



CENTERING COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HEALTH

# The Role of Culture in Basebuilding Community Organizing for Health, Justice, & Racial Equity





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## BACKGROUND

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The Praxis Project is pleased to share this brief which describes the many ways culture manifests in community organizing and health justice. **The purpose of this brief is to inform institutions and institutional allies of the critical role culture plays in community-led movements, and how to positively and respectfully honor and uplift culture in advancing health justice.** This brief describes how community partners define culture, and the barriers, opportunities, and best practices for harnessing cultural assets as we work to advance health, justice and racial equity.

## PROCESS

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In October 2018, The Praxis Project convened 59 basebuilding community partners from across the United States to participate in a Learning Circle in Houston, TX with a specific focus on discussing the role of culture in community organizing for health, justice and racial equity. Using a modified focus group process incorporating popular education methods utilized by Paolo Freire, the group worked from a shared definition of culture (see next page), and identified barriers, opportunities, and best practices for using culture in community organizing and public health advocacy. This network of basebuilding organizations represented a diverse range of racial identities, ages, geographic locations, and issue areas, which resulted in rich, deep, and personal reflections, observations and lived experience on “culture.”

## FINDINGS

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Learning Circle community partners shared the important and nuanced role that culture plays in advancing health justice. Culture, in its multiple and intersecting definitions referenced below, was primarily viewed as a strength in community organizing, but also associated with various external challenges that can be addressed and overcome. Participants shared considerations for how the fields of public health, community organizing, and health justice can intentionally include elements of communities' respective cultures in our work to improve strategizing, advance connection, strengthen impact, and achieve health, justice and racial equity.

<sup>1</sup> <https://bioneers.org/manuel-pastors-10-key-elements-movement-building-ztvz1802/>

## MOVEMENT DEFINITIONS

**Social movements:** “Social movements are sustained groupings that develop a frame, a narrative, a story about where we need to head in the future, and begin to build a broad base that helps to create long-term transformations in power.” – Manuel Pastor<sup>1</sup>

**Basebuilding organization:** An organization that sets strategies using the priorities of their constituencies to build collective strength and power to address a variety of inequitable conditions within a community.

**Health justice:** Advancing policy, systems, environment and practice changes with the leadership and authentic engagement of community partners to transform the root causes of health inequities and systems of oppression.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “CULTURE”?

**Culture is integrated into our individual and shared identities, and can encompass the following characteristics:**

- Customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.
- Integrated pattern of human knowledge, beliefs, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.
- Set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.
- Weaving throughout these characteristics of culture are traditions, rituals, symbols, rites of passage, language, virtues, values, and protocols—just to start. The characteristics that are endemic to “culture” are a complex web of all of these elements.

**A Note on White Supremacy Culture:** This discussion centered on the identities and cultures of the community organizers participating in the Learning Circle: primarily organizers of color proudly representing cultures that have historically been dismissed, marginalized, or otherized in the mainstream. An overwhelming, pervasive culture that must also be acknowledged is that of “white supremacy culture,” as defined by Tema Okun. White supremacy culture is the harmful ideology that the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people and cultural traits of whiteness are superior to Black, Indigenous and people of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. This includes white cultural expectations around urgency, perfectionism, paternalism, and other characteristics.<sup>1</sup> White supremacy culture is often implicitly or explicitly wielded as the norm or standard in organizations, even in many of those working towards health, racial equity and social justice. The opportunities and best practices outlined below can serve as antidotes to white supremacy culture as it shows up within organizations, as well as supporting [healing-centered practices](#) within communities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

### How do you use culture in your work?

Participants shared how they intentionally center their own culture in their community organizing for health justice:

- Honoring the land and those who came before us.
- Respecting all voices and perspectives, including youth and elders.
- Promoting culturally-relevant, anti-racist and ethnic studies curriculum in schools to be able to see ourselves in the history books and connect with/ learn about traditions.
- Practicing language justice, including addressing language barriers, honoring experiences of bilingualism and being family translator.
- Honoring the complexity, beauty and nuance of the range of cultures in our communities.
- Relationship-building focused on the whole person and their needs.
- Finding inward peace through prayer, meditation and other cultural practices to promote outward peace.
- Practicing traditions reflective of cultural heritage such as dance, poetry, music, performance.

