

Awakening the Antiracism Collective Through Transformative Organizational Praxis: A Participatory Evaluative Case Study

Jelena Todić
Sherri Simmons-Horton
Elizabeth Cruz

Amy Manning-Thompson
M. Candace Christensen
Lucinda Nevarez

Abstract: *Dismantling structures that impede social work professional and organizational growth begins with social work educational institutions. In 2020, the convergence of three pandemics – COVID-19, economic injustice, and, notably, structural racism, catalyzed a group of social work staff and faculty at a public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the Southern U.S.. The group relied on community organizing and organizational change strategies to form the antiracism collective (ARC). We employed a participatory evaluative case study (Merriam, 1998) methodology to answer two questions: 1) How has ARC accelerated one social work department's integration of antiracist praxis (theory, reflection, action) into all aspects of the department to support the department's mission?; and 2) How can ARC dismantle structures which impede social workers' ability to confront racism? We find that ARC 1) catalyzed department transformation as evidenced by the increased sense of critical consciousness, struggle, integrity, and community; and 2) achieved primarily individual impact, with small but potentially significant department impact, and small but potentially significant structural impact. We highlight strengths and limitations of antiracism collectives as a pathway to confront racism in other social work educational institutions.*

Keywords: *Antiracism, collective, organizational change, Social Work Grand Challenges*

The newly added Social Work Grand Challenge to Eliminate Racism (Teasley et al., 2021) underscores the urgency of dismantling racism and white supremacy in the US and social work. The grand challenge authors call for evidence and practice-based research that can uproot racism at the individual, organizational, community, professional, and societal levels. Among recommendations for how to move forward with addressing what Dr. Larry Davis (2016) referred to as “America’s Original Grand Challenge,” the authors recommend “professional revision of social work education,” policy agendas to “eliminate racism and white supremacy from organizations and institutions,” and “continuous evaluation with accountability” (p. 401). To demand that practicing social workers take on this critical challenge, social work educational institutions (SWEI) must also begin to uproot racism embedded in our organizational structures. Despite claims of valuing social justice, social work has played a significant role in maintaining white supremacy (Beck, 2019; Davis, 2021; Jacobs et al., 2021; Teasley et al., 2021). Still, SWEIs can and must be sites of transformation.

This case study describes the first year of forming and operating an antiracism collective (ARC) in one social work department in a public Hispanic Serving Institution in

Jelena Todić, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX. Sherri Simmons-Horton, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH. Elizabeth Cruz, MSW, Community Practitioner and Adjunct Faculty, Amy Manning Thompson, MSW, Director of Field Education, Candace Christensen, Associate Professor, and Lucinda Nevarez, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX.

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the Southern U.S. In 2020, the country witnessed a renewed uprising against systemic racism following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. The convergence of three interconnected pandemics – COVID-19, economic injustice, and, notably, structural racism – catalyzed a group of social work faculty and staff to form a collective. In this manuscript, we chronicle our activities, share first-year evaluation findings, and offer lessons we learned as founding members and co-facilitators of the collective. First, we describe the case study context, theories guiding the collective, and the collective's activities. Next, we present the case study methodology and findings. We conclude with the lessons learned and implications for our department and SWEIs in general. We also highlight strengths and limitations of ARCs as a pathway to confront racism in other SWEIs.

Several vital assumptions frame this case study. We firmly believe that we cannot prepare students for antiracist social work praxis (theory-reflection-action cycle) consistent with social work ethics unless we, as faculty and staff, engage in antiracist praxis. Social work departments and schools provide an obvious setting for this work. By racism, we refer to a system that produces and reproduces racist discrimination by historical and contemporary "laws, rules, and practices, sanctioned and even implemented by various levels of government, and embedded in the economic system as well as in cultural and societal norms" (Bailey et al., 2021, p. 768). Broad cultural endorsement of competitive individualism normalizes power hoarding and power-over hierarchies as the only way to organize a safe and productive society (Walker, 2010). This cultural apparatus also enables white supremacy in all institutions, including academia (Bailey et al., 2021; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Davis, 2003; Davis, 2021). By antiracist, we refer to a person supporting an antiracist policy through taking actions or expressing an antiracist idea (Kendi, 2019). Finally, by antiracist social work praxis, we refer to actions grounded in theory and knowledge aiming to eradicate racist social relations, racialized dynamics, and racial disparities from society and the social work profession (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020).

Case Study Context

In May 2020, with the murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black people, two department-wide email exchanges ignited a group of faculty and staff to start an antiracism collective. In the first email, a white assistant professor asked colleagues to prioritize discussions about racism in the summer classes and offered resources for supporting Black students through that process. In the second email, an African American assistant professor shared personal fears as a mother of Black sons and outlined concrete actions for the department's antiracist activities. Shortly after, the two faculty initiated a workgroup, with 11 racially and ethnically diverse faculty and staff attending the first meeting. Through the initial exploration of values that brought people to the first meeting, the group agreed that an antiracist praxis was the only approach that could rise to meet the needs and obligations created by structural racism. ARC's members decided that the aim was to "assess and accelerate the integration of antiracist praxis into all aspects of the Social Work Department and Department's work to support our mission. We prioritize growth and accountability as we advance our antiracist praxis" (ARC, 2020, p. 1). Given our assumption that hierarchy and power-over dynamics are central to academia

and white supremacy, the group decided to function as a collective, using a power-with model. By “power with,” we refer to an intentional choice to center interdependence, mutuality, and solidarity as we take collective actions to achieve our stated aim (Walker, 2010). Moreover, in a collective, leadership is shared or rotated, people are assumed to be capable and can be trusted to do the right thing, and that success comes from the skills of many (O’Neill & Brinkerhoff, 2018).

