Sustaining Personal Activism: Behavior Analysts as Anti-Racist Accomplices

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Abstract

One pervasive social issue that has received little attention within the behavior analytic community is racism and the systemic oppression of Black, Indigenous, and non-Black People of Color (BIPOC). The present paper offers guidance and examples of how each of us as behavior analysts might build individualized self-management behavior change plans that support initiation and sustained socially significant anti-racism work as we move from allies to accomplices within our own sphere of influence. This paper introduces the concept of self-managed anti-racism behavior change plans that (a) operationally define anti-racist action, use measurable outcomes and strategies for data collection on specific anti-racist and support actions; (b) provide choices to improve engagement and reduce barriers to adherence; and (c) use effective behavioral interventions to alter the availability of discriminative stimuli or reduce their influence, and increase the availability of reinforcers that are compatible with the goal of the behavior change plan for increasing anti-racism behavior and dismantling structures perpetuating racial inequities.

Keywords: Anti-Racism, Activism, Self-management, Social justice

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The present day is a time of great duress in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has spread unabated in the U.S. due to slow, inadequate, and disjointed federal, state, and local public health action (Haffajee & Mello, 2020), and as a result we are facing unprecedented economic and societal challenges that have laid bare long-standing disparities in healthcare and educational access for Black, Indigenous, and non-Black People of Color (BIPOC) as well as people with disabilities (CDC, 2020). These minoritized communities and persons with disabilities have experienced greatly disparate morbidity and mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic when compared to healthy white people (Price-Haywood et al., 2020). During this time, Black people, who already experience higher rates of poverty than other Americans due to environmental, medical, and structural racism, have experienced higher rates of unemployment, job loss, and food insecurity, and are less likely to have access to technology and educational opportunities (Álvarez, 2020).

During this time, several racially-motivated murders sparked an uptick of participation by those not previously engaged with anti-racist activism. In February of 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man was jogging when he was murdered by three white men allegedly because they believed him to be a criminal (Fausset, 2020). In March of 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black emergency room technician was murdered in her home by police following a no-knock warrant (Oppel & Taylor, 2020). George Floyd, a 46-year old Black father and grandfather was murdered by a white police officer on a street in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 during an investigation of an alleged \$20 counterfeit bill used to purchase cigarettes (Taylor, 2020). Demonstrations began in Minneapolis the day following Floyd's murder and these

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protests eventually spread across each of the 50 states, over 400 cities, and in more than 60 other countries (Buchanan et al., 2020) and show no signs of stopping in some metropolitan cities even in the face of federally sponsored violence toward protesters.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations and longstanding efforts by Black activists have resulted in meaningful change including legislation, policy, and funding implications. Democrats in Congress have proposed police reform legislation including the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020 (2020), a bill that supports enhanced federal monitoring of constitutional violations such as excessive use of force by state and local law enforcement, and transparency of efforts to eliminate discriminatory police actions. This bill would lower the criminal intent standard making it easier to convict a law enforcement officer for knowing or reckless misconduct in a federal prosecution, would restrict qualified immunity as a counter to liability in private civil suits against a law enforcement officer or state correctional officer, and would allow the US Department of Justice to issue subpoenas in investigations of police departments in relation to discrimination. The Minneapolis city council voted to disband the police department and Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota announced comprehensive police reform. Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City reallocated about one billion dollars from the 6 billion dollars police budget to youth and social services (Rubinstein, & Mays, 2020). Further, many states and localities have banned chokeholds and reviewed police reform efforts, confederate and slavery associated statues have been removed or toppled (Ankel, 2020), and contracts with school resource officers/police have been terminated by several school districts and universities (Balingit et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020, July 10). Of course, these actions are

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insufficient to counter the historical cost of white supremacy, and there is still so much action needed.

We are at a point in time when our professional organizations are taking more seriously Skinner's 1982 call to action for those in our field to use our science to address larger social problems and, ultimately, "change the world." This is evidenced by the formation of special interest groups such as Behavior Analysis for Sustainable Societies and Behaviorists for Social Responsibility, ABAI's recent stewardship of *Behavior and Social Issues*, and the First Annual ABAI Culturo-Behavior Science Conference highlighting research and practice related to large-scale behavior change and social activism. Most of the work in our field examining underlying mechanisms of racism such as prejudice, stigma, biases, and cultural competency emerges from relational frame theory, the practice of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and related practices such as mindfulness (Levin et al., 2016; Lilis & Hazeys 2007), and perspective taking to mediate the automaticity of established reactions (Todd et al., 2011).

Also of note is the work that individual behavior analysts are doing to better understand and address large-scale societal issues such as poverty (e.g., Lemos & Todorov, 2020) and crime, substance misuse and access to health care (e.g., Anderson-Carpenter et al., 2017; Watson-Thompson et al., 2018), and calling for collective action from those in our field (e.g., Biglan et al., 2017; Hantula, 2019; Mattaini, 2019). Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) are now more than 30,000 strong in the United States and we have the capacity to influence as individuals, as change agents in our clients' lives, and as members and leaders in the organizations we work within, our professional organizations, and in our own neighborhoods, cities, and states.

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Personal Work for Behavior Analysts

As behavior analysts we are uniquely positioned to understand how inherently racist structures and systems in our environment have reinforced and shaped our behavior over time. Yet there is a dearth of behavior analytic conceptual and empirical research literature focused on how to account for and address racist beliefs and actions and the larger problem of institutionalized racism (Matsuda et al., 2020). This is likely associated with the challenging reality that, as part of a predominately white field, many of us do not directly and regularly experience aversive consequences related to racist actions and policies. For those of us under the influence of motivating operations (MOs; Michael, 1993) to strive for societal change, either for ourselves or on the behalf of others, large-scale social change can feel insurmountable, or it can be all too easy to focus exclusively on more manageable behavior change endeavors. However, while sweeping policy reforms and wide-spread social movements will indeed be a necessary aspect of sustainable societal change (Mattaini & Aspholm, 2016), our entire field of study is largely predicated on the power of lasting individual behavior change. To choose not to apply our science in areas of social justice or to doubt the efficacy of doing so is tantamount to being complicit in the systematic oppression and harm of these communities.

As practitioners, scholars, and leaders in the field, it is imperative that we better understand the mechanisms that contribute to racism and racist actions as well as those mechanisms that can interrupt the development and maintenance of racism and racist actions in US society. Our understanding of human behavior affords us the ability to arrange environmental contingencies to occasion and reinforce anti-racist behavior, and there is no shortage of resources from outside of our field focused on specific anti-racist actions that we as

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individuals can take and teach to others (e.g., Dominelli, 2017; Embrick & Hinricks, 2015; Kendi, 2019; Kivel, 2017; Love, 2019; Malott & Schaeffe, 2015). On a personal level, as white practitioners working with vulnerable populations, we can begin by educating ourselves on the history continuation of racism within the United States, including within our states, communities, and schools, and how racism intersects with ableism and other forms of discrimination (Whitesel, 2017). Having a more thorough understanding of these issues can help us not only to better reflect on our personal biases, but also to recognize how inherently racist policies and norms in our society affect everything from our client populations (i.e. those who seek and are eligible to receive our services) to the target skills that we teach as part of our programming. In addition, both in our personal lives and within our organizations we can create verbal communities with other white behavior analysts (i.e. affinity groups; Blitz & Kohl, 2012) to regularly discuss the issue of racism, identify goals for change, operationalize plans of action, and hold each other accountable for continued progress. It is essential that we seek the voices of and actively listen to our BIPOC colleagues and clients to acknowledge their lived experiences as well as our ignorance of the direct impacts of those lived experiences and the types of discrimination that people regularly face in the United States.

BCBAs who conduct research can empirically investigate the environmental conditions that occasion and maintain racist behavior and identify evidence-based anti-racist practices and the conditions under which they are most likely to be effective. For investigators for whom research specifically related to racism is not feasible, including race and ethnicity data for study participants and positionality statements in write-ups and presentations are small steps that can be taken to improve our knowledge and limit bias. Those of us who publish and prepare

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pre-service behavior analysts and other professionals can highlight the work of BIPOC scholars in our writing and teaching, embed culture, diversity, and anti-racism content into BACB course sequences, and work with colleagues to improve recruitment and retention of students from traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups. Within our organizations we can actively seek to create ethnically and racially diverse work environments by instituting policies to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in hiring practices (e.g. advocating for cluster hires of BIPOC faculty; Akpapuna et al., 2020; Muñoz et al., 2017). We can also work to support our BIPOC colleagues by providing mentoring opportunities and working to create inclusive environments that are free from microaggressions (Fong et al., 2017). From our leaders, we can ask for mission and values statements to be matched by measurable action. One way that we can start is by advocating for the addition of items to the BCBA/BCaBA Task List to ensure that those working to become behavior analysts receive supervision and training related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural competence (Beaulieu, et al. 2019). These topic areas could also be required in the same way that ethics credits are currently required as part of continuing education for certified behavior analysts practicing in the field.

Purpose of the Present Paper

Clearly behavior analysts have a potentially large role to play with the need for strategies to assist in sustained individual action. This paper offers guidance and examples of how behavior analysts might build individualized self-management plans that support initiation of value-based action, and sustained socially significant work within our own individual sphere of influence. We summarize strategies for operationally defining anti-racist action and monitoring our personal progress, and offer strategies for self-managing our self-education and

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personal growth. Although we focus on individual action, it is essential to recognize that allyship and accomplice work is entering into a larger movement led by Black activists (Ransby, 2020) and that individual action alone will not suffice.

Leveraging Principles of Behavior Analysis to Change Our Own Behavior and Sustain Progress

Anyone who has embarked on a new commitment to exercise, started a writing routine, or endeavored to eat more vegetables has encountered roadblocks that prevented timely goal attainment and sustained action. Most of us start with optimism and strong adherence to our plan, but at some point, we fail to adhere to our plan to engage in the desired behaviors – whether completing a marathon, writing a book, or reducing our low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels. When starting or accelerating our journey to become an anti-racist accomplice, we should expect to encounter the same types of difficulties.

For those who are not Black in America, moving from complicit bystander to accomplice involves educating oneself about white supremacy and its harms, critical and ongoing examination of our own culture and sources of implicit bias (Machado, & Lugo, 2020), accruing new knowledge that positions the voices of Black authors and activists front and center, and uncomfortable behavior such as speaking up against racism when a family member, friend, colleague, or neighbor express anti-Black sentiments (Okun, 2006). These behaviors and organizational changes are absolutely essential if we care about civil rights and racial equality, but these are effortful actions subject to the principles of behavior including the variables that influence adherence to self-managed behavior change plans. Several challenges are uniquely inherent to anti-racism activism and require consideration when launching a personal behavior change plan. First, whites do not personally experience the traumatic and ongoing experiences

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of racism and can more easily set aside effortful and uncomfortable work, allow others to do the work, and make excuses to avoid experiencing negative feelings (Harmon & Burch, 2020).

Second, smaller measurable goals are more easily achieved, but few roadmaps exist that break down the steps of taking anti-racist action. Indeed, becoming an accomplice has no definitive completion goal as white people continue to be members of the oppressor race. Any self-management plan must operationally define actionable steps including accomplice behaviors, go beyond verbal behavior of stating solidarity with the BLM Movement or disgust for police brutality, and plan for long-term change.

Finally, white supremacy continues because it is self-perpetuated by individuals who have been cautioned not to cause other white people discomfort by calling out racism, and there is a relative lack of accountability for self-education and professional growth as an accomplice (e.g. no current Behavior Analyst Certification Board requirement for continuing education units center on equity and inclusion, no task list items focused on these issues). These barriers, although not insurmountable, do pose challenges to adherence to any plan of action we create to engage in activism to support civil rights, and offer insight into the potential operant function of anti-racist action (e.g. private events, recognition of peers) or failure to engage in anti-racist action (e.g. private events, avoidance).

Fortunately, the issue of decreased adherence has long been a topic of study in behavioral science and medicine (Pérez-Jover et al., 2019; Wiecek et al., 2019). Several theories have been developed and empirically tested to explain the potential reasons for declining treatment adherence or the degree to which a person adheres to proscribed health behavior change. Theories with close alignment to ABA include the Transtheoretical Model of Change

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(Prochaska et al., 1992). This Model included the following processes: (a) consciousness raising, (b) choice of options, and (c) contingency control. A key conceptual point is that this model accepts that, on the way to habit development, an individual cycles through stages of change including precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983).

Self-Management Strategies to Initiate and Sustain Behavior Change Related to Anti-Racism

Activism and Accomplice Work

In the section that follows, we introduce and discuss guiding principles of creating an effective, sustainable self-management plan that uses the principles and practices of behavior analysis to address some of the aforementioned challenges to personal behavior change. Table 1 provides examples of self-management strategies. Anti-racist activism takes place along a continuum from actor to ally to accomplice (Osler, 2020) and we have strived to include accomplice type behaviors as examples when discussing self-management strategies in an effort to avoid encouraging performative acts that fail to challenge white supremacy (Grundy, 2020). As allies and accomplices, we should strive to follow Kayla Reed's helpful mnemonic to A-always center the impacted, L-listen and learn from those who live in the oppression, L-leverage your privilege, and Y-yield the floor (Reed, 2016).

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Table 1*Example self-management strategies*

Choices, Antecedent Reminders	Self-Education	Manage contingencies
Identify, follow, join and contribute to racial justice organizations in your community and nationally to motivate personal change (for partial map, see http://mendozao.github.io/Resource-Generation-Map/app/index.html).	Break down anti-racism work into discrete, manageable and measurable steps (e.g. read 15 minutes each night from fiction or non-fiction book written by a Black woman every weekday).	Pair work supporting activism with putative reinforcers (e.g. attend online events with favorite notebook, beverage).
Follow @antiracismcalendar on Instagram and complete daily tasks.	Pool group finances to pay Black author or activist speak to your anti-racism book club, organizations.	Organize/ participate in anti-racist activism accountability group of White colleagues – operationally define long-term goals and meet regularly to encourage forward progress in individual and group activism.
Engage in mindfulness practice to assist with value driven action.	Assign supervisees BIPOC authored readings that support them in learning about how to work effectively with minoritized clients and their families.	Graph, evaluate progress, and self-reward behavior associated with your anti-racism activism goals. Examples of goals include total dollars donated, count of Black led events attended, number of minutes written (e.g. letters to the editor, practitioner publications), count of protests attended.
Set personal calendar reminders to complete specific actions (e.g. schedule donation to Black led activist organization, write letter to local official).	Make anti-racism, cultural sensitivity a priority topic in supervision. Include reminders on any supervision checklist.	
Tie activism action to another already engrained habit to increase automaticity (e.g. weekend household purchases tied to purchases from Black owned businesses).		
Post behavioral expectations in workplace, during online meetings with scripted examples for White employees to speak up about white supremacy, racism, and bias during staff meetings, and professional development.		Tangible rewards planned for adherence to your plan that are compatible with retribution (purchases from Black owned businesses).

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Operationally Define Action and Monitor Progress

Activism and efforts to self-educate, advocate and protest may maintain in the absence of operational definition if linked to Black led movements and organizations that provide guidance on the when and how of action. However, as with other self-management plans, we anticipate improved effectiveness when anti-racism goals are operationally defined to be measurable and observable to ensure we know what to do and to allow for tracking our progress towards engaging in the desired or terminal behavior. For example, a behavior analyst working in higher education might track daily minutes writing that is focused on racial equity or monthly minutes spent reviewing course syllabi for inclusion of BIPOC scholars. A behavior analyst in private practice might evaluate their progress by minutes spent monthly supporting early career behavior analysts in their state who are BIPOC which could include lifting their work on social media, and inviting them to provide paid professional development related to their areas of content expertise. Many of us have purchased non-fiction and fiction books written by BIPOC authors and could track minutes spent reading each weeknight and the number of concrete actions (e.g. researching, following and financially supporting prison abolitionist organizations after reading a book on the topic of racism and the prison industrial complex) that we take based on our increased knowledge. Graphical representation (e.g. line graphs, histograms, daily bubbles to fill in on bullet journal) of our goal progress can provide needed self-reinforcement (e.g. McDougall, 2012).

Identify Barriers to Personal Growth

We can proactively identify and plan for barriers that may arise. For instance, if there are concerns about having limited time to engage in activism, some actions can be automated

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such as arranging regular, monthly electronic donations to Black-led organizations. If an individual finds themselves too often tired to attend events after the workday, they can sign up for only those events that will be recorded for later viewing. If a person finds themselves lacking motivation, they could schedule regularly occurring low effort podcasts or movie viewings to jump start the work. If a person is routinely too stressed to take on additional work, they could consider scheduling short meditation and/or exercise sessions to alleviate stress and schedule a calendar reminder to come back to their activism plan once they have engaged in self-care.

Give Yourself Options

We assume that the reader is committed to some form of anti-racist action and encourage exploration of potential actions along the actor to ally to accomplice continuum, choosing uncomfortable actions where possible to scaffold personal progress, and then development of a self-management plan to sustain action. Anti-racist actions take many forms (e.g. protest, use of money, in our jobs, homes, and neighborhoods, when educating our children, voting, and volunteering) and this paper does not provide a summary of these forms of action, which are well-described elsewhere (Osler, 2020). Additionally, for those behavior analysts that work in an organization, we encourage formally and anonymously surveying BIPOC employees to ensure any individual actions towards larger organizational change are meaningful. Choices may change over time in relation to an individual's time, money, and community connections and the goal should be to flexibly design an activism plan to ensure sufficient choices for times when identified barriers present. To decrease early abandonment of an intervention due to poor contextual fit or barriers that arise, personal activism plans should

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include several strategies which can be selected to implement based on level of energy and mood (Oullette & Wood, 1998).

Consciousness Raising Through Self-Education

MOs result in *temporary* alteration in the value of a consequence and alteration in the rate of behavior the organism engages in to obtain the consequence (Cooper et al., 2020). As one example, the top 10 *New York Time's* best sellers in June 2020 were about anti-racism, but it is unclear how many of these books have been read, and how many readers took any action after reading these books (Jackson, 2020, June 4). Nevertheless, increased access to information for learning and teaching about anti-racism are readily available to shape our behavior as individuals, organizations, and communities and curated collections of articles, books, videos, podcasts and movies exist to assist in self-education on Black and Indigenous History, abolition efforts, colonization and systematic racism, personal racialization processes (White, 2020), reparations to acknowledge and repair anti-Blackness (Coates, 2014), and participation in Black-led Collective actions (Schillinger, 2020)

Contingency Control

It is difficult to imagine reinforcing oneself for “doing the right thing”, but reinforcement is necessary for the acquisition and generalization of behavior and relying on accolades from others for supporting human rights is considered distasteful in anti-racism work (Jackson et al., 2020). The work of activism is often publicly shared during the process of activism (e.g. sharing fundraiser on social media), but the outcomes more typically privately celebrated (Li, 2020). In addition to values exploration that links our activism to meaning and a sense of purpose, we encourage scheduling self-delivered preferred consequences that are compatible with the goal

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of increasing anti-racism behavior and dismantling structures perpetuating racial inequity (e.g. purchase self-care or household items from Black owned business for self or as a gift, order meal from Black owned restaurant). Additionally, individuals can arrange contingencies that trap desired behavior. For instance, volunteering to serve on a committee focused on anti-racism for regular accountability checks. Punishment of our actions by others or changing the behavior of others is not covered in this paper, but we must be ready to minimize the sting of punishment when we make other white people uncomfortable by calling out racism and when we put ourselves in other tough interpersonal situations to counter racism such as discussing current events with family members and friends who are not engaging in anti-racist behavior.

Antecedent Reminders

Many local municipalities, states, workplaces, educational institutions, professional organizations, and individuals have been forced to grapple with their own existing racist structures, practices, and racial inequities resulting in public statements renouncing white supremacy and commitment to anti-racist action, some of which includes reparations and donations to activist organizations. The MOs produced by these events will fade for those farther from the negative impacts of racism; personalized action plans and antecedent reminders will be useful replacements for naturally occurring discriminative stimuli to sustain progress. Arranging clear and repeated discriminative stimuli such as calendar reminders to engage in action or assess progress, drinking from a mug that includes a pro-activist message, email listserv subscriptions, and linking new behavior to other ingrained habits such as reading at bedtime, and listening to podcasts while exercising, for instance (Conn et al., 2016).

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Progress Monitoring

Scheduling a regular check in that is tied to another routine such as planning for the week ahead in a planner to graph or otherwise document progress is essential to identify occasions to self-reinforce and when to adapt our self-management strategies to achieve anti-racist actions and outcomes that we personally value. Forgetting to engage in planned activities or otherwise failing to follow through with behavior change plans are common to us all so an attitude of generosity and kindness towards oneself is needed as is a willingness to return to committed action when we notice a decline in our behavior. When noticing a decline a person should review the available data, identify any potential MOs and actions to boost motivation or remove barriers, adjust the goals to reduce effort and renew interest, renew self-administered reinforcement, and refresh or change the delivery modality of antecedent reminders.

Concluding Thoughts

We set out to examine the extent to which our knowledge and practices as behavior analysts might be helpful in sustaining our own efforts as individuals, employees, and scholars. We have produced a humble example of how we might inform potential individual actions that we can take to sustain our efforts in anti-racist activism, and have described some self-management strategies to sustain personal growth and action. We encourage behavior analysts to build and enact plans of individual, organizational, and cultural change that can be sustained without an end in sight. The larger social contexts in which we operate matter a great deal and individual behavior change alone is unlikely to advance human rights and decrease harm to people who are BIPOC. The ideas advanced in this paper are not intended to represent an exhaustive list of anti-racist behaviors that behavior analysts can engage in, and are but one

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small part of the action needed to change inherently racist and inequitable systems.

Nevertheless, we posit that individual behavior change is essential to continue the push towards becoming anti-racist as a field and as a society.

Acknowledgements

Wendy Machalicek is a white woman currently living in the Pacific Northwest. She is a first-generation college student from a small suburb outside of a mid-sized city in Central Texas where she grew up in a blue collar family. She completed several undergraduate and graduate courses in Black history in America and multicultural special education. Prior to becoming a BCBA, she worked as a respite care program director across multiple urban and rural TX counties serving racially/ethnically minoritized and low socio-economic status families of children with intellectual and developmental disability, including children in foster care.

Kathleen Strickland-Cohen is a white woman who currently lives in the Pacific Northwest. She grew up in a single-parent household in a small suburb outside of a mid-sized city in East Texas. Her knowledge related to anti-racism is a result of independent study in preparation for a course that she taught for preservice teachers focused on culturally responsive teaching practices, her early experiences working as a teacher at an after-school program serving children from racially/ethnically minoritized and low socio-economic status families, and work as a behavior analyst in Texas school districts serving majority-Hispanic students and families.

Christine Drew is a white woman currently living in the deep south of the United States. She is from Houston, TX where she grew up in a majority white suburb. Her experience with

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anti-racist knowledge and skills came from her independent reading on intersectional feminism and work in a Hispanic-serving school district in Texas.

Dana Cohen Lissman is an Israeli international doctoral student, currently living in the Pacific North West who is living through the experience of being defined as a person of color when entering the United States and the daily struggles of the unpredictability of the United States immigration policies. She is an advocate for students' voice and a committed member of the Students of Under Representative Race, Culture and Ethnicity group at her college.

The authors concede that we are far from expert in anti-racism actions, that many BIPOC scholars have labored to advance the ideals and practices we discuss, and that writing this paper may confer us with privilege and influence that we have not earned. At the same time, we share a belief that scholars like us should engage in good faith efforts to improve our practices, and that we must undertake this work ourselves while aligning the way we go about the work with the suggestions of BIPOC activists. Therefore, this paper centers the responsibility of personal behavior change on white people in particular while acknowledging the longstanding and underrecognized activism and efforts of BIPOC to counter racism and dismantle white supremacy.

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