### Barriers

Participants reflected on the nuances of culture, including the challenges within their organizing work. They shared the barriers to centering their respective cultures in today’s society and context, or misuse of one’s culture that can cause harm:

- Others appropriating or exoticizing one’s culture.
- Not knowing one’s culture or being perceived as not being “enough” of your respective culture.
- Balancing old and new traditions; overcoming generation gaps.
- Narrow media portrayals of “other” cultures.
- Young people experiencing bullying for their culture.
- Negative attitudes toward LGBTQ in some traditional cultures.

## Opportunities & Best Practices

Balancing the challenges above with the importance and strength that results from integrating culture into community organizing, participants identified the following opportunities and best practices for centering culture in their work:

- Be comfortable being uncomfortable. We can do this through exploring activities to engage and express culture as a means of connecting to one another.
- Recognize people’s cultures. We can do this by giving people time and space to come out of their comfort zones; to feel safe expanding their comfort zones.
- Create spaces to share and talk, and intentionally center people and their full humanity in the process. Community organizing and health justice does not happen in a vacuum; culture needs to be intentionally invited into the process.
- Learn and reclaim our histories.
- Practice mindfulness.
- Bring food as a means of connecting with culture and with each other.
- Honor language differences by providing translation services and other [language justice practices](#).
- Ensure cultural representation in all spaces.
- Connect with each other on a personal level by opening up and getting to know your collaborators and partners.
- Reaffirm cultural differences through discussing discovery and shared histories.
- Create healing through intentional cross-racial community conversations.

*Learning Circle, Houston 2018*





- Integrate intergenerational wisdom from youth to elders, and cultivate intergenerational relationships.
- Recognize and honor the risks and courage we each take to be in the same space together, and with others.
- Authentically center, honor, and uplift the leadership of those most affected by historical and structural oppression.

Building off of these definitions shared by Learning Circle participants, Praxis ally and partner Tufara Waller Muhammad from Datule' Artist Collective shared the following on **cultural organizing**:



*“When I say Cultural Organizing I am talking about the strategic use of Art and Cultural to work toward policy and practice shifts that empower marginalized people. If you do not understand how Culture shapes and influences the way marginalized people relate to “Power”, or you do not understand that Organizing is about helping People to stand in what I believe is their God given Power, you probably shouldn’t call me to work on your Cultural Organizing work. I promise we won’t be a good match. Yes, I will facilitate your meeting. Yes, I will write your song. Yes, I will sing your background. Yes, I will do an arts workshop with your group. Yes, I can make your costumes. But, it’s not all the same work! Cultural Organizing for me is about using all of our Ancestral wisdom and tools to change the lives of real people versus some pseudo-intellectualized middle/upper-class interpretation of what they think poor and working-class folks OUGHT to be/do.”*

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, ALLIED PROFESSIONS, AND PHILANTHROPY

The Learning Circle discussions provided an opportunity for participants to identify shared strengths and opportunities for including diverse representations of culture in health, justice and racial equity work. Additionally, participants developed specific recommendations for public health entities, allied professions, and philanthropy to incorporate culture in our activities:

- 1.) **Create intentional relationships with partners.** Get to know each other’s backgrounds and histories.
- 2.) **Ensure authentic cultural representation in all spaces.** Whether internally, or at meetings with partners, or at presentations, assess the cultural representation of your organization and identify gaps that need to be filled.
- 3.) **Partner with community members in communications** to increase cultural relevance of messaging (e.g. music, storytelling, art and poetry).
- 4.) **Recognize and honor cultural practices in engaging with community partners** (e.g. honor that some communities will not take photos or videos).
- 5.) **Ensure partners who support cultural integration into our work are adequately funded for their efforts.**

### Remember that:

- One can only have power if one has autonomy, and one can only have autonomy if one has identity.
- Policy wins are nothing without creating community and building people power in a sustainable way.
- Solidarity—across racial groups, political identities, movements, cultures—requires intentionality, and it often includes challenging how we think and what we’ve learned.

## CASE EXAMPLES

### Housing Justice League

<https://www.housingjusticeleague.org/>

Housing Justice League is a community-led organization focused on Black community organizing fighting displacement, land, and community control. In community organizing our culture may be the most important way we protect ourselves from the harm of outside interest. Our communities are not worthy of investments for long-term residents, not valued and under sieged by gentrification and predatory speculators. We know this to be true by past and present racialized housing. We organize with the resources that already exists in our communities. Most of leadership is held by long-term community organizers and community stakeholders; often by community members who are committed to resources that will support and to sustain a healthy community. Our community style of organizing is not formal or even recognized by the city of Atlanta as a formal entity. We are group of dedicated neighbors fighting for our communities not to be displaced. As our communities are undersigned by gentrification and exploitation, we use our ways of gathering in parks, green spaces and utilizing the Black-owned small business to meet and plan on how to make our community a better place for our children and seniors. Culture in spaces that are occupied by Black families and people are being erased by other ethnic groups because of gentrification, it is important for us to express our love and desire for our neighbors when we are congregating, standing outstand at the corner stores, having cook outs and listening to music that motivates and inspires us.



These experiences from outsiders or new neighbors are often seen as threatening. Our Saturday morning meetings are filled with neighbors wanting to know when is the next council meeting, when is the PTA meeting or who are the people running for local offices and how do we create forums for those running for public offices as well as how do we our municipality to allocate more funding for our afterschool and early childcare programs, how do we get programs to prevent our teens from joining gangs, how can build our community policing programs, how can we repurpose empty building for more affordable housing and open more mental health clinics, where are job trainings while people are visiting the refreshment tables grabbing fresh biscuits Mrs. May Helen has baked for the meeting, Ms. Clemmie is sitting at the sign in table asking people to sign in and step outside if on their phones, while a verbal disagreement has broken out. Our children are always invited in the meeting spaces, whether they are crying or sleeping. We look out for each other's children; we do not hire a babysitter. Our culture of organizing with those of us who are oppressed through struggles of economics, housing, education, disabilities, and criminal justice is critical to keeping our culture alive and strong; we choose our leaders and not outside influencers. We are unbought and unbossed! We don't allow for different types of privileges, misogyny, patriarchy, leaders' lateral violence, role-playing tokenization, silo issues, NIMBYism to shape our organizing. In our culture we are creating legacies for our children and grandchildren by showing up present to do the hard work with being grounded, nurturing our children, not quick to punishment as our criminal justice does them - especially our Black boys. We are providing healing stations, teaching traditions of growing our own foods in our front and back yards, bridging generational gaps through community projects, respecting matriarchy big mamas, shared leadership, unify families, sense of connection, confidence, self-wealth, respect, including everyone's heritage, challenging toxic masculinity and hierarchy. This is why our culture must be present in organizing.





## AYPAL

<https://www.aypal.org/>

AYPAL's integration of culture primarily focuses on centering navigating the Asian American and Pacific Islander identities, with space to incorporate regional (Bay Area and Oakland) nuances in how space also informs the definition of culture for our youth leaders. While our cultural and artistic curriculum has a focus on traditional and historical knowledge, our youth leaders who are a majority of 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants have the opportunity to redefine what culture means to them as well as shape their cultural identity in new ways. For AYPAL, we integrate and center a number of AAPI communities and use cultural grounding as a tool in order to ground our youth into the history, struggle, and celebration of their ethnic backgrounds, as well as grounding them in the culture of resilience and organizing each of our cultures have had here in the US, in the fight for ethnic studies, and various movements for labor, housing, education, etc. Historical cultural knowledge and traditions are also our starting point in addressing intergenerational trauma to heal the relationships our young people have with their elders, to understand the circumstances of fleeing war and genocide, economic instability, US imperialism, etc. and how that has shaped their relationships with individuals and the community in order to start conversations to start moving our communities forward toward collective liberation. Additionally, being a youth power-building organization, we also center youth culture as they are defining their current generational moment through the advancement of technology, social media, various crises, etc. Youth culture is deeply integrated within our artistic and programmatic structure, an example is the rise in usage of Meme's which we have utilized in outreach, as campaign tactics, and for our arts practices, using social media platforms like TikTok in the early days of the pandemic to continue to engage our youth leaders in cultural arts practices while remaining socially distanced.

Recommendations we have for others integrating culture and cultural practices into their organization would be to first define what aspect of culture they are aiming to integrate. Culture and Cultural practice as we define it is constantly evolving and constantly changing. Particularly working with youth of color who are pulled in a multitude of cultural directions, questions of assimilation vs. adaptation vs. integration are constantly shifting and shaping how our youth

define their culture and relate to their traditional or contemporary cultural practices and values. We look to culture as something that enhances the experiences of our young people to ground them and connect them to community and place, with our main focus in highlighting ethnic identity as well as place-based movement grounding in the rich history of organizing in the Bay Area and Oakland. In defining culture as well, it is important to understand all the aspects of our culture that do not serve us, i.e while we find great value in looking at historical and traditional cultural practices, in areas such as our relationship to land/earth, spiritual practices, food, art, storytelling, etc. Practices that are grounded in heteropatriarchy and misogyny in particular need to be acknowledged and navigated around to best serve our base.

## La Plazita Institute

<https://laplazitainstitute.org/>



In my world, in my community and organization the role of culture is as expansive as the universe. Our philosophy, as is many of our partner organizations is “La Cultura Cura” which translates to culture heals. The role of culture in our organization informs our practices, our methodologies, our thinking our way of life and much more. We initiate cultural healing where people are. In our own experience many of our people feel very vulnerable when we introduce the idea of culture because of the unfamiliarity.

The Journey of cultural healing comes in stages. Here at La Plazita those stages come from our approach known as Quinto Sol, the fifth sun. Quinto sol is our cultural framework that comes in 5 stages. The methodology is a much longer delivery that we’re always open to sharing at La Plazita. We welcome everyone to hear, see and experience it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Praxis staff plus list of participating organizations:

- Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise
- Asian Services In Action, Inc.
- AYPAL
- Baltimore Algebra Project
- Black Women for Wellness
- CAIR MA
- CARECEN
- Causa Justa :: Just Cause
- Chainbreaker Collective
- City Life/Vida Urbana
- Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth
- Communities United
- Community Movement Builders
- Community to Community Development
- Connect Your Community / Ashbury Center
- Cook Inlet Tribal Council
- Detroit Women of Color, Inc.
- Diné Community Advocacy Alliance
- Empower DC
- Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)
- Genesee County Hispanic Latino Collaborative
- Global Action Project
- Grassroots Leadership
- Gwinnett STOPP
- Housing Justice League
- InnerCity Struggle (ICS)
- Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization
- Khmer Girls in Action
- La Plazita Institute



- La Union del Pueblo (LUPE)
- LABALink
- Martinez Street Women’s Center
- Media Mobilizing Project
- Menīkānaehkem
- Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project
- New Mexico Acequia Association
- One Voice
- Padres & Jóvenes Unidos
- Pan-African Community Development Initiative
- PATHE People’s Alliance for Transportation Housing and Employment
- PODER SF
- Providence Student Union
- Providence Youth Student Movement
- Racial Justice NOW!
- Right to the City Boston
- Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE)
- Southeast Immigrant Rights Network
- Southern Echo. Inc.
- Struggle for Miami’s Affordable and Sustainable Housing, Inc.
- Take Back the Land Rochester
- Tenants Union of WA
- Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services
- The Black Feminist Project
- The Central Valley Urban Institute
- U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives



The Praxis Project is a values-driven, national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve justice and equity through partnerships to build community power. Praxis believes strongly that organized communities are critical partners in the struggle to create just and equitable communities.

**Our mission** is to build healthy communities by transforming the power relationships and structures that affect our lives and communities.

#### **LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR WORK**

Visit our website, [www.thepraxisproject.org](http://www.thepraxisproject.org), to learn more about our initiatives and explore our multimedia resources.



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