The immediate community surrounding ARC and our department provides daily reminders of structural racism. The West Side neighborhoods, which are adjacent to the campus and more than 90% Latino, experiences high rates of poverty, lower levels of educational attainment, fewer opportunities for economic growth and mobility, and higher incidences of crime (Community Information Now, 2017). Even though at its inception the university’s stated goal was to establish a physical presence near the Westside to foster a relationship with the community and promote higher educational engagement levels (Olivo, 2018), the goal did not come to fruition. Rather than creating community growth, our institution has fostered feelings of displacement and uncertainty among the community (Wang, 2019). Only recently, the university established the Westside Community Center and created the Westside Community partnership focused on developing collaborative projects (The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2022), aiming to live up to our institutional mission of community support and accessibility.

Similar to other higher education institutions in the area, incidences of discrimination, hate, and harassment have also occurred at our university. These incidents include white nationalist signs in prominent areas of the campus, hate groups infiltrating Black student group meetings with hate speech, and targeting immigrant students with materials threatening deportation or removal (Zielinski, 2017). In addition, a highly publicized incident involving a white faculty member using police to remove an African American student from a classroom setting for a perceived minimal infraction (Mendoza, 2018; Kong, 2018) touched off critical conversations about policing, race, and the academic environment throughout the institution. The university has responded to these racialized acts through investigations, community conversations, and creating a new department focusing on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and invitations to leaders such as Dr. Angela Davis to campus. In this context, ARC was motivated by the idea that in a racist society, we must take an antiracist stance, which must begin with self-evaluation to understand our complicity in systemic racism and translate into persistent ongoing actions. This self-evaluation and action cycle also must occur at the university level, college level, department level, and beyond.

Theory

ARC relied on two frameworks to inform our work: emergent strategy (brown, 2017), and Kotter's (2014) 8-step organizational change. Emergent strategy, grounded in the work of Octavia Butler, Grace Lee Boggs, Margaret J. Wheatley and others models adoptive and relational leadership (brown, 2017). It includes practices and philosophy for humans to be in "right relationship" with each other and the planet, “practice complexity,” build movements, and “grow” a just future (brown, 2017, p. 17). Some of the main principles

that support “right relationships” are: 1) new patterns at a small-scale change patterns at a large scale; 2) change is constant; 3) movement happens at the speed of trust and 4) critical connections are more important than critical mass (Brown, p. 27). Consequently, as ARC members evolve towards antiracist praxis, so does our department of social work, and potentially our academic institution.

Additionally, Kotter’s (2014) 8-Step Process for Leading Change provided a roadmap through the complexity of organizational change. Kotter’s model is a widely used organizational change model, which includes eight steps: 1) create a sense of urgency; 2) build a guiding coalition; 3) form a strategic vision and initiatives; 4) enlist a volunteer army; 5) enable action by removing barriers; 6) generate short-term wins; 7) sustain acceleration; and 8) institute change. We used the acceleration version of the model, which assumes that these steps are not linear; requires the mobilization of volunteers from up, down, and across the organization to be and implement the change; allows volunteers to function in a network flexibly outside of, but in conjunction with, a traditional hierarchy; and ensure that volunteers seek opportunities, identify initiatives, and complete them quickly (Kotter, 2014).

Structure

Over the summer of 2020, 10 out of 11 individual who attended the initial ARC meeting met every two weeks to dialogue and plan activities. We incorporated poetry or artistic images into each session, started with a check-in (a simple meeting opening activity enabling participants to voice their needs and transition into the collective space), and ended with a check-out (a simple closing activity to gather insights and exit the collective space). The goal was to develop meaningful relationships and a sense of community antithetical to the larger societal context. We also used an action-oriented meeting agenda, took minutes, and kept track of action items. We planned events and intentionally collaborated across academic roles, engaging students, staff, and faculty in the process.

Activities

During the first year, ARC drafted a framework for organizational change (Came & Griffith, 2017) and organized several successful events with students, staff, faculty, and field instructors. We a) developed an antiracism resource guide; b) drafted an evidence-informed framework for department transformation; c) hosted two book clubs and one film discussion; d) co-organized “Social Work So White with Rachel Cargle” (Social Work Coalition for AntiRacist Educators, 2020) watch party and “Radical Roots: History of Racial Capitalism 3-Part Lecture Series” with students; and e) conducted a first-year evaluation of our progress, including writing this manuscript. In addition, individual members have taken actions in numerous ways, including presenting nationally and internationally about antiracist praxis, embedding antiracism into teaching, providing guidance to the university’s diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, and engaging in community action. A university publication about our new college and the Department’s Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) re-accreditation report prominently featured ARC’s activities. One of the ARC’s founding members received a university-wide,

prestigious employee recognition award, in part due to her efforts in ARC. Another one received a nomination for the President's Distinguished Diversity Award.

