion

Our third theme reveals varied experiences of inclusion-exclusion among our AAP. Demonstrating a tension between inclusion-exclusion, some AAPs indicated a lack of awareness of opportunities for collaboration. Pastor Logan, serving a small urban church, noted that the nemesis of citywide efforts to collaboratively address local community issues is grounded in limited access to information networks. He referenced a large white church that leads a citywide collaborative service: ‘So, how do I know what is out there? I forget the church name ... they get all the churches ... to help with destroyed houses ... I would love to be a part of it but I don't have the information.’ The pastor then referenced the work being done. ‘But again, if you are not part of that church or someone at that church, you probably are not going to know what they are doing ... Segregation and the lack of information are really the key things.’ His experience stresses that the lack of AAP access to these networks means exclusion from community collaborations.

In contrast, other pastors spoke of inclusion. For instance, Pastor George, from a small southwest church, stressed the role of relationship building for trust. Pastor George spoke to an experience of collaboration involving diverse partners, including citywide nonprofits such as the foodbank, with schools and other collaborative congregations. Pastor Rick, in a mid-sized downtown church, gave voice to the transcendent role of faith. He referenced partnerships with nonprofits and congregations, framing collaboration and non-collaboration in terms of ‘common ground’ and ‘the will of God’ and in not find(ing) identity in ‘labels or denominations.’ This theme of identity framed by faith to transcend race continued as he discussed partnership formation: ‘God puts us here to love one another. We go to the nursing home ... to the Salvation Army ... feed the homeless and the hopeless and the helpless. So that’s why we partner ... ’

This same pastor, rather than framing inclusion-exclusion in terms of issues of power or being marginalized due to lack of information sharing, focused on how ‘then those needs that I don’t think can be met, can [be], when we all come together collectively.’ He adds ‘I just pray that all of us in the city will see people out there hungry, hopeless, and hurting that need help.’ This desire to transcend the dialectic of inclusion-exclusion was further underscored by the way AAP framed the past-present dialectic.

Framing the past-present through civil rights icons

Our fourth and final theme focused on framing the past-present dialectic in terms of connection and continuity. AAP framing of the past-present provided a context and impetus for collaboration. Continuity with the past was evident in the comments from Pastor Hill who pastors a mid-sized church in the historic district: ‘During the 1957 Central High crisis four of the Little Rock Nine were members. Daisy Bates, was a member ... meetings were held [here]. [We served] as the pulse, politically and economically.’ Pastor Hill then brings this history into the present with reference to the intersection of racial and faith identity focused on social issues. ‘The focus of the Black community pushes us towards ... equality ... economic security ... social concerns ... the whole driving force, you know, has to be faith.’ This foregrounding of faith in the context of AAP collaboration creates a continuity with the past, such as the Little Rock Central High crisis. Any effort to address inequality and social concerns through the Church, must be inclusive of the ‘Black experience.’

Similarly, AAP reference Civil Rights icons to create continuity with the present. Pastor Jeremiah spoke to his congregation’s Civil Rights history which started in 1877.

[Our church] has been the most influential African American church in Arkansas. [T]he Little Rock Nine came out of here The church itself wasn't very political. But a lot of the members were political ... [O]ne of Dr. King's best friends was a member here. Roselle Sutton he was with Dr. King when he was shot

Pastor Jeremiah, as he gave voice to the past, stressed a struggle with the present and future. ‘We're trying to shift. [T]he church kind of lost its identity. It is known to be an elitist type church and we're trying to change that [to be] more of a people's community, which is a struggle.’ His words capture the challenge involved in creating a present and future congruent with this past. This framing in terms of connection and continuity needs to be seen in the context of AAP talk of breaking down racial barriers. Pastor Hill, as noted earlier, said ‘there has to be a deliberate approach to break[ing] down those walls [W]hen we collectively get together on an issue ... we're able to change communities at the local level ... the state level and even at the national.’

In summary, the strong historical connection of some AAC communicatively fuels efforts to engage in social issues in the present. This theme, along with the others, suggests several theoretical and practical implications.

