An Anti-Racist Practice in Social Work Research Teams: One Story of Germination and Pollination

Juliana Carlson
Kelechi Wright
Meredith Bagwell-Gray
Amy N. Mendenhall
April Diaz
Sarah McCall
Nancy Jo Williams
Becci A. Akin
Linda Banda

Abstract: Social work researchers must intentionally and explicitly be anti-racist in commitments and actions if we are to disrupt, rather than simply acknowledge, racist systems and practices. This article, written by members of several research teams (including research staff, graduate research assistants, and principal investigators), describes an anti-racist team practice, which germinated in one research team and pollinated to others within a school of social work. We share our learnings and barriers, collected via an online, synchronous, anonymous platform, based on engagement in and implementation of the anti-racist research team practice. Learnings regarding the anti-racist research team practice clustered around three areas: professional individual experiences, takeaways, and ways the practice shaped our thinking about research teams. Identified takeaways included the importance of developing an anti-racist lens; a critical understanding of the role of academia in oppressive systems; transferring anti-racist content to other (non-research) areas; and augmenting our sense of responsibility to take action to combat racism. Anti-racist research team practices are one mechanism to disrupt "white logic, white methods" of normative research that is embedded in and perpetuates oppressive systems. Furthermore, sprouting anti-racist practices at the research team level can create a stronger culture of anti-racism within the social work discipline.

Keywords: Research team, anti-racist, social work, team practice

Social work researchers commonly work in teams to meet the aims of a specific research project or to collaborate on shared goals in a longer-term research trajectory. Many factors shape social work research teams' functioning, including team composition, the organizational culture of the team's larger structure, and funding source. Within the United States, white supremacy culture, defined as

_____

Juliana Carlson, PhD, Associate Professor and BSW Program Director, School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS. Kelechi Wright, LCPC, LPC, Assistant Professor, School, University of Houston, Houston, TX. Meredith Bagwell-Gray, PhD, Associate Professor, and Amy N. Mendenhall, PhD, Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs and Professor, School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS. April Diaz, MA, MSW, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Fort Hays State, Fort Hays, KS. Sarah McCall, MA, Undergraduate Engagement Librarian, Libraries, Nancy Jo Williams, PhD, Associate Professor, and Becci A. Akin, PhD, Professor, School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS. Linda Banda, PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT.

the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value. (Okun, 2021, p. 4)

This also manifests itself at the organizational level of all teams. For example, research teams, seen through the critique of white supremacy, are often plagued with a sense of urgency, get trapped within either/or thinking, or place greater value on team members' written contributions compared to other equally valuable or more necessary contributions that sustain the project (Okun, 2021). Joining other social work researchers in naming that "most researchers in the United States do not practice antiracist research" (Goings et al., 2023, p. 103), we assert that the persistent influence of white supremacy culture in social work research teams should compel research team leaders and principal investigators to seek out team-focused remedies and antidotes using anti-racist strategies.

"Anti-racist" is a term brought into the national vocabulary by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (2019) with his book *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. Being anti-racist within a research team means "being" so across all aspects of the research process (Palmer et al., 2022). Further, based on the clear axiom from Kendi's work: there is no such thing as "not racist," there is either racist or anti-racist; an anti-racist social work research team actively pursues the embodiment of being anti-racist. Furthermore people (or, in this case, teams) are not either racist or anti-racist; every team will make a combination of choices, some being racist and some being anti-racist, with a goal of shifting the balance towards a greater and more consistent combination anti-racist practices (Kendi, 2019). This framing demands then that social work research teams take action to become aware of how racism is woven into every part of the research endeavor and perform regular practices to build that awareness and (re)design how they approach research from start to finish (Goings et al., 2023). This manuscript tells the story of how social work research teams within one school of social work responded to this call for action. As the seeds for anti-racist practice began to germinate and grow within one team, they inspired others toward action through pollination across multiple teams.

Context Setting

In accordance with professional social work values and guiding ethical principles, "social workers challenge social injustice" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017, para. 3). This is echoed in the Council of Social Work Education's 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, particularly explicitly naming an "anti-racist and anti-oppressive" foundational orientation to social work education. With this call to action and professional commitment, it is essential for social work scholars to be explicitly anti-racist in our *research praxis*—that is, the iterative process of reflection and action within our research practices as we move between practice and theory (Freire, 1985; Leavy, 2017). Anti-racist scholar activism—that is, choosing to use our positionality within academic institutions as a site of resistance by combining scholarship and activism— is "something we do, rather than something we are" (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2021, p. 2). In the practice of anti-racist scholar activism, social work scholars can learn from and contribute to a robust and growing body of academic research and scholarship that

interrogates and resists neo-liberal assumptions and methods of knowledge production, which reproduce systemic and structural racism (e.g., Strega & Brown, 2015; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Within the authors' home institution, a *critical perspective* guides our work as follows:

We engage in deliberate and continuing examination of social conditions and solutions. We use critical inquiry to analyze and challenge existing structures and systems in order to advance the field and promote social, economic, and environmental justice. (University of Kansas School of Social Welfare [KUSSW], 2020, p. 10)

Anti-racist scholar activism is an important, specific component of our more general anti-oppressive and critical focus. To set the context of our work of collectively growing in our service to communities of resistance through anti-racist research through research teams, we review principles of anti-oppressive research praxis more generally, apply them to anti-racist research praxis more specifically, and identify core tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). This background provides context setting for how we applied the associated principles, practices, and theoretical constructs within and across our research teams.

Anti-Oppressive Research and Anti-Racist Research Praxis

Critical, Indigenous, and anti-oppressive research have served (and can serve) as a model for anti-racist practice on research teams. Anti-oppressive research can be defined as engaging in research praxis that intentionally avoids contributing to systemic harm towards people who have been marginalized and minoritized by systems of oppression while focusing efforts on systemic and institutional justice (Lavallée, 2014). Because critical, Indigenous, and anti-oppressive frameworks are connected to a broader realm of combating harmful practices in research across all intersections of marginalized populations, they offer a foundation for employing racial and ethnic anti-oppressive research methodologies more specifically.

Potts and Brown (2015) outline three tenets of anti-oppressive research. As the first tenet, anti-oppressive research is socially just in every step of the research process, thereby extending the goal of social justice in research outcomes to social justice in research processes. Socially just research processes begin with asking research questions that shift our focus from studying people who are at the margin to people, systems, and structures that dominate. For example, according to the Boston University Center for Anti-Racist Research (n.d.), conducting anti-racist research starts with asking anti-racist questions, which direct researchers' gaze toward the root causes of inequity. Specifically, antiracist questions ask, "What is wrong with policies?" as opposed to "What is wrong with people?" Socially just research processes also question and interrogate power differentials between the researcher and those being researched, asking how research participants can also be the researchers and ensuring equitable distribution of credit, resources, and benefits of the research (Potts & Brown, 2015).

Second, anti-oppressive research rests on epistemological claims that all knowledge is socially constructed and political (Potts & Brown, 2015). People co-create knowledge

based on their social and political positioning—that is, based on aspects of their identity, such as race, class, gender, ability and so on—which speak to one's relative power and privilege; therefore, "it is created within and through power relations" (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 19). For anti-racist research specifically, deliberate attention is paid to race, ethnicity, and color with the intersections of these identities (Kendi, 2019).

Third, anti-oppressive research foregrounds relationships and, in so doing, rejects the hierarchical and paternalistic research structures wherein researchers are "experts" and co-authors are objects of study (Potts & Brown, 2015). With this relational orientation, "constant attention is given to" key relationships and their attendant power relations, "and care is taken to try and shift the balance of knowledge-creating power from outside researchers to those with lived experience of the issue under study" (Cegaloski, 2000, as cited in Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 21). Relationships are also seen as long-standing rather than disposable upon the completion of the research project. In anti-racist research, this means relational accountability in terms of moving from critical reflexivity to action; for example, for white researchers, an important part of relationship building with racialized research participants is naming both one's whiteness and one's anti-racist stance with them as a part of the research process (Mayor, 2022). Anti-racist research is necessarily community engaged research: "Without community input or intentional collaboration, research with communities becomes vulnerable to a myriad of oppressive practices that can derail social-justice oriented goals," (Palmer et al., 2022, p. 225). Building and maintaining anti-racist researcher-community partnerships necessitates considerable time investment for transparent conversations about the purpose of the research and the researchers' intentions at project initiation; learning about the community's history, including its history of trauma and resilience; identifying and connecting with key organizations and community leaders; and learning verbal and non-verbal nuances and cultural codes for communication (Collins et al., 2018; Flicker et al., 2007; Palmer et al., 2022). Primarily, anti-racist researchers should align their goals with the goals of the community (Palmer et al., 2022).

Applying Critical Race Theory to Social Work Research Teams' Work

Critical race theory (CRT) has a long influential rhetorical and material history interrogating the academy and research (Yosso, 2005). At the same time, CRT has been used to question and transform the constructs and functioning of endeavors within and outside the academy. Writing about this, Yosso (2005) states, "CRT finds that racism is often well disguised in the rhetoric of shared 'normative' values and 'neutral social scientific principles and practices" (p. 74). This application of CRT has also included social work research (Constance-Daftary, 2020), education (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Constance-Huggins, 2012), practice and policy (Kolivoski et al., 2014; Razack & Jeffrey, 2002). While many CRT formulas are offered in different fields and texts, for the purpose of this manuscript, we look to social work scholars for key tenets. Kolivoski et al. (2014) provide five central tenets by which they examine social work practice and policy; they are "racism as ordinary, the critique of liberalism, Whiteness as ultimate property, interest convergence, and the unique voice of color" (p. 270; see article for full review of scholarship supporting these tenets). With these tenets in mind, the application of CRT

to social work research teams fits well within an anti-racist approach. CRT was applied to this research context in that it was the foundational theory used as an anchor to guide the various research teams in the work. CRT provided a critical lens to engage and approach research related tasks and steer efforts towards an anti-racist approach.

Anti-racist Practices in Research Teams

While the literature on "doing" anti-racism in social work (and sister disciplines) research is on the rise particularly in the last few years (e.g., Goings et al., 2023; Waller et al., 2022), there still is a paucity of writing about how anti-racist practices occur or could occur in teams conducting research. In other words, strategies to make research anti-racist have been limited mostly to the research process, including sampling, methods, and dissemination. Writing with explicit attention to the individuals making up an anti-racist research team is surprisingly thin. In their recent article, Goings and colleagues (2023) provide a needed exception, describing clear research team roles in anti-racist research, including principal investigator and team personnel, as well as training and ethics. Others have written about diversity, equity, and inclusion in research teams (Hatterty et al., 2022), and about anti-racist or racial equity research that could be applied by research teams (e.g., Hawn Nelson et al., 2020; Sukhera & Palaniyappan, 2022), although this application is implied rather than described in detail to be utilized in team functioning. Overall, documentation on developing and sustaining anti-racist research teams, within social work and beyond, is sorely lacking.

Aims and Structure

This article describes how an anti-racist practice germinated in one social work research team and through a natural pollination process bloomed in multiple research teams at the same school of social work and subsequently grew into their work with community partners. The aim of this article is twofold. First, by sharing this journey, including the practice itself, we seek to engage in direct dialogue and new learning with fellow social work research teams who are striving to be anti-racist in their research teams (and beyond). We have much to learn and welcome critique. Second, we join with other students and researchers to move out of the "not racist" research team status quo by acknowledging that we were trained (without our full awareness) within a white supremacist system and structures, including, uniquely so, the academy.

With these two aims in mind, we structure this article into five sections. First, we provide positionality statements as authors, motivated to define our positionality as a form of transparency in our writing and to make explicit the power, privilege, and team-level dynamics relevant to research teamwork including team roles (e.g., principal investigator, graduate research assistant, research staff). Then, we describe the germination process for the anti-racist practice, including the history, context, and motivation for the practice, along with a description of the practice as it normed to become with one research team. Next, we convey the pollination of the anti-racist practice. Here, we outline the experience of two additional research teams with different principal investigators and a university research office. Following that outline, all authors contribute to a synthesis of what we learned

through our engagement in and implementation of the anti-racist practice. This section is organized with our positionalities at the center to focus on learnings within our distinct roles relevant to the nature of research teams. Finally, we identify our desire to join with other social work researchers in ongoing learning in anti-racist practice within social work research teams.

Positionality Statement

All authors at the time of writing are connected in one or more ways to the University of University of Kansas. The authors are all cis-gender women. Our racial/ethnic identities include three biracial (South or East Asian and white), three Black (African American, Malawian, Nigerian-Jamaican American), three white, and one white Mexican American. Five are principal or co-principal investigators, three are (or were when they were on the teams) doctoral students/graduate research assistants, and one staff member. All authors were members of the research teams that implemented the anti-racist practice; of those, six were a part of the team where it originated. Lastly, from a positionality standpoint, it is important to note two of the five principal or co-principal investigators are bi-racial, three are white, and three of the five principal or co-principal investigators hold administrative positions.

Germination

In this section, we describe the germination of the anti-racist practice in the research team that originated the practice. The term "germination" is used to reflect the organic and dynamic nature of growing, literally speaking of the energy and conditions needed in the transformation from a hard small seed to a seedling and eventually, when the conditions are suitable, a plant. In this case, the condition for the germination of the anti-racist practice in research teams was a specific federally funded project. Therefore, the history and purpose of that project is fundamental to understanding the germination of the practice. The following describes the federally funded project and the research team's motivation to respond in action to the overall project's principles over several years, including the onset of Covid related impacts on the project.

History and Context Setting: The QIC-DVCW Research Team

In 2016, the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare (KUSSW) research team entered into a cooperative agreement for the five-year project, the Quality Improvement Center on Domestic Violence in Child Welfare (QIC-DVCW). The QIC-DVCW developed six guiding principles of the Adult and Child Survivor Centered Approach (ACSCA), to "provide the foundation for expanding the range of responses and improving outcomes of families who are experiencing domestic violence and are involved in the child welfare system" (Carlson et al., 2023, p. 2). These principles are collaboration, connectedness, planning with survivors, unique strengths and challenges, equity (i.e., racial, ethnic, and gender), and healing and well-being. While each of the principles are foundational, equity surfaced early on as a location of both aspiration and struggle for the QIC-DVCW management team and the technical assistance team, but also specifically for

the KUSSW QIC-DVCW research team. Specifically, as planning for the project evaluation unfolded, issues surfaced regarding how systemic racism infiltrated every aspect of the project work and therefore the evaluation. Namely, project partners brought forward concerns about selected measurement instruments, in that they reproduce white norms about core constructs of the project, including parenting, collaboration, domestic violence, and healing. Concerns grew and led to tension within many of the project workgroups to develop instruments for the studies.

During this initial development timeframe (2016-2018), the research team was led by three faculty members at the KUSSW and included a research associate/evaluation manager and several graduate research assistants. Starting in 2018, all three principal investigators (including two coauthors, initials J.C., B.A.A.) were simultaneously a part of QIC-DVCW based voluntary group with the specific aim of decreasing harm perpetrated by white folks within the projects. In addition, our analysis on how insidious racism and white supremacy culture was in research practices, including the work of the QIC-DVCW team, grew to the level of recognition that we needed to have structure that would disrupt normative research and team practices and inform team norms and decision-making. Although the team was beginning to understand how much we did not know and how many assumptions about fairness and rigor were baked into their work, we lacked the mechanisms and skills to act effectively within the overall project's principles.

Motivation for and Pathway to the Anti-Racist Practice

In 2018, informed by the above, the QIC-DVCW research team initiated the development of "QIC-DVCW Evaluation Team Principles" to guide our work. The development work took approximately one year and occurred in phases as our team collectively wrote our principles through a process of reflection, discussion, and wordsmithing, culminating in our establishment of five principles: (1) pursue racial equity, (2) center the voices of families, (3) practice a collaborative approach, (4) conduct anti-oppressive research that translates to positive social change, and (5) be kind and courageous.

During this Principles work, I [J.C.] stepped into a greater leadership role as the primary PI in January 2019. Based on my personal [J.C.] engagement in using the "antidotes" to "White Supremacy Culture Characteristics" (Okun, 2016, 2021), I started a time for sharing appreciations during research team meetings. The purpose of the appreciations time was to "develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to make sure that people's work and efforts are appreciated" as an antidote to the white supremist characteristic of perfectionism (Okun, 2016, p. 2). The team identified the value of the appreciation practice. Then, in fall 2019, I [J.C.] adapted a team-based activity of reading Okun's (2016, 2021) work for the QIC-DVCW research team, thus contributing to the initiation of the anti-racist practice described below in our weekly research team meetings.

Description of an Anti-Racist Practice in a Research Team

The QIC-DVCW research team's anti-racist practice was a weekly, prioritized activity that always included a chosen reading and reflection. Sometimes the reading was paired with appreciations. Each team meeting started with this anti-racist practice, lasting for approximately 20 minutes, and setting the tone for subsequent discussions about project decisions that occurred within this and other project meeting spaces. The choice to protect time can be challenging when faced with managing a logistics-heavy project with regular deliverables, therefore the practice becomes an act of resistance against white supremacy norms of a *sense of urgency* and *quantity over quality* (Okun, 2021). The short-term loss of time was more than rewarded by deeper insights into how a team approaches their daily and weekly tasks, resulting in more gains over the long-term scope of a multi-year project. To offset the short-term discomfort of doing something different, the practice required a buy-in from all team members followed by a consensus-based, collaborative approach to shaping the practice, including how the team selected readings, engaged the readings, and engaged each other within this discussion space. The research team practice evolved and deepened overtime and through the onset of Covid.

The QIC-DVCW evaluation team members worked together to identify possible readings and created a centralized "anti-racism readings" file folder within the project's shared drive where any team member could add materials. We agreed to identify readings and other media sources that would be easy to engage in incrementally to facilitate deeper discussions related to research and scholarship. Iteratively, we discussed and came to a consensus on what readings to focus on over the course of a few weeks to months depending on the length of the document. Over several years, the team collected, selected, and read a wide selection of articles, sometimes choosing specific sections and other times reading the entire article. Examples of what we read include:

- Black Lives Matter, and Yes, You are Racist: The Parallelism of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries (McCoy, 2020)
- How to Embed a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective in Research (selected sections; Andrews et al., 2019)
- Ten Counterproductive Behaviors of Well-Intentioned People (Charles, 2016)
- Transformational Collaboration (from Caminar Latino/Latinos United for Peace and Equity; White Starr, 2021)
- White Supremacy Culture (in Dismantling Racism Workbook; Okun, 2016)
- Why am I Always Being Researched? (select sections; Chicago Beyond, 2018)

The team also agreed upon a process of how to engage the readings. To help all members ground themselves in the materials and create a collective practice, the team read, processed, and discussed the readings within the time set aside during the weekly meetings. We agreed to limit outside reading, instead opting to read small sections of the material out loud during the meeting. Given the intuitional and system issue of racist practice in research, this choice prioritized our collective accountability instead of shifting responsibility to individuals; it also ensured that all team members could fully participate in our anti-racist practice, regardless of their time constraints and responsibilities outside

of our meeting time. Team members also identified that hearing the words together as we read them aloud was powerful and familiar, as in an oratory tradition. During the reading time, team members agreed to take turns reading a small section of the material out loud, creating a shared sonic experience and slowing everyone down to be present with the text through visual and auditory cues. Overall, the process was characterized by shared responsibility for facilitating the discussions, which was readily applied since the practice followed a clear, simple structure and relied upon reading in a round-robin format followed by reflections. Like any new practice, the consistency of applying this process repeatedly helped the team build their anti-racist muscles; initially, it was new and uncomfortable to many, but with time, it was expected and appreciated.

The QIC-DVCW research team identified three beneficial components of the practice. First, the regularity of the practice was critical to reminding individuals that equity work is an on-going practice, not an outcome to be achieved. Second, the team approached conversations using radical candor, allowing for honest and sometimes uncomfortable conversations, creating a culture that centered on dialogue, trust, and feedback. Third, the practice was an ongoing reminder that all team members should be mindful of positionality when thinking about how we approach our own work and how the team approaches each stage of the research process. For example, there was open dialogue about how the team was meaningfully engaging interested communities and partners. As another example, the team had ongoing conversations about the appropriateness of validated scales to measure marginalized experiences and had to move into spaces of discomfort to find and create measures that both partners and researchers could agree upon.

These conversations held during the anti-racist practice lent themselves well to ongoing reflection on how to approach the analyses and subsequent interpretations in a way that did not further harm families experiencing co-occurring child maltreatment and domestic violence. In summary, this specific anti-racist reading practice shifted the team culture by modeling how to show up to anti-racist practice within the team setting and, subsequently, to the evaluation work itself.

Pollination: Spread and Uptake by Other Project Teams

Pollination of the anti-racist practice occurred in powerful yet unique ways and into multiple spaces because the research team leads (e.g., Principal Investigator) intentionally introduced it after exposure to the practice. Here two such examples are provided. The first is within the Kansas Strong for Children and Families (Kansas Strong) and the second is within the work of Child and Family Research Team.

First Example: Kansas Strong for Children and Families

The positive experience I [B.A.A.] had with the anti-racist practice, as well as the skills developed from applying it in the QIC-DVCW team, served as a springboard for bringing it to other teams with which I work. Also important were influences from my interactions with the QIC-DVCW Technical Assistance (TA) Team, another project's work on racial disparities with Kristin Weber, then of the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), and my personal anti-racism learning journey. I worked collaboratively with Ms. McCall

to consider and plan for bringing the anti-racist practice to the project team of Kansas Strong. As with the QIC-DVCW 's evaluation team's practice of sustained and prioritized anti-racist activities, the Kansas Strong team engaged in a weekly collective learning and listening practice around anti-racism and anti-oppression that, at the time of this writing, continues to develop, affirm, and further the team's commitment to racial and social justice, and their capacity to understand and challenge norms, systems, and their own positionality and assumptions that uphold white supremacy (e.g., scrutinizing how being a white researcher trained in white normative universities influences processes). The fit and usability of the anti-racist practice with the Kansas Strong team were straightforward because of significant alignment with the project's values, ways of work, and existing project activities, such as conducting an Institutional Analysis (IA) of racial disparities in child welfare and engaging parents and youth with lived experience in system-level initiatives.

While the Kansas Strong research team adopted the practice without major revisions, applications of this practice rooted and grew with some variations. For example, the Kansas Strong team was comprised of faculty researchers, doctoral students, and staff. At the team level, antiracist discussion and reflection came from various sector-related lenses: research, evaluation, implementation, child welfare practice, project management, graduate student perspectives, along with team members' personal and intersecting identities and power differentials.

Kansas Strong's antiracist team practice yielded additional offshoots at the community, systems, and practice/program level. Kansas Strong is governed by a 50+-person Steering Committee comprising child welfare managers, community-based leaders and advocates, and parents with lived experience of the child welfare system. With technical assistance from CSSP, the project undertook an IA, aiming to center the experiences of Black families involved in the child welfare system and discover ways institutions' policies and practices misalign with Black families' needs and strengths (Wright et al., 2022; Weber & Morrison, 2021). While inequities and disparities were markedly apparent for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx families, the technical assistance providers strongly advised the Steering Committee to establish a focus on a specific, well-defined subpopulation of families. After multiple discussions, the committee decided to conduct the IA with a focus on the experiences of Black families of young children in this specific community. In the process of conducting the IA, the Steering Committee adopted a Covenant on Racial Equity in Child Welfare (LaLiberte et al., 2021), which laid out guiding principles as an accountability mechanism for taking firm action to address racial inequities within the community, instead of conducting extractive research that offers no tangible benefit to the community being studied. Building on the momentum of the IA and the pledge of the Covenant, a new initiative took root that aimed to provide infrastructure and support to a coalition led by Black community members who are pursuing progress toward racial equity in a local child welfare system. At the systems level, the team was invited to be a founding member of the Kansas Racial Equity Collaborative, a statewide group that is building shared knowledge and accountability to achieve racial equity in child welfare. At the practice and program level, the wing of the Kansas Strong team that developed a strengths-oriented, skills-based coaching program included anti-racism as one of six priority topics for the program. In

sum, the anti-racist practice at the team level nurtured an outgrowth of multiple initiatives and practices that created actions toward racial equity.

Second Example: Child and Family Research Team

Upon hearing about the anti-racist practice being implemented in the QIC-DVCW and Kansas Strong teams, I (A.N.M.) was eager to learn more to apply it in the child and family research team I was leading. In my role as associate dean, I invited the QIC-DVCW research team to present about their anti-racist team practice at a School Research Conversation, which was open to all faculty, researchers, and doctoral students. The Research Conversation was a critical moment in the School, amplifying the importance of anti-racist work not just in the classrooms and in teaching but also in how social work scholars do research and scholarship. The QIC-DVCW research team presented the anti-racist practice described above that could be easily adapted into diverse projects and teams.

After the research conversation, I adapted this practice for use in the child and family research team I lead, which includes students and staff from various projects. Within that team, the practice has looked similar, with the team initially reading aloud and discussing some of the anti-racism readings mentioned above, and then expanding to also include readings related to broader anti-oppressive research design, with a different team member picking a reading each meeting. The primary difference with the practice in this team has been that the members represent multiple projects and did not come together except in the context of the bi-weekly multi-project team meeting. This difference meant that team learnings and reflections were brought back to various research projects for broad impact, but also meant that team discussions about direct application were more difficult because members did not work together daily or have knowledge about details of each project represented in the group.

What We Learned

In drawing conclusions for this section, we coordinated a meeting as co-authors of this article to consider what we have learned and continue to learn from our experience with these anti-racist practices within our respective research teams. During our brainstorming session, we used an online, synchronous, anonymous forum to write down our lessons learned across three main categories: (1) professional individual experiences, (2) takeaways, and (3) ways the practice shaped thinking about research teams. Three co-authors (K.W., J.C., M.B.G.) agreed to take these brainstorming documents and synthesize and summarize a written overview of themes from our collective experiences. Then, all co-authors were given the opportunity to edit and add to the section to ensure it accurately reflected our experiences.

Professional Individual Experiences About/With the Anti-Racist Practice

Reflecting on this work, we expressed an appreciation for our experiences engaging in the process. Within the realm of process, elements such as the collaborative selection of reading materials and the power of reading texts aloud together were beneficial to building community and shared decision-making in the anti-racist work. Many of us also felt that

reading aloud together was beneficial insofar as it allowed us to better gauge how others on the team were responding to and thinking about each reading's content. This practice of reading aloud further removed any pressure to carve out time to read prior to meetings. As such, it became more feasible to incorporate and sustain anti-racist practice into the team priorities. Enabling sustainability, the regularity of the practice and knowing that it would occur each week allowed us to stay grounded in intentionality and to carve out mental space for engaging in the content. This consistency in prioritization intentionality promoted the "infusion" of anti-racism in the research team—that is, focusing on permeating anti-racism into everything we do—as opposed to an "integration" approach wherein anti-racist practices remained outside of and additional to the team's core work.

From a student team member-co-author's perspective, I (L.B.) appreciated the added benefit of learning from this experience in my early career. As such, the anti-racist practice provided a framework and foundation for my research that I can now build upon throughout my career and eventually take to other institutions. From my (L.B.) perspective as an international student, the anti-racist practice provided a space to learn about what anti-racist practice looks like not only in research teams but also within the U.S. academic context.

Takeaways About the Anti-Racist Practice

We collectively identified four primary takeaways from our anti-racist practice including 1) the development of an anti-racist lens; 2) a critical understanding of the role of academia in promoting oppressive systems; 3) the ability to transfer the anti-racist content discussed to other, non-research areas of our lives; and 4) augmenting our sense of responsibility to take action to combat racism.

The first takeaway was our development of an ever-present anti-racist lens. Inherent in this work was a realization that we could not be neutral with regards to racism, necessitating that we actively work to be anti-racist in our research work specifically. Members shared that we learned to devalue "objectivity" as a goal of research and learned to see how what we often defined as "knowledge" can reflect and further white norms and thus white supremacy. Learning to see through an anti-racist lens further meant understanding how anti-racism could be incorporated into every step of their research. As one of us shared during the brainstorming and reflection session, "Being anti-racist as a researcher ... is not just in my mind. It isn't just in the way I construct variables, in the way I create an instrument, in the way I incentivize co-authors, in the way I write grant proposals; it is in *all* the spaces."

Second, related to the ability to see through an anti-racist lens, we gained an understanding of how academia in general promotes racially oppressive systems. Values within academia, including perfectionism and individualism stem from and reinforce what Okun (2021) calls white supremacist culture. Many of these values are ones we came to internalize as the normed, desirable values within society. Engaging in the anti-racist practice, then, required us to unlearn these and become aware of where our "truth" about what is normal and expected was problematic and harmful. It also helped us to be more mindful of other scholars' positionality when reading their works and reflect on potentially

problematic assumptions that could inform what they present as "fact" or "evidence." For example, the federal prevention clearinghouse, which espouses to identify child welfare interventions with the strongest evidence, and which does not require transparency of researcher positionality, has denied nearly all submitted culturally relevant interventions from being identified as having adequate evidence for their mark of approval (i.e., "well supported"). Given our growing understanding of how academia supports and sustains racism if not interrupted and resisted, engaging in the anti-racism practice meant recognizing we did not and could not fix systemic racism in research alone; rather, we need to and can collectively work on changing the culture of academic research teams. This shift in perspective led to a decentering of the self and a greater focus on the collective and collaborative.

Third, we shared that the anti-racist practice can be applied to other areas of our work, such as in the classes we teach or in our work with community partners. For example, many of us now plan and budget for cultural consultation with other racial justice experts so that we can provide feedback and blind spots and to ensure practices align with anti-racist values. Importantly, the practice also had implications within our personal lives. We recognize that these are the lenses we should use not only in our work and research, but also in our everyday lives. Anti-racist practice should go beyond just writing about it, but also ensuring that in all spaces we are in, we should live it.

As a fourth and related takeaway, we learned that to be anti-racist in our research praxis it is less important to think about what is racist about research in general and more important to think very specifically about what is racist about our own research and our own practices and decisions within academia. Given the pervasiveness of systemic racism in all aspects and steps of the research process, we and our team members recognize that every member of the research team – students, research staff, principal investigators, etcetera – has a role in contributing toward infusing anti-racist practice in our research. However, as we name power dynamics within teams, the principal investigators stress here, how important being anti-racist in team leadership is for an anti-racist research team.

The Ways the Anti-Racist Practice Shapes our Thinking About Research Teams

The anti-racist research team practice shapes our thinking about research teams. Fundamentally, the practice has supported our anti-racist process of "unlearning" beliefs, norms, and standards we have been taught about how research should be conducted and how research teams should function. Those areas of unlearning include rejecting the importance and superiority of individual contributions and redefining the conceptualization of rigorous research. This understanding is grounded in our recognition that we have been taught guidelines that are often misaligned with being anti-racist.

Additionally, the anti-racist practice shapes our thinking about research teams as it relates to the importance of manifesting collaboration and collectivism in the research teamwork, identifying these as antidotes to white supremacy culture in research. It was clear to us that team discipline to an anti-racism practice was a powerful way to establish team identity and culture and thereby work more collaboratively.

Lastly, we have experienced a growing awareness and have changed our behaviors related to our positionality as research team members, more directly attending to the inherent power differentials. The anti-racist practice was powerful in challenging and scrambling notions of authority, expertise, and attribution (e.g., who gets the credit for research works). Namely, for those of us who are principal investigators of research teams, the implementation of and commitment to the anti-racism practice shapes our awareness that we have the power to change team culture. This power to change is directly linked to our accountability as social workers to the professional National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics, which includes "challenging social injustice." With an acknowledgement that research can be an oppressive enterprise, we have discovered ways in which research teams and our specific team practices can challenge the injustice within it.

Implications

Since social work research is deeply connected to social work practice as a mechanism to introduce and test practice and theory, creating norms of anti-racist research practices in research teams is past due in the social work field. Rigorous research and training can be conducted with anti-racist approaches in mind. Anti-racist research teams can question what used to be presumptively accepted (by ourselves and our profession) as okay and be open to new ways of conducting research that can make it more inclusive and relevant to a wider audience. This goes beyond "culturally relevant research." Anti-racist research is novel because it acknowledges the structural and systemic racism that permeates every US institution and its practices. Without intentional unlearning and explicit practices to be anti-racist (i.e., not neutral on racism), research will be racist. Anti-racist research team practices, like the one described here, can disrupt the normative practices in research that are embedded in white supremacy and help to perpetuate oppressive systems. Furthermore, germinating anti-racist practices at the research team level can create a stronger culture of anti-racism within the social work discipline since research disseminates into the practice level in overt and covert manners.

Observing the pollination and germination process described here suggests that anti-racist research frameworks require more of an *infusion* at every level and stage of the research process rather than just inclusion. Infusing anti-racist theory and methodology can help to ensure that an anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens is maintained throughout the research trajectory, and a team practice establishes a mechanism for promoting anti-racist actions and accountability in the research team. However, having established that there is a gap in the literature as it relates to anti-racist research teams, it is recommended that the generation of more scholarship is needed to continuously challenge research practices at the team level because of its role in the production of research.

As the social work academy is constantly influenced by ever-changing institutional factors in society overall, anti-racist research literature in social work is especially needed, to continuously ensure that research practices over time are not complicit with oppressive practices that marginalize and harm as the research world evolves. It is also recommended that anti-racist research practices replace antiquated notions of cultural competence which

assumes that expertise and proficiency especially in cross cultural/ethnic research can be mastered. Anti-racist research bears more relevance in establishing that more productive means forwards are creating a culture of anti-racism rather than false beliefs of competency, that are often rooted in white supremacy.

Barriers: What We Faced, What Other Research Teams Could Face

We identified many barriers to implementing and sustaining anti-racist practices in research teams based on our experience. Some of these barriers are within our own teams and some barriers are within the larger academic and research apparatus (for a rigorous discussion of barriers within larger academic and research spaces in social work see: Going et al., 2023 and Waller et al., 2022). First, we experienced tensions associated with taking risks to infuse our work with anti-racist approaches, which we anticipated might not be well received by funders or institutional collaborators. A remedy for this was finding solidarity with those who were a source of encouragement amid opposition. The examples traced in this article showed how such efforts can have real earth-moving impact (one university and colleagues' community garden) over time. Second, the transient nature of research teams comes with the risk of leaving gaps in the accumulative knowledge of and engagement with an anti-racism practice like the one described. Since research teams' function in collaborative spaces change with funding source transitions and when students and faculty move to other projects, team composition can rotate rapidly. Therefore, consistently implementing an anti-racist stance at the research team level in an ongoing way (as opposed to a singular training or seminar) can ensure anti-racist practices are constantly being infused into the team.

Third, we also experienced that our research teams operate with gaps in various areas of diversity. For example, one of our research teams found that creating accommodating spaces like race caucuses can be helpful when there are few people of color on the team, with the goal to display radical empathy and candor. Race caucuses created a sense of solidarity and reprieve to keep engaging material that was deeply personal and painful. Additionally, we identified that people are at various levels of willingness to engage and challenge themselves and their positionality, and when individuals' levels are low it can be a potential barrier to the team overall and their participation in the anti-racist practice. In considering positionality, I [J.C.], as a white person, admonished that white people should do their own work inside and outside of multi-ethnic and racial groups engaged in anti-racism work so as not to dominate conversations and engagements about their own experiences. This is particularly relevant to note, as mentioned above, given that half of the principal investigators were white, and given that this is the norm in social work research teams, with the disproportional number of white social worker academics (Goings et al., 2023).

Lastly, some of us also acknowledged that it was difficult to engage materials that challenged our complicity with racism in the research field in the past. Yet, after committing to embracing consistent anti-racist frameworks in research, what was formerly uncomfortable, later became more normal. One contributor even stated that it became uncomfortable to collaborate with teams that did not approach their research with an anti-racist stance.

Conclusion

The social work discipline was generated, created and has been sustained in a society rooted in white supremacy and systems that racially and ethnically oppress (Wright et al., 2021). Since the massive and pernicious problem of racism remains at the roots of the discipline, the evils of these oppressive structures permeate through the entire field (Wright et al., 2021). Anti-racist research does not require uprooting the social work field, which is impossible from a CRT understanding that asserts that racism is in the fabric of our society, but by radically changing and reforming our research framework, including how research teams function. This article provides a viable introductory model, which is one approach (not the only way), to an anti-racist research team practice, for social workers who seek to be anti-racist researchers.

References

Abrams, L. S., & Moio, J. A. (2009). Critical race theory and the cultural competence dilemma in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *45*(2), 245-261.

Andrews, K., Parekh, J., & Peckoo, S. (2019). How to embed a racial and ethnic equity perspective in research. Child Trends.

Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. (n.d). *Research* [Archive]. Author.

Brown, L. A., & Strega, S. (Eds.). (2015). *Research as resistance: Revisiting critical, indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches* (2nd ed.). Canadian Scholars' Press.

Carlson, J., Kepple, N. J., Akin, B., Park, C. C., DeWolfe, J., Ung, T., & Taggart, S. (2023). Bridges to better: Groundwork for building survivor-centered systems, Executive summary of the final report of the Quality Improvement Center on Domestic Violence in Child Welfare (QIC-DVCW). Adult & Child Survivor-Centered Approach.

Chicago Beyond. (2018). Why am I always being researched? Author.

Charles, C. (2016). T*en counterproductive behaviors of well-intentioned people*. YES! Media/Positive Futures Network.

Collins, S. E., Clifasefi, S. L., Stanton, J., Straits, K. J. E., Gil-Kashiwabara, E., Rodriguez Espinosa, P., Nicasio, A. V., Andrasik, M. P., Hawes, S. M., Miller, K. A., Nelson, L. A., Orfaly, V. E., Duran, B. M., & Wallerstein, N. (2018). Community-based participatory research (CBPR): Towards equitable involvement of community in psychology research. *The American Psychologist, 73*(7), 884-898.

Constance-Daftary, A. (2020). Critical race theory: An effective framework for social work research. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, *29*(6), 439-454.

Constance-Huggins, M. (2012). Critical race theory in social work education: A framework for addressing racial disparities. *Critical Social Work*, *13*(2), 2-16.

Flicker, S., Travers, R., Guta, A., McDonald, S., & Meagher, A. (2007). Ethical dilemmas in community-based participatory research: Recommendations for Institutional Review Boards. *Journal of Urban Health, 84*(4), 478-493.

Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Goings, T. C., Belgrave, F. Z., Mosavel, M., & Evans, C. B. R. (2023). An anti-racist research framework: Principles, challenges, and recommendations for dismantling racism through research. *Journal of Society for Social Work and Research, 14*(1), 101-128.

Hattery, A. J., Smith, E., Magnuson, S., Monterrosa, A., Kafonek, K., Shaw, C., Davidson Mhonde, R., & Kanewske, L. C. (2022). Diversity, equity, and inclusion in research teams: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Race and Justice*, *12*(3), 505-530.

Hawn Nelson, A., Jenkins, D., Zanti, S., Katz, M., Berkowitz, E., Burnett, T. C., & Culhane, D. (2020). *A toolkit for centering racial equity throughout data integration*. Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy, University of Pennsylvania.

Joseph-Salisbury, R., & Connelly, L. (2021). *Anti-racist scholar-activism*. Manchester University Press.

Kansas University School of Social Welfare [KUSSW]. (2020). *A look forward: 2019 & beyond.* Author.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.

Kolivoski, K. M., Weaver, A., & Constance-Huggins, M. (2014). Critical race theory: Opportunities for application in social work practice and policy. *Families in Society*, *95*(4), 269-276.

LaLiberete, T., Gehringer, S., & McKizzie Cooper, D. (Eds). (2021). CW360: A comprehensive look at a prevalent child welfare issue. Confronting racism. Engaging partners. Finding solutions. Summer 2021. Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, University of Minnesota.

Lavallée, L. F. (2014). Anti-oppressive research. In D. Coghlan & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of action research* (pp. 40-44). Sage.

Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. Guilford Publications.

McCoy, H. (2020). Black lives matter, and yes, you are racist: The parallelism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *37*(5), 463-475.

Mayor, C. (2022). Anti-racist research praxis: Feminist relational accountability and arts-based reflexive memoing for qualitative data collection in social work research. *Affilia, 37*(4), 624-644.

National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (2017). *Code of ethics*. Author.

Okun, T. (2016). *White supremacy culture*. Dismantling Racism Works.

Okun, T. (2021). *White supremacy culture–Still here*. Dismantling Racism Works.

Palmer, J., Morgan, J., Hinojosa, S., Olomi, J., Ayala, L., & Rosay, A. (2022). Anti-racist & intersectional approaches in social science and community-based research. In R. Throne (Ed.), *Social Justice Research Methods for Doctoral Research* (pp. 222-243). IGI Global.

Potts, K., & Brown, L. (2015). Becoming an anti-oppressive researcher. In L. Brown & S. Strega (Eds.), *Research as resistance: Revisiting critical, indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches* (2nd ed., pp. 17-41). Canadian Scholars' Press.

Razack, N., & Jeffery, D. (2002). Critical race discourse and tenets for social work. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue Canadienne de Service Social*, *19*(2), 257-271.

Sukhera, J., & Palaniyappan, L. (2022). Walking the walk: Advice for anti-racist academic leaders. *Psychiatry Research*, *308*, 1-3.

Waller, B. Y., Maledu, A., Quinn, C. R., Barman-Adhikari, A., Sprague Martinez, L. S., Traube, D. & Bellamy, J. L., (2022). Just research: Advancing antiracist and antioppressive social work research. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 13*(4), 637-644.

White Starr, R. (2021). Transformational collaboration: Considerations to apply a racial equity lens. National Resource Center for Reaching Victims Caminar Latino.

Wright, K. C., Carr, K. A., & Akin, B. A. (2021). The whitewashing of social work history: How dismantling racism in social work education begins with an equitable history of the profession. *Advances in Social Work*, *21*(2/3), 274-297.

Wright, K., Akin, B. A., Byers, K., McCall, S. E., Alford, D., Parker, A., Clark, S. L., Shaw-Woody, N., Kline, M., Brown, N., Hill, E., Davis-Myers, S., Parham, W., & Rush, R. (2022). Using institutional analysis to examine the systemic sources of racial disproportionality and disparity: A case example. *Child Welfare, 100*(2), 99-136.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 69-91.

Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.). (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Author note: Address correspondence to Juliana Carlson, School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 66045. Email: jmcarlson@ku.edu

Author ORCHIDs:
Kelechi Wright   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0636-445X
Meredith Bagwell-Gray https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5485-5448
Sarah McCall   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0097-7834
Nancy Jo Williams   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2741-9293
Becci A. Akin   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0026-5730
Linda Banda   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0863-5049
Juliana Carlson   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0372-5552