

Revolutionizing Child Welfare through an Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Racist Research Framework: Guidelines from Applying Institutional Analysis to Racial Disparities

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Abstract

The child welfare system has been fraught with racial disparities for Black children and families, showing that there is significant work needed to reform the system. While prior research has expanded the field's knowledge of racial inequities, few studies have been conducted with methods that center Black families and community. This paper describes a framework for anti-oppressive and anti-racist research in child welfare, which emerged from a research team's work in conducting an Institutional Analysis on racial disproportionality and disparities in one community. Six guiding principles are shared to describe how this work applied an equity-centered and justice-oriented approach to interrogating the child welfare system and identifying potential solutions for reducing structural inequalities.

Key Words: Child Welfare, Foster Care, Racial Disparities, Parent Engagement, Community Engaged, Institutional Analysis, Anti-racist Research, Anti-oppressive Research

Disclosure Statement

All authors report no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

The U.S. child welfare system was constructed on the soil of a nation embedded in and founded on deep racial injustices. Thus, it is not surprising that racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system have become a long standing and plaguing issue. Evidence shows that routine practices of the child welfare system fail to help Black families stay intact (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Hill, 2004; Pryce et al., 2019). One statistic sharply illustrates the child welfare

system's oversurveillance of Black families: National research that examined the percentage of children who experienced a child maltreatment investigation during their childhood (age 0 to 18 years) found that 53% of Black children compared to 28% of White children were investigated one or more times (Kim et al., 2017). In other words, Black children's rate of lifetime prevalence of child maltreatment investigations was nearly double that of White children. Similar results have been found by other researchers who investigated a single birth cohort in California and 20 large counties across the United States; both studies indicated that surveillance of Black families via child protective services (CPS) investigations was common (Edwards et al., 2021; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2021).

Scholars posit that the child welfare system is responsible for creating grave outcomes for Black children, beginning with failing to properly assess, develop meaningful case plans with, and adequately serve Black families in ways that meet their needs (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Hill, 2004). Additionally, child welfare systems disregard Black families' unique cultural and ethnic practices and diminish their struggles with navigating a system that is inherently designed to work against them (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Hill, 2004; Weaver, 2008). Indeed, scholars have found that child welfare systems are designed precisely to perpetuate control and surveillance of Black families, which fuels disempowering, stigmatizing, and disenfranchising experiences and poor outcomes for Black families via individual racial biases and structural racial biases (Merritt, 2021; Miller et al., 2012). Once the child welfare system is involved, Black families are more likely than their White counterparts to have their children removed and placed involuntarily into foster care (Maloney et al., 2017; Rivaux et al., 2008; Shaw & Webster, 2011; Wildeman et al., 2020). Further, the likelihood of poor permanency outcomes as children exit care is higher for Black children and their families. For

instance, rates of reunification with families are lower and parental rights termination rates are higher for Black children than for White children (Kortenkamp et al., 2004; Noonan & Burke, 2005; Wattenberg et al., 2001; Wildeman et al., 2020).

Beyond negative outcomes that are tracked by the formal child welfare system, separating Black children from their communities marks the ignition of lifelong injustices for these children. Roberts (2021) posited that child welfare involvement has a significant impact on the Black community and suggested that the racial disproportionality in child welfare mirrors the violent effects of mass incarceration on Black people. Researchers have repeatedly shown a foster care to prison pipeline that disproportionately affects Black children, especially Black boys (Marshall & Haight, 2014; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Overall, child welfare surveillance marks an entry point into grave, long-standing violence: the iniquitous practice of institutionally policing Black bodies (Baughman et al., 2021; Michalsen, 2019; Summersett Williams et al., 2021).

The causes of racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system are multifaceted and historical. From a historical lens, the forcible removal of Black children from their families has been traced back four hundred centuries to slaveholders separating Black children from their parents as a cruel tool that instilled fear in parents to encourage submission (Briggs, 2020; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). Scholars have also identified factors both internal to the system (racial bias, institutionally racist policies, and placement dynamics) and external to the system (poverty, under-resourced communities, neighborhood conditions) that perpetuate this violent inequity, noting that all of these factors are founded in structural and institutional racism that permeates child welfare systems and society as a whole (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020, p. 257). Current day structural and institutional racism cannot be delinked from the ongoing legacies of colonialism, slavery, and segregation that reinforce

oversurveillance and devaluation of Black lives. Importantly, at the heart of the quantitative indicators of racial disproportionality and disparities lie real past, present, and future families who are directly, collaterally, and generationally affected by an oppressive and systemically racist system.

The purpose of this article is to share the guiding principles of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research that emerged through the lessons learned from the experiences of a community-engaged research team. The guiding principles were developed inductively while conducting a research study that sought to uncover and describe the racial disproportionality and disparities occurring for Black families of young children in one urban community of a Midwestern state. This work was based in two key definitions. First, racial disproportionality was defined as occurring when a specific racial or ethnic group is represented in the child welfare population at a different percentage than what they represent in the child population. Second, racial disparities were defined as occurring when a specific racial or ethnic group experienced poorer outcomes than other racial or ethnic groups.

With training and technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy, we undertook an Institutional Analysis (IA) (Weber & Morrison, 2021) that aimed to understand more deeply the experiences of Black families who became involved in the child welfare system. Importantly, we sought to discover and amplify the ways in which the child welfare system was structured as an institution, specifically identifying misalignment between the needs and strengths of Black families and the institution's practices, procedures, and policies (Wright et al., 2022; Weber & Morrison, 2021). This work, through systematic reflection and assessment of our approach, led to our development of six guiding principles of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research, which may be applied in many other jurisdictions and among other populations to extend and enrich work that advances racial and social justice in child welfare systems.