Discussion

Beyond the on-going interest of scholars and practitioners in inter-organizational collaboration, this study was prompted by the underrepresented voices of AAP. These pastors are part of a long history of congregations providing critical services to their community. This study sought to shed light on AAC collaboration in the context of a city with a long history of racial strife. As part of our longitudinal, community-engaged research project, we sought to understand AAP’s experiences with collaborative processes conflicted by race and faith. We found that AAP varied in the ways they framed collaboration–non-collaboration in relation to intertwined dialectics of dependency-independency, spiritual-

physical, inclusion-exclusion, and the past-present. This exploration of AAP voices suggests theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical implications

First, we extend CRT through our dialectical analysis by identifying the use of paradoxical framing practices in relation to authoritative texts. The ‘invoking an authoritative text, such as strategic planning documents or [other organizational texts e.g. scripture] relies on the notion of collective identity’ (Hoelscher, 2019, p. 357). As such, tensions may be based on a voice of authority shared by the group. AAP consistently evoked Biblical phrases. Evoking such references gives them ‘textual agency’ or ‘the ability of the document to do something in the moment’ (Hoelscher, 2019, p. 351).

Other research on collaboration across denominational and racial lines relies on scriptures as a counter-narrative to confront the problematic nature of division and non-collaboration (Driskill et al., 2012). We extend this research by highlighting how such texts are not univocal in addressing CRT tenets of privilege and power. Despite AAP reference to scriptural ideals for a united, collective identity in promoting collaborative practices to address community issues, AAP meaning-making processes constituted paradoxical framing practices. The language of self-empowerment, of ‘taking care of our own’ stood in contrast to those giving voice to scriptures calling them to work together to transcend race. By attending to these dialectical framing practices, the CRT lens suggests that collaborative practices have not fully attended to tensions inherent in racialized, historical contexts. The salience of this finding validates Koschmann's (2016) case analysis of failed collaboration. In particular, our AAP voices attend to the need for ‘discursive resources’ that create ‘shared identity, and collective agency’ that ‘emerge through communication processes’ (p. 427). Paradoxically, authoritative texts are framed in ways that communicatively create collaboration and non-collaboration.

Second, the voices of AAP extend CRT tension-centered analysis by adding to our understanding of a context shaped by the complex and conflicted role of race, faith, and history. Martin and Nakayama (2015) call for tension-centered research that will ‘break any notion of a monolithic cultural identity, but instead focus on the various dialectical tensions that rivet throughout all intercultural interaction’ (p. 21). Our findings respond to this call by illustrating how AAP are not monolithic in their framing responses to dialectics such as inclusion-exclusion or dependency-independency. At the same time, we capture the ‘complexities of lived everydayness’ (Martin & Nakayama, 2015, p. 21) as they share a continuity with the past and present through historic ideals rooted in their faith and the Civil Rights Movement. Pastors serving in the historic district referring to the ‘Little Rock Nine’ and the names of Civil Rights leaders that had been members of their congregations represent a unique historicized lived experience. Some AAP framed this tension in terms of transformation – the need to live up to their scriptures and Civil Rights ideals by reducing racial divisions and improving collaboration and continuity with the past. Others, such as Pastor Hill, focused on continuity by referencing the Civil Rights Movement as ‘critical in terms of kind of serving as the pulse, ... in the community ... both politically and economically.’ Thus, we extend CRT analysis through a dialectic lens by noting the significance of place and the varied framing responses to these intertwined dialectics in the context of race and faith.

Practical implications

We also identified three practical communication implications. First, leaders across racial boundaries need to address varied lived experiences and power dynamics. Pastors, while not all referencing negative experiences, did at times foreground the problematic and even paradoxical nature of power. AAP had differing takes on their role in working to solve problems in their own community versus finding partnerships in the larger community. As such, building coalitions across power asymmetries and racial lines could be facilitated, by grounding those opportunities in shared authoritative texts. However, given the entrenched nature of racism and socio-economic segregation in Little Rock, we concur with Wolff (2016) that a move towards more just and equitable collaboration requires bringing together the most powerful and least powerful community members, and then engaging spirituality as a ‘compass for social change’ (p. 7). In addition, following Woo (2019), organizing practices should promote tensions in order to create a more dynamic and tension-resistant collaborative environment.

Second, faith leaders seeking to improve collaborative processes should engage in a network analysis as a ‘systematic means to evaluate network processes and performance’ (Liu, et al p. 317). Little Rock is home to a bridge-building organization which launched in 1999. This relational network has engaged in varied identification strategies to

unite congregations across racial and denominational divides (Driskill & Camp, 2006). Yet, our AAP had varied levels of knowledge of this network. Recall how Pastor Logan lamented his experience of being left out of the information flow. In exploring efforts at inclusion, attention should also be given to the intersection of race and faith based on the historic experience of Black men negotiating inclusion and opposition as dominant culture members question their competence and integrity (Hopson & Orbe, 2007). Given the networking experiences of the AAP, we recommend that a network analysis, consistent with Milam and Heath (2014), insures that inclusiveness is more than an opportunity for expression and representativeness, but one grounded in decision-making and agency.

