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Can we just talk? Exploring discourses on race and racism among U.S. undergraduates during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken an extraordinary toll on racially minoritised and economically disadvantaged communities. The United States has been no exception. In the U.S., serious illness and death are two- to three-times more common among Black, Latinx, and Native American populations than among white people. In the summer of 2020, growing outrage over the racialised impact of the pandemic coincided with weeks-long protests of police killings of Black Americans—George Floyd in Minnesota, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and Tony McDade in Florida, among others. The convergence of two racialised phenomena, a public health crisis and police violence, intensified public scrutiny of the practices that sustain racial inequalities, including within higher education. Even as U.S. colleges and universities issue statements decrying the burden of the pandemic and the concomitant racialised violence on communities of colour, racial inequalities persist in higher education and pedagogical practices centring racial justice remain largely uncommon. In this paper, we argue that U.S. institutions of higher education are complicit in the perpetuation of fallacies surrounding race and racism when their curricula fail to prepare students to understand and address these issues. Using survey data from two undergraduate courses taught at an elite, predominantly white institution in Fall 2020, this paper examines how specific pedagogical approaches led to increases in students' self-reported confidence and capacity to discuss race and racism. Based on our findings, we demonstrate that undergraduates benefit from teaching that specifically develops their capacity to understand, discuss, and address racism.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed what public health research has long documented: race shapes life outcomes in the United States. Data from the Centers for Disease Control Prevention (2021) reveal Black, Latinx, and Indigenous[1] people experience higher rates of hospitalisation and death from COVID-19 than their white counterparts. Individuals of these backgrounds, particularly those from working-class and lower-income households, also disproportionately experience higher rates of un(der)employment, eviction,

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homelessness, and food insecurity (Center for American Progress, 2020). These social, health, and economic disparities have had a profound impact on U.S. higher education (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). The number of students withdrawing or taking leaves of absence has increased among Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous students over the course of the pandemic, particularly at public universities (Jackson & Saenz, 2021). U.S. community colleges, which often serve first-generation collegians, have reported enrol-ment declines of 30% among Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (St. Armour, 2020). College-going rates declined overall in 2020, but the impact was significantly greater in high-poverty high schools, where college matriculation rates declined by an average of 11.4% nationally (Causey et al., 2021). A 2020 Lumina-Gallup poll found that, among those enrolled in an undergraduate degree program in Fall 2020, 56% of Black and His-panic students expected that the COVID-19 pandemic would negatively affect their ability to finish their degree, compared to 44% of white students. How, precisely, the COVID-19 pandemic will ultimately affect college matriculation, persistence, and gradu-ation among students of colour is yet to be seen; early evidence, however, suggests that the pandemic has deepened extant patterns of racial inequality in higher education.

Notably, in the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the resurgence of public social justice action following the police killings of Black individuals, including George Floyd in Minnesota, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and Tony McDade in Florida (Buchanan et al., 2020). The convergence of two racialised phenomena—a public health crisis and state-sponsored police violence—has intensified public scrutiny of the exclusionary practices that sustain racism and racial inequalities, including those within higher edu-cation. Even as institutions of higher education vow to combat racism, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored how U.S. colleges and universities reproduce wider inequal-ities in society (Tichavakunda, 2021). To date, few U.S. colleges and universities have delineated how substantive changes will be made to how we *teach* anti-racism in a sector still shaped by white supremacy (Ahmed, 2012). Robust anti-racist action in higher education requires moving beyond public statements of support issued in the past year (Bartlett, 2021). Such actions should include strategic efforts to provide stu-dents with the discursive tools to acknowledge, understand, and address racism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper highlights the importance of teaching undergraduate students to talk about race and racism as one in a series of steps necessary for pursuing and sustaining anti-racism in higher education institutions. First, we highlight scholarship that examines how U.S. institutions of higher education often approach the topic of race through horta-tory gestures rather than through substantially altering institutional practices around teaching and learning. In doing so, we advance the argument that such practices do little to challenge dominant systems of knowledge that overlook or minimise the role of race and racism in all domains of U.S. society. Second, we discuss how ignorance of the material and symbolic impact of racism within the U.S. could be countered, in part, through anti-racist pedagogy in higher education. In order to disrupt what sociologists Desmond and Emirbayer (2009) call racial fallacies–a set of hegemonic beliefs that race and racism no longer matter–we argue that institutions of higher education could do more to challenge racism within their own classrooms and contribute to policies, systems, and structures of anti-racism in society at-large. Third, we detail the anti-racist pedagogical approaches employed in two undergraduate courses taught in the Fall

2020 semester that explicitly addressed the role of racism in U.S. society during the COVID-19 pandemic, including pre–post survey data that demonstrate student learning. Finally, we discuss our findings and conclude by highlighting the implications of teaching students how to talk about race and racism in order to pursue healthy, racially diverse democracies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

U.S. Higher education's minimisation of race

The enormous challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have continued to highlight the racial inequities that structure U.S. society. The structural and material forces that shape racial hierarchy are not new. Rather, the disparities that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect the longstanding, and sometimes covert, ways in which racism continues to be reproduced. Disproportionate college matriculation and completion rates among Black and Latinx students in comparison to their white counterparts are among the inequities that have long informed U.S. higher education (Causey et al., 2021; Lumina-Gallup, 2020). In recent years, sociological and educational research has been concerned with the possibilities and limits of "diversity", "equity", and "inclusion" in making universities just institutions (Berrey, 2015; Warikoo & De Novais, 2015; Jack, 2019). Such research also considers the structure and substance of university curricula– noting what is taught, by whom, and under what circumstances (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Long, 2011). Recent scholarship considers the power of pursuing epistemic justice as part of the "decolonizing the curriculum" movement, which started first in Southern and West Africa and expanded to various parts of the global North (Arday & Mirza, 2018). This and other scholarly work in this body of literature emphasises the ways in which U.S. higher education often diminishes the importance of discussing race and racism in classrooms and society at large (Ahmed, 2012; Byrd, 2017, 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; LaFleur, 2021; Wallace 2017, 2018, in press).

In a systematic review of research conducted on racial disparities in higher education, Shaun Harper (2012) found that researchers often did not consider how racism and racist institutional norms might perpetuate and deepen inequalities that disadvantage students of colour. Instead, researchers were found to employ semantic alternatives to words like "racist" and "racism" to explain racial differences in college access and student outcomes, overlooking how institutional practices undercut efforts centring racial equity and inclusion. This critical oversight reinforces the notion that race and racism are insignificant to our social structures despite increasing evidence demonstrating how "race continues to be a consistent determinant of various sociopolitical, employment, and educational outcomes" (Harper, 2012, p. 11).

Drawing from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2003) framework of colourblind racism, Harper centers the "minimization of racism" frame to identify and problematise narrow conceptions of racism that tend to overlook all but the most overt acts of racism. Bonilla-Silva's (2003) "minimization of racism" frame demonstrates how white people have been socialised to disregard allegations of racism and maintain the belief that racial discrimination no longer impacts the lives of racially minoritised people. Harper (2012), Bonilla-Silva (2003, 2020), and other scholars invite careful consideration of how we teach and talk about racism in universities (Cheah, 2021; McGowan et al., 2021; Tichavakunda, 2021; Warikoo, 2016). Such perspectives can lead to more comprehensive

understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global public health crisis as well as a racial justice crisis.

The concurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and police violence against Black people served as a reminder of the pervasiveness of racial inequalities in U.S. society, even within colleges and universities. The racialised implications of the pandemic were made visible by the ways social institutions responded to the state of emergency first introduced with the spread of the virus (Brookings Institute, 2021). Racially minoritised undergraduates, many of whom contended with challenges to their health, housing, and employment brought on by the pandemic, were also confronted with rising xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiments as well as continued anti-Black police violence (Center for American Progress, 2020; Diep, 2021). In such a climate, the value of employing and enhancing anti-racist pedagogy in higher education cannot be understated. When young adults learn to grapple with complex questions about society in colleges and universities, training them to understand the nuances of race and racism in the U.S. is an important step to disrupting persistent racial inequalities. This will be significant both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Symbolic solidarity?

Institutions of higher education often decry racial inequalities without fully acknowledging their role in maintaining racist norms, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. These symbolic gestures raise questions about the pledges universities make to actualise anti-racism (Tichavakunda, 2021). A report published by two higher education professional associations, *Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education* and the *National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education*, examined the strengths and weaknesses of 300 statements issued by U.S. colleges and universities following George Floyd's murder, several months after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Wesley, Dunlap & Russell, 2021; Whitford, 2021). A follow-up survey asked college and university administrators to describe what actions were taken after the initial issuance of statements on racial violence and inequity. Findings from the two studies suggested that while institutions of higher education often addressed racism as a great scourge, few detailed how teaching and learning should be revisited in order to actively combat racial inequity.

Emma Whitford (2021) revealed that only one in ten statements included actionable next steps for their respective institutions. Among those that said they would take next steps: one-quarter of respondents said that their institutions were seeking funding for DEI-related initiatives; 22% of institutions set up committees focused on equity; 21% hired additional DEI staff; and 18% reported developing DEI education or training resources for students (Whitford, 2021). Despite roughly one-fifth of colleges and universities reporting ongoing developments of DEI training and resources for students, institutions did not often mention pedagogical changes and shifts in the curriculum (Wesley, Dunlap & Russell, 2021). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that most U.S. colleges and universities are not making curricular and pedagogical shifts to address racism, even in light of the gross racial inequities revealed through the COVID-19 pandemic.

In another review of 20 college and university statements responding to the murder of George Floyd and the civil unrest that followed, Lindsay McKenzie (2020) described how leaders in higher education often identified systemic racism as a structural force plaguing

the country, while overlooking the perpetuation of racism within their own institutions. Only two of the collected statements called out the role that institutions of higher education play in reifying racist structures, while an additional two offered pledges to take action against racism through educational programs. These statements largely failed to consider the importance of teaching and learning to challenge misguided, if normative, beliefs about the declining significance of race. Such statements are inattentive to higher education institutions' role in finding solutions that can address racial inequalities and move beyond offering symbolic support for anti-racism by providing meaningful changes to teaching and learning that advance anti-racism (Tichavakunda, 2021). There remains an urgent need to provide students, faculty, and staff with opportunities to develop: (1) the discursive tools to talk about race and racism, (2) an understanding of how racism operates within institutional structures, and (3) strategies to address and mitigate racial inequalities.

Racism is frequently misunderstood as a discourse of racial hatred. But the COVID-19 pandemic challenges these dominant interpretations of racism and highlights the complex, wide-ranging nature of racism in the U.S. and around the world. The disproportionate rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalisation, and death among Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people (CDC, 2021), as well as the rise in anti-Asian violence in the U.S. (Diep, 2021), have called attention to racism as both systemic and structural, as well as institutional and interpersonal. The failure by U.S. colleges and universities to thoroughly address racism can be attributed to institutions' perpetual minimisation of racism which only reinforces misguided beliefs about racial inequality in the U.S., and overlooks anti-racist pedagogies as tools of disruption and resistance. Recent studies deploying anti-racist pedagogies underscore the significance of centring curricula that advance racial literacy (Cheah, 2021; Grayson, 2019; Sealey-Ruiz, 2013; Twine, 2004). Their findings contend that racial literacy offers historical context on the contemporary construction of race, challenges the existence of taken-for-granted institutional structures that foment inequality, and develops a critical praxis aimed at acknowledging, understanding, and addressing racism. In the remainder of this article, we build on this line of scholarship by highlighting the significance of anti-racist pedagogy that counters racial fallacies perpetuated within U.S. higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dismantling racial fallacies

Colleges and universities committed to anti-racism should strategically invest in teaching and learning that counters racial fallacies. Desmond and Emirbayer (2009) theorise a set of fallacies about racism in U.S. society that must be dismantled if we are ever to teach effectively about race and racism in the United States. Despite increased public discussions of racism, these racial fallacies uphold its character and consequences. Here, we briefly outline the dominant fallacies, the first of which is the individualistic fallacy. This fallacy suggests "racism is only the collection of nasty, prejudicial thoughts 'a racist individual' has about another group" (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009, p. 27). The individualistic fallacy holds racism as merely an expression of prejudicial ideas and bad intentions. The second racial fallacy is the legalistic fallacy, which claