

Finding Shelter in the Storm: Undoing Racism in a Predominantly White School of Social Work

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Abstract: *This paper presents the case study of a 100+ year old school of social work recently shaken by acts of racial aggression targeted toward our Black/African American community. Following campus incidents that received national attention, minority social work students urged faculty to organize action to voice values of equity and justice, and to provide an intentional safe space within our school. In response, a volunteer faculty committee dedicated themselves to the group's formation and implementation of the Undoing Racism Principles from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB, n.d.), beginning internally and expanding outward. Representing multiple identities and positionalities of power, committee members use these principles to process our privilege. We reflect on our journeys with racism as social work educators and as individuals who are, and have been, influenced by internalized historical and contemporary racism. Guided by Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 1970/ 2002) and Critical Race Theory (Sulé, 2020), the praxis of reflecting in-and-on our work has evolved (Schön, 1983, 1987). Authors share their personal experiences, professional impacts, and efforts to implement anti-racist pedagogy. Contextual implications for schools of social work that aim to become anti-racist within their implicit and explicit curricula are provided by this case study.*

Keywords: *Anti-racism, Critical Race Theory, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, social work education, undoing racism, white supremacy*

Undoing Racism

As the all-encompassing aim of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB), the primary principle of **Undoing Racism** is trademarked as, "Racism is the single most critical barrier to building effective coalitions for social change. Racism has been consciously and systematically erected, and it can be undone only if people understand what it is, where it comes from, how it functions, and why it is perpetuated" (PISAB, n.d., para. 11). In approaching this difficult work within our own academic

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community, we humbly lean on the wisdom and teachings of the PISAB to guide our efforts at addressing racism for social transformation.

This paper presents the antiracism efforts of a 100+ year old school of social work across two major campuses in Norman and Tulsa Oklahoma. In this article, authors describe the formation of an Undoing Racism Committee (URC) as the active mechanism to transform our school from one anchored in white supremacy to one that actively dismantles it. Deepak and Biggs (2011) offer a definition of antiracism that requires Whites to acknowledge participation in racism *and* (emphasis added) to make an active commitment to the disruption of racism. Recent racist events, rather than being isolated incidents, have been painful layers atop the long and enduring history of racial oppression and white supremacy inherent within our academic communities, cities, and state. The Anne & Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, housed within the College of Arts and Sciences, is at the University of Oklahoma, which is a Research-1 institution. With approximately 600 MSW and 150 BASW students, the 2019 student body self-identified as: 54% European American; 16% Native American/Alaskan Native; 13% African/Afro-Caribbean/ African American; 7% Hispanic/Latinx; 2% Asian/Asian American; and 8% as not otherwise listed. Recognizing the racial diversity of our current students further spurred the desire to address this history of oppression. It was amid campus unrest that the URC began its mission of learning, envisioning, and operationalizing Undoing Racism principles (PISAB, 2018) within Socratic Circles, collegial relationships, and classes at our school of social work.

We chose the Anti-Racist Principles of the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB) as the foundation and guide for our aims, actions, and advocacy efforts. This was due to the years of training and experience by one of our faculty members who uses this work. PISAB (n.d.) offers the following anti-racist principles as the roots for their effective “broad-based movement for social transformation” (para.1). Including the overarching purpose of Undoing Racism, the nine principles are: Learning from History, Identifying and Analyzing Manifestations of Racism, Analyzing Power, Developing Leadership, Maintaining Accountability, Gatekeeping, Sharing Culture, and Undoing Internalized & Racial Oppression (PISAB, n.d.). Reflecting on this work to date we examine our process through each principle’s lens, secure our theoretical stance, and share our experiences in narrative form through case study methodology. True to this process, our first aim is to understand our recent campus turbulence, as explained in the following section, by researching lessons from the past within our state and our school of social work.

Learning From History

The PISAB (n.d.) principle **Learning from History** is a: “...*tool for effective organizing. Understanding the lessons of history allows us to create a more humane future*” (para. 6). An honest synopsis of our state and institution’s history, plus that of our school of social work, reveals well-established roots of white supremacy that permeate painfully into present day.

Historical Landscape of Racism in Oklahoma

The following section contains references to racial slurs and violent acts of racism. Founded on land taken from Native Americans by the U.S. government, the University of Oklahoma existed before statehood. In 1907, the state constitution did not include strict segregation because delegates feared President Theodore Roosevelt would veto the document. Immediately after the state was included in the union, the first legislature passed segregation laws (Smallwood, n.d.). Across our state, schools and public facilities were segregated and interracial marriages outlawed. To maintain a strict Jim Crow system of control over Black/African Americans, lynchings were commonplace from 1907-1930's (Smallwood, n.d.). Many believe one of the most extreme examples of racist violence in America occurred in 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma when a white mob destroyed more than one thousand Black/African American-owned homes and businesses, murdered many people (Ellsworth, 1982), and made clear the message of white supremacy.

According to resources from the Oklahoma Historical Society, Norman, Oklahoma (the university's main campus), was known as a sundown town until the 1960's and in an historical account by Givel (2018), it was enforced not by law but as evidenced by threat. Loewen (2006) describes a sundown town as, "any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans, or other groups, from living in it and was thus all-white on purpose" (as cited in Givel, 2018, p. 261). Typically, sundown towns were enforced by both legal and extralegal means. In the 1920's, the university town displayed prominent signs that said "N----, don't let the sun go down on you in this berg" (*Black Dispatch*, 1922, p. 1). During this same era, the 1920 university yearbook featured a student chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were no Black/African Americans in Norman, Oklahoma from 1907-1940 (Givel, 2018). Lynchings and other violence, known as "extralegal vigilante incidents" (Givel, 2018, p. 263), continued from 1899 to the early 1920s, effectively excluding Black/African Americans from working and living in Norman (Wommack, 1976). In February 1922 the *Norman Transcript* printed a letter from the KKK stating, "...from now on no negroes will be permitted to reside, work, or entertain in the city of Norman and no negroes will be permitted to remain in Norman after the sun goes down" (Ku Klux Klan Takes a Hand, as cited in Givel, 2018, p.276).

The first challenge to the city's sundown status came in 1940 when a group of students and local church leaders passed a resolution denouncing the job ban on African Americans. Further pressure on the city to cease its extralegal actions occurred in 1942 when the Navy constructed housing for Black/African Americans on the north side of the town. Then in 1946, a Black/African American woman was denied admission to the OU College of Law. In an historical lawsuit, she sued the university and her case went to U. S. Supreme Court, which resulted in a landmark ruling that ordered the university to admit her. Thus, 1949 marked the beginning of the end of the city's sundown practices and the university's segregation practices. Seventeen years later in 1967, Dr. George Henderson and his wife, Barbara Henderson, became the first African American homeowners in the city. Sundown practices lasted in Norman, Oklahoma from 1889-1967, a 78-year span (Givel, 2018).

The School's History of Racism

From 1917, when the School of Social Work at the University of Oklahoma (OU) began, it did not hire a tenure-line Black/African American professor until 1964 notably the same year as the Civil Rights Act. An interview with Dr. Kenneth Wedel, an OU School of Social Work historian, revealed that between 1960 and 2020 only 57% of the faculty of color hires were on tenure-track lines; whereas, 43% of the adjuncts, instructors, and grant-funded positions were POC (personal communication, September 11, 2020). His unofficial review estimates only half of the 19 tenure-track faculty of color during these years were retained or successfully promoted, which may be an indication of the lack of support for POC faculty versus the support for white faculty hires during these years.

The Undoing Racism committee attempted to learn from history by reaching out to prior African American graduates. Six alumni were contacted but only three responded and agreed to be interviewed. Similarities between their anecdotal responses were striking, even though there was a 20-year span across their time in the program. All alumni mentioned micro-aggressions and racism. One alumni respondent shared that she felt marginalized and vulnerable because she was outspoken about racism and social justice. This was especially obvious when this student and her family were impacted by the bombing of the Murrah building in Oklahoma City, a major event of domestic terrorism, and neither faculty members nor leadership reached out to her with support. She did not know if faculty reached out to other students or not (Renea Butler-King, personal communication, August 15, 2020).

Every year the school administers a survey to all graduating students as part of an annual program assessment during their final practicum. The 2020 program assessment surveys student data on implicit curricular items specific to inclusivity and oppression experiences. Students' reported experiences indicate that 71% had no experiences of intolerance or oppression, 12% did experience cultural intolerance, 11% experienced racism, and 4% experienced ethnocentrism. The identified context or location of the oppression was depicted as follows: 35% peer interactions, 31% classes, 21% faculty interactions, 8% school-based events, 3% virtual spaces, and 2% student organizational meetings (Brady et al., 2020). Although 71% of students reported no experiences of intolerance or oppression, it is noteworthy that 54% of all responding social work students demographically identified as White, with 13% Black and 33% other (Brady et al., 2020). These results indicate the school's need to examine the experience of BIPOC students more closely.

Recent Atmosphere of Racism at OU

On March 8, 2015, a video surfaced showing Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity members on the University of Oklahoma campus chanting and singing a racial slur. Their national president immediately placed the fraternity on a "cease and desist" order. In January 2019, near the commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., two separate incidents of "blackface" occurred on campus. The first of these occurred over social media and the second was when an individual wore blackface while walking across the

campus. In September 2019, yet another incident surfaced on Instagram of an image of a student in “blackface” with the caption “another day, another case” (Hermes, 2019). Then, in February 2020, there were two incidents of professors who used the “n-----” word in their classes. The first was from the College of Journalism who compared use of the “n-----” word to saying “Okay, boomer,” meant to be a derogatory term for older adults or people in the Baby Boomer generation. The second was a history professor who provided a trigger warning before reading aloud from a historical document that had the “n-----” word repeatedly throughout. Both faculty members who said the “n-----” word caused pain and discomfort for students. The events of 2015, 2019 and 2020 gained national attention on news outlets and comedy programs further illustrating the work that needs to be done to combat racism on our campus (Hassan, 2020; Saturday Night Live, 2020; The Daily Show, 2015).

Identifying and Analyzing Manifestations of Racism

The PISAB (n.d.) principle of **Identifying and Analyzing Manifestations of Racism** declares, “*Individual acts of racism are supported by institutions and are nurtured by the societal practices such as militarism and cultural racism, which enforce and perpetuate racism*” (para.5). A critical examination of our process efforts to undo and dismantle racism requires confirmation of our theoretical foundations.

Standing on Theoretical Ground

As a team of seven faculty members within the school of social work who represent multiple identities regarding ethnicity and positions of power as a group, we recognize that the basis of our work rests on Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 1970/2002) and Critical Race Theory (Sulé, 2020). Both of these are foundational supports for dismantling racism within our school of social work. As social work educators, we honor the theoretical lenses through which our committee has endeavored to uphold this work. Theoretical perspectives allow us to analyze our efforts through a continual praxis of reflecting on our actions; both as a committee that is unique in purpose and as individuals dedicated to this mission. Each lens brings depth to discussion while also allowing for ample critical reflection.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Members of this committee team are drawn to Freire (Freire 1970/2002) for his theoretical and pragmatic conceptualization of transformation through *praxis* (action/ reflection) within the process of *dialogue* to promote *conscientization* concerning power realities (Freire Institute, 2021). Freire identified conscientization as “the process of developing critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action” (Freire Institute, 2021, para. 6). The aim from Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2002) is to educate people who are dehumanized and oppressed by a dominant social order that seek to maintain the status quo. His pedagogical lens provides inspiration and guidance as we process undoing racism ourselves while also implementing the work within our school. By enacting his ideas, we utilize a dialogical approach as a core method that offers trust-

building and respect, thereby enabling a safe dynamic for raising critical consciousness toward undoing racism. Critical reflection on theory, practice, and self-awareness are promoted through these safe spaces to encourage dialogue, enhance understanding, and build compassion. Cooperation and communication are essential elements for transformation in this process of dialogical action and cultural revolution (Freire, 2002). From the challenges of the instructor/student power dynamic, to that of peer-to-peer interactions, the team echoes the need for bravery in doing this work. The Undoing Racism principles were selected as the means by which we dedicate our efforts to embracing dialogue that allows for resistance to change within the process, and encourages people to think and respond freely as unique and valued individuals, regardless of the cost. As Freire (2002) proposed, we believe the continued practice of dialogue will yield long-term results.

Pedagogical Cost of Conscientization

Our task then at the school, the academy, and in society, according to Freire (2002), is to create a relationship between the struggle for freedom from oppression and authentic authority. What is the cost of our commitment to actively undoing racism? To unpack this question, we know the development of critical consciousness requires that we share our power by being both engaged participants *with* our students and a witness *within* the process. Freire (2002) reminds us that we must have critical knowledge of the current historical context, see through the people's eyes, and understand existing societal contradiction. This does not mean that we are the experts - quite the contrary. For faculty members of the academy, open dialogue about racism in the classroom may be uncomfortable because it requires true self-examination. Teachers, mentors and leaders (even anti-racists well-intended), who have not yet discovered *for themselves* the invasive nature of their interactions, may become defensive when given feedback that their actions feel dehumanizing to recipients of their efforts. As professionals affirmed by the dominant culture, social work educators (regardless of their racial identity) can and do struggle with their place of privilege and power in promoting racial equity with students. Societal oppression has a strong grip as a force that will attempt to continue to occupy what it perceives as its rightful place. Remnants of the past will inevitably remain, even as transformation begins. Freire (2002) explains that this is "...a highly educational process in which leaders and people together experience true authority and freedom, which they then seek to establish in society by transforming the reality which mediates them" (p. 178). Engaging in these change efforts is expensive. From the dynamic of extending relational power to the emotional impact of examining one's truths, transformation is a demanding process.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework for understanding the past and present experiences surrounding the formation of the URC. Sulé (2020) lists five CRT assumptions that apply. The first assumption is that racism is endemic and ordinary. The premise creates the expectation that racism would pervade the university and the school of social work. Further, this racism would be unacknowledged based on its common nature.

The second assumption is that progressive change occurs only when the interests of the dominant and oppressed groups converge. Progressive changes requiring training for the student body, staff, and faculty were based on years of overt racist incidents committed by community members that had both received national attention, and also campus incidents that were only reported in the local paper. The recent national level media reports of overt racism by two faculty members appears to have been the change point to confirm that students were not the only issue. Thirdly, CRT proposes that people represent multiple identities that intersect to define experiences with racism. Sulé (2020) states, “The lived experience of racially marginalized [committee members] is instrumental to challenging inequities” (p. 2). Therefore, experiences of these members are a valued source of knowledge building. Experiential knowledge is the fourth tenet that promotes the experiences of the oppressed as the source for understanding oppression and instituting change that is inclusive. It is through intentional Socratic circles that we operationalize these experiences. The final assumption requires the rejection of meritocracy and colorblindness in our society. Instead, Whites have defined the standards that continue to favor them. The belief that merit defines our opportunities and successes perpetuates racism by denying those lived experiences (Sulé, 2020). Therefore, committee members expect to encounter inequity in the past and present academic communities.

Studying Our Method

From these theoretical posts, we offer this case study as supported by Greenwood and Lowenthal (2005) of our undoing racism efforts and describe our use of narrative elements. First, use of case study as a methodology has the advantage of supporting a reflexive approach to practice. Professional descriptive data presents evolving knowledge on the process for study and provides context for any adaptations that are needed. This approach can showcase “... knowledge that emerges as a consequence of experience rather than from a preoccupation with proof” (Greenwood & Lowenthal, 2005, p. 193). As a fitting addition within this case study, narrative strategy utilizes creative and collaborative research methods and provides both the structure *and flexibility* for describing our aims and efforts to dismantle racism (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). In reflecting on the choice of method for researching the experience of authentic White allies, Hornung (2012) wonders if narrative approaches help build “...‘emotional muscle’ in order to go *through*, rather than *around*, the complex and traumatic history of race relations in the United States” (p. 96). Just as social work is an academic discipline built on multiple theoretical frameworks, we offer our case study experience as one that is inclusive of our stories. Rather than a thematic analysis, our stories reflect the parallel process (Haber et al., 2009) that emerged from self-exploration and collective connections within the evolution of our case study.

Within this case study, the use of sharing and revealing our stories with one another has been crucial to the communication and trust-building process within our ongoing commitment to undoing racism at our school. As URC members engage in this difficult work together, some very experienced and others newly oriented to it, the praxis of reflecting in and on our actions occurred (Schön, 1983, 1987). The willingness to be vulnerable within a culture of white supremacy by exposing personal histories of living and working, along with the fears and doubts we carry, is *uncommon* to most academic

committee work even among faculty colleagues with good rapport. The use of sharing our stories has been essential to processing the socially constructed impacts of white supremacy. Support comes from Holland and Kilpatrick (1993) as their early efforts to enhance multicultural social work education promoted the use of narrative techniques. “Stories invite teachers, practitioners, and students to consider how persons, in any culture, come to understand themselves as they do, how such understanding influences behavior and relationships and how change in self-understanding occurs” (p. 302). We offer a retrospective look at our committee’s efforts to date and include the parallel process we experienced through sharing collective connections uncovered along the way.

Developing Leadership

The PISAB (n.d.) principle **Developing Leadership** states: “*Anti-racist leadership needs to be developed intentionally and systematically within local communities and organizations*” (para. 3). As racist campus events prompted student cries of concern, an approach of leadership collaboration to address and undo racism within our school of social work began.

Students Sound the Alarm

The January 2019 campus events prompted conversations about racism in the common areas, classrooms, and hallways of our school of social work. These offered spaces to process the most recent high-profile racist incidents and vocalize the reality that racism was happening across campus with far *more* frequency than news outlets suggested. They were not producing results, however, and students wanted to do more than continually ask *why* this was happening. When the associate director of the School of Social Work asked leaders of the Social Work Student Association (SWSA) if their meeting could serve as a student forum to debrief, they knew this was their invitation. Essential to the process, the SWSA undergraduate president, a Black man, co-led the first listening session with a Black social work faculty member, who leveraged two decades of experience in facilitating community conversations about race in diverse communities. The faculty member was versed in operationalizing the principles of undoing racism and between her guidance and the student’s enthusiasm and passion for racial justice, the first session moved forward. The student appreciated the official school-sanctioned platform and opportunity to co-facilitate this crucial discussion. He recalled, “I just needed a foot in the door. Once I was in the room, I was ready” (Dedrick Perkins, personal communication, August 25, 2020).

During that first listening session, safety was not yet established, and the tension was high. Trust in social work school leadership was building due to the inclusion of student voices, and thus began our collective dedication to undoing. This foundational meeting set a course to follow for those who were ready for meaningful action, with faculty and staff attendees asked to simply “listen and learn.” Many students at the first listening session approached with skepticism and uncertainty. Some were angry that conversations had not been sooner; several brought their racial trauma in with them; a few shared what it was like to be a student of color in a primarily White space, while others wrestled with how to be

an ally. Students initially requested the next session be “students only,” but then wondered what faculty leadership had to say about racism, so future meetings were again open to all. Fueled by a desire to respond with meaningful action, faculty and students set about to write the next chapter in this story. The Undoing Racism principles helped create sacred (or intentionally safe) space and united everyone to get to work.

This collective action led to the intentional organization and planning for an experiential learning opportunity for students and faculty to Learn from History by engaging in a social justice spring break 2020 trip along the Historic Civil Rights Trail to Birmingham. This student group also launched a successful fundraising campaign and hosted a benefit dinner that together raised over \$5,000 to support the trip. These immersive plans were publicized in the community and university newspapers. Involved students gained valuable leadership experience and community around their commitment to racial justice as they engaged in these efforts. Due to COVID-19 the trip was postponed; however, with the Undoing Racism principles in place to guide and protect our path forward, faculty sought next steps to support student voice during the global pandemic.

Creating a Climate of Safety at the School

Following the initial student listening sessions, in March 2019 at a faculty meeting, members acknowledged the challenges for our campus regarding racism, and our responsibility to students for holding conversations about race. Faculty members voiced the need to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to addressing racism. A motion was approved for an “undoing racism” committee to develop a strategic response to undo racism within our school and campus, provide advice on continuing education, and to help build bridges with students on this work. We vowed to acknowledge historical patterns of racism and to work on reconciliation within our school (March 8, 2019 Faculty Minutes).

It was apparent we needed a long-term, committed team to address ongoing racism. This work would be arduous, so it was paramount that members be self-appointed to do this work of their own accord. Committee members were challenged to address and manage the dynamics of power and privilege due to race, tenure status, and administrative authority. Co-chairs stepped up because they represented crucial communities, and each had years of research and practice in the areas of race and culture. An administrative member offered support and commitment.

As with the creation of any group, the committee struggled with forming and norming (Connors & Caple, 2005) and specific barriers challenged our academic committee. Due to the distance between our two campuses across the state, we relied on electronic communication, which can lack the full context and of a writer’s intention. Though we expected some tension due to developing group dynamics, this forced each of us into a parallel process (Haber et al., 2009) of individually doing the work while also experiencing the storming associated with group formation (Connors & Caple, 2005). Face-to-face communication has been the most productive for strategizing our anti-racist work. Through one-on-one and group retreat settings, the intentionality and real-time processing of conversations has proven to be our best pathway through the tension. Due to varied campus cultures, erupting community stressors, and emerging consciousness about our individual

racism journeys, we expect challenges will continue. However, with each situation comes new insight and greater depth. We are not discouraged by our struggles, but rather see them as a model for anti-racist practice that generates communication patterns of growth and resilience.

Maintaining Accountability

The PISAB (n.d.) principle of **Maintaining Accountability** affirms “*To organize with integrity requires that we be accountable to the communities struggling with racist oppression*” (para. 7). In addition to these guiding principles, specific methods served to respectfully hold and facilitate difficult conversations with respect for both committee members and community members.

Sacred Work and Socratic Circles

To understand the methods chosen to implement this sacred work, requiring both safety and trust, the newly formed URC adopted the use of Socratic circles (Chisom & Washington, 1997; Freire, 2002; Thomas & Goering, 2018). This approach allowed us to investigate and discuss the truths of our varied opinions (to agree where we could and agree to disagree where we could not) and to continue the work tasked to do. In partnership with the student association, the URC hosted four listening sessions and facilitated the *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible* (Gutierrez & Shwartz, 2006) structured discussion sessions. This documentary features White social justice advocates and their confrontation of racial privilege. Further faculty listening/dialogue sessions were also held for those who were interested in learning more about the Undoing Racism principles (PISAB, n.d.). In addition, workshops were facilitated across campus, at the NASW state conference, as continuing education events, and at field education training for faculty and staff. The committee also developed a 2020 Undoing Racism film festival series for the campus community in partnership with three departments. Due to the COVID-19 campus closure, the film series was cancelled after the first movie event. Individual committee members were also planning to attend Undoing Racism training in New Orleans and Portland; however, those were also cancelled. Accessible online member trainings are now the focus.

Sheltering in Place

At the time of our committee establishment, campus offices for diversity and inclusion were also being developed. With pressure from university administration to be reactionary and expansive, as a team, we felt the need to start with intentional and centered aims. Initially, we declined invitations to participate in DEI. The URC chose to focus specifically on race rather than on broad categories of inclusion for the purpose of sustainability. A founding team member had recently left the committee and our nation was facing a pandemic, plus Black Lives Matter uprisings. In late spring of 2020, the URC also made the difficult decision to close membership for several months. The committee’s effort to maintain its focus has at times resulted in other faculty members feeling excluded, and accusations about the committee’s exclusivity have popped up as red flags. While

frustrating, these are no surprise, but rather a manifestation of the nature of this difficult work around race. To mitigate these reactions, we chose to use social media messaging and develop opportunities for involvement. The team felt called to hunker down and emerge with a vision for the coming year. During this regrouping, we decided to expand communication and collaboration efforts. Soon, the URC will thoughtfully add new members who are drawn to this work. Although we value the intimacy of a smaller group, there is also value to greater diversity of voices at the table, including those of students.

Gatekeeping

The PISAB (n.d.) principle of **Gatekeeping** reminds us, “*Persons who work in institutions often function as gatekeepers to ensure that the institution perpetuates itself. By operating with anti-racist values and networking with those who share those values and maintaining accountability in the community, the gatekeeper becomes an agent of institutional transformation*” (para. 4). Engagement of undoing racism within our school community prompts us to see the significant connection that social work gatekeeping has to our efforts.

As a role that is crucial to the social work profession, gatekeeping functions to ensure a high standard of competence and to protect the public from potentially incompetent or unethical social workers. Lafrance and colleagues (2004) suggest that gatekeeping is an obligation to ensure that students resolve the personal issues that could interfere with their becoming competent practitioners. This becomes more intense when adding a race/racism context since, as social work educators who are the gatekeepers; we are also obligated to eradicate unconscious or implicit racial bias ourselves to be effective in our jobs.

During committee formation, the URC members worked conscientiously to establish our mission, vision, activities, and roles, while being mindful of the balance of relational power (Chisom & Washington, 1997; Lerner, 2010). Schools of social work are reminded to ensure the gates are open to students who have been marginalized by white supremacy (Billings, 2016; Singleton, 2015) and provide sacred spaces inside for everyone (Chisom & Washington, 1997; Younes, 1998). The practice of anti-racist student advisement, and creating a school environment that enables Black and Brown students to succeed, can be challenging (Kendi, 2020; Singleton, 2015). As a gatekeeper in an institution predominately White, actively recruiting faculty and staff with lived experience as indigenous or as people of color can be our most compelling efforts. The committee began to respond to the wisdom of anti-racist gatekeeping practices in a proactive way.

Sharing Culture

The PISAB (n.d.) principle of **Sharing Culture** claims: “*Culture is the life support system of a community. If a community’s culture is respected and nurtured, the community’s power will grow*” (para. 9). Paulo Freire (2002) echoes this principle in his sentiments as well: “The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore, it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed” (p. 85).

Many students told their stories in the listening sessions, which helped explain their beliefs and frame of reference, and how they interpreted the incidents that were occurring on campus. Students also expressed how the incidents on campus were changing their view of the world, and altering some of their beliefs and expectations. As students shared through these and other events, URC committee members began to learn with them how best to process these incidents on campus. Collectively, we began to form ideas of what might be needed to help our students and faculty heal, grow and move forward. The students and the committee members began a parallel process of learning how to cope and to reframe the negatives into positive action (Haber et al., 2009). The committee members began to tell their stories in our committee meetings, furthering both individual and committee growth. Some members shared these stories with students as well. We dedicated ourselves to sharing cultures, calling out and acknowledging acts of racism within the school and university, and to maintaining accountability to one another.

Undoing Internalized Racial Oppression

The PISAB (n.d.) principle of **Undoing Internalized Racial Oppression** is known to manifest in the forms of inferiority *and* superiority. **Internalized Racial Inferiority** is described as, “*The acceptance of and acting out of an inferior definition of self, given by the oppressor, is rooted in the historical designation of one’s race. Over many generations, this process of disempowerment and disenfranchisement expresses itself in self-defeating behaviors*” (para. 10). **Internalized Racial Superiority** is described as, “*The acceptance of and acting out of a superior definition is rooted in the historical designation of one’s race. Over many generations, this process of empowerment and access expresses itself as unearned privileges, access to institutional power, and invisible advantages based upon race*” (para. 10). Reflecting on the richness of our efforts to effectuate this work, URC members offer collective stories on the challenges of using praxis and reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987) to examine our pedagogies along with our personal racial identities and internalizations. Though not a topic of exploration for this manuscript, we do acknowledge that the struggle to promote racial equity is a dynamic process that is distinctively different for BIPOC educators and White educators.

This committee understands that to do this type of work well within the school, we must allow differences to strengthen and not divide us. To accomplish this, we looked to the principles of Undoing Racism to help us understand our own internalized racial inferiority and superiority. Individuals on the committee differ regarding positionality. Each has come to their own identity of privilege and power based on such things as race, income, educational attainment, and gender. Currently, all members are female, but do vary in power and privilege within the school. One member is from upper administration at the School of Social Work, several have Ph.Ds. and the rest have MSWs. The racial makeup of the committee includes one woman of American Indian and Alaska Native identity, one a Black woman, with the rest identifying as White. One of the White members also identifies as gay. All of these racial terms are in the own words of members as personal identifiers, and our ages span four decades. The oppression experienced by members, due to the intersection of their race and gender, or gender and educational attainment, or even their sexuality and society, also influences the lenses through which each of us views

undoing racism. Some members have been addressing racism for several years and others are new to the work. White member awareness concerning their own white privilege varies. Our collective efforts are enriched by the deepening and evolving internal understanding of the impact of racism, and vice versa.

Christina's Story

The headline, bold type across the front page of the local newspaper, "OU Student in Blackface," stared up at me while I sipped my morning coffee. Five months into my role as interim director of the school and my heart sunk. *What do we say that hasn't already been said? What can we do to respond to the pain and fear experienced by our students? What do my colleagues think?* These questions swirled in my mind as I began to enter the work of Undoing Racism with intention. Though I found myself growing into this new area of work, I was not prepared with the skills and training needed to lead effectively. I leaned heavily upon the expertise of a new faculty member with years of practice in Undoing Racism but only months of experience on our faculty. I was and continue to be grateful for her steady mentorship and encouragement as I took my first steps in active anti-racism work. She introduced me to the Principles of Undoing Racism and modeled the deeply intensive work of facilitating these conversations about race, privilege, oppression, and white supremacy.

The following weeks were full as I composed a statement calling out racism on our campus and hosted listening sessions with students, faculty, and staff within the school. A common message emerged from these listening sessions: the students wanted sustained action from the school. As I raised my hand to join the UR committee during a faculty meeting, my head filled with doubt. *I'm not ready to lead others in discussions about race. What if I say or do something offensive? I am the acting director; will my role as an administrator stifle the process of the group? On the other hand, as a leader I cannot remain silent on the issue of racism and white supremacy.* Through the remainder of that spring semester, I forged ahead letting my intentions and actions move beyond my knowledge and skills. The summer was filled with reading *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018), processing, and training on the principles of Undoing Racism alongside my URC colleagues. We prepared for the upcoming school year and the return of our director from a yearlong sabbatical.

Fall 2019, I gratefully stepped back into my role as Associate Director of the school and the university welcomed our third president in three years. The URC established a mission and vision statement. During spring 2020, I left for a semester sabbatical and from active work on the committee. I returned in May as our state was reopening after a period of quarantine, finding ourselves uncertain how to proceed with this work in our new virtual environment. Summer 2020 unleashed a wave across the country of racist violence, protest, and calls for action to fight racist policies and practices. School colleagues stepped up to lead book discussions, listening sessions, organize speakers, and talks about racism. I found myself pulled by the URC to maintain intentional and steady work aligned with the principles, while also being pressed by administration of the university to engage in an

ever-growing list of more. We experienced tension between what university leadership expected us to be and what our URC mission and vision statements say we are.

Renea's Story

As with most of my service and research, I approach it with the idea of opportunities to be of service in my various communities without breaching integrity. I look for ways to increase race literacy and relevancy and the need for incremental change that comes from learning race literacy. My lenses when engaged in race work reside in discourse framed by Undoing Racism (PISAB, n.d.) and/or Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2002). Both frames allow for the unpacking of systematic oppression and systematic racism. Both allow for development of language between two individuals, two communities, and two organizations, in a collaborative or collective manner which Paulo Freire (2002) presents as one of the gifts of conscientization.

We buckled our seat belts and planned the first meetings that year. We were naïve to think that we would have one meeting and get back to social work education as usual. That did not happen because it became necessary to add more faculty to the working process of trying to dismantle white supremacy with students in a Socratic circle (listening session) at the School of Social Work. We had pop-up cafés and planned listening sessions for various types and combination of groupings. As the students started to learn more about the process of engaging in undoing racism work, the students, faculty, and staff, decided they needed more information and wanted more engagement that was practical; subsequently, the Undoing Racism Committee was born. The committee is self-selecting and progressive in doing anti-racist work.

The dance of a dialogue is empowering for all. I began the journey of dismantling white supremacy in social work education after our associate director asked me to provide a listening session for our students challenged by the racist behaviors on our campus. Students stated they wanted to talk about racism, some of the racist behavior on campus and that of faculty members too, and they wanted the school to provide a safe space to do so. Dr. Christina Miller's response was quick in approaching me about facilitating a listening session defined by the students as a sacred and safe place to have dialogue about race. I had been doing race work within my community for the last 20 plus years. As a grassroots activist now academic, I shifted this work to the Undoing Racism framework as developed by the PISAB's principles (n.d.).

Lisa's Story

I was at an inter-tribal stomp dance when I began receiving texts from students that a video of an OU student in blackface was going viral. Students were upset and angry. I validated the individual student reactions and assured them I would make the social work administration aware. I contacted the acting associate director to let her know that students were reacting to the racist video. I was shocked when she immediately responded by drafting a statement denouncing the incident, and by the end of the evening, had a statement from the school completed. I had never expected a public statement. Overt racist incidents

were not new; however, we had never published a statement before. I was grateful for what I interpreted as a new responsiveness. The Acting Director validated my interpretation with her call for a staff/faculty meeting following the blackface incident. At this meeting, I spoke about the overt and covert racism our students experienced and my alienation as an ethnic faculty member. I asked that we form a committee to institutionalize our work against racism.

As an American Indian and Alaska Native woman, disconnection has been a constant in my academic career. My cultural teachings that focus on a communal sense of self, balance in all relationships, and collaboration, have been at odds with the individualistic and competitive orientation of American educational institutions. One critical change came with my exposure to Jean Baker Miller's (1986) Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). Reading this work gave me a feeling of coming home based on synergy with my cultural teachings. RCT focuses on the primary factor of relationship in understanding human development. Miller challenged traditional Western theory as misguided in its focus on the attainment of individuality as the pinnacle of development. Instead, Miller (1986) theorized that we grow through and toward connection throughout life. Connection is defined as an authentic interaction between two or more people that is balanced in its mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. This type of interaction is poised to become a growth-fostering relationship characterized by zest, clarity, sense of worth, desire for more relationships, and productivity. In contrast, when interactions lack authenticity, empathy, and empowerment, disconnection results. Disappointment and a sense of being misunderstood ensues that can lead to an impasse, danger, and even violation.

Relational Cultural Theory captured my marginalized reality in higher education. Additionally, it validated my approach to teaching and mentorship (Byers et al., 2020). Finally, it offered a framework for approaching the aims of the committee. Now in our third year, I can report that it has been difficult to share my and my community's reality. Fear was ever-present as I anticipated individual repercussions for sharing a reality of racism. The White members of the committee listened and never denied my lived experience. Instead, they have used those experiences as reflection points. My connection to the other ethnic member has deepened with empathy that can only be gained from sharing the micro to macro tortures of racism. I sense a growing mutual empathy and empowerment based on listening and learning from the stories of our students, our communities, and ourselves. Threads of connection are beginning to replace the burdensome blanket of academic isolation (Byers et al., 2020).

Kirby's Story

I started this work as a new employee in the department - not only new, but young, and without a PhD. I knew I entered academia at a disadvantage. My work experience brought value and knowledge, but I knew I lacked influence in some spaces. I decided to stay steady and constant, as much as could be. There would be no race to acknowledgement or recognition because I knew a foundation would need to be built. At times, I felt useless spending my time reading and listening. We live in a world that prioritizes productivity over all else, but we forget that no one ever becomes successful overnight.

As systems began to shake across the university through sit-ins and vocalizations of inequality, I felt steady. These were the moments for which I had been preparing. I chose not to act as a leader or advocate running into the fire, but rather as a place where others could come to rest. I sat across from students who told me tales of the injustices they had faced. I listened to fellow faculty members express their frustrations. I created space in my classes for discussion and validation. I would not back away, I would not break. I would dig in and find strength in the stillness. A shelter in the midst of a storm.

Throughout this process, I found myself modeling what it means to learn and grow as an anti-racist. Changing our mind or admitting that we were wrong is not weakness, but rather, displays resiliency and awareness. Walking along with our students as we grow and learn does not disqualify us from teaching. For us to become anti-racist, it means that there is hard work to do. In those moments spent reading and listening, we must not disqualify ourselves. Missteps facilitate learning for us, and those around us. So, build your foundation and find your team, for there is still so much work to be done.

Jennifer's Story

The spring semester of my first year teaching full time was just underway when two back-to-back racist incidents shook our campus. I was lecturing when the room jolted to attention - one student had seen a social media post of a person in blackface walking through campus. I had never watched in real time how the life could be sucked out of a room so quickly. We were consumed and all questioning, *why does this keep happening?* As the undergraduate coordinator, part of my job was helping students figure things out, but there was no course override for racism. *So, what now?* Insulated by my white privilege, I was ill equipped to lead the needed critical conversation about race.

A few days later, outraged students linked arms and walked through campus in protest. Some held signs; others wore tape over their mouths bearing the words #stillunheard. *Was I listening?* The group stopped at the steps of the university president's office chanting, "What do we want?" "Justice!" *How was I standing up for justice?* There are minority students, staff, and faculty who did not (and still do not) have the same sense of safety and belonging that I had come to expect at this predominately White institution. I spent the rest of the academic year intentionally learning and listening. *It never felt like enough.*

Over the summer of 2019, I committed to doing more. The words of my colleague who reminded us "if it can be done, it can be undone" were ever present in my thoughts. *So, what could I do?* The 2020 Bachelor's Program Directors conference was scheduled to take place in Birmingham, Alabama during our spring break. With the blessing of our associate director, I approached the same colleague who had opened my eyes to the undoing racism work about taking a group of students to the conference. Twelve social work students joined our planning efforts and aptly helped name the journey "Historical Footprints." We had finalized an itinerary that would include daily opportunities for individual reflection and for large group discussion. One student checked out recording equipment for video diaries and we developed plans to highlight key takeaways from the journey to carry lessons forward through the creation of a Historical Footprints podcast. Then, four days before we were set to leave, the global pandemic brought the country to a screeching halt.

The conference was cancelled, historical sites and museums closed, and university travel was banned. *We were devastated.* However, the time since then has brought additional meaning to this work. The last five months of protests have caused much heartache but have also given me hope as I see racism challenged and change demanded.

Important conversations continue about how to discuss race in our classrooms and on our campus, book clubs that encourage authentic dialogue about race, and a level of support and accountability. *Most days it still does not feel like enough.* Nevertheless, this journey - my journey - of learning and unlearning continues.

Charlotte's Story

Growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a northern college town where the only people of color were the migrant farm workers who lived on the outskirts of town (and whom no one paid attention to) taught me nothing about oppression nor did it prepare me for the work I am engaged in now. In retrospect, if not for some key events in my life, this work might not even *be* important to me. My first encounter with a Black person was in high school, my second while working in an oil refinery in the mid-70's. Being paired with the only two Black men at the refinery taught me a bit about racism. I saw hatred and the use of power by those in power in ways that sickened me - all done simply because they could. It was not until 1998 though, during my MSW, that my education in oppression and racism continued. A Black professor accused me of being a racist and I took issue with his statement. He told me I had no idea of how privileged I was simply because I was White. What I learned from those experiences helped prepare me for my 20 years in the field.

Yet I admit I still was not truly prepared for the racial incidents that began to occur on our campus in early 2019. I felt many emotions, anger being the first one. Anger that this could still be happening, anger that what I had seen as progress over the last decade was not true. Then guilt that I had not done more in my career, that I was gullible enough to believe that progress had really been made. I knew that I had to do something and working on the URC has been a good outlet for my anger and guilt.

I will never know what it is like to be oppressed or to be a person of color and to be hated for it. I do know what it is like to be White with all the privileges that affords me. This is what brought me to this committee; what makes this work important to me. Beyond the URC, my charge is to try as best I can, wherever and whenever I can, to educate other White people about their privilege. I speak about white privilege in my classes, no matter the subject of the class, do presentations when asked, take the time to have conversations with individuals when the opportunity presents itself, and use my privilege of those unearned benefits to benefit others. I must remember to maintain accountability to those who are struggling with racist oppression.

Ann's Story

As an adult Boomer, from a family of generational legacy and alumni pride in our state's flagship university (The University of Oklahoma), I had always believed our town

and campus were among the safest in the country. Ironically, coloring this idyllic impression was my white privilege and what I thought was my non-racist view of the world. Growing up I was only minimally aware of my immersion in white supremacy. Now, I more readily recognize the institutionalized presence of White man's manifest destiny. The culture and climate here are thick with resistance to being uprooted and undone. The more aware I become, the more I sense the tenacity of these historic roots and their powerful grip. *How do we uncover resistance so deeply planted to ensure true racial justice?*

When initially presented, I did not raise my hand to join. Though I was deeply concerned for our students of color, I doubted whether I was best for this committee. I had never taught the diversity course and wondered if those faculty members were better prepared (*comfortable*) than me to act on and articulate what the school and our students needed. After a year of engaging in this work, I still feel somewhat inadequate - like a weak link trailing my colleagues just trying to catch up. The intentional work of learning and living the principles of Undoing Racism (PISAB, n.d.) takes time and continues to challenge me, both personally and professionally. With developing critical consciousness, I do believe "my heart is in the right place"; but I rightly question that of my privilege. Honestly, I have made mistakes. After I offended a respected colleague, I met with her and apologized for having allowed my privilege to lead. Because she is brave and believes in this work, she was willing to help me begin to understand her lived perspective as a Black woman with a worldview much different from mine. I value the relationships that are helping me grow.

In mid-March 2020, I set off to attend the People's Institute Training; excited about the deep work ahead and the tools I hoped to walk away with to promote this work. Unfortunately, the training was cancelled just as I arrived in New Orleans; suddenly the pandemic was real. Amid the public health crisis and political tension, nationwide protests are collectively exposing the ugly reality of ongoing white supremacy and raising our (primarily Whites') awareness that Black people are in dire need of protection. These systemic atrocities present opportunities for dialogue that require safe space in the classroom. In my graduate direct practice courses, the impact of trauma (historical, current, and now social media triggered) presents a lens to explore clinical treatment approaches with clients of color and for raising White consciousness. As I create teaching moments based on the PISAB's principles and pedagogies that promote praxis for student truths about their own racism, I aim to be actively and accountably anti-racist myself.

Analyzing Power

The PISAB (n.d.) principle of **Analyzing Power** contends that, "*As a society, we often believe that individuals and/or their communities are solely responsible for their conditions. Through the analysis of institutional power, we can identify and unpack the systems external to the community that create the internal realities that many people experience daily*" (para. 2). Indicative of this work, our case efforts to undo racism and analyze power within our community at the school of social work and the university is an on-going and persistent work in progress.

The Long Game

Power is difficult to deconstruct when it is built into the foundation of an institution. Racism is part of the origin story of higher education more broadly and must be addressed by the development of new infrastructure. Students, faculty, and staff from multiple departments have given voice to historical trauma and acknowledgment that racism is not just a storm from our past; we are, in fact, in the eye of the storm. University leadership has historically adopted reactionary measures to racist incidents. These have sent the outward message “*not on our campus*” and chipped away at the foundation but have not led to a systemic transformation.

Important changes at our university have happened since February 2019, fueled by a convergent interest between oppressed and dominant groups. Individuals at all levels have said, “*enough is enough*” and the university has finally acknowledged the value of dismantling racism. The last eighteen months have led to numerous positive developments, including a restructuring of the first-year student diversity experience; creating the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); forming a Bias Response Committee; and increasing diversity and inclusion education for faculty and staff. In addition, a #WeAre media campaign focuses on DEI values, and beginning 2021, a requirement that all students will take the new DEI course. In September 2020, the student government authored the Indigenous Land Acknowledgement to pay respect to the Indigenous history of the university within our state of Oklahoma. Further progressive institutional change began with the search and appointment of a vice president of diversity and inclusion in January 2020. For the first time in the history of the University of Oklahoma, we have mandated training on diversity, equity, and inclusion for not only students, but also administration, faculty, staff, and even regents. Tracking the data shall inform future training needs. In addition, a protocol using restorative practices is in development for student-experienced bias incident reporting.

A true anti-racist reckoning must come from all levels of power. At our school of social work, a convergence at various levels of authority received support. First, officially authorized conversations about race occurred in an open forum lead by the experience of a new non-tenure-line faculty member who represents the Black/African American community. Secondly, shared power from faculty voices concurred in response to the students’ call for action. As we continue to weather this difficult work, student voices will always be the source of energy for our efforts.

The Future Forecast

The Undoing Racism Committee is dedicated and committed to long-term efforts to dismantle racist and oppressive systems. After meeting with the university’s new vice president of diversity and inclusion, the URC will join in efforts to institute a solid foundation for anti-racist work across the University of Oklahoma’s campuses. Motivated by the newly established partnership, and humbled by the invitation to participate, committee members feel ready to embrace both the anticipated resistance and hopeful growth that lie ahead. Through continued learning alongside our students and colleagues

within the school, we plan to secure training from the People's Institute. One school of social work recently conducted an exploratory study of their student's responses to PISAB training (Hamilton-Mason & Schneider, 2018), reporting outcomes that recognize the reinforcing nature of effective antiracist pedagogy for both the students who learn and the faculty who commit to teaching it, as well as, the impacts on the implicit curriculum. According to Ronald Chisom, founder of PISAB, "...effective community and institutional change happens when those who serve as agents of transformation understand the foundations of race and racism and how they continually function as a barrier to community self-determination and self-sufficiency" (personal communication, May 18, 2021). Although the journey ahead is long, we are encouraged by the power of knowing that we are not there yet as #WeAreLearning, while also unlearning, along the way.

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