As the group's mission took hold, the collective engaged the internal and external social work community by leading discussions on antiracism and the role of social work. In the fall semester of 2020, an administrator approved a 30-minute session at the monthly faculty and staff meeting for ARC to engage the broader department in antiracist work. Our aim for these sessions was to build a department culture committed to antiracism. While it has been challenging to find sufficient time in the faculty meeting to focus on antiracist praxis, the department continued to work collaboratively to maintain a portion of the faculty meeting to ARC. Similarly, ARC was active at the university level, indirectly addressing issues of racism and discrimination, which we describe in the findings. This engagement with the SWEI highlights the potentially symbiotic relationship between ARC members' evolution towards antiracist praxis and the SWEI's integration of this perspective. Thus, as ARC grows in its capacity for antiracist praxis, it may also grow the SWEI's capacity to nurture diversity and promote social justice.

Method

This paper employs a participatory evaluative case study (Merriam, 1998) methodology to answer two questions: 1) How has ARC accelerated the Social Work Department's integration of antiracist praxis (theory, reflection, action cycle) into all aspects of the department to support the department's mission?; and 2) How can ARC dismantle structures which impede social workers' ability to confront racism? The case study methodology is appropriate because we are interested in a bounded system (Merriam, 1998)—an antiracist collective inside one SWEI. A case study is descriptive and heuristic, illuminating a mezzo-level phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). The methodology was participatory because the six authors of this paper each facilitated ARC meetings and events, generated interview data for this project, and collectively analyzed the data.

We used six sources of data: ARC facilitator interviews (manuscript co-authors, $n = 6$), ARC survey (completed by remaining ARC members [$n = 1$] and non-ARC faculty and staff [$n = 7$]), an administrator interview ($n = 1$), observations, ARC documents (e.g., minutes, agendas, event evaluations), and department documents (CSWE re-accreditation report). We conducted the analysis using several steps. First, the lead author conducted training on qualitative research and analysis for the co-author team. Next, we transcribed all interviews using auto transcription services (e.g., Zoom, Panopto). We checked all transcriptions for accuracy against the interview recordings. The administrator who participated in the interviews also read and edited their interview transcript for accuracy and provided additional context for parts of the interview. Next, we developed a provisional coding book (Saldaña, 2021). Using the person-in-the-environment model (Gitterman et al., 2018), we developed a deductive coding process (Gilgun, 2019). All co-authors applied preliminary codes to one randomly selected interview, discussed codes, and agreed to use the codebook as was. Preliminary codes included: individual impact, department impact, structural impact, strengths, challenges, and future. Two authors then used the codebook to analyze the remaining data, developing new sub-codes to answer the two research

questions. They used descriptive matrices (Averill, 2002) to analyze data across interviews and across sources of data to develop themes. Descriptive matrices enabled organization of quoted content from participants' responses in individual cells across two dimensions - preliminary codes as horizontal axis and individual participants as vertical axis - enabling researchers to see patterns and trends across participants (Averill, 2002). We kept an audit trail throughout the process because in qualitative research, while one should not expect to replicate an account, one should see how the researchers arrived at the findings (Merriam, 1998). All authors reviewed and approved the final themes.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Literature suggests that being an insider offers a distinct advantage in accessing and understanding the case; however, these advantages are not absolute, presenting several ethical and methodological dilemmas associated with entering the field, positioning, shared relationships, and disengagement (Labaree, 2002). Instead of "going native" to gain the most accurate picture of the organization as insiders, we needed "to go observationalist," that is, "to distance ourselves introspectively from the phenomena so that a more complete understanding of the community's reality can be obtained" (Labaree, 2002, p. 116). As insiders, we needed to be hypersensitive to our previous knowledge assumptions and positionalities throughout our "entry" into the field of study. The entry came with obligations and responsibilities to the study participants that an outsider may never experience (Labaree, 2002). For example, we had to negotiate relationships with colleagues in this department that negative findings could harm.

Conversely, the relationships may influence our ability to present certain findings out of consideration for colleagues or department reputation. Furthermore, relationships are complex and multidimensional, often based on the unequal distribution of power, which influences the degree of one's "insiderness" (Labaree, 2002). In addition, at the time of this evaluation, three of us were people of color already navigating complexity associated with institutional racism, two were assistant professors navigating the tenure and promotion process, and two were staff navigating complex power dynamics as university employees who are not faculty. These positionalities are associated with various levels of vulnerability inside of a hierarchical university system. We negotiated these power dynamics by being transparent about our research throughout the process, providing multiple opportunities for participation to all in the department, and sharing that the primary purpose of our research was to discover ways to improve ARC's work and therefore the department. Finally, terms of disengagement are particularly challenging for insiders because we remain in the community we study and may experience repercussions from those who may feel that our conclusions misrepresent the department or individuals (Labaree, 2002). We carefully considered our ethical responsibilities and obligations to the department, our colleagues, our students, our profession, and our community before and throughout the study (Mays de Perez as cited in Labaree, 2002).

To address these concerns, we employed several techniques recommended by Merriam (1998) throughout the design, data collection, and data analysis stages to enhance the credibility and dependability of our findings. First, we triangulated data using multiple

investigators, multiple sources of data, and multiple methods to confirm findings, which allowed us to gain a holistic understanding of the case. Second, we conducted a member checking session to present findings to staff and faculty ($n = 9$) and a follow-up survey to attendees to provide additional thoughts ($n = 2$). We presented our themes with verbatim quotes, directly connecting our interpretations to the voices of participants. Third, we engaged in long-term observation. All of us were actively engaged with ARC since its inception as active members and co-facilitators. Fourth, we engaged in a peer debriefing. One co-author also shared findings with a colleague from a near-by university who indicated that our main themes resembled experiences in their SWEI.

Results

Two main themes in the data were: 1) ARC catalyzed department transformation as evidenced by the increased sense of critical consciousness, struggle, integrity, and community; and 2) achieved primarily individual impact, with small but potentially significant department impact, and small but potentially significant structural impact.

ARC Catalyzed Department Transformation as Evidenced by the Increased Sense of Critical Consciousness, Struggle, Integrity, and Community

Across all six data sources, there was a clear sense of difference before and after ARC related to department-wide discussions about racism. Participants felt that "racism was on the table" and that "it was not going away." There was a universal sense of change in that ARC's activities resulted in an increased focus on racism as an issue important to the profession and to the mission of the program. The following four subthemes, which are present across data sources, explain the complexity of that change.

Critical Consciousness. Critical consciousness, a term coined by a Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1973/2018), refers to developing critical insight about the nature of oppression through dialogue and reflection, then translating that insight into action to transform the oppressive conditions through praxis. This theme is present among ARC and non-ARC members; however, one difference is that ARC members were more likely, although not exclusively, to give examples of praxis compared to the other evaluation participants, which were more likely to focus on learning. As one white ARC member noted,

ARC has had a huge impact on me. I always thought I was very open and not racist, until becoming part of this. It's really opened my eyes to see it [as a] humongous problem, racism in our country. And also looking at myself and doing a lot of self-reflection to see ways that I've bought into that system freely, unfortunately. And I know I've been a racist in the past, unknowingly. But also learning that I can use my voice too, and then with the collective to help try to dismantle the system. To become antiracist in everything I do.

Several ARC and non-ARC participants described that ARC impacted other people in their lives. A white non-ARC participant shared the following in the survey, "Personally, ARC

has had an impact not only on me but also my family... We read as a family Ibram X. Kendi's book *How to Be an Antiracist* and processed interactions and implications for our family."

Struggle. To struggle is to "make great efforts in spite of difficulties; to contend resolutely *with* (a task, burden); to strive *to do* something difficult " (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], 2022c, para. 4). Struggles related to internal growth or not knowing what to do, interpersonal conflict – often across racial differences, and disparate views of social work and its underlying political philosophies accompanied the increased sense of critical consciousness in the department. The following quote from a non-ARC member (participant did not disclose race/ethnicity) survey responder expresses disagreements with ARC's strategies:

To reach or engage more people, perhaps the ARC can consider embracing social work values of "meeting people where they are," that is, expressing non-judgement for the different experiences and backgrounds people may have. Yes, perhaps it is important for people to be "uncomfortable," yet sometimes that is not always the best way to help someone open their mind to a new way of seeing something because it causes them to be defensive as a natural reaction to a judgement that they are perceiving...Certainly, there is value in working and striving toward a commitment to antiracism- at the same time, continual use of the term "antiracist" can also create a "if you are not for us you're against us" division that does not meet each person where they are.

The newly emerged department-wide struggle also created a new management challenge for a white administrator, who needed to figure out how to respond to the diverse staff and faculty needs. The following quote exemplifies some of the challenges:

Sure enough, there were a couple of times during the year when people came and talked to me...about something related to ARC...Most of the time triangulation is bad...Here's a direct relationship and you're diverting it through a third-party, and the more you do that, the more that prevents you from directly confronting whatever it is [you are dealing] with...Because of the nature of my role,...I felt like I couldn't shut the door to people [who] want to talk to me, but it was a little bit of a challenge to figure out how to redirect the energy back. You know how could this be communicated directly? This is where for me in my role, that open door, the permeable boundaries, was really, really important that ARC kept restating that.

These struggles were a source of intense heartbreak for ARC members, especially for people of color. An ARC member who is a person of color noted:

When the pushback is coming from white faculty, then really, the reaching out needs to be done by the white staff and faculty, because it's so triggering. Just seeing how that shows up in the faculty and staff meetings, and where people of color are continuously experiencing this deeply disrespectful, deeply invalidating, deeply violent process.

Another white ARC member expressed uncertainty about the department's ability to move through the struggles and heartbreak successfully.

I feel like now, the issues of racial justice are so explicitly on the table...People are bringing themselves to the table more fully, and I think that's causing strain in a way that can deepen our relationships, if we can work through it. But also, it can be fracturing if we don't figure out a way to work through it. And I think that's really important. Tension can be growth-producing, and it is growth-producing, but you have to move through that process, and that requires time and skill and willingness. There's a part of me that wonders if we have what's needed to actually get to the other side of that.

Integrity. Integrity refers to "the condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting; undivided or unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety" (OED, 2022b, para. 1). In moral sense, it refers to the "soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue, esp. in relation to truth and fair dealing; uprightness, honesty, sincerity." (OED, 2022b, para. 3). ARC's activities contributed to the sense of integrity to ARC and non-ARC members in several ways. An ARC member who is a person of color stated:

So, for me, because we're social workers, this is what we should be about...I know initially when we started, I recall just feeling such a, a sense of urgency...as the mother of a Black man, as the wife of a Black man. And it's just, as the grandmother of boys that are going to grow up to be Black men, that sense of urgency that I want to, if it takes my everything, to work towards change. And we are the educators of future social workers, we, we are the gatekeepers of future social workers, there should be some antiracist foundation for every student leaving our program.

A white non-ARC member shared that they "felt that there was more space to be recognized as an imperfect yet growing individual." Another white non-ARC member noted how ARC contributed to the department's ability to fulfill its mission.

Antiracist thinking naturally fits within the broader transformative, culturally competent mission of our program, but the work of ARC has helped to serve as a tip of the spear, providing focus and energy around making antiracist strategies a more explicit part of faculty and community dialogue and general program thinking.

Finally, a white administrator who navigated multiple demands related to leading through the pandemic, renewed uprising against systemic racism, CSWE re-accreditation, and the new college structure appreciated the role that ARC played in leading the department's response to racism in summer 2020:

So, part of my internal dialogue, I do remember briefly thinking, "Oh good the President wrote a statement," but then after a couple of days, thinking like "No, I need to write a statement," but feeling isolated in that...I know there are some other universities...where the faculty is on it right away...I came in on Monday morning after the whole weekend of protests and I sent something out to everybody like, "What, what should we, what can we do? And nobody ever responded to me, but that's OK...because it was right at the exact same time S. sent something else

that was very, very, very personal about looking at her son and wondering about his safety...I felt a real relief and kind of a break from isolation [when ARC started] but almost in a mechanical way...I almost felt like, "Oh good. I'm feeling overloaded in this, in the leadership role, but here people are taking care of this," and so that's just kind of like a confession. Like last summer was kind of checked off the list, people are working on this in a way that's beyond the statement.

Community as a sub-theme reflects "the state or fact of being shared or held in common; joint ownership, tenure, liability, etc." (OED, 2022a, para. 10).; as well as "the fact of having a quality or qualities in common; shared character, similarity; identity; unity" (OED, 2022a, para. 11). In an ecological sense, it also refers to "a group of interdependent organisms of different species growing or living together in a specified habitat" (OED, 2022a, para. 12). ARC members expressed a strong sense of community and belonging that developed through working under the shared vision, camaraderie, truth-telling, conflict, and witnessing each other's growth. For people of color, it was a place to be heard, valued, and seen as a leader. For white members, it was a place to take accountability and interrupt hegemonic whiteness through working for racial justice. One ARC member who is a person of color describes the experience:

One of the most profound ways [that ARC has impacted me] has been in creating a place. Working in a department where you feel like your voice is kind of very minimal, it's not really acknowledged, you know? It doesn't weigh as heavily as you might hope. To go from that space to a space where you feel like you know, you can share that voice...and it's, it's actually integrated as meaningful and powerful...can feel really important, all of a sudden.

Non-ARC members also experienced an increased sense of community, although not as intensely as ARC members. A white non-ARC participant noted:

This kind of energy or new connection or excitement, there's more bonding in the department...I was trying to think, when that went away?...We had been more in our faculty and staff relationships, just very mechanical [focusing on] program logistics and things like that. And we talked about things, we talked about courses, or whatever, things in isolation, but I don't feel like we had been energized by talking about big issues, big ideas like antiracism. There's a new level of engagement, again. Let's talk about something important and central to our field, and what we can do about it.

During the year, different views of social work and their underlying political philosophies emerged during ARC activities. ARC members generally align with the social change-oriented social work, which expresses the critical theoretical tradition, centering power analysis and transformation of unjust systems to achieve the professions' goals (Payne, 2020). At least three non-ARC members expressed views more aligned with social cohesion-oriented social work, which expresses the neoliberal political philosophy, centering meeting individual people's needs in order to recover stability within the current system (Payne, 2020). Even within these differences, there was a general sense of community. One white non-ARC member reported, "[ARC] created a stronger sense of

collegiality, especially as I voiced some points of view that were not in direct alignment with Kendi's work, and these were received respectfully and with kindness."

Primarily Individual Impact, With Small but Potentially Significant Department Impact, and Small but Potentially Significant Structural Impact

Across data sources, participants observed ARC's most significant impact to be at the individual level. They noted strengthened relationships among ARC members. These relational changes, with observable cross-racial organizing and an unwavering focus on antiracism, also shifted conversations and relational dynamics at the department level. Moreover, ARC members shared activities and lessons learned with other university groups working on antiracism, offering a model and inspiration for action within the broader institution. However, ARC and non-ARC members primarily viewed ARC's impact at the structural level as minor one year after its inception, noting its potential for future structural impact should ARC continue and make recommended changes (see Future section). The following quote from a white non-ARC member summarizes it well:

The biggest opportunity is to take the next step through praxis thinking into action. Much of the work of ARC up to this point has been in reflecting on and promoting an antiracist approach. This is powerful and essential. If we leave it there, though, I'm not sure it reaches the level of transformational. The next steps in this direction from my perspective will be to USE the perspective. I think it is already being incorporated somewhat into teaching, depending on the faculty member. A powerful next step would be to explore what it means on the policy and practice level. I envision the creation of explicit defining practical principles that can be used to evaluate policy decisions, curriculum choices, and more.

However, of note is that one non-ARC member indicated no individual impact and two were unsure about the department or structural impact. In addition, in the follow-up survey after the member checking process, one faculty (undisclosed race/ethnicity) stated that this theme:

Seems to reflect a series of subthemes to which I agree with the first, partially agree with the second, and feel unable to assess the third given the limited time during which this has been discussed as a faculty at large...ARC's impact may have been at the individual level since individuals chose to be involved...I feel that the department impact may have been somewhat small, but definitely notable given the attention given to this topic for our student body (e.g., film series [documentary 13th]) and time set aside to discuss during faculty meetings.

Strengths

Amidst the data sources, engagement across stakeholders (faculty, staff, students, and field instructors), strengthening relationships, and focusing on praxis were strengths. ARC's collective approach asserted antiracism into the department dialogue that was impossible before the collective formed. ARC members also noted that the relationships among members deepened through the collective's work, supporting their voice and growth

and allowing them to translate their values into actions as educators, researchers, and community members. ARC members also noted that ARC is future-oriented, leading the department toward the professions' emerging commitment to antiracism. The CSWE (2021) site visit report also identified this department movement "beyond cultural competence" toward antiracism as a strength in the CSWE site visit report (p. 1).

Challenges

ARC faced many challenges at individual, collective, departmental, university, and structural levels. As one ARC member who is a person of color simply said, "Systemic racism is a challenge." Across the six sources of data, five main challenges emerged: lack of a clear strategic plan, resistance, differences in the view of social work and its underlying political philosophies (which reflected different views about antiracism and strategies for how to address racism), conflict avoidance, and time.

Data sources showed a clear need for a multi-year strategic plan. ARC's immediate goal was to work with an experienced antiracism consultant, who would first facilitate a retreat and help the department develop a strategic plan. ARC received a proposal from the consultant and had a meeting with a senior department leader in the first few months of the collective to discuss the next steps. At the time, the resources were not available to engage in this process. Despite missing this goal, ARC proceeded with many outlined activities for the first year but never developed a multi-year plan. Furthermore, even though ARC had a theory of change and plan for activities, they were never clearly communicated to the department. This white non-ARC survey participant's response reflects this well:

I am not clear on the specific strategies ARC is using to reach its ambitious goal - - the "how" (for example, in comparison to other groups that have developed antiracism plans laying out the map). As opposed to a collection of events and conversations...I believe ARC's vision is achievable but there is a mismatch between its grandness and the lack of specifics so far.

Resistance was also a theme across the data sources. Among ARC members, resistance showed up primarily, although not exclusively, among white faculty around whether to include students in the book club discussions. They were concerned about how students may perceive their internalized racism. On another occasion, faculty of color were resistant to white faculty starting a white accountability group. These sources of resistance were also sources of conflict that eventually led to transformation for the collective, deepening relationships and trust.

ARC members also perceived resistance to their work from senior leadership and other faculty members at the department level. While the department senior leadership supported and appreciated ARC's work, including attending ARC events, ARC members expressed a concern that the leadership "did not own it." For example, while ARC did receive a 30-minute slot on the monthly faculty and staff agenda, the allocated time was rarely honored. ARC asked for resources to work with an antiracism consultant during the annual retreat and develop a strategic plan. The resources were not available at the time, and the senior leadership never revisited them. During the member checking session, a senior leader was

surprised to hear these findings and countered that monthly meeting reports during faculty and staff's meetings about department's funding challenges indicated that funding for the antiracism work with a consultant was not possible. Furthermore, a senior leader explained that they valued "giving credit where credit was due." Their strategy was to "step into the background and promote others," mainly because "ARC's collective nature was a strength and one embraced by ARC itself and a good model to promote in the college, university, the world."

There were also differences in the perception of who has the power to make changes in the department. Although several senior faculty acknowledged past challenges that junior faculty experienced with advocating for racial justice in the department, they still felt that, for example, ARC members were dispersed throughout the curriculum committees and could change the curriculum. On the other hand, ARC members who were junior faculty had at least two examples of attempts to make changes consistent with antiracism but experienced resistance from white senior tenured faculty. For example, a junior faculty experienced intense resistance from a senior faculty member to integrate intersectionality throughout the cultural competence course, which primarily relied on the multicultural rather than the critical theoretical framework. As a result, the official course syllabus reflected individual class sessions dedicated to African Americans, Latinos, or American Indians until the senior faculty left the department. In response, the junior faculty developed "a shadow" syllabus to teach the course from an intersectional critical perspective. In fact, the only ARC member that was able to make official changes as a course lead was the one who did not have to collaborate with a senior faculty member on their committee.

At the department level, differences in underlying political philosophies emerged, reflecting different views about antiracism and strategies for addressing racism. Three faculty members expressed concerns related to ARCs work. In the member checking follow-up survey, the same faculty (undisclosed race/ethnicity) who observed that "the department impact may have been somewhat small, but definitely notable (see quote above)," expressed concerns about ARCs perceived ideology. They note:

Whereas once a matter of personal liberty, this ideological framework is now being discussed here and at other universities in a way that creates clear imposition on alternative viewpoints both among faculty, staff, and students. Although the ARC's specific impact on the student body at [the university] is largely unknown, I know of at least one student who no longer wants to be in social work due to this shifting ideology. Of note, this student is a Black female.

Other concerns were related to strategies that generated discomfort rather than working with people where they were. Two faculty expressed concerns about using the term "antiracism" because it signaled a particular ideology which is not universal to all social workers or may cause people to feel defensive because of feeling judged if they are not constantly working to dismantle racism. A faculty (undisclosed race/ethnicity) offered the following approach:

Perhaps rather than asking questions that assume a specific ideological framework and are pretty open-ended (i.e., how are you doing the work of

antiracism?), questions along the lines of the following might allow for more unpacking/rumblings: What do you perceive as the benefits and/or disadvantages to using a term like “antiracism” versus other terms such as “diversity and inclusion”? What are the key tenants of “antiracism” as you understand them? Let's talk about these starting with X... (probably would need time each meeting to just discuss just one – e.g., with regard to policing, capitalism, affirmative action, focus on equal processes vs. outcomes etc.) What is clear? What is not? What might be some of the benefits and challenges to adopting Kendi's antiracist framework within our department? What is viewpoint diversity and how does it matter to this conversation?

Conflict avoidance was also consistent across the data sources. Even ARC members, who embraced and engaged in generative conflict, struggled at times with offering critique to each other or asking clarifying questions about ARC processes. ARC's conflict avoidance also got in the way of figuring out how to effectively integrate ARC into the department. While members had concerns about the impact of rotating leadership or decision-making processes on the advancement of ARC's goals, they did not bring them up. In addition, a few non-ARC faculty or staff members went to the department leadership to discuss concerns related to ARC's activities. Still, they never attended ARC meetings to discuss their concerns. Moreover, senior leadership struggled with finding the right way to respond to these grievances, given their administrative role and procedural responsibilities related to needing to listen to employees' grievances carefully.

Finally, time was a constant challenge. ARC members struggled to move antiracism forward within the department, having to remind themselves constantly that undoing racism is a long-term process. Time on the department meeting agenda to engage in a meaningful conversation, even when the 30-minutes were honored, was never long enough. Finally, a white non-ARC participant noted that "a major challenge is that we already have a lot of service requirements and not much bandwidth, so it's hard always to give these conversations our full attention."

ARC's internal infrastructure problems exacerbated the described challenges. Rotating ARC leadership promoted diverse leadership voices but was inefficient. It impeded progress and negatively impacted access to the allocated staff and faculty meeting time. This ARC member who is a person of color describes some of the challenges of operating as a collective with unclear processes:

ARC is, at times, it can feel directive, and it can feel like, you know, we're generating these ideas and then it's kind of like, you know, “just do this.” And so, for me, sometimes it gets confusing because I get confused about, okay, where, where is my opinion and, and my idea about how we're supposed to do this. And when am I supposed to hold that back and say, okay, no I gotta wait for collective agreement on this? Because sometimes it feels like we're working with collective agreement, and sometimes it feels like we're working from a more directive approach. And so, for me, that's a challenging area, because sometimes, I'll hold back and I will not do something. And then, you know, it won't have, something won't happen in ARC, and then I'll say “oh well, I could have done that” but I don't

feel comfortable all the time stepping in. But then at other times it feels like, you know, we can go based off of opinion, you know, and so it's for me that's kind of confusing.

Forces external to the department and ARC added complexity to the context and presented additional challenges. Mid-level senior leadership roles at our institution require simultaneous attention to leadership, administration, DEI issues, legal issues, student issues, community relations, and teaching in the classroom. The university support for their role in advancing complex DEI initiatives is limited. Finally, the past year was challenging in new ways. In addition to the normative hierarchical, individualistic academic culture that embodies structural racism, the department was also going through CSWE re-accreditation, establishment of a new college structure, and a global COVID-19 pandemic.

Future

Two themes were consistent among all sources of data: that ARC should continue its activities, including working across stakeholders (faculty, staff, students, field instructors), and that it should develop a clear strategic plan. Other recommendations from participants, which do not necessarily reflect ARC's plans, included: determining the scope of work (department vs. university vs. community), including outlining how ARC's work in the department of social work relates to the broader university and community equity efforts; developing principles for advancing antiracism; outlining concrete actions (e.g., curriculum and teaching strategies; white accountability group); developing skills for operating as a collective; developing sustainable collective infrastructure; defining collective membership/boundaries; embedding antiracism in performance evaluation for staff, faculty, and leaders; and using formal department structure to advance ARC goals. Of note is a comment by a faculty (undisclosed race/ethnicity) who expressed appreciation for ARC's work but voiced significant concerns for the future:

it will be important to lay the groundwork regarding definitions, to “rumble” (to quote Brené Brown) about this ideological framework and the extent to which there is agreement with its various facets, and how the department can move forward in a spirit of collegiality, unity, and in respect of diverse viewpoints...Some of the future plans should be carefully reconsidered—e.g., tying an antiracism framework to pay, evaluation, retention, and promotion is not only discriminatory and divisive, but inhibits free thinking and speech.

Discussion

This evaluative case study follows the first year of an antiracism collective in one social work department located at a Hispanic Serving Institution in the Southern U.S. We found that ARC 1) catalyzed department transformation as evidenced by the increased sense of critical consciousness, struggle, integrity, and community; and 2) achieved primarily individual impact, with small but potentially big department impact, and small but potentially big structural impact. While our findings have implications for ARC, our department's mission, and our local context, we believe these results are transferable to other SWEIs committed to antiracism. Given that structural racism is embedded in all

institutions (Bailey et al., 2021; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Davis, 2003; Davis, 2021), starting a collective inside SWEIs may be a step toward beginning to undo that structure. ARC was a source of wellbeing for both faculty and staff of color and white members, positively influencing their work as professionals and community members. Furthermore, strengthening interracial relationships through truth telling, accountability, and solidarity are new patterns at a small scale that can begin to shift patterns at a large scale (brown, 2017). While it reflects the larger pattern – we assume that internalized racism still exists within ARC members and therefore the collective – new ways of engagement at the small interpersonal scale signal a possibility for the large institutional and structural scale (brown, 2017).

However, operating as a collective requires skills and frameworks that most social workers do not learn. Faculty and staff who consider starting a collective should invest in developing skills and knowledge for collective leadership. While limited and mostly focused on worker cooperatives, the existing literature suggest that governance challenges that ARC experienced are common (Basterretxea et al., 2022). This is not surprising, given that faculty and staff, even as trained social workers, have internalized competition, hierarchical work structures, and focus on individual success that are key to the U.S. culture and white supremacy. Staff and faculty considering starting an antiracism collective within their departments should invest in developing the necessary skills – communication, meeting and decision-making, conflict resolution, and teamwork. Contacting a local cooperative incubator that also centers racial justice, exploring the resources of a cooperative such as RoundSky Solutions, and learning about mutual aid projects (Spade, 2020) are potential avenues for obtaining the necessary skills.

Internal groups for white faculty and staff that focus on critical whiteness and white accountability is essential for moving the antiracism work in the department forward. Such groups have been extensively, and for good reasons critiqued for performative activism that continues to center whiteness (Ahmed, 2006; Wooldridge, 2019). Still, it is also clear that white people must engage individually and collectively in cautious and careful antiracist praxis that interrupts hegemonic whiteness (Frey et al., 2021; Kivel, 2017; Swan, 2017). ARC work in the department frequently resulted in painful conversations that did not deepen relationships in a way that conflict did in ARC meetings. Therefore, ensuring that white faculty and staff engage in exploration of white ignorance and white complexity with each other, while also being in accountable relationships with people of color within the department is key (Swan, 2017). There are many resources that can help with developing white accountability groups, such as Paul Kivel's book *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, other social work programs experimenting with approaches to interrupting hegemonic whiteness (see Frey et al., 2021), or a national organization Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), which mobilizes white people to work for racial justice and emphasize accountability through collective action.

Evidence suggest that leadership is a critical factor in implementing successful organizational change (Stouten et al., 2018). Given the social work field's only recent move towards antiracism, it is inevitable that ideological differences (Payne, 2020) will emerge. Developing processes and skills to express and discuss these differences through generative conflict will be essential. Leaders are key in implementation success because they can

ensure that staff and faculty develop change-related knowledge and skills, including how to engage in transformative conflict. Transformative conflict centers reflexivity, feedback, harm-naming, listening, mutuality, accountability-taking, and repair (Creative Interventions, 2012; Kaba & Hassan, 2019; Ross & Ghadbian, 2020). They can normalize internal and interpersonal conflict as a critical element of ongoing growth and lifelong learning, which is an ethical imperative (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). This framing, in turn, can reduce stress, skepticism, and the sense of threat that conflict and change might bring (Stouten et al., 2016).

DEI leadership that centers antiracism is vital for organizational transformation (Todić et al., 2022); however, many social workers do not have these skills. Rather than generic leadership training, social work leaders need opportunities to develop DEI leadership skills and receive ongoing support in the context that is sensitive to how their positionality (e.g., intersection of race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation) contributes to their vulnerability and agency. Leaders must have a deep understanding of how white supremacy, structural racism, and their intersections with other forms of oppression operate inside their institutions (Davis, 2021). More importantly, they must have the skills, resources, and support to lead in a way that undermines and ultimately uproots them. Therefore, CSWE, National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD) must support social work administrative leaders in learning, confronting and leading through these challenges. Literature also indicates that organizational change benefits from multiple visible leaders (Stouten et al., 2016), indicating that sole reliance on formal leadership in SWEIs is not sufficient for a meaning change however, antiracism collectives must be clear on their sphere of influence. With senior leadership taking an explicit antiracism stance, antiracism collectives can partner in the organizational change process. With leadership hesitant to assume or resistant to an explicitly antiracist stance, collectives can serve as a source of support and empowerment for faculty and staff committed to antiracism, serving as a space where they can carefully consider their collective change strategies. Knowledge gained from movement building and organizational change theories provide helpful tools for navigating complex organizational dynamics.

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge the nature of change in the neoliberal university context, undermining and co-opting anti-oppression work (Todić et al., 2022). Being realistic about the length of time it takes to create change and adequately preparing for the journey is critical. However, there should be a clear understanding that the slow process comes at a cost, especially to people of color. Since the initiation of the antiracism collective, four people of color resigned their full-time positions in the department, including two co-authors of this study who are women of color. Clear strategic plans for antiracism work can help (Polk et al., 2021). In addition, SWEIs can advocate for resources and technical support from university DEI departments, which can support the department-level momentum (Polk et al., 2021). These resources can also enable leadership development skills, work with consultants to develop strategic priorities, and assistance with organizational change.

Although ARC made small advances within their SWEI, much work remains ahead. Broader discussion around the role of critical race theory and incorporation of antiracist

pedagogy in academic settings have become a point of the political divide used to generate controversy. Similar to ARC, schools of social work across the country are grappling with how to actualize social work standards of social justice in their departmental and institutional activities while preparing future social workers to engage social systems as well (see examples in *Advances in Social Work Summer 2021 special issue on Dismantling Racism in Social Work Education* guest edited by Charla Yearwood, Rosemary A. Barbera, Amy K. Fisher, and Carol Hostetter). This has presented some challenges, with at least one institution indicating an inconsistency between its institutional mission and the social work accrediting board's guidelines for practice standards (Lauer, 2021). Collectives similar to ARC can play a critical role in developing individual, departmental, and institutional capacity to address these issues by ensuring life-affirming spaces for faculty and staff committed to pursuing liberation efforts within complex institutional environments.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Jelena Todić, Department of Social Work, The University of Texas at San Antonio, 501 W. Cesar E. Chavez Blvd. San Antonio, TX, 78207. Email: jelena.todic@utsa.edu

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