Third, additional attention needs to be given to partnerships that bridge policy with the service focus of congregations. Pastor Glenn noted that they provide an ‘education appreciation component where we ... provided school supplies ... a back-to-school health fair for the kids.’ Although common among congregations, the effort does not address the policies that still allow for disparities in school funding, a racially divided school system, nor the complex tensions between public, private, and for-profit education providers. Put differently, congregations providing school supplies need to be at the table with policy makers and educational leaders, asking questions like, ‘why is this school resource poor? To what extent does this program address a deeper, systemic equity issue?’ Sharing these results with our community partner organizations affirmed the need for policy prescriptions specifically designed to address social problems. These types of questions are consistent with McClellan and Nadesan’s (2015) call from a pedagogical stance consistent with CRT to invite ‘multi-level analysis of the complicated networks of communication codes produced by government agencies, powerful corporations, social activists, and other resistant agents’ (pp. 317-318). In this analysis process, Koschmann (2016) argues for the need to shift from communication that constitutes ‘positional bargaining and protecting one’s turf’ to techniques such as ‘concurrent planning groups’ to create knowledge that effectively addresses complex issues (p. 428).

Limitations and future research

Our study has a number of limitations that suggest areas for future research. First, researchers should explore framing practices and power asymmetries in collaborations across other intersecting identities in addition to race and faith. Indeed, a more diverse sample of clergy could attend to experiences based on age, gender, and ability and may reveal findings that our study did not. For instance, future research could examine clergy within the same larger denominational framework (e.g. Southern Baptist Black and white congregations) versus those across denominations. In addition, future research could explore the potential impact of AAP age and tenure as well as interviewee identity on interviewer responses, particularly interrogating power asymmetries associated with social locations within the academy vis-a-vis pastors as elites within the community. We would also recommend that diverse research teams, a strength of our study, also explore their positionality and assumptions about research goals and participants, and measures of collaborative effectiveness (Palmer-Wackerly et al., 2021). Such critical self-reflexive research could uncover the impact that social location or identity has on data collection and interpretation.

Second, the framing of the past-present dialectical tension as discontinuity or continuity merits further exploration. For example, AAP tended to frame the past in terms of continuity with the present. However, a future study involving white pastors as well as AAP from varied socio-economic backgrounds may surface other framing practices. For instance, Florini (2014) argues that a ‘historicization of racism as a resolved issue’ may function to ‘obscure structural racism’ (p. 317). Florini (2014) further argues that references to Civil Rights discourse, such as King’s often quoted phrase that people should be judged not ‘by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,’ contributes to an ideology of ‘color blindness’ that may work against efforts to collaboratively address structural racism and discrimination (p. 317). Thus, our study lays groundwork for ‘multifocal-relational scholarship’ which seeks to understand the experiences of people of color and whites as ‘multidimensional, similar and different, and inextricably linked’ (Orbe & Allen, 2008, p. 205). Such research should attend to Deetz and Simpson (2004) who foreground the transformative significance of meaningful engagements across differences as opposed to those that focus on common ground, which may inadvertently impose a colorblind ideology. Further research is needed to understand how this colorblindness contributes to the ‘historicization of racism as a resolved issue’ (Florini, 2014, p. 317) and shapes collaborative practices between racially diverse congregations. Thus, while we focused on AAP in this phase as a way to foreground marginalized voices, we see value in engaging majority culture pastors in conversations about their experiences with collaboration.

A final limitation of this study is inherent in our focus on faith and race in a U.S. context. This study was conducted in a single U.S. city, drawing on U.S.-centric literature, with U.S.-trained researchers. The United States, and the South in particular, has a specific racial context. Findings derived from our focus on AAP in Little Rock may not travel well to other contexts, where disparities may occur along different racial lines. Thus, we acknowledge this limitation and recommend future work exploring the lived experiences and interactions of race and faith in other contexts as a way to de-westernize communication research (de Albuquerque et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Our CRT tension-centered analysis contributes to the emerging body of knowledge on how race and faith intersect to shape AAP's experiences of collaborative processes. This analysis is of particular relevance given the increased need for collaboration to address endemic social issues. Thus, attending to dialectical tensions inherent in collaboration guided an analysis aimed at understanding the lived experiences of clergy navigating the intersection of faith and race. The rich interview data demonstrated that AAP's experiences are not monolithic – race and faith inform their views on collaboration and the role of the AAC in communities in many different ways. Our hope is that these findings, as part of our on-going community-engaged research process, can also be used by other applied researchers and community leaders to develop meaningful dialogue across racial lines aimed at improving collaborative processes that address endemic community issues.

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