Using the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research to Promote Anti-Racism in Social Work Higher Education

Dashawna J. Fussell-Ware
Kess L. Ballentine
Ana T. Flores
Laurenia C. Mangum
Serwaa S. Omowale
Kristen T. MacKenzie
Adrian J. Ballard
Christopher T. Thyberg
Laura Ellen Ashcraft

Abstract: *Recognizing a clear call to dismantle traditionally racist structures within our nation, doctoral students at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work formed the Anti-Racist Doctoral Program Student Committee (ARDPSC) to push for systemic changes within our school and profession to eliminate anti-Black racism. Our student-led initiative is an innovative approach for two reasons. First, we strengthened our community virtually despite the limitations of COVID-19 and virtual spaces. Second, although collective organizing among students can be seen as threatening, we held a tension between agitation and collaboration, and contributed to, rather than disrupted, implementation of anti-racist reform. We map our experiences onto the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) using narrative data and documents produced by our committee. First, we describe how we built anti-racist group processes, established brave working environments, and integrated processes to reflect on change at various system levels. Next, we describe our actions to push our school and profession to be anti-racist and assess outcomes using the CFIR. Finally, we share our reflections on how to continue this work. We hope to document our experiences and reflect on how social work student groups can contribute to dismantling white supremacy and rebuilding institutions with an anti-racist approach.*

Keywords: *Anti-racism; social work education; higher education; doctoral education; implementation science; CFIR*

The Spring of 2020 marked the beginning of a global shift in how we interact, work, and exist. Social work education was no exception. Unprecedented in the last century, the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant threat and disruption to our lives. The pandemic,

Dashawna J. Fussell-Ware, PhD, LSW, Assistant Professor, College of Social Work, University of Tennessee, Nashville, TN. Kess L. Ballentine, MA, MSW, PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. Ana T. Flores, MSW, PhD candidate, and Laurenia C. Mangum, LMSW, PhD candidate, School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA. Serwaa S. Omowale, MPH, LMSW, PhD, Marc and Lynne Benioff and a T32 training grant (1T32HD098057) postdoctoral fellow, Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology & Reproductive Sciences, California Preterm Birth Initiative, University of California, San Francisco, CA. Kristen T. MacKenzie, PhD, MSW, Postdoctoral Associate, Department of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA. Adrian J. Ballard, LCSW, PhD candidate, and Christopher Thyberg, PhD candidate, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA. Laura Ellen Ashcraft, PhD, MSW, Scientific Officer, Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion (CHERP), Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center, Philadelphia, PA.

which has disproportionately affected Black and Latinx communities in the U.S. (Figueroa et al., 2021; Gold et al., 2020), was later compounded by a reckoning with this nation's deep-rooted, systemic, and persistent anti-Black racism. Black Lives Matter protests occurred across the globe during the Summer of 2020 in response to numerous highly publicized incidents of anti-Black violence in the preceding months, including the release of video footage of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, continuing with the news of the murder of Breonna Taylor, and climaxing due to the widely viewed video of a white police officer murdering George Floyd (Buchanan et al., 2020). Moreover, calls for transformative change within social work education emphasize how the current climate of anti-Black racism creates an undue burden on Black educators and students (Abrams et al., 2021; Davis, 2021; McCoy, 2020).

The harsh and racist realities of our country have become too blatant and too harrowing to continue without action for change. We decided to form a social work doctoral student group to advocate for anti-racist pedagogy and confront the enduring problem of anti-Blackness in the academy. Our shared vision for anti-racism in social work academia helped us capitalize on the opening window for change. With a commitment to social justice, we, a group of emerging social work scholars, accepted our collective role as change agents by forming the Anti-Racist Doctoral Program Student Committee (ARDPSC).

Student activism and advocacy for civil rights in higher education is not a novel concept. In fact, because of campuses' ecological facilitators for recruitment, mobilization, and coalition-building, students played a critical role in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and continue to do so in more recent social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, the DREAMer movement, #BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo (Earl et al., 2017). Modern technology expanded tools for disseminating messages, meeting discreetly, sharing resources and information, and having a central hub for communicating and saving documents (Maher & Earl, 2019). Access to organizing tools for university students was also expanded due to the virtual work requirements during the pandemic (He et al., 2021). The ARDPSC capitalized on the availability and power of Zoom and Microsoft Teams for our change efforts, creating a virtual solidarity to facilitate participation regardless of physical location.

Our work began organically, but when we considered how other student groups might replicate our approach, we determined that the analysis of factors which supported our work aligned well with the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR; Damschroder et al., 2009). Through this paper, we describe a novel way of identifying barriers and facilitators to anti-racist work in the social work academy that can be a model for other social work doctoral student advocates and their allies. Because the CFIR is inherently race-neutral, we have adapted the framework using a three-level conceptualization of institutional racism and applied it to our narrative (Griffith et al., 2007). By intentionally centering racism in our analysis, we show how the adapted CFIR can support an organized approach to progressive change within academic contexts. We operationalize our innovation of interest, or the product we wish to implement, as anti-racist curricula and policies. Successful implementation would entail the uptake and sustainment of anti-racist products into the individual, curricular, and organizational

frameworks of a social work program at a predominantly white institution.

We begin by contextualizing our work in the literature and describing the frameworks of anti-racism and the CFIR. After setting the context, we share our narrative to explain how our anti-racist work can be described using the CFIR. Specifically, we describe our innovation and implementation narrative across three of the CFIR domains: Characteristics of Individuals, Inner Setting, and Outer Setting. For each domain we discuss the facilitators and barriers for implementation of the anti-racist transformation we advocate. We hope that by connecting our experiences to the CFIR, other doctoral student activists can use an anti-racist CFIR approach to organize their work and support anti-racist advocacy across social work higher education. Instead of using the traditional language of CFIR, we replace "intervention" with "innovation" to better encompass the set of products and values we set out to implement in social work education (see Rogers, 2003).

Background and Theoretical Framework

Anti-Racism: A Framework for Transformation

Anti-racism provides a framework through which to reimagine institutions as safe places for Black people to work and learn. The anti-racism phenomenon is one that critical social theorists, scholars, and researchers have studied for many years (Davis, 1990; Dei, 1996; Zamalin, 2019), but recently the term gained popularity in the broader community. This may be due to Ibrahim Kendi's (2019) book, *How to be an Anti-Racist,* becoming the go-to reference guide for anti-racist work in 2020. Though not a discrete theory or concept, scholars suggest that discourse around anti-racism shares a few common themes across Black history and political movements (Dei, 1996; Zamalin, 2019). First, the anti-racist perspective seeks to transform society to secure equity for Black people by redistributing power. There are many levels at which to achieve this, including centering Black thought and scholarship, acknowledging racist outcomes of allegedly colorblind or so-called post-racial structures, and transforming those structures to create different outcomes. Second, anti-racism celebrates resistance and actively builds resistance to conservativism and reductionist thinking about race and racism. Thus, anti-racist advocates are politically involved in collective work while simultaneously participating, individually and collectively, in consciousness-raising and re-education to inform resistance movements. Anti-racist advocates regularly participate in collective movements to fight for equity and strategically understand and navigate dynamic political environments.

Institutional Racism in Social Work Higher Education

Anti-Black racism, "society's inability to recognize the humanity of Black folks--the disdain, disregard and disgust for our existence" (Ross, 2020, para. 6) is pervasive in U.S. society. The most egregious and salient incidents of anti-Black racism are often observed within predominantly white spaces (Blackstock, 2020). When these spaces are formal institutions, institutional racism occurs. Institutional racism is generally understood to mean "discriminatory treatment, unfair policies, or biased practices based on race that result in inequitable outcomes for whites over people of color and extend considerably

beyond prejudice" (Dominquez et al., 2020, p. 7). Institutional racism presents itself within the combination of policies, practices, and procedures embedded in organizational structures, which lead to systematic, unequal outcomes for people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Aligning with the common levels of the social environment used in social work – micro, mezzo, and macro – institutional racism has been conceptualized at three levels of an organization (Griffith et al., 2007). At the macro level, extraorganizational racism functions through the reciprocal relationship between organizations and their external environments, such as the interactions of our professional organizations. At the mezzo level, intraorganizational racism functions through organizations' internal climates, policies, and procedures. At the micro level, individual racism functions through the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of organization members. These levels are explained in detail below within the context of CFIR.

Unfortunately, despite an emphasis on social justice in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics*, social work institutions are not immune to institutional racism (Abrams et al., 2021; McCoy, 2020; NASW, 2021b). Institutional racism at any level can have insidious effects on the education, research, practice, and overall experiences of all social work students, yet the impacts are particularly harmful for Black students. Extraorganizational racism is pervasive throughout social work systems and the profession's history, which has helped stifle the progress, well-being, and liberation of Black people in America. Social work systems have reinforced anti-Black racism through systems, practices, and institutions that are inherently unjust, inequitable, and outright violent toward Black people (Miller & Grant, 2007; Mustaffa, 2017). From social work pioneers excluding Black people from settlement houses to contemporary racism in child welfare, anti-Black racism in social work is well-documented (Detlaff et al., 2020; Hounmenou, 2012).

Intraorganizational racism contributes to ahistorical education and field training, enabling social workers to practice with little knowledge of the problematic tensions in our profession's history and few skills to dismantle them (Jeffrey, 2005; McCoy, 2021). This affects doctoral students not only in our practice but also in our role as current and future educators. When our education lacks content and processes to interrogate anti-Blackness and build anti-racist skillsets, future social work educators lack a critical competency. Indeed, social work faculty train thousands of social workers annually (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2019). Thus, the impacts of instructor capability to teach about the effects of anti-Black racism and anti-racist strategies are far-reaching.

Finally, at the individual level, Black social work students are affected by racism individually and through institutional racism within social work schools and programs and through their universities at large (Fussell-Ware, 2021). Meanwhile, white students and predominantly white faculty are not held accountable for their microaggressions and racism in the classroom. Dismantling institutional racism at each level is a necessary aspect of anti-racist transformation in social work.

Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research: A Tool for Implementation

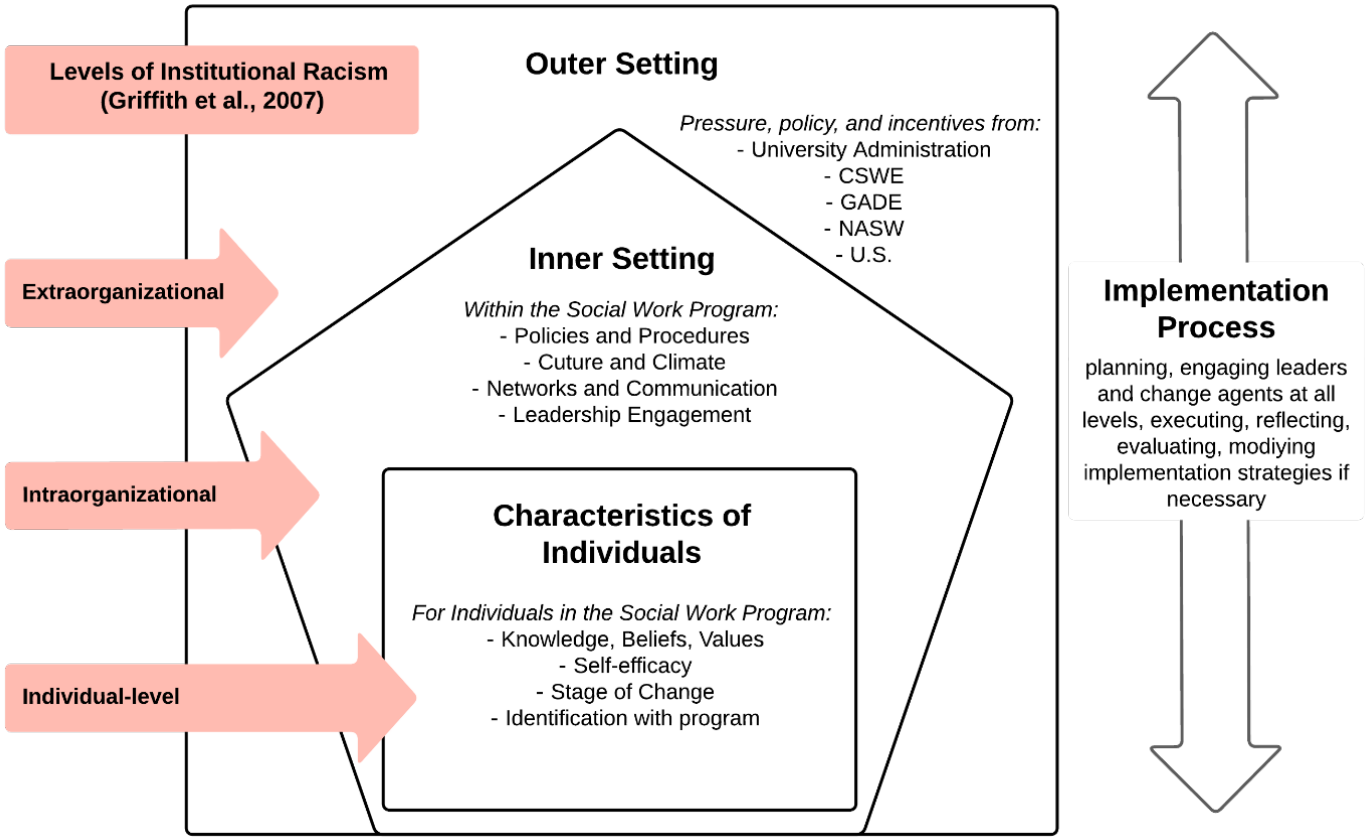
As we have described, the harm and insidious nature of institutional racism is significant, making the stakes for doing anti-racist work in social work education high. However, the energy of doctoral students is a precious and limited resource. Any framework that can support this challenging work may slightly ease the burden and help sustain these crucial endeavors.

Implementation science, or the systematic study of how evidence-based knowledge is applied to practice, is a potential tool for guiding anti-racist work. Implementation science has traditionally evolved for the purpose of translating research evidence from a laboratory setting to diverse healthcare environments (Tinkle et al., 2013). The "evidence-based practices" to which most implementation science literature refers encompass not only preventive, diagnostic, or therapeutic goals, but also cover a broad range of products and processes, including services, programs, methods, techniques, or routines (Nilsen & Birken, 2020). The focus on organizational structures, processes, and their influence on implementation outcomes offers a useful lens for contextualizing and promoting anti-racist activities in social work academia.

One useful implementation science framework is the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR). This commonly used framework defines and organizes theoretical constructs to describe, understand, or explain factors that may have an impact on implementation success (Damschroder et al., 2009). For example, efforts to implement the use of a therapeutic intervention in a mental health clinic may be influenced by broader mental health policy, the support of leadership within the organization, and/or an individual clinician's perception of the intervention (Allchin et al., 2020). Researchers have begun to use the tool for implementation research in novel contexts such as K-12 schools (Asada et al., 2020; Hudson et al., 2020; Leeman et al., 2018). One study even used a Critical Race Theory approach to adapt the CFIR to investigate the ways in which structural racism interacts with the implementation of a school-connectedness intervention (Allen et al., 2021). Though the benefits of implementation science in educational settings have been acknowledged (Kelly & Perkins, 2012), to our knowledge only one study has used the CFIR for higher education implementation science research (see Soicher & Becker-Blease, 2020).

Because the use of the CFIR in higher education is a recent development, we have adapted the domains and constructs of the CFIR to allow for a university-specific context analysis (see Figure 1). The five original domains of the CFIR are 1) Characteristics of Individuals, 2) Inner Setting, 3) Outer Setting, 4) Innovation Characteristics, and 5) Process (Damschroder et al., 2009). Within our analysis, we focus on the first three domains, as they are the most salient to the institutional racism we are combatting, though Innovation Characteristics and Process will be discussed briefly. Further, we operationalize our innovation of interest, or our implementation product, as the application of anti-racist curricula and pedagogy in social work doctoral education.

Figure 1. *Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) for Anti-racist Reform Within Social Work Education*



Notes. Conceptual model is based on theoretical frameworks by Damschroder et al. (2009) and Griffith et al. (2007). CSWE=Council on Social Work Education. GADE=Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work. NASW= National Association of Social Workers.

Additionally, we reconceptualize the overarching domains of the CFIR within the three levels of institutional racism (see Figure 1; Griffith et al., 2007). At the micro level, the Characteristics of Individuals domain includes the knowledge and beliefs of individuals within social work education. Here we focus on individual interactions within our group of doctoral student colleagues. While individual racism can occur at any level, we focus especially on interpersonal relationships in this section and highlight the complexity of addressing individual racism. At the mezzo level, the Inner Setting includes the organizational characteristics and culture of social work education. In the current paper, we focus mostly on our social work program and the role of intraorganizational racism therein. At the macro level, the Outer Setting includes the context surrounding social work education, such as governing bodies (e.g., CSWE), the universities that house social work programs, and national-level policies and events. These macro-level influences correspond with the extraorganizational level of institutional racism, or the reciprocal relationship between organizations and their external environments. Incorporating the levels of institutional racism into the CFIR will allow us to ensure we are addressing racialized practices at all levels. For example, were we to only address anti-Black racism at the Individual Characteristics and the Inner Setting levels in our social work program, we risk factors from the Outer Setting perpetuating the status quo and undermining progress.

Current Aim

The fight against anti-Black racism, both internal and external to the social work discipline, extends far beyond the summer of 2020. However, the national conversation, media coverage, and community-led initiatives presented a rare inflection point in history to make a serious impact. Our student-led collaborative to address anti-Black racism within our social work program emerged through an organic process of mutual aid, support, and communication. We sought to collaborate with faculty and create a collective that could bridge traditional forms of school hierarchy. This paper documents our processes through the lens of the CFIR and seeks to provide an example of how one group of doctoral students worked to support our school in furthering efforts to address anti-Black racism within our institution and profession.

Catalysts for Change

In March 2020, cases of COVID-19 began to proliferate across the United States, resulting in local and state governments implementing shelter-in-place orders to mitigate the risk of exposure and potential for contracting the deadly disease. In alignment with governmental response, universities closed their doors, and social work education, like other disciplines, was disrupted and forced to adapt to new public health measures (Allegheny County Department of Health, 2020; Wolf, 2020). With a total shelter-in-place order in April 2020 and subsequent university closures, students were forced to return to their homes to cope with uncertainty and ever-changing university announcements across time. Then on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota. By May 26th, video footage of the murder had circulated the nation widely and was met with grief and outrage (Dixon & Dundes, 2020; Priniski et al., 2021). Despite escalating

violence against Black people throughout the spring, Black students in our school continued to be met with an overwhelming, deafening silence. Black students and faculty felt unsupported due to the lack of communication from non-Black faculty, a disappointing response consistent with a history of Black degradation in higher education (Dancy et al., 2018; Mustaffa, 2017).

Unfortunately, the silence was not limited to our university. In fact, it was pervasive across the entire social work community. By May 31st the first author noted on Twitter that there was "no public denouncement" of the murder from major social work professional institutions (e.g., CSWE, NASW, etc.), and no overwhelming public response from other social work programs across the United States. Our social work program did, eventually, formally acknowledge the murder of George Floyd at the school level and offered a time to gather as a community to process. While this acknowledgement certainly broke the silence, the suggested action (i.e., a collective one-hour Zoom session with breakout groups) was disproportionate to the magnitude of pain and mourning Black students were experiencing.

Additionally, during this same period, we were regularly receiving communication from our program and the university that explicitly acknowledged the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but did not acknowledge George Floyd's murder or the growing civil unrest. For many Black students this felt like an erasure of their experience. This kind of communication spurred anger: anger with the apparent inability to acknowledge the social movement, anger with reticence to say George Floyd's name, anger that members of our community had appeared to have already moved on. Where were all the social workers in our social work program? In various events in the months that followed, we learned that our program was not unique, that many Black students across the country experienced a similar underwhelming response. With this backdrop for our work, we define the Characteristics of Individuals, Inner Setting, and Outer Setting, describe its overlap with our shared lived experience, and discuss facilitators and barriers in the hopes that our experiences may act as a roadmap for other social work doctoral students.

Characteristics of Individuals

Definition & Conceptualization

For the purposes of this paper, we conceptualize Characteristics of Individuals as existing or developed individual factors which influenced the application of anti-racist work. Individual-level characteristics, specifically knowledge, beliefs, and self-efficacy, were critical factors for the implementation of anti-racist innovations. The following describes our implementation narrative and the facilitators and barriers we experienced.

Implementation Narrative

Individual Stage of Change

The ARDPSC represents a cross-section of doctoral students who were ready to

implement anti-racism efforts within our social work program. First, as doctoral students we had experienced or witnessed the difficulties for students of color in academia. Second, we were ready for change and equipped with expertise in race and racism literature, critical theories, and the belief that things needed to change. Third, our training as social workers meant we were skilled in being resourceful, organized, persistent, and resilient. Fourth, we were well-prepared as student leaders to leverage this privilege within the doctoral student body and existing relationships with school administration and faculty.

Individual Identification with the Organization

As the ARDPSC, we worked together to build a brave and healing community of student activists that, over time, demonstrated our commitment to each other and the desire to see change within our social work program. This relates to the CFIR construct of individual identification with the organization, which describes individual perceptions and commitment to the organization and is often manifested in the degree to which people are willing to contribute to implementation efforts (Damschroder et al., 2009).

In our case, we formed in the midst of significant discomfort and tension that, for many of us, has continued throughout our work together. We navigated these tensions in our group. Sometimes these were anticipated discomforts associated with challenges to white supremacy, white fragility, or white guilt. At other times, the tensions had to do with differing communication styles, a sense of imbalance in power dynamics and workload, or questions of commitment. Often, there were negative feelings, like frustration and anger, which were directed toward entities beyond our committee but needed to find voice in the relative safety we strove to establish among our group. Neither we as individuals nor our work were isolated from things happening in our own lives—including our academic pursuits—and in the mezzo and macro social contexts within which we came together. Ultimately, it required our individual commitments to our collective pursuit to enable us to persist despite our micro challenges.

Similar to other organizing spaces, Black students are left to do more social justice work with the risk of white students dropping out or doing less (Chudy & Jefferson, 2021). Thus, it was important for white students to commit to showing up, completing work, and being humble and trustworthy. At the start, most of our relationships did not have the necessary depth of trust necessary, so honest conversations and time were important to build trust and accountability.

We also needed to establish strong boundaries. In reflection on this work, Black authors emphasized the importance of boundaries, acknowledging that caring deeply about the work and setting boundaries were not mutually exclusive. Rather, boundary setting is a foundation for sustainable social justice work and overall wellness. Setting boundaries was also necessary due to the challenge of completing doctoral coursework and scholarship, graduate assistantships, and service work. We worked toward healthy boundaries and accountability by identifying these issues in our meetings and discussing them with honesty, acknowledging that the solutions would entail a long-term and dynamic process.

Self-Efficacy

At an individual level, every member of the ARDPSC was unequivocally motivated by a commitment to ameliorate anti-Black violence and persistent, pervasive racism that was permeating our internal and external worlds. This, in conjunction with our diverse lived and educational experiences, empowered us to have confidence in our own abilities to develop and lead anti-racist innovations.

The need for anti-racist changes pre-dated the origination of our group and became clearly necessary at the Doctoral Student Organization meetings in Spring of 2020. With only doctoral students in attendance, numerous concerns about the safety and success of Black students were raised, as well as concerns that our program and university was not supplementing its public acknowledgment of the importance of anti-racist social work with tangible, measurable actions. We were also concerned that momentum for actionable efforts may be waning.

We arranged several meetings with the administration to discuss these concerns. The general response was to assure us that a schoolwide plan was being developed. Meetings were also characterized by general invitations for students, particularly Black students, to provide school leadership with guidance and insight on how best to move forward. We were frustrated by reproductions of traditional systems of oppression inherent in these meetings: white Americans demanding emotional labor from Black Americans and the academy demanding unpaid labor from its doctoral students. Our commitment to change in the context of these challenges meant we were often caught between our commitment to social work and feelings of frustration and disappointment that social work often reproduces racial inequities. This overlaps with the CFIR construct of individual perceptions of the organization, which describes perceptions and willingness to support the innovation as an outgrowth of commitment (Abraham, 2000; Greenberg, 1990).

Furthermore, work to address anti-Blackness was routinely diluted by adding it as a task to a long list of tasks, rather than as a central goal. We continue to find this approach unacceptable and have contested it whenever possible. One way we chose to communicate our desired changes was to develop and share a list of demands centered around our innovation of interest: implementing anti-racist pedagogy and addressing anti-Blackness in our doctoral program. We developed our demands collectively and sent them to our school leadership. Our demands included a requirement that leadership and faculty take responsibility for their own self-education, the immediate initiation of a doctoral program curriculum review, planning anti-racist pedagogical training for all faculty, and distribution of a school-wide racial climate survey. In addition to these demands, we insisted on transparency and consistent updates on progress toward these goals from school leadership.

Since our group was formed at a predominantly white institution, a key theme in our discussions about anti-racism work was that in-reach must precede outreach. In other words, before we made recommendations or provided technical support to the community, we needed to address racist behaviors and structures in our own institution. ARDPSC identified a Doctoral Vision Statement as one way that we could hold ourselves and our

overall doctoral student community accountable to anti-racist principles. Our vision statement centers anti-racism and anti-oppression, establishing the expectation that all current and incoming doctoral students recognize inherently racist structures within academia and the vulnerable communities that we engage within our research and praxis. It stresses that each student will commit themselves to intentional and continued anti-racist praxis by seeking appropriate guidance and education. It also maintains that sustainability of our anti-racist reform will require ongoing reflection and action for which we all accept responsibility. The Characteristics of Individuals allowed us to not only develop the ARDPSC but also become empowered to develop and implement anti-racism products for use in our program.

Facilitators and Barriers

Technology

Creating communal spaces was a common challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, our doctoral co-working office often served as a space for connection. During the year of limited access to campus, Microsoft Teams provided our communal space. We were able to post updates, vote on decisions using the reaction buttons, and provide support to each other.

However, using Teams was not always easy. Each member of our group attempted to develop their own time management related to using Teams and participating in the work. Some of us were trying to manage our time to maintain productivity – a perpetual challenge even when the stressors of 2020 were not in play – so automatic alerts and the implied continual availability of online platforms was a disruption for some. Others were coping with platform overload given how many community organizing groups use similar, but distinct, platforms. However, when these concerns were raised by white students, it was clear this was a moment to stretch ourselves to build the community that was necessary to support each other and engage in the work at hand. Teams failed to provide the empathy and warmth of in-person connection and may have been easy to opt-out of. Although Teams was a powerful tool for our work during this year when we had limited access to campus, it has significant limitations compared to in-person organizing.

Meeting Processes

In addition to interacting through Teams, we had video meetings. Sometimes these meetings were impromptu to address a particular issue, but most were held formally. We determined how frequently to meet based on the pace and quantity of projects occurring at that time. One member with strengths in organization scheduled meetings and wrote draft agendas. Agendas were available and editable for the whole group, which was important for transparency and keeping meetings on task. We then rotated the tasks of facilitating and writing minutes based on who had interest and energy at meeting time. We included an ice breaker and/or check-ins during each meeting to continue to get to know each other better.

The intentional anti-racist process taken by the ARDPSC acted as the primary

facilitator for our implementation success. Our regular check-ins and reflections on how our group was interacting were examples of the CFIR construct of reflecting and evaluating, which seeks to provide ongoing feedback on implementation efforts. When developing our ground rules, we chose not to implement traditional ones that are steeped in white supremacy, social control, and order. We reflected together that ground rules in many white spaces are built to avoid conflict, often resulting in its mismanagement and contributing to broken or harmed relationships. Those of us with experience working and/or living in Black community organizing spaces have seen more models of actively managing conflict, addressing harm, and prioritizing, maintaining, and growing relationships. Thus, one approach to centering Blackness in our work was to seek to maintain relationships, which includes preparing for conflict and promoting care. So, we pushed ground rules and meeting processes beyond traditionally white-centered reflections and check-ins by providing feedback with the goal to center the experience of our colleagues of color. In reviewing products and talking about group processes, the use of our ground rules encouraged open and productive conversations among one another about intersections between race and gender, ways to give feedback, and how we engage with each other.

As the ARDPSC, we used meeting time to strategically consider how to prioritize our implementation efforts. We then worked together and engaged our mentors and the administration within our social work program. As has been mentioned, we leveraged existing relationships with leadership and administration to promote and build support for our anti-racism efforts. During ARDPSC meetings we took time to reflect and process how well (or poorly) our outreach, accountability, and dissemination efforts were received and plan next steps.

Established Structures & Relationships

At our school, the Doctoral Student Organization is a fully student-run, student-member organization for all doctoral students in our program with autonomy over our communications and meetings. This group helped us connect and hear broad concerns. However, it was not well-suited to do this work in part because it encompasses all the doctoral students and would have been too large. Additionally, the high stakes and potential risks of this work required a subgroup of students who were willing and able to build the depth of relationships required to sustain the challenges of the work. We had to be committed to holding the tension between challenging and working with the established systems, which we discussed regularly. Most members of ARDPSC also had significant leadership experience or additional roles in the Doctoral Student Organization.

Inner Setting: Our Social Work Program

Definition and Conceptualization

The CFIR Inner Setting is defined as the context within which the innovation occurs as well as factors which interact with the innovation to affect implementation (Damschroder et al., 2009). For purposes of this paper, we conceptualize the Inner Setting

as the climate, culture, structure, and procedures within our social work program, including our interactions with faculty, staff, and other students (see Figure 1). The inner setting is dynamic, and the year 2020 introduced dramatic disruptions, challenging us to continually adapt.

Implementation Narrative

In addition to work within our own group, we worked in concert with schoolwide efforts. The interventions subsequently described, including learning environments and school task forces, were formed by school leadership who offered ARDPSC members opportunities to participate as student representatives. Through this service we were able to continue to raise students' experiences of individual- and intraorganizational-level institutional racism from our perspective as community members. To adapt to these new roles, the ARDPSC made it a point to have students share progress updates from their respective roles in learning environments and school task forces in regular ARDPSC meetings. Committee members then devoted a portion of meeting time to strategizing how best to advocate for student interests.

The ARDPSC identified the need for developing a more designated space for anti-racist learning and reflection. This aligns with the CFIR construct of learning climate, or the degree of psychological safety felt by team members and leaders to try new things and seek input (Damschroder et al., 2009). In alignment with this goal, an important part of our work with faculty and staff was creating a space for learning and discussion. The Anti-Racist Learning Collective served as one space to create such a learning climate. This collective was led by one of the authors and a faculty member during the Fall of 2020 and was taken over by another faculty member and doctoral student in Spring 2021. Interested members in the school community were invited to meet biweekly to discuss issues of race and racism and the role we played, as social workers, in ensuring social and racial justice in society. Readings and videos to assist in anchoring discussions were sent out in advance for review by attendees. Collective sessions were also supplemented by lectures and events held by other entities in the University.

Alongside the Anti-Racist Learning Collective, four task forces were developed as a mechanism to ensure an ongoing commitment to anti-racist action. Each of the four task forces was led by two members of our program's Inclusion and Diversity Committee (IDC) and was tasked with one of four central scopes: 1) faculty and staff, 2) students, 3) curriculum, and 4) infrastructure, policy, and practice. Membership in each task force was intentionally diverse and generally included one member from administration, a tenure-stream faculty, an appointment-stream faculty, and student representatives from all program levels.

As active community members, we also wanted to create products and participate in actions that would further support anti-racism in our school. Our first priority was to address the experiences of racism of doctoral students in the classroom. We did this in two primary ways. As discussed above, we wrote demands for our doctoral program specific to anti-racism. To support our request for a curriculum review with a special focus on inclusivity of research and theory by scholars of color, a review of classroom practices,

and transparent decision making, we also wrote an anti-racist syllabus review guide for faculty (University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work ARDPSC, 2020). Two ARDPSC members with expertise in race, racism, and social work education drafted the guide to help faculty interrogate both implicit and explicit curriculum. This document was well-received and has been incorporated into ongoing curriculum review. Additionally, it has been shared publicly and seems to have been applied in other programs (DeVlieger, 2021).

Facilitators and Barriers

Resources and Service Capacity

An ongoing barrier for doctoral students to lead this effort is access to resources. Most of us were participating in service for our social work program, the university, or community partners. Though students in our program are typically paid for 20 hours of research or teaching work weekly, additional service added even more unpaid work to our schedules. Time can also be a significant barrier for those in doctoral programs. As doctoral students in a competitive research environment, the productivity expected of us remained the same throughout the spring of 2020 and the time since then. In fact, it was even suggested that we could be even more productive due to working from home, and with the additional service work, we were indeed working harder than ever before. It was helpful that ARDPSC members spanned the stages of our doctoral program, meaning that our leadership could rotate naturally with the ebb and flow of our individual semesters. Ultimately, relationships proved to be the ladder over these barriers. As challenges arose, we used open communication to discuss them and tried to come to solutions that would support individual members.

Implementation Climate

One barrier to implementation was a broader cultural resistance to anti-racism work, which affects schools of social work and the broader academy (Davis, 2021; Jeffrey, 2005; McCoy, 2021). The implementation climate within our social work program is continually evolving and seems to have become more receptive to anti-racism efforts over time. As students seeking change and enhanced transparency, we were grateful to be able to work with faculty, staff, and students across levels to participate in committees and task forces. Most of us had participated in service through committee membership as doctoral student representatives and had built credibility with faculty through our coursework and our work as research assistants.

Initially we had some concerns that adding additional committees might dilute efforts. In large part, they seemed to work as intended, sharing work across the school community. Task forces that were designed to be time-limited, with specific goals, seemed to maintain forward momentum better than established committees for whom anti-racist work was one of many tasks and goals set prior to the current year. Overall, we valued the opportunity to be on task forces and committees but wish that, in the future, more attention would be paid to these obstacles.

Outer Setting

Definition and Conceptualization

The Outer Setting of the CFIR includes the larger context within which the Inner Setting is housed. It encompasses external pressures and incentives as well as their influences on the innovation adoption process. For the purposes of this paper, the Outer Setting refers to our university and social work education and national organizations (e.g., CSWE, Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE; see Figure 1), National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), National Association of Social Workers (NASW)). The following describes the ways in which external entities influenced our experience and innovation implementation.

Innovation Narrative

Though not our primary focus, we wanted to contribute to national work to reimagine and restructure social work. A primary example of the utility of our social network was becoming aware of the movement to write to the CSWE regarding adding "anti-racist pedagogies" to social work competencies. We became aware that other groups of social work doctoral students were writing these letters and were provided with a model letter. Our membership then revised the letter and applied our organizing skills to reach out to our current students and alumni to obtain over 100 signatures on our letter. We were subsequently able to share the letter on our social media where it was widely circulated (University of Pittsburgh SSW DSO, 2020). Though not the center of our efforts, engagement in our professional networks was important. As evidenced by changes in the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the NASW *Code of Ethics*, and the overall social work rhetoric in the last year, collective engagement in the outer setting can lead to meaningful change (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2021a; NASW 2020b).

Facilitators and Barriers

One key facilitator of our work at this level was having social networks beyond our school and university, which aligns with the CFIR construct of cosmopolitanism or connectedness to external networks (Damschroder et al., 2009). One unfortunate experience of many academics, including graduate students, is the experience of feeling confined to a single silo or isolated from peers. However, a number of members of ARDPSC had worked to resist this and built a robust social support network. Our collective includes students who worked in multiple departments, such as students earning master's degrees in public health along with their social work doctorates. We represent students working in various campus and community groups, including graduate student organizing, the Latin American Graduate Organization of Students, and our program's MSW alumni group on Facebook. Our membership also includes students with networks across the country, with two members who were part of the Society for Social Work and Research Doctoral Student Committee. These connections meant that our members were engaged in the broader university and social work community, facilitating participation in local and

national change efforts.

Barriers, however, included extraorganizational forces. Our school was in the middle of Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) re-accreditation, which meant that our curricula were already being carefully reviewed by a governing body and needed to be static during the review period. At this time, CSWE EPAS did not include language on anti-racism, and re-accreditation tends to be a meticulous process for which social work programs need to demonstrate that they satisfy accreditation mandates. These reasons were given multiple times by faculty and administration to explain why our syllabus review guide could not be used to revise syllabi until after the accreditation process. Our demands included reform within lesson plans and pedagogical techniques, as well, but again, extraorganizational forces impacted this being implemented. Additionally, faculty at our school are typically not contracted to work during the summer, while still having the burden of productivity and publishing expectations. Thus, following our accreditation year and visit, summer meant anti-racist efforts slowed considerably.

Implications for Social Work

We frame our implications as recommendations for other social work programs or groups of doctoral students who are working to dismantle institutional racism in their programs.

Build a Multi-Level, Brave Learning Environment

One potential barrier to anti-racist work is not having strong, trusting relationships as the foundation for doing and sustaining ongoing social justice work. This barrier merits significant attention. Educational scholars provide useful concepts for change agents in higher education, advocating for making the contexts in which discussions about race take place brave rather than safe (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Singleton & Hays, 2008; Sparks, 2002). Seeking to ensure everyone feels "safe" in conversations about injustice generally serves only the status quo, which is counterproductive to anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and justice-seeking efforts.

Rather, members of the ARDPSC took the risk of being vulnerable and feeling unsafe at moments and made our committee a brave space. Doing so required patience, compassion, ongoing self-reflection, mutual support, and openness to continuous adaptation along the way. Self-care for all members was an acknowledged need that was honored, respected, and encouraged. We would also suggest building a sense of community into broader school- and university-wide networks, so individuals feel connected and simultaneously supported. The value of diverse voices contributing to work such as this also requires a respect for diverse ways of working together and of attending to personal needs outside of the group.

Notably we did this work in our own group even as we worked in multiple groups with other students, faculty, and staff from our social work program. Meanwhile students at other levels and faculty and staff had other spaces where we were aware they were organizing around anti-racist learning and change. This reality highlights an important

lesson for others doing this work. Specifically, many brave spaces need to be organized and cultivated for change to progress. Some groups benefit from being inclusive. In our experience, the anti-racist task forces within our program made effective progress because representatives from all facets of the school community were involved, and we learned from each other as we worked. Other groups benefit from being more like affinity groups. Our group only included doctoral students. Other groups included only faculty. This created spaces where individuals in similar situations could build relationships and could confront each other without those conversations being widely shared. Thus, many groups should be organized to move forward while also working toward all spaces being brave and using an anti-racist framework.

Finally, we must consider the sustainability of our efforts. Within the ARDPSC we have taken a number of steps for sustainability. Among our members we were constantly communicating about our individual capacities and considering the potential differential consequences for individual students who took specific actions, such as writing an email or speaking up at a particular meeting. Though decisions about who should act and what action should be taken are a dynamic process that changes over time, the key point is that boundaries, inclusivity, potential consequences, and capacity benefit from being part of an open and continuous conversation to protect and support all members. Additionally, by using Teams and documenting our work with transparency, we can continue strategically working through our goals. For example, we documented our demands and our ongoing progress toward them, enabling us to share with incoming members.

Include All Community Members

If we are to dismantle racism in social work, we all need to be involved, including students. If they are not already included, programs should incorporate student voices, and students should organize and plan to be included. Additionally, we encourage students to resist the isolating nature of academia and organize together. If students are not involved or could be more involved, these organized groups can work together to approach the program administration about the potential for being included while planning to mobilize independently, if necessary. We hope that program administrators, faculty, and staff encourage inclusivity of all invested community members, including students. Additionally, we hope programs can consider how to compensate students for their unpaid service work or include it as a part of paid duties.

Consider Using a Guiding Framework

We have shown that frameworks like the CFIR can be used to help guide anti-racist work. Though there are certainly many ways to mobilize efforts, we are finding that a framework like CFIR will help us strategize and sustain our work over the long term. For example, it has helped us reflect on the facilitators and barriers we experienced over the last year and consider how we can continue to be effective in our work. Additionally, by mapping the CFIR constructs onto the levels of institutional racism, we can see the levels of our work more clearly. Going forward this will enable us to be more organized about pursuing multi-level efforts, since working across levels of the social environment are a

necessity for anti-racist efforts to succeed.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged us to reimagine established routines and allowed us to bend the rules we once thought unalterable. As social workers and doctoral students committed to anti-racism, we recognized anti-Black racism as a systemic threat that demands intervention. Institutional racism is sustained by white supremacy and permeates all levels of our institutions. Therefore, to begin dismantling it, a multi-level analysis and strategy is crucial. The CFIR provided a valuable framework for analyzing barriers and facilitators to our efforts by adapting it to center the levels of institutional racism (see Figure 1; Griffith et al., 2007). There are limitations to our work, but we used CFIR to illuminate not only the areas in which we were impactful and the factors that contributed, but also areas that need continued attention and pursuit of change. We chose to focus our change efforts at our social work program but have described our process in hopes of modeling our approach for other change agents.

The Characteristics of Individuals included our knowledge and beliefs about anti-racist reform, our individual stage of change, and identification with social work. Doctoral students involved in planning and executing this work have a history of success in engaging multiple community partners, working with diverse communities, and building strong professional relationships. We used these attributes to our advantage along with our individual areas of expertise such as critical race theory, pedagogy, and implementation science. Because of these characteristics, we were able to collaborate well together, obtain support from faculty, and create products to disseminate. We encourage change agents wanting to do similar work in their setting to identify strengths within a team and start with relationship-building. It was additionally helpful to establish an organized and reliable mode of communication with ground rules to build relationships through discomfort, misunderstandings, and disagreements. Thanks to our initial attention to relationship-building amongst ourselves and others within our setting, we were able to rebound quickly and refocus when relational challenges required collective resolution in order to effectively proceed.

Our social work program comprised the Inner Setting. At this level, we balanced requests with commitment of our time and expertise. We communicated our concerns about anti-Blackness to our administration through our list of demands while contributing an anti-racist syllabus review guide to aid these efforts. We participated and helped guide the Anti-Racist Learning Collective to continue improving the learning climate of our school and to further the development of an anti-racist climate and pedagogy. We participated in task forces while also understanding there were limitations to our participation as students. While acknowledging the unpaid labor of graduate students, developing and facilitating an anti-racist learning community and participating in community work were key facilitators in our ability to implement change.

The Outer Setting included pressures, policies, and incentives from entities outside of our social work program, our university and professional bodies, like CSWE and NASW. Entities that govern and impact our social work education operate in the

extraorganizational realm, upholding values of white supremacy through the promotion and rewarding of hierarchies, profits, policing, and exploitation of labor (NASW, 2021b). We identified facilitators within this potentially volatile system: the networks and connections we built across and within exterior organizations enabled us to strengthen our reach. Trusted colleagues at other social work programs, the Society for Social Work and Research Doctoral Student Committee, and student organizations at our university were key in spreading our message and building a coalition of change.

This work requires building working relationships with a variety of people – fellow students, faculty members, colleagues from other disciplines, and others. Though we often talk about building networks as doctoral students, this work showed the value of growing one's professional network through service and beyond the constraints of one's research area (i.e., the implementation benefits increased cosmopolitanism). Broader relationships with rich and diverse social networks may better facilitate social justice work than those constrained by academic discipline or other boundaries.

We remain committed to challenging ourselves, each other, our program, and the social work profession to live up to the values and principles to which we devoted ourselves upon entering the field (NASW, 2021a). Our goal for the current paper is to support the work of other students to develop and lead anti-racism efforts within their social work programs. We found that aligning our experience with the CFIR helps us to meet this goal. That said, we chose to focus on three of the five domains and only some of the underlying constructs. Future efforts can and should expand the use of the Characteristics of Individuals, Inner Setting, and Outer Setting domains to also include Intervention Characteristics and Process in addressing racism within social work programs.

Much more work lies ahead to invest in anti-racist transformation in the academy and fully acknowledge the value of social justice efforts for our students, our research, and our communities. This example is within a singular setting and should be tested and refined in other academic settings. The work of the ARDPSC within our own school of social work and its alignment with the CFIR is an example of how implementation science, specifically the CFIR, may inform anti-racism efforts within academia. We hope that by sharing our experiences and this alignment we and other groups of students supporting anti-racist transformation in higher education can build a sustainable model for this ongoing work.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Dashawna J. Fussell-Ware, College of Social Work, University of Tennessee, Nashville, TN, 37210. Email: dfussel1@utk.edu.