Literature Review

Racial Disproportionality Research, Identifying Historic Harm

As clearly and richly documented by Dettlaff (2014), racial disproportionality in child welfare systems has been identified and studied for more than four decades. Across studies, researchers have largely applied quantitative methods to clearly define and describe the problem with only a few exceptions (Chibnall et al., 2003). Researchers have analyzed multiple waves of the National Incidence Survey (NIS) examining the occurrence of disproportionality (e.g., Sedlak et al., 2010). Researchers have similarly examined administrative data available from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (Ards et al., 1998; Morton, 1999). Fluke and colleagues (2011) advanced this field by illustrating disparities at multiple decision points in the child welfare process. More recently, researchers have used county- and state-level administrative data to investigate differences in court, placement, and permanency outcomes for Black children involved with the child welfare system (Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Wright et al., 2022; Zinn & Cusick, 2014). Additionally, researchers have identified disproportionality among Latinx children entering care as a salient problem within child welfare systems (Dettlaff, 2014; Duarte & Summers, 2013; Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2021). Birth cohort analyses have demonstrated yet another analytic approach to observing racial disparities, and one recent analysis reported the greatest disparities in termination of parental rights among Indigenous children (Wildeman et al., 2020). Researchers have also identified important methodological critiques and advanced the measurement and reporting of disproportionality and disparities (e.g., Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2008). For example, Johnson-Motoyama and colleagues (2018) described the calculations, strengths, and weaknesses among different measurement approaches including decision point analysis, disproportionality index, and disproportionality ratio.

Moving Toward Inclusion and Accountability

Moving beyond problem identification, subsequent scholarship has advanced, specifically highlighting the significance of child welfare system accountability to communities, demonstrated through the implementation of anti-racist policies, training, and use of data (Anyon, 2011; Gourdine, 2019; Johnson et al., 2009). Community-engaged scholars have worked alongside communities of color to rectify disparities and disproportionality within child welfare systems. For example, one California study examined a grassroots group who sought to rally and create a community task force to address the issues of overrepresentation of Latino children within the county's foster care system. This task force, comprised of leaders within the community, served as a permanent force of accountability for the local child welfare system (Duarte & Summers, 2013). Another coalition was founded in Washington state, fueled by passion for justice due to similar disparities among Black and Native children (Clark et al., 2008). The systems of interest in both studies welcomed this accountability and leveraged partnerships to collaboratively address racial disparities. This approach has facilitated the reduction in the number of children of color in foster care within the California site (Duarte & Summers, 2013) and other important system accomplishments in the Washington site, such as new state legislation (Clark et al., 2008).

Another study conducted in Canada assessed community involvement attempts and the inherent challenges that emerge when operating within a racialized society (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2021). This study, conducted in a nation fraught with similar racial disproportionalities to those in the United States, applied qualitative methods to assess a local child welfare agency's attempt to bridge gaps with local communities of color. The study found that decisions makers' limited understanding of the context of families of color, poor organizational approaches to culture, and weak legislative support stunted any sincere attempts to build relationships between the child welfare system and local

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Rich qualitative data directly from members of the community themselves were especially pertinent to this study and represented a rare find in community centered, rigorous research on racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2021).

Theoretical Foundations to Decolonizing Research on Racial Disproportionality and Disparities in Child Welfare

Despite advancements in building knowledge on the study of racial disproportionality and disparities, much of the previous research has used methods devoid of perspectives from the people most impacted by the negative consequences of the child welfare system. Many studies intensely focus on the child without considering the family and community from which the child comes (Brown & Bailey-Etta, 2018; Curtis & Denby, 2011; Garland et al., 2003). Beyond omitting family and community voices, the literature largely does not honor the communal nature of the Black family. Rather, an overemphasis on the child isolates Black children from their families, communities, advocates, connections, and their culture's collective norms. Such practices continue to sustain covert and systemic racism.

In conducting community-based research that aimed to reduce racial inequities in child welfare, the present study was informed by several important theoretical foundations that contributed toward developing a framework for anti-oppressive and anti-racist research in child welfare. First, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was relevant to our thinking and research practices. Ford and Airhihenbuwa (2010) *Race Equity, and Public Health: Toward Antiracism Praxis* (2010) asserted that "to center in the margins is to shift a discourse's starting point from a majority group's perspective, which is the usual approach, to that of the marginalized group or groups" (p. S31). Truly challenging systemic and structural racism in child welfare must involve positioning the Black community and Black families at the forefront of

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service planning and delivery, research, and systems reform efforts. CRT acknowledges the forces of race and racism in society, and, when applied to child welfare practices, policies, and research, CRT amplifies the importance of knowledge building through the sharing of families' lived experiences (Bell, 2008; Kolivoski et al., 2014). Derek

And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice

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and provides tools to challenge White-dominant narratives and norms, reject colorblind approaches, and interrogate unequal power differentials (Andrews et al., 2019; Kolivoski et al., 2014). Second, while centering Black families, this work was also influenced by conceptual frameworks that call for decentering Whiteness and naming and discussing White supremacy, anti-Black racism, and anti-Native racism, including critical race feminism and decolonization frameworks (Okun, 2021; Pon et al., 2011; Tamburro, 2013). While we recognized that we were operating within an institution of higher education that often perpetuates White supremacy characteristics such as individualism, perfectionism, paternalism, and power hoarding, we strove to use our positionality and power to enact antidotes that centered on power sharing and valuing all contributions to the work (Tamburro, 2013; Dismantling Racism Works [dRworks], 2016; Okun, 2021). Community members and impacted people were included in the analyses and authorship of research findings. Data from the lived expertise of Black family members were recognized and lifted up as essential knowledge. Despite missteps in unlearning Whiteness, we dedicated time, attention, and care to language and its potential impact on communities who have been marginalized by our systems (e.g., raising our awareness of the meaning of the term "stakeholders" (Delaney, 2021) and excluding it from our lexicon). The team was explicit in conversation and in writing about the harm caused by the child welfare system. As an example, one community-facing document included a statement of acknowledgement that named this

harm. Third, this study was grounded in conceptual frameworks of anti-racist approaches that necessitate acknowledging and incorporating two key concepts into anti-oppressive and anti-racist research: (1) the historical contexts of slavery and colonialism, and (2) the contributions and consequences of institutional, structural, and systemic racism. Finally, the study was aligned with theoretical and practice-based models that apply critical reflection on self, including those that require researchers to assess and acknowledge their own roles in perpetuating and recreating harmful structures (Badwall, 2016).

Study Purpose

Current literature has advanced the child welfare field by exploring and fine-tuning the quantitative methodologies required to understand racial disproportionality and disparities. A few qualitative or mixed method studies have also centered Black parents and community members to acknowledge historical and structural racism, recognize the specific struggles and challenges they experience, and hold up their overall lived experience of the child welfare system. Missing from literature are descriptions of child welfare research approaches that are anti-racist and anti-oppressive. To our knowledge, no studies have identified a framework for anti-racist and anti-oppressive research that is specific to child welfare settings and explicit in guiding work toward racial and social justice in child welfare. Given the racialized history of forced child removals in Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities (Briggs, 2020); the current state of outcomes described above for Black families; and, the coercive, patriarchal, and oppressive nature of the child welfare system, an equity-centered and justice-oriented framework is needed to guide research in the child welfare system.

In sum, we find that the existing literature lacks examples of real-world research that occurred in collaboration with community and practitioners and demonstrated concrete examples of dismantling racism, achieving racial equity, and ensuring the child welfare system's accountability to the Black

community. The aim of this paper is to describe a research approach that examines and dismantles problematic structures, sets goals in partnership with and is accountable to community, and applies practices that honor and support Black families and communities. This example works toward addressing the identified gaps by describing our process of applying an equity-centered framework to interrogate the child welfare system and identify potential solutions for reducing racial disproportionality and disparities. Our study aim was to describe the guiding principles of our research team's process that established and sustained an anti-racist and anti-oppressive framework.

Method

Research Design

This article is a descriptive case study of the approach to one Midwestern state's federally funded demonstration grant, focusing on the pillars of an anti-racist/anti-oppressive research team, which we identified while working to eliminate racial disproportionality and racial disparities in child welfare. The description represents a retrospective, reflective, and longitudinal view of our process over a two-year period. Case study was selected as an appropriate design due to the need for in-depth description (Yin, 2018) of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research teams in child welfare settings. We initiated this process by systematically reflecting on the approach applied when undertaking a qualitative study that used IA. The results of our IA have been recently published (Wright et al., 2022). In the current study, we aim to describe the results of our retrospective analysis of our team's process that wrapped around the IA and formed a framework of the guiding principles of an anti-racist and anti-oppressive research process.

Case Study Setting

IA is a unique framework that served as a foundation for bold anti-racist research practices. IA was originally developed by the sociologist, Dr. Ellen Pence of Praxis International, in her work on

domestic violence, and IA was identified as the Safety and Accountability Audit (Weber & Morrison, 2021). The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) worked with Dr. Pence to apply the IA framework to the examination of racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare. IA is a diagnostic process for exploring how negative outcomes occur for individuals involved with human service institutions such as child welfare and for revealing disconnects between an institutions' stated mission and purpose and individuals' experiences (Pence, 2021; Weber & Morrison, 2021). Importantly, IA is different than many other methods because it avoids attributing institutional failures to the attitudes, personal beliefs, biases, or ignorance of individual workers (Pence, 2021, p. 331). In contrast to individually focused problem analysis, IA explores structural contributors to see how they organize workers to think about, talk about, and act on cases in their daily practices (Weber & Morrison, 2021). By collecting and analyzing qualitative data that exposes the institutional discourses that direct practice, IA seeks to identify the mismatches between those institutional discourses and the lived experience of people served by the institution (Pence, 2021). CSSP's IA framework is organized to consider institutions' daily operations around eight trails of inquiry, which are viewed as regulating or standardizing daily practice. These eight trails include: mission and job functions; rules and regulations; process, tools, and forms (e.g., paperwork); linkages between workers and external agencies; resource allocation; accountability; education and training; and concepts and theories (Pence, 2021; Weber & Morrison, 2021). Details on our use of IA are available in an earlier article (Wright et al., 2022).

For this study, IA provided a basis for examining the child welfare system through methods that specifically account for the impact of contextual factors that influence how services are designed and delivered. To examine racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare, contextual factors included geographically-specific legacies related to slavery; forced labor; segregation; discrimination in education, housing, and employment; and

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voting disenfranchisement. All of these factors have benefitted White families while devastating Black families and their communities (McCoy, 2020).

Sample

The sample of our case study included the members of the research team trained in IA by the CSSP. All members were employed by the university and identified as women. One team member identified as Black, one identified as a Person of Color, and three identified as White. With regard to discipline, one member held a Master's in library sciences, two were social work doctoral students, and two held PhDs in social work. With regard to job positions and power positionality, the team included a research coordinator, two graduate research assistants, and two faculty members. All five team members had work experiences and/or personal experiences with the child welfare system beyond their work on this research team.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our case study is described by members of the research team who were trained in and participated in the IA. Our process of regular discussions and debriefings commenced with the IA training, continued during the IA data collection period, and followed directly and seamlessly throughout formal coding and analysis. The team held virtual meetings by Zoom at least weekly for a period of two years. In addition to addressing the activities required to execute the IA study, the team engaged in discussions of anti-racist approaches that pertained to the child welfare system and, as a parallel process, to our research process. The guiding principles identified and described in this article were developed through a consensus-based thematic analysis that grew out of our discussions in weekly meetings. After two years, we established a common document in Microsoft Teams and used screen sharing during Zoom meetings to collectively and critically discuss and develop our ideas. In other words, we met repeatedly to name, discuss, refine, and finalize the guiding principles. All principles were identified collaboratively with full consensus on each principle,

and all members of the team contributed to descriptions of each principle. In sum, we describe our data collection and analysis process as being co-created among the entire team through an iterative process of peer consultation and debriefing. Collectively, we developed a framework that outlines six guiding principles for engaging anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices in child welfare research.

Findings

Six guiding principles were identified and described below. Collectively, these findings represent one revolutionary pathway for pursuing racial equity in the child welfare system, challenging the policies and institutional procedures that have created disparate outcomes, and implementing strategies to eradicate violence perpetuated against Black families. These six themes are presented in roughly the chronological and progressive order in which they occurred; however, our process was also characterized by an open and iterative learning process with ongoing reflection and refinement, at times overlapping or necessitating returning to previously completed activities to revisit or adjust the direction of action steps.

Guiding Principle One: Applying an Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive Research Method That Centers Lived Experience and Promotes System Transformation and Accountability

Our anti-racist/anti-oppressive approach to research began with the selection of a research method explicitly designed to interrogate systems, center the voices of those with lived experience, and be accountable to the community for action as a result of study findings. Serving as the framework for the ways in which research is conducted, selection of a research method well-aligned to anti-racist and anti-oppressive principles is imperative. Characteristics of such methodological approaches include mixed-methods examination of multiple perspectives and data sources that center the voices of those most impacted by systems, policies, and practices and that are authentically engaged with and accountable to

the community throughout all stages of the research. IA is an example of one method with anti-racist and anti-oppressive characteristics inherent to its design. Thus, selection of the IA method was an intentional choice, deviating from traditional methods to understand policy and outcomes within the historical and systemic context, reveal pain points and disconnects in policy and practice, and uncover opportunities for dismantling and restructuring systems to better serve children, families, and communities of color.

IA methods include rich qualitative inquiry from multiple perspectives, centering those with lived experience along with the communities surrounding vulnerable populations. This serves to recognize these participant partners as the experts over their own spheres, as compared to traditional models that elevate outside researchers' perspectives. One strength of this inclusive approach is that IA helps the researchers explore remedies that may already exist and serve as sources of resilience within a particular population, such as Black families and communities, exposing at times what may have not been obvious or simply ignored.

The qualitative IA approach is further deepened by delving beyond individual outcomes into organizational records and may include analyses of policies, forms, job descriptions, beliefs, and other functions undergirding the system. Together, these diverse data sources help reveal the origin of procedures and practices and their effectiveness with applied populations. This approach segments complex problems like racial disparities into discernible trails that emerge as themes, rising to the surface to help expose root causes of negative systemic outcomes.

In practice, the application of IA through a public-private university collaborative included all of these characteristics. For example, we formed and partnered with an advisory board of Black community members. The goal of this approach was to co-design and co-interpret study findings alongside members of the community, who are co-leading subsequent action planning to ensure

systems are held accountable to the study's findings. We also applied a family-centered methods approach, conducting qualitative interviews with study partners and participants to represent and amplify the voices of the community members themselves, rather than translate findings through the lens of the researcher. Further, to document accountability to the community and to authentic action, the research team engaged with the community advisory group and the project steering committee to formalize a guiding covenant (see principle three). Finally, the research team undertook two activities intended to help them understand the historical and geographical context of racial disparity, disproportionality, and racism within the community.

A historical examination of the county revealed a hidden history of the Black community; many professionals interviewed, including child welfare leaders in the county, could not describe the history of the Black community in the area. Geographically, this county was also characterized by systemic inequity. Through a mapping analysis of the target geographic area, we were able to visually understand the contextual factors facilitating or impeding family access to services and supports. This analysis revealed several key findings that informed other aspects of the IA work and informs current and future action planning.

Importantly, the Black community in this area was isolated by fragmented bus systems and interstate and highway systems cutting through the county, separating community members from services. Through a community mapping activity, we learned that families involved with and impacted by the child welfare system were not geographically located near areas where most services clustered. Finally, this activity highlighted the variation across the target county, which is a sprawling urban center that also includes outlying suburban and rural areas with inequitable access to food sources, healthcare, childcare, and social service organizations. These community characteristics have implications for how action is implemented in the community and are essential components of an equity-based approach.

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By selecting and applying the IA methodological approach, we turned our gaze on the system and structure, including ourselves, as the focus of inquiry for systems reform to address racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare. With this method, we committed to centering and amplifying Black voices and holding ourselves accountable to action benefitting the community as a primary outcome of our research. With these methods, we were able to uncover opportunities and imperatives for systemic, structural, and practical transformation that could meaningfully change the experience of Black families through the words and experiences of the families whose lives were impacted by this system directly. Through application of this action-based anti-racist and anti-oppressive research methodology, we help realize a more equitable system that centers, values, and protects Black families.

Guiding Principle Two: Responding to Wise Skepticism and Distrust From the Black Community

Profound distrust among members of the Black community toward institutions is not exclusive to the child welfare system. This distrust is often directed towards researchers who are attempting to gather data from Black families to inform social change. This skepticism has deep roots in the clear consequences of a vast history of systemic injustices, racism, segregation, disinvestment, and outright intentional violence perpetrated upon Black people in the name of science (Chicago Beyond, 2019). As an antidote to this historical violence, Chicago Beyond (2019) highlights practices for researchers to ensure an equity-based research approach. Our team applied principles of this approach to this IA process to avoid further perpetuating harm and in response to the clear skepticism, resistance, or distrust expressed by members of the community when approached to discuss this study. Researchers were not immediately welcomed by members of the community. Members of the research team were cautioned that previous efforts in the community had not resulted in action. This left many

community members with negative feelings about research. In order to proceed, it was necessary to establish credibility by engaging with community leaders in ways that were collaborative, honest, real, authentic, trustworthy, and accountable. By applying this equity-based approach to authentically engage in community-driven reform, we sought to begin redefining how research is perceived in one community—moving from a view of research as a one-way relationship characterized by unreciprocated taking and both overt and covert harm to one of partnership, shared values, reciprocity, action, and open accountability.

Equity-based approaches applied included: (1) designing, analyzing, and disseminating the research reciprocally alongside the members of the community to reflect their purpose and goals and produce value for the community; (2) situating researchers as support and community collaborators and participants as experts; (3) applying an equity lens to analysis and dissemination; (4) ensuring transparency in information sharing to elicit community-based wisdom and expertise; (5) recognizing and working to disrupt and dismantle hierarchical power dynamics in all interactions; (6) ensuring compensation for contributors in recognition of the full cost of participation; (7) owning our mistakes and mitigating risks to build and honor trust given; and (8) ensuring accountability to the participants and to the larger community through bold action.

In practice, the team approached distrust with empathy and understanding, adapting expectations for what “involvement” meant while still working intentionally to build relationships, demonstrate and prove worthiness, and ensure participation and input of Black community members. For example, the research team communicated clear intentions to community members of our willingness to challenge a system that has historically felt “off limits” to communities disproportionately targeted by such institutions. We held their input as that of experts, communicating their feedback directly to child welfare systems leaders through their words without

unnecessary translation. Rather than asking who needs to be at the table, we asked ourselves, “How do we need to reconfigure the table so that more people can participate?” We then followed through with this engagement.

Of note, skepticism about the majority White research team and process did not come only from parties outside of the research team. Black and Indigenous members of the IA workgroup, who were also child welfare professionals, similarly expressed skepticism that this work would result in meaningful or sustained changes, noting that previous equity work in the state and system had not resulted in real or sustained changes. These members advocated that producing outcomes, and not researching for the sake of researching, was imperative for the integrity of this project. One Black member of the project’s steering committee and IA workgroup stated, “We already know what the problem is, so why aren’t we doing something?” This highlighted the need to apply equity-based principles holistically, outside and *within* the research team. Finally, the leadership and advocacy dynamic added weight to the need for swift and meaningful action undertaken as a result of this work.

Guiding Principle Three: Developing a Guiding Covenant as Commitment to Community

In accordance with the iterative nature of this equity approach, the research team—inclusive of community members—engaged in intentional and ongoing reflection on IA activities to adjust and refine study procedures and activities in response to the process and needs of the community. One example of this emerged in response to the earlier theme of distrust among community members. To respond to this need for the research team to demonstrate trustworthiness and accountability both within and outside the team, we engaged the project’s 52-member Steering Committee in a process to create a covenant to serve as a guiding compass articulating the purpose and direction of the IA work (Wright et al., 2021). Members included

leaders and professionals in the state child welfare agency, private child welfare agencies, court and legal partners, and parents with lived experience with the child welfare system. This activity extended the community commitment beyond the IA workgroup and engaged all members of the project in discussion and planning for concrete action, thus extending the potential for impact within and beyond the target community. The covenant was developed using an anti-racist framework that emphasized: (1) centrality of the lived experience and expertise of Black families involved with the child welfare system; (2) importance of partnership with Black community leaders and members; (3) prioritizing equity over equality; and (4) exploration of systemic dysfunction over individual racism. This covenant was prepared as a living and dynamic document intended to bind those involved in the IA work in their intention to be accountable to the community.

Development of the covenant was a lengthy and iterative process, lasting nearly 6.5 months. The covenant draft underwent 12 revisions, strengthening the language through each revision to clearly state the urgency in the need for direct action. This incremental approach was necessary given the geographical and cultural context of the region, where local populations proudly embrace being “Midwest Nice.” This niceness is socially constructed as “polite,” and it allows people to avoid feelings of discomfort or open conflict that may be necessary for change. However, recent discourse has emphasized this type of politeness as a characteristic of White supremacy culture (Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks), 2016; Okun, 2021) and as a form of violence toward People of Color that often masks aggression while using niceties in an attempt to disguise opposition (Kubota, 2002; Miller & Harris, 2018; Ng & Lam, 2020). Thus, politeness is a characteristic that must be deconstructed among members of teams wishing to apply an equity approach to research. The team, as a whole, embraced this work individually and collectively during project meetings, sharing resources, engaging in shared readings and learning opportunities, and taking opportunities to check and correct inherent biases in our language and practices.

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In addition to this incremental refinement coupled with individual and collective development, the team applied a race caucus approach (Obear & Martinez, 2013) to small group discussions and reflections on covenant language. The goal of this approach was to provide Black partners the space to process and discuss topics independently, without the burden of carrying the discussion for White counterparts, and to eliminate opportunity for further exposure to hurtful discussion among White partners who are less knowledgeable, or willfully ignorant, of issues related to systemic racism. A third group was added for members who identify as non-Black People of Color, multiracial, and/or ethnic minorities. All individuals self-selected into the group that most closely described how they identified their race.

Following these processes allowed for introduction of new language and concepts of anti-racist practices over time, challenging the assumption that Whiteness is normative and default, and examining ideas about how we define family in a multicultural society. This process also reduced the burden of education and potential tokenizing representation in workgroups among Black and other People of Color on the team. By recognizing and accounting for the needs of members across the full spectrum of experience and exposure to these concepts, we prioritized meeting and honoring each team member where they were. This helped to promote trust among members in both the process and in each other, and increased buy-in and commitment among all members of the team.

The process of developing the covenant concluded with a formal vote among partners to adopt this final document as a set of guiding principles for our research team to address racial disparities in child welfare. The vote was intended to signify and confirm each person's commitment to uphold the covenant principles, supporting the dismantling of oppressive systems and realizing racial equity and justice for Black children and families. Key features of the final covenant include a direct orientation toward action and a mechanism for accountability from the research team and steering committee to

the community.

Guiding Principle Four: Initiating and Sustaining Anti-Racism Practice in the Research Team

During the planning phase for the IA, the university research team began and sustained a weekly practice of collective knowledge-building and reflection on the legacies of systemic racism, pathways to resistance, and liberatory research practices that center those marginalized by White supremacy. Among team members, the meetings were referred to as "our anti-racism practice." Team members included the principal investigator of the statewide study, the lead evaluator, researchers, project coordinators, and graduate students. Over the course of 14 months, the group read passages from *Dismantling Racism* (dRworks, 2016), *Why Am I Always Being Researched* (Chicago Beyond, 2019), and *Black Lives Matter, and Yes, You are Racist* (McCoy, 2020).

At each meeting, team members took turns reading aloud selected excerpts. Following the readings, the team engaged in critical reflection and discussion on how the reading's ideas and examples showed up in the child welfare system, the research process, academia, and other settings. Discussions emerged around topics such as critical self-reflection; cultural rigor and decolonization in research and teaching; naming and identifying ways to counter White supremacy/bias as it shows up in child welfare, research, and in other systems; examining how interlocking systems work together to enforce disparities across health, education, economics, and other sectors; reflecting on the disconnect between social work and community-engaged work; and strategizing ways to bridge the gap.

Most team members also engaged in independent reading, journaling, and/or other individual activities to expand their awareness of power, privilege, racism, and oppression. Recognizing that this type of practice is an ongoing learning journey and that each team member held their own social identity that affected their process, the team meetings provided

space for members to identify ways that they could affect institutional change from their individual positionalities, challenge traditional colonized research methods grounded in White supremacy culture, and implement revolutionary methods that dismantle oppressive structures in search of equity. By instituting the readings as routine practice of team meetings, individual team members increased their capacities for establishing habits and norms to facilitate individual engagement with research practices that use an anti-racist lens. Consequently, team members also carried these new habits and norms to other spaces and thereby extended them to other activities and projects both within the outside the initiative.

Guiding Principle Five: Amplifying Black Parents' Lived Experience in Data Collection and Analysis

As a core element of the IA approach, it was essential that we centered the lived experience of Black parents in all elements of the project as their experience was the essential evidence of and a direct reflection of the inequities present in the system that were the target of system change. While Guiding Principle One includes centering the voices of those most impacted by systems, Guiding Principle Five is distinct in requiring a process that gives more weight in the analysis and meaning-making to people who have been harmed and marginalized by systems. By recognizing and not silencing or eclipsing these voices that offer inherent expertise, we were able to identify specific changes needed and carry those forward in the words and experiences of the families whose lives were touched by the system. This approach intentionally privileges and amplifies lived experiences and makes a powerful case for change in inequitable policies and practices to end unnecessary surveillance and policing of Black bodies and separation of families. Without this intentional emphasis on Black parents' lived experience of child welfare, findings could have been inadvertently missed. We believe Guiding Principle Five is necessary for researchers working to achieve an anti-racist child welfare system and a reimagining of this

system, such as the child welfare future described by Dettlaff and Boyd (2021).

We demonstrated this core value in our approach by prioritizing the analysis and dissemination of the interviews conducted with birth parents and family members from among the many sources of primary and secondary data, using interviews of system workers and case reviews as evidence further illustrating parents' statements. Key findings from these interviews were derived directly from the birth parents, family members, and community leaders who were interviewed. Further, key findings were reviewed, refined, approved, and disseminated in partnership alongside members of the community advisory group to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Community partners co-authored a paper reporting on study findings along with the university team (Wright et al., 2022), and key findings have and will continue to inform and guide action plans resulting from this project.

Guiding Principle Six: Taking Action and Ensuring Accountability

By engaging a research method that intentionally centered an equity approach, we were able to *show* rather than *tell*, clearly demonstrating our commitment to authentic and engaged inquiry focused on the systems in question rather than laying blame for inequity at the feet of the marginalized community. This often takes the form of misdirected blame-placing, further colonizing research in Black communities by perpetuating misinformation and taking information, history, and emotional labor of the community and failing to deliver in kind through action. Through this public demonstration of commitment, as described earlier, researchers laid the foundation necessary to establish a seed of credibility and trust within the community. This seed must be nurtured through ongoing engagement in action and leveraging the voices gathered through the IA process to realize authentic systems reforms that truly protect and support Black families equitably. This is just the start, and this fragile trust would likely be irreparably broken should the effort stop there.

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In response to the call for demonstrative action, a standing community advisory group was formed. This group is comprised of members of the Black community who are compensated for contributing their expertise. The community advisory group, initially created to guide the work of this specific research initiative, has become a standing group, meeting quarterly, with support from the state and the university evaluation team, to engage in action planning and implementation of system reform initiatives. The research team will also report other areas of action to this group routinely as a mechanism of accountability to the community. The research team is actively seeking additional funding to ensure the sustainability of this group, demonstrating recognition of the importance of ongoing accountability, action, and a commitment to keep efforts of community leadership at the forefront of the research and reform process in place.

Additionally, the approach and findings of the IA initiative sparked a partnership with the university team initiated by Black state agency partners to develop and host a statewide learning collaborative targeted at child welfare and other child and family serving professionals (e.g., educators, early interventionists, court and legal professionals, medical professionals, etc.). This learning journey is planned as a “statewide effort to understand the history of racial inequities in child welfare and to define the problem through a shared language” (Dupree et al., 2022, heading) with the intention of reducing racial disparities within the state. The joint initiative is targeted across sectors to begin moving from a system of siloed agencies and supports and mandated reporters to an integrated system of mandated *supporters* who share responsibility for child welfare and well-being outcomes and wrap around families to ensure they can thrive within their communities. Lecture topics include understanding the historical context of structural racism and current implications, how child welfare inequities intersect with early childhood education, myths in child welfare systems that perpetuate racial inequities, and ways to dismantle practices that control the Black community and shift to practices

that support and embrace them. This initiative is an example of a multi-sector collaborative, with individuals from three organizations coming together to plan and convene this event series. Planning required careful construction of agendas, speakers, and activities in order to move forward toward equity in a constructive way that challenges biases while meeting people where they are in their own personal and professional journeys toward anti-racist practice.

Discussion and Implications

This article provides the guiding principles of an anti-oppressive and anti-racist framework for research in child welfare settings. It serves as an example of the ways in which research may be applied to authentically engage members of the Black community and other marginalized communities and the child welfare system in an accountable process of systems change toward racial equity in child welfare. This study may be distinct in that we extended beyond developing knowledge of *race* as a demographic characteristic related to specific child welfare outcomes; rather, we focused on *racism* in child welfare institutions and systems (Kornbluh et al., 2021). Given that the vast majority of racial disproportionality and disparities literature to date has been quantitative and has not involved the Black community and given that the field lacks comprehensive frameworks for conducting racial equity work with an anti-oppressive and anti-racist approach, this article makes a novel contribution to the field. In all, we identified six guiding principles: (1) Applying an anti-racist and anti-oppressive research method that centers lived experience and promotes system transformation and accountability is necessary; (2) Wise skepticism and distrust from Black communities may be expected due to historical harm and oppression; however, research teams can take specific actions to build trust and collaboration; (3) A written document, such as our covenant on racial equity, can provide a process and tool that promotes racial equity and accountability; (4) Racial equity work in child welfare is complimented by team-based and individual practices that create

greater awareness of structural racism; (5) Black parents' lived experience must be centered in this work toward eliminating racial disproportionality and disparities; and (6) Racial equity work must always extend beyond study to real and sustained action and accountability. Below is a discussion of these principles in relation to the existing literature and consideration of implications for child welfare research teams.

Guiding Principle One suggests that child welfare teams that undertake work on racial and social disproportionality and disparities must use research methods and strategies that align with racial equity and social justice work. In applying *Guiding Principle One*, this research team selected IA as a method that supports anti-racist and anti-oppressive research. At least three aspects of IA call on researchers to integrate some unique components into their work. First, researchers must systematically examine inequity among the target community from multiple perspectives, including lived experience. Second, anti-racist and anti-oppressive research includes analysis of historical as well as present-day harms. While a few studies have discussed the influence of historical racism and the ongoing and cumulative disadvantages it creates for families of color (e.g., Chibnall et al., 2003), most of the existing literature on racial disproportionality and disparities fails to acknowledge the legacy of slavery and intergenerational trauma that persists in the current lives of families and communities. A third feature of IA that is largely missing from the existing literature is naming and exploring racism and oppression in communities and specific geographies. Other scholars have advanced our understanding of the community and geographic impacts of racial disproportionalities in child welfare and identified community-wide consequences for family and community networks (Boyd, 2014; Roberts, 2021). The proposed framework for anti-racist and anti-oppressive research compels researchers to involve community members and to include both historical and geographical aspects in this work.

The nuanced methods of IA serve as a baseline anti-

racist and anti-oppressive approach to researching systems, structures, and processes. IA is well-aligned with anti-racist goals including exploring specific pipelines for disparities, centering data collection and analysis around information sourced directly from parents, and situating parents as foundational to the process of reform.

One key benefit of applying anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches such as IA is the opportunity to increase the multidisciplinary nature of the research. In order to ensure inclusion of many types of knowledge from diverse informants, it may be necessary to borrow and adapt methodological approaches from other disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, anthropology, history, urban planning, and geography, thus strengthening the rigor and trustworthiness of the results. For example, we described the activities and methods applied in this IA to understand the historical and geographical context of racial disparity, disproportionality, and racism within the community. These variations result from generations of historical and structural oppression and manifest in diverse ways that cause harm to Black families.

Novel methods may be required to disentangle the nuance and complexity of these conditions. Without the addition of these components of the analysis, we would have missed important local contextual factors stemming from historically oppressive policy decisions (e.g., redlining), urban planning (e.g., highway development in low-income areas, fragmented bus system), and other experiences contributing to the systemic oppression of Black families in the community. When combined with other types of data collected to inform the IA (e.g., case records, interviews with families with lived experience, interviews with child welfare and social service professionals, etc.), we more fully understand a comprehensive view of the misalignment between system goals and family experiences, gaps and challenges to system reform, and diverse strengths and opportunities from which to build toward an equitable and just system that halts harm to Black families and meets their needs to ensuring thriving

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families and communities.

Guiding Principle Two speaks to the need for researchers to approach racial equity work in child welfare in ways that prioritize collaboration, reciprocity, action, power sharing, and accountability, especially when working with marginalized individuals and communities. While we used this framework to guide research with Black community members, it can support researchers in validating and working with, rather than against, natural skepticism on the part of people who have been oppressed and harmed by the child welfare system. While these dimensions of research are consistent with some research methods, such as community-based participatory research, few examples exist in racial equity research in child welfare.

IA challenges traditional philosophical and epistemological research approaches by prioritizing community informants' knowledge and recommendations for conducting the study; implementing research that involves collaboratives with key parties, including policy makers and enforcers of racial equity; and directing energies towards deeper community involvement in holding the system accountable to involving families of color in decision making and policy development that repairs practices within the child welfare system. One important implication to the application of these methods is that while using best practices to comprehensively examine a complex issue, the strategies used in IA may also serve a function of supporting restorative justice among communities harmed by the system, thus alleviating the potential skepticism of potential partners over time.

Another important implication is that the activities necessary respond to and alleviate wise skepticism may not be linear and may be resource intensive to implement. Scholars must make space and time to work with target communities to develop and implement research from design to dissemination. To bring co-creation to life in meaningful ways, one key recommendation would be to frontload processes for trust-building and backload processes for developing and executing action plans.

Guiding Principle Three suggests that child welfare researchers conducting racial equity work should consider concrete strategies for acknowledging past harms to Black families and communities, identifying their purposes and intentions, and ensuring accountability for change. We shared one example process, which was the collaborative development of a covenant on racial equity in child welfare (Wright et al., 2021). This approach fits alongside other scholars' recommendations for truth, reconciliation, and reparation in child welfare (Collins et al., 2014; Pryce & Meyer, 2021). For our team, the process was powerful in building shared agreement, speaking truth aloud, and creating a binding document that placed the onus of responsibility on the collective. We asked members to help develop and then publicly endorse the covenant, acknowledging past violence for which they may be complicit, and codifying what was owed to each other. This overt act required displays of professional and personal vulnerability and courage from all members of the group and provided transparency of values, disrupting power dynamics related to positionality.

Collective products and activities such as the covenant example illustrate ways in which anti-racist and anti-oppressive research can counter negative forces like capitalism and White supremacy by minimizing competition in a privatized system intended to foster competitive relationships within the field and instead spotlighting communal efforts and collective agreement. In this example, the covenant serves as a living document and touchstone of our shared values and responsibilities, thus reducing counterproductive activities such as blame shifting and diffusion of responsibility. By stating our intentions in writing, we put the onus for system change as a result of this work squarely on the project team rather on the community.

Guiding Principle Four leans into the critical self-reflection and learning journeys that are required of anti-racist and anti-oppressive research teams. Importantly, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice runs deeper than attending a one-time training or reading a couple of books. It requires the ongoing

resources of time, personal commitment, and courage. To be accountable for change, researchers must name the historical and current harms of structural racism in Black communities and undertake their own unlearning of White supremacy. While not speaking solely to researchers, Saad (2020) describes this type of work as “your truth, your love, your commitment” (p. 17). Other scholars have discussed anti-racism and amplified how it can bring researchers into the research process as humans (Kornbluh et al., 2021). In addition to acknowledging the positionality and privileges of university researchers, necessary is naming and knowing how White supremacy shows up in our training as scientists and scholars (Daftary, 2020).

Guiding Principle Five raises up the critical point of centering the lived experience of people who have experienced violence and marginalization by our systems. Overall, prior child welfare racial disproportionality and disparities literature has frequently fallen short in centering Black families and community members by failing to recognize their overall lived experience of the child welfare system that demonstrates their specific struggles and challenges (Roberts, 2021). Literature that amplifies the voices of not just the child, but the parents, relatives, and kin that comprise family and authentically document how the Black community perceives and experiences racial injustices in child welfare is scarce. Even more rare is any recognition of the inherent strengths and resiliencies that can be derived from the community to remedy problems and reduce the number of Black children in the system (Stephens, 2021). These are important and promising points, as prior studies suggest practice approaches that heighten awareness of racism and racial bias, center and prioritize families over services, promote authentic engagement and the integration of family protective factors, and use a racial equity lens show great potential for transforming child welfare systems (Best et al., 2021).

Guiding Principle Five also demonstrates the necessity of using research methods that decolonize knowledge by honoring multiple ways of knowing. Black families

and communities experience acts of violence every day in the form of racism, oppression, and marginalization, and thus know their individual experiences and their community’s historical experiences. In other words, child welfare research that is anti-racist and anti-oppressive honors life experiences as a central way of knowing. Child welfare researchers hold power and privilege that may blind them to inequities and violence that people with marginalized identities understand fully. The application of this framework suggests that there should be a decentering of researchers and a decentering of their power, privilege, and expertise. Exploring beyond the bounds of traditional research methods, this framework encourages multiple ways of knowing to more holistically understand the system.

Guiding Principle Six spotlights the necessity for action and accountability while illuminating the potential for new relationships and additional momentum that may arise from engaged, service-oriented action. Our approach centered the voices of Black families impacted by child welfare, along with members of the target community. We intentionally and systematically viewed this issue from the perspective of Black families. We also formally documented our commitment to leveraging findings to realize actual systems change in the community. Centering Black families and community members in decision making creates a signpost and safeguard of accountability for institutions like the child welfare system that have a longstanding history of covert and overt systemic racism.

Limitations

In considering this article’s findings and implications, its limitations should be acknowledged. First, we conducted IA within one county of a Midwestern state. While our qualitative study findings (Wright et al., 2022) and these current reflections are consistent with the trends identified across the CSSP’s multiple IAs (Weber & Morrison, 2021), we encourage others to investigate differences between our work and others’ work, which may be specific to cultural,

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geographic, or other contextual factors of a study site. Second, our IA was initiated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but all data collection, analysis, and interpretation occurred remotely due to COVID restrictions and safety precautions. This was the first IA to be conducted remotely, which constrained opportunities for direct observations of families in interaction with the child welfare system. Court hearings were dramatically reduced during this period, so we did not have an opportunity to observe parents in the courtroom. Further, our challenges with partnering with the Black community may have been compounded by not having opportunities to meet with people in person and use important strategies for developing relationships and creating safe and collaborative spaces (e.g., sharing a meal). Third, we acknowledge that our interactions with Black parents and community members were in the context of a coercive system. The research team sought honest and real feedback from participants; however, we also recruited parents' participation through child welfare agencies and knew that they may be reluctant and afraid to speak honestly about a system with so much power over them. Future studies could consider using different mechanisms to recruit Black parents. Fourth, the court/legal system participation in our study was limited to judges and prosecuting attorneys. Other roles within the court/legal system certainly impact children and families and should be considered in future work. Finally, while our IA work extended over 2 years, our data collection still represented a specific point in time. Going forward, especially following the development and implementation of action plans to address racial disproportionality and disparities, it could be useful to repeat IA data collection and examine institutional responses over time.

Conclusion

Courageous, bold, and revolutionary practices are needed to challenge the deeply rooted history of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system. Assimilating to readily available and convenient research methods that fail to involve the people harmed by the system is not only negligent but also adds to the present and persisting problems of systemic racism. As scholarly debates about child welfare continue, Black families are struggling as targets of the system. Beyond the debates, this is a time where innovative research methods are needed to challenge approaches that privilege Whiteness, explore problems beyond individual level contributors, honor and raise up the expertise of people with lived experiences, and provide broad and deep evidence of institutional and systemic racism. Expanding and asserting the evidence of historical and ongoing systemic harm is one strategy for tangible action to help influence the development of policies that will eliminate unnecessary child and parent separation and establish supports for families so that they may thrive within their self-determined communities. The Black community and families within the community have demonstrated a rare historical resiliency. It is incumbent upon us as researchers to honor and recognize this and not perpetuate further harm through our use of research methods. Rather, we must use every tool available to us to shine light on and amplify Black voices, sparking and sustaining action to dismantle and reimagine the systems and structures they identify as harmful into systems of authentic, meaningful, and equitable support.

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