**Maintaining Local Autonomy in the US EJM**

**Abstract**

Since elite environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOs) and grassroots environmental justice (GEJ) groups began collaborating, they have faced regular challenges cooperating effectively. An especially important problem for GEJ groups in these partnerships is maintaining autonomy while still securing the resources necessary to pursue their goals. While challenges to autonomy are widely recognized by EJ activists and scholars, less work examines how these unfavorable outcomes can be avoided. Thus, I borrow theory from the broader social movement literature and process trace a partnership between a GEJ group and an elite ENGO to understand the factors allow GEJ groups to maintain autonomy in these partnerships. My results support many past findings that consider the maintenance of local autonomy but also emphasize how communication and transparency between these groups incites mutual respect, ultimately encouraging local autonomy.

**1 Introduction**

Scholars formally recognized the United States environmental justice movement (EJM) as beginning in the 1980s when environmental racism was brought into the spotlight by groups across the country who were concerned about issues that disproportionately impacted communities of color (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009). This movement redefined US environmentalism through its grassroots, decentralized structure (Bullard 1993; Colsa Perez et al. 2015; Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Schlosberg 1999) in which groups were situated locally but formed a network across the entire country (Schlosberg 1999, 133). This structure is noteworthy since it allowed groups to be more authentic representatives of community concerns, as many larger, mainstream environmental organizations have historically been organized more hierarchically (Brulle and Essoka 2005).

Since the 1990s, these differences created a rift between the EJM and conventional environmental organizations, bringing about tensions between the “Group of 10” mainstream ENGOs and GEJ actors (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). As the public became more familiar with the notion of environmental justice (EJ) during this period, mainstream ENGOs were pressed to adopt principles of EJ (Bullard 1993; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Schlosberg and Collins 2014). Thus, with many elite ENGOs incorporating EJ issues into their frameworks for action, a partial alliance was formed between them and GEJ groups.

Despite this alliance, many individuals have still been critical of these partnerships (Bullard 1993; Kaup and Casey 2016; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Schlosberg 1999). Elite ENGOs who get involved with EJ issues often prioritize other environmental concerns, fail to mobilize communities of color, and employ tactics that GEJ groups see as insufficient for promptly achieving justice (Bullard 1993; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007).

More precisely, Kaup and Casey (2016) explain that larger, more powerful ENGOs confront environmental issues in different ways and for different reasons than grassroots actors. These varying concerns and approaches can lead to stronger coalitions, but can also potentially contribute to future injustices. When the success of a partnership is based in strategies that protect interests and use institutions that uphold historic disadvantages, grassroots actors’ principles and notions of justice can become lost in the interests and institutions of more powerful ENGOs.

These findings illustrate a principal concern for grassroots groups involved in partnerships with more powerful and well funded actors. Namely, if and how they can engage in these partnerships and maintain autonomy. Importantly, Schlosberg (1999) notes that autonomy is as important as unity in partnerships across the EJM and emphasizes the significance of decentralization and self-determintion in his discussion of autonomy. McCarthy (2004) further explores this question of autonomy in terms of self-determination, asking how EJ groups can continue working toward their goals unobstructed. Similarly, Sandler and Pezzulo (2007) describe how the loss of autonomy entails a group losing control over their agenda in order to maintain a partnership. In this paper, I abide by these definitions of autonomy and, through process tracing, seek to answer how a local EJ group can maintain autonomy when working with elite ENGOs.

**2 Threats to Autonomy in the US EJM**

Much of the literature surrounding the EJM explores this question of autonomy. Here, scholars emphasize the importance of self-determination (McCarthy 2004; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). In other words, for groups in the EJM to be considered autonomous, they should have unmoderated control over their agendas and decisions. GEJ groups frequently face threats to their autonomy because though partnerships are sometimes vital for them to secure resources and organizational skills that allow them to achieve their goals (Bullard 1993; Kaup and Casey 2016; Méndez 2020; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Schlosberg 1999), services that powerful groups offer in these collaborations may be contingent on changes to the grassroot groups’ principles, goals, or agendas, since many of these larger groups perceive grassroots groups’ as too threatening or radical (Bullard 1993; Pellow 1999; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). Méndez (2020) draws attention to the necessity of these partnerships for grassroots groups, and notes the power differentials between GEJ groups and professional advocacy organizations, explaining how fast-paced justice issues can especially perpetuate challenges for groups who are small and under-resourced (65).

Because these partnerships are necessary but present potential problems for autonomy in the EJM, scholars and activists engaging with this movement have explored numerous threats to autonomy, all of which are related. Some of these potential threats to grassroots (and overall movement) autonomy include formalization, professionalization, channeling, and co-optation. The literature that focuses on formalization and professionalization notes that many groups involved in the movement have recently sought to become registered, legally formalized organizations in order to be eligible for more resources and to appear more legitimate (Colsa Perez et al. 2015). During this process of formalization and professionalization, grassroots groups’ structures, goals, and actions become moderated, causing them to lose local autonomy and become less representative of communities’ interests and voices (Colsa Perez et al. 2015; Schlosberg 1999).

The formalization and professionalization of groups in the movement is deeply intertwined with the process of “channeling” that Brulle and Jenkins’ (2005) describe as follows:

Citizens first mobilize around an environmental threat, which generates movement activity. This stimulates foundation interest in the problem and the creation of funding programs with conditions that require organizations to take up issues or engage in activities that they would otherwise not have done. Foundation priorities then come to the fore in terms of the movement discourses and styles of organizations that are viewed as more legitimate and worthy of support (Brulle and Jenkins 2005, 154).

Channeling is thus a clear threat to autonomy as defined in this paper, since it means organizations redirect their agendas to accommodate foundations’ priorities. The literature finds a great deal of support for this idea about how foundation funding influences movement principles, strategies, and tactics. Specifically, Brulle and Essoka (2005), Jenkins (1998), Jenkins and Halcli (1999), and Jenkins et al. (2017) use various methodological approaches and sources of data to arrive at the unequivocal conclusion that foundations most frequently give funding to environmental organizations with conservative mainstream environmental discourses and professional structures, which tend to be elite ENGOs (Schlosberg and Collins 2014, 366). Chewinski and Brown (2020) go on to further depict how funding sources, including foundations, channel groups into different types of advocacy. They specifically find that foundation and business funding channel environmental groups into more institutional advocacy, such as lobbying, litigation, and the provision of research. Thus, foundations are most likely to fund certain types of environmental organizations, but environmental organizations are also likely to shift their tactics and discourses to meet the requirements of receiving foundation funding.

While channeling can directly impact the autonomy of all types of environmental organizations as McCarthy (2004) disccuses, it can also indirectly influence grassroots groups in their partnershsip with elite ENGOs. Since this phenoma impacts large/elite ENGOs, I argue its effects can trickle down to impact GEJ groups engaged in partnerships with these larger, more powerful groups, potentially moderating their organizational structure or agenda, even if they themselves do not directly secure the foundation funding.

Funding and differential goals between GEJ groups and elite ENGOs also present another more explicit threat for the autonomy of GEJ groups. The work surrounding this more explicit threat, co-optation, examines how the EJ groups’ goals may be symbolically adopted by more powerful entities, while few or no substantive advantages are gained, effectively watering-down the movement by appeasing its participants (Eady 2003; Harrison 2015; Holifield 2012; Liévanos 2012; McCarthy 2004; Sandweiss 1998). Co-optation can occur when a smaller group’s agenda presents some type of threat to a more powerful group. It creates a problem for the autonomy of smaller groups, as they may be willing to temper their agenda to maintain a partnership, in hopes of gaining resources and fulfilling *some* goals.

**3 Maintaining Autonomy in the US EJM**

Beyond the large body of work that examines these threats to the autonomy of GEJ groups and the EJM more broadly, there are a few scholars who consider the factors that might enable these groups in the EJM to secure partnerships and still maintain autonomy. For example, McCarthy (2004) describes channeling and co-optation in the movement, but she also considers the agency of movement actors in these scenarios. She explains that as EJ groups gain access to funding foundations they are also well aware of the potential threat this funding presents to self-determination. Thus, groups in the EJM have attempted to work with individuals in these funding organizations and attend collaborative meetings to secure funding in ways that do not restrain their mission and goals.

Chewinski (2019) also puts forth some promising findings about partnerships between GEJ groups and elite ENGOs in the EJM. He describes how processes similar to channeling encourage ENGOs to gravitate toward collaborations with governments and foundations (rather than GEJ groups). However, his findings show that when grassroots groups and large NGOs share values, have limited resources to accomplish their goals, and engage in complimentary forms of advocacy, large NGOs will actually prefer to engage in coordinated action with grassroots groups around EJ issues rather than working with funders. While Chewinski does not explicitly seek to explain autonomy of GEJ groups in these partnerships, he describes the factors that enhance the accountability of elite ENGOs to these groups. Collaborations that center around shared values and complimentary advocacy rather than maintaining an agenda that is agreeable to funders and governments presents some encouraging findings for autonomous partnerships. If these groups are working toward shared goals and rely on one another, the partnership is less likely to be conditional, and therefore less likely to threaten local autonomy.

Finally, Pezzulo and Sandler (2007) compile some factors from cases in their book that result in mutually beneficial partnerships (315-17). Similarly to Chewinski (2019), they note the importance of complementary expertise, resources, and capabilities in partnerships between mainstream ENGOs and GEJ groups. However, they also explain respect between groups as an important factor in successful partnerships. For example, each group’s contribution, exactly what the other is trying to accomplish, and their means of achieving their goals, should all be recognized and respected. Finally, they observe that productive partnerships in their book all consisted of well-defined campaigns.

Thus, there is a robust literature outlining threats to local group autonomy in the EJM, including the impact of professionalization, formalization, channeling, and co-optation. Still, McCarthy (2004), Chewinski (2019), and Pezzulo and Sandler (2007) offer some encouraging findings about how collaborations between different actors in this movement can still hold some promise. Specifically, these authors suggest a few important factors for maintaining local autonomy: 1) More local group direct engagement with funders, 2) Better alignment of large NGO values with local group values, 3) complementary expertise, resources, and capabilities, 4) Mutual respect of each groups’ contributions, goals, and means of achieving those goals, and 5) well defined campaigns.

While this work lists several elements that are important for GEJ groups maintaining autonomy, beyond these few cases, there is little empirical investigation about the specific factors that might reduce threats to local autonomy in these EJ partnerships. While McCarthy (2004) observes how organizations who work on EJ communicate with foundation funders to attempt to arrive at more autonomous outcomes, this analysis is limited in that it only considers the direct impact funding can have on groups, rather than understanding that this funding can flow through other channels in the movement to impact the autonomy of groups who are specifically involved in partnerships with *one another*, too. Chewinski’s (2019) analysis meanwhile contributes some valuable findings about what makes ENGOs accountable to GEJ groups rather than funders, making local autonomy more likely. However, this theoretical analysis falls short since it does not explicitely consider the GEJ group’s role in maintaining local autonomy. While the analysis acknowledges that GEJ groups play an important role in the formation of partnerships, it does not consider the actions they can take in the maintenance of autonomy. Finally, Pezzulo and Sander’s (2007) observations are the most thorough exploration of autonomy in this specific type of partnership, but these accounts even fail to consider some factors that the social movement literature identifies as potentially important in explaining how or why groups maintain autonomy. Because of these limitations, I draw from relevant theories in the social movement literature to better understand when and how GEJ groups can work with more powerful partners and still maintain autonomy.

**4 How Do Other Social Movements Maintain Autonomy?**

As growing amounts of funding are being funnelled into EJ issues, and elite ENGOs are becoming increasingly involved in partnerships with GEJ groups, we should have a better understanding of how local groups can maintain autonomy to ensure a focus on issues that are more representative of community concerns. Though there are only a few accounts in the EJM literature that examine when and how local groups involved in this movement can maintain autonomy in their partnerships with more powerful groups, scholars have more extensively examined this question in the context of other social movements.

For example, Fung and Wright (2003) and Wampler (2007) note that social movement actors who are at risk of losing autonomy must employ some type of countervailing power to combat this threat. While this notion of countervailing power is key, some of the more specific factors that the social movement literature points to as allowing groups to maintain autonomy are intentionally setting forth clear goals and demands and having experienced unfavorable outcomes in past partnerships or initiatives.

In Murphree, Wright and Ebaugh’s (1996) case, an environmental group actually *was* co-opted by a corporate toxic waste company, losing autonomy. However, following this development, community actors who *still* opposed the siting of a toxic waste facility now made an intentional effort to push back against both the project *and* the environmental group who once sided with them, but now sided with the siting company. Once they realized that the environmental activists who now sat on the negotiations committee were no longer on their side and working toward their clearly defined interests, they actively pushed back so they could still prevent the siting of toxic waste. Thus, in this case, the community actors were able to maintain their autonomy because they very intentionally established their goals and demands were and abided by these—they did not want the waste sited in their community, and thus they continued to resist the siting. Additionally, though the toxic waste company was able to appease the environmental activists and divert their goals by letting them sit on their board, effectively co-opting them, this led to extra resistance from the community. Co-optation of the initial group made community actors who opposed the siting more inclined to push back and maintain their own autonomy. They had been deceived before, but they still knew what they wanted.

Holdo (2019) also puts forth some explanations to describe why social movements do not get co-opted or lose autonomy when partnering with powerful entities. He first asserts that more powerful groups may not want to co-opt challengers when their interests about some specific policies align. In this case, cooperating may be more beneficial than co-opting since both actors are more likely to achieve their mutual goal when working together, even if some of their other goals or tactics vary. In other words, their shared goals must be more important to collaborate around than their challenging goals or tactics are threatening. Secondly, Holdo argues that an elite group may decide not to limit the autonomy of a local group if the elite group needs to gain greater legitimacy in a community to achieve their agenda. In this case, they may allow the local group to maintain autonomy and use their autonomous collaboration to establish legitimacy for the outside group that could not be established if they had co-opted the local group. In sum, for Holdo both groups involved in these partnerships have agency and play a role in the maintenance or degradation of autonomy.

Taken together, when less powerful groups intentionally put forth clear goals and demands, and also have knowledge about potential issues in these partnerships and past experiences to learn from, they may be able to maintain control over their agenda and engage in more contentious action when needed. However, more powerful actors may also recognize that success is not a zero-sum game, and thus realize that co-optation and channeling may not be what leads to the best outcome for their goals. If working with grassroots groups and allowing them to maintain their autonomy will lead to desired policy outcomes or enhanced the outside group’s legitimacy, then there may be little reason for elite ENGOs to redirect these groups’ goals or tactics and strip them of autonomy.

Despite knowing that loss of autonomy is a significant problem in the EJM, we know little about if the same factors mentioned above apply to partnerships between elite ENGOs and GEJ groups, and if so, which might be more important. EJM scholars have done little empirical work assessing how or when smaller, less powerful groups can maintain autonomy. Thus, I seek to identify some of the factors that facilitate local autonomy in partnerships with larger ENGOs in the EJM, drawing on this limited research on examples of strategies to preserve local autonomy.

**5 Research Question and General Approach**

In this paper, I ask: how do local GEJ groups maintain autonomy in partnerships with elite ENGOs? To answer this question, I study a partnership between a GEJ group and an elite ENGO in Indiana in which the GEJ group maintained control of its agenda.

This is an interesting case because though we would expect loss of autonomy to occur, it did not. The previously mentioned literature suggests that loss of autonomy can occur when some characteristic of a smaller group presents a threat to a more powerful group. Based on the EJ literature, many professional ENGOs who predominantly seek to pursue change through litigation, such as the ENGO in this case, perceive grassroots groups’ emphasis on bottom-up organizing and engagement in noninstitutional tactics as threatening or too radical (Bullard 1993; Pellow 1999; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). This means that theoretically, we should expect that this elite ENGO would want to moderate the GEJ group’s agenda. However, we instead observe that the GEJ group maintained autonomy in this case, as illustrated by their continued use of contentious strategies and push toward their original goals without obstruction. Because loss of autonomy is a significant concern in the EJM, it is essential to recognize how threats to autonomy are avoided in movement partnerships such as this one.

**6 Method and Data**

In this study, I employ community-engaged research with the help of the GEJ group I observe. Discussions with one of the central organizers in this group helped me to form a research question that would be helpful to answer. This group member conveyed the importance of doing more than simply describing the autonomy observed in this mutually beneficial partnership. It was instead important to understand the groups’ approaches to action and the features of this partnership that allowed for an autonomous outcomes. Deeply understanding another successful case would allow other movement actors to learn what kind of collaborations work best and how to form one that allows for autonomy.

To study this question, I use process tracing since it is conducive to understanding causal processes (Bennett and Checkel 2014) and therefore allows me to understand the causal mechanisms that enabled the GEJ group to maitain autonomy in this partnership. Important sources of data include information on the partnership from both participating groups’ websites, media coverage of the partnership and the relevant environmental conflict, and semi-structured interviews with key actors in the partnership.

I conducted semi-structured interviews to get a better sense of the overarching context surrounding this partnership and ensure all participants were able to communicate any information that they found relevant to explaining it (Mosley 2013). Since this is a group with a small membership base, I conducted interviews with any individuals who had been involved in this partnership and agreed to do so. After reaching out to the initial point of contact for an interview, they were able to pass my information along to others to interview. The “active leadership network” of the GEJ group at the time of interviews consisted of approximately 9 people. My final participants consisted of 3 paid staff members and 2 volunteers for the GEJ group. Because I am only concerned with the autonomy of the less powerful group in this case, the viewpoint of the ENGO is unncecessary here. I reached saturation in these interviews (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013), with the final respondents answering my questions very similarly to previous respondents. Interviews were all confidential to ensure the protection of any individuals who may be critical of the partnership. For confidentiality purposes, I also do not disclose the names of the groups involved in this partnership.

**7 Case Description and Justification**

This case includes a partnership between a prominent elite ENGO and a local, GEJ organization in the Greater Lakes Region of the United States. The grassroots group officially formed in the fall of 2019 and was established by several community members and activists who were engaged in EJ work pertaining to an area electric provider polluting in low-income communities and raising electricity rates. Some group members had previously partnered with a different ENGO. However, following the announcement of stagnant electric rates and the retirement of some electric stations by the electric provider, this partner withdrew from the effort. At the same time, several individuals who were involved in this local movement banded together to continue working on ongoing EJ issues in the community, predominantly related to coal ash generated by the same electric facility.

The group began to frequently meet and agreed on their mission, values, and goals beginning in 2020. Their principal values include inclusivity, solidarity, and justice. They also have long-term goals of clean, healthy, and united communities. Since its formation, the group committed to various means of achieving their goals, including protest, petitioning, and community-building. However, they were also interested in engaging in institutional action.

The GEJ group began to work with a new ENGO in early spring of 2020, relatively soon after their formation. This partnership emerged when an organizer from the GEJ group was put in contact with a regional worker of the ENGO who was very interested in assisting with the smaller group’s cause. Additionally, the GEJ group sought a partnership with this larger, more powerful environmental organization because this organization could give them access to digital, technological, communication, scientific, and legal resources that they otherwise would not have access to. While this elite ENGO has access to all types of these resources, their primary and preferred means of achieving environmental goals is through litigation. Thus, because of the GEJ group’s reliance on this organization for resources, along with a potentially threatening difference in strategies, an opportunity and motive for co-optation was present.

Despite this potential threat, the group has maintained their original agenda and continued to work toward their goals unobstructed. According to interviews with individuals in the GEJ group, the elite ENGO has always given them a great deal of autonomy and empowers them, never trying to “water-down” their approaches. Additionally, when they have informed the elite ENGO of direct-action initiatives, the group has not intervened or attempted to stand in the way. Members also note that the elite ENGO has encouraged the GEJ group to pursue their mission and push harder on issues if needed, while also allowing them to make the final call for themselves and deferring to the GEJ group when unsure about decisions. Therefore, I seek to understand several key moments in this partnership where loss of autonomy could have occurred but did not.

**8 Analysis and Results**

First, corresponding with Murphree, Wright, and Ebaugh’s (1996) findings, I find that group members’ experiences with the previous ENGO they worked with influenced their intentional setting forth of clear goals and demands to safeguard their autonomy. In 2018-2019 several community members took part in EJ efforts with a different elite ENGO. In this campaign, members of the partnership sought to fight for clean, affordable energy locally, while remedying some of the EJ issues caused by an electric generating facility. This collaboration concluded when the electric provider decommissioned a local coal-burning facility and announced that rates would be stagnant. With many of the environmental issues that the first elite ENGO sought to address no longer presenting an immediate issue, they claimed a partial victory and mostly divested from the community, moving their efforts elsewhere.

A member of the GEJ group who was involved in this previous campaign explained how in their work with the previous ENGO, they “had to be careful in terms of the way we push in our public image.” Thus, members of the GEJ group were well aware of the potential issues surrounding loss of autonomy in this movement. I find that following the adverse outcome of participating in the campaign with the earlier elite ENGO, members took precautions in the current partnership to avoid these harmful outcomes that stripped them of autonomy. As this GEJ group was founded in the fall of 2019, just months after the end of the previous campaign in which some group members were involved, members had reason to be cautious. Further, as their new partnership began in spring of 2020, not much time had passed between some members’ last unfavorable ENGO encounter, and the GEJ group could possibly be seen as somewhat vulnerable. Still, it seems unlikely that the GEJ group could have lost autonomy here, even if it would have been attempted, because of the safeguards they’d implemented going into their new partnership, due to their past experiences.

Specifically, because of their past experiences, group members worked hard to construct a very clear mission, goals, and demands. Two particpants explained that both their group and the elite ENGO were very clear about their needs from the beginning of the partnership. Several members of the GEJ group also explained the importance of being clear about their mission, knowing the needs of community members and not losing sight of them, having a strong sense of political clarity, knowing what they really want to achieve, and understanding if new initiatives are aligned with their vision. A participant explained, “We really have, I think a clear sense of like our own personal politics and like what, what we're trying to get out of the work…” and additionally explained, “If, you know, in very clear terms, what you're trying to achieve, then you can always approach everything, uh, through that lens…I think that's very important because, certainly within the environmental justice movement, but also other like progressive left social movements, you’ve got the issue of career prism, um, just people, you know, not necessarily getting into it to try to bring about change, but just kind of promoting their own kind of personal careers. And that's something that we definitely want to steer clear from within our movement [and] really have it be focused on the work and the change that we're trying to achieve in our community.” So, GEJ participants in this case even imply they would be willing to turn down help or propositions from the elite ENGO if they did not align with their vision or goals.

Thus, apart from previous experiences with this group that led them to be cautious and proactive in their approach, several participants were also well aware that co-optation and formal funding channels frequently pose a risk in these types of partnerships, so this gave them another reason to be explicit about their mission. One participant explained “I think the main reason for [co-optation] is the issue of funding. Um, so these NGOs are kind of essentially beholden to the people that they get their funding from. And as long as that relationship exists, I think there's an incentive for them to just enact that agenda as opposed to doing like true, grassroots organizing that really like tries to shift the balance of power.”

Yet, their experience with this new group was vastly different from their personal collaborations with the previous elite ENGO. One of the previous participants noted that “… past experiences and continual issues within the sort of NGO-grassroots struggle [have] never really materialized within our relationship with, [new elite ENGO], where they’ve always asked us, you know, ‘what do you need? How can we be helpful?’ And rather than putting their name out there, trying to make it so that, they’re putting themselves before us or again making it so it’s like a branding thing. It’s always been, ‘what can we do to really be able to support your work on the ground?’ This series of events therefore illustrates how unfavorable experiences with the last ENGO, as well as awareness of challenges in this movement, has shaped how the GEJ group has sought to proactively preserve their autonomy.

Next, in line with Chewinski (2019), Holdo (2019), and Pezzulo and Sandler (2007), I find that alignment in goals and preferences, complementary capabilities, and well-defined campaigns matter in understanding why GEJ groups maintain autonomy. In 2002, several environmental agencies identified high levels of boron and other metals in groundwater caused by coal ash in another community in this area. However, in 2016 when they also found that coal ash had been used as yard fill in this area and high levels of these metals were thus present in the community’s soil, this elite ENGO became heavily involved in lawsuits surrounding remediation of coal ash pollution. Respondents and online documentation indicated this “long history” of the elite ENGO’s involvement around this community, before the GEJ group had even been formed.

Thus, as the under-resourced GEJ group emerged in the fall of 2019 and soon entered into a partnership with the elite ENGO, they also intended to work on the persistent coal ash issues in this area. Early on, the under-resourced GEJ group exhibited that they would be willing to use more confrontational tactics to draw attention to this existing environmental injustice than the elite ENGO did. Thus, as they became heavily involved in this partnership, making use of the elite ENGO’s organizational skills, the opportunity for the GEJ group to lose autonomy seemed apparent. Yet, they maintained their agenda and continued working toward their goals unobstructed.

Interviews provide insight into why the GEJ group’s autonomy did not come under threat here. One participant explained that since the elite ENGO was familiar with the many environmental injustices that the electric provider has contributed to in this community, they wanted to work with the GEJ group to tackle similar issues that they saw the company was creating again. Despite this being a fruitful opportunity for the elite ENGO to channel the GEJ group into certain types of activity, one participant noted that “they really understand the area, they’ve had that experience. And so, I think that's why they've been so supportive of having us, you know, push as hard as we want and to be able to, you know, think about like what's most effective. And they've never tried to water down our approach.” The elite ENGO did not seek to redirect the GEJ group’s agenda or tactics since they had previous ties in this community and wanted to ensure the grassroots group was able to achieve the change that community members wanted to see. In this regard, the two groups’ values and goals concerning this community aligned, limiting the threat to the GEJ group’s autonomy. As further support for this assertion, the groups’ websites and interviews illustrate that they have similar goals related to justice and creating healthy and clean communities. One participant specifically noted that the organizations share similar goals regarding public policy, especially local policies related to coal ash.

The participant here also proceeded to say that employees of the elite ENGO have relied on the GEJ group for certain types of change that they can only pursue through the grassroots regarding these issues, since their role restricts them in some ways. Thus, their complementary capabilities also played a role in the elite ENGO allowing the GEJ group to maintain autonomy. The elite ENGO benefitted from supporting the GEJ group’s own initiatives, even when they did not take the elite ENGO’s preferred approach, since the GEJ group had the capacity to push back against these issues in ways that the larger group could not. These means of action were complementary to the elite ENGO’s goals, since they allowed them to confront the coal ash issue and were not necessarily antagonistic to the elite ENGO’s litigative approach. Moreover, if the elite ENGO did not allow the GEJ group to maintain autonomy, they could potentially fall short in achieving shared goals that they relied on their partner to help them achieve. We can also see here how a well-defined campaign, that purely focused on coal ash, helped tie these groups together to work autonomously on the issue at-hand

As this partnership continued to progress, a decline in the COVID-19 pandemic invigorated the GEJ group to seek strategies to further involve the larger community in engaging with local environmental injustices. Thus, in the summer of 2021, the GEJ group decided to put on a film screening about the impacts of coal ash, which their elite partner agreed to sponsor. The screening required many resources and an extensive amount of planning. Thus, sponsoring the event certainly presented the elite ENGO with an opportunity to exert much influence over what it looked like and what types of action the groups advocated for at the event. Instead, the elite ENGO simply acted as a resource for the GEJ group during the planning process without contingencies. One member specifically described the relationship as “nontransactional”, explaining that the elite ENGO does not divert ideas, but rather collaborates around them. This series of events allows us to further understand how complementary expertise, resources, and capabilities stimulated an autonomous partnership. Once again, the GEJ group’s approach was not antagonistic to the goals of the elite ENGO. While the movie screening’s community-building approach did not necessarily align with the elite ENGO’s predominantly litigative work, the event still allowed the elite ENGO to make further progress on the campaign they were concerned with.

Interestingly, a participant briefly mentioned that the elite ENGO is a national organization, who is not engaged in the struggle for limited local resources in the area, leading to little sense of competition. This means that they may be more inclined to support types of action by other groups that do not necessarily use their preferred tactic, since they are less constrained by resources when deciding how to best support or pursue EJ. Thus, the kinds of action they support are not mutually exclusive. Working within the GEJ group’s framework for action may still help the ENGO to pursue some of their EJ goals in this case, even if they do not use their preferred strategy.

Most clearly and notably though, the elite ENGO has checked in with the GEJ group and vice versa every step of the way during this partnership. From early on in the partnership, these norms of continuous transparency and strong communication between groups had led to the establishment of a sense of trust. During several key moments in the partnership, the groups have consulted with one another. This includes any decisions about upcoming meetings, ideas about current legislation or petitions, local town decisions, and thoughts about possible action.

All five interviewees noted the open lines of communication between the groups, with two participants explaining how this allows for a great deal of transparency about actors’ goals, initiatives, intentions, and actions. In fact, when there were times the elite ENGO had proposed or suggested a possible channel for action that the GEJ group did not feel ready for, they were not encouraged or pressured to pursue this sort of action. Instead, the elite ENGO took a hands-off approach and carried on per usual. Members of the grassroots group explain that communication and trust between the two entities makes conversations and decisions like these ones possible. Group members mentioned that they do not perceive a risk in partnering with this group, whatsoever. One member explained, “I think we have a very strong relationship, and we trust them implicitly.”

**9 Discussion**

My findings are largely supportive of past literature that explores co-optation and autonomy, but it also adds a few new insights. Several factors that EJM and social movement scholars more broadly have identified as important for autonomous partnerships are also applicable to this partnership. First, unfavorable past experiences have encouraged groups to be very intentional about their mission, demands, and goals, fostering autonomous collaboration. Second, when groups involved in a partnership have aligned values and goals and complementary expertise and capabilities, this further deters loss of local autonomy. When groups are largely in agreement and a threat is not perceived by elite ENGOs, there is no reason for them to attempt to redirect GEJ groups’ agendas. Lastly, well defined campaigns can help to rally groups to autonomously work on an issue in a mutually beneficial way.

I also find an interesting statement from one participant about how because this elite ENGO is a national organization and is not competing for limited local resources, they are less constrained in how many ways they pursue EJ. Thus, they can support actions that help to achieve their goals but do not use their preferred tactic, as well as pursue change through their preferred means. Contrary to what the literature says, it seems possible that elite ENGOs’ definitions of *complementary* expertise, resources, or capabilities may actually expand, rather than being channeled, as they gain more funding or resources.

Finally, while this case does support McCarthy’s findings about communication and Pezzulo and Sandler’s (2007) assertions about mutual respect of each groups’ contributions, goals, and means of achieving those goals, my findings provide a bit more insight into these broad assertions. Namely, respect and trust between groups would not be possible without a great deal of communication and transparency between these groups. Each participant in the study was very explicit that they believed these factors were fundamental to the groups having a mutually beneficial partnership that was respectful of each groups’ boundaries and independence. Ultimately, participants believe that this explains their success in maintaining autonomy, since the elite ENGO supported their decisions and respected their boundaries in interactions where they discussed potential means of achieving their goals.

**10 Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study opens the door for future research on co-optation avoidance and EJ partnerships, it has several limitations. First, because the observed partnership is very small and relatively new, I had limited data to explore this question. Additionally, the interviews I draw from are subject to social desirability bias since members of a partnership are somewhat unlikely to discuss threats to autonomy in a partnership that they are still involved in.

Though this study adds to the literature surrounding theories of co-optation and autonomy, it predominantly contributes to the literature concerned with the EJM. Though loss of autonomy is a relevant concern in the EJM, particularly when there are power imbalances between actors, unfavorable outcomes are not inevitable. There are specific, tangible actions that can be taken in these partnerships that may minimize these risks before they occur. More exploration of partnerships in the EJM is needed to thoroughly understand if factors that contribute to the maintenance of autonomy in this case are widely applicable, especially between various types of actors in this movement. Further, I do select on the dependent variable in this study by observing a case in which a group *does* maintain autonomy. This is a common critique of social movement research (Walker 2014), and though it does not invalidate my findings, other studies should explore cases in which groups do lose autonomy to better understand these factors, if possible.

Future work should also consider whether these findings would hold for partnerships between groups whose goals do not align as well. At what point might a GEJ group’s goals or tactics vary enough from an elite ENGO’s where they might try to channel the GEJ group into certain types of action, rather than supporting them? While complementary forms of action help promote autonomy, how complementary do they have to be? In this case, the elite ENGO did not perceive the GEJ group as a threat. This in itself is a useful observation for groups involved in the movement, as it suggests that they may only want to partner with other groups who they know enough about and recognize as similar enough to work with without their autonomy being threatened. However, if they partner with elite actors who do not have completely aligned goals or very complementary tactics, would intentionality in goals, a well-defined campaign, and frequent communication, transparency, and respect still allow groups to overcome these differences and maintain autonomy? We would also benefit from a deeper understanding of what allows these groups to communicate and maintain transparency so well.

Additionally, this question should be scaled up to examine how autonomy can be maintained in the overall EJM, rather than just in individual partnerships. While several studies seek to understand the influence that foundation funding has had on the overall movement (Brulle and Essoka 2005; Jenkins 1998; Jenkins et al. 2017; Jenkins and Halcli 1999), they do not examine how various movement actors can secure resources to achieve environmental justice goals while still maintaining complete control of their agenda. Still, many scholars and activists emphasize the importance of partnerships among various actors, as well as both “inside” and “outside” action (Harrison 2019; Méndez 2020; Pellow 1999; Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). Thus, as partnerships between various entities become more common in the pursuit for EJ, the EJ literature would benefit from a renewed interest in social movement studies and understanding autonomy. This is especially relevant since one of my findings indicate that the impact of funding in the EJM may be more complex than previously understood.

Large ENGOs and grassroots groups alike will benefit from understanding the factors mentioned in this paper that have allowed for a grassroots group in the EJM to maintain autonomy and continue working toward their ultimate goals while also securing resources to achieve these goals. These findings will allow grassroots groups and more powerful groups to consider next steps in their own work. Some work suggests that NGOs should serve as “bridges,” simply acting as support for grassroots groups and movements (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015). This study puts forth several mechanisms that allow partnerships in the EJM to function in this way, offering a greater understanding of factors that allow for these groups to work together to achieve advances in EJM while still ensuring the autonomy of grassroots groups. As EJ continues to become a more pressing and increasingly funded issue, and NGO-grassroots partnerships become more commonplace, this information will be highly beneficial to all groups concerned with EJ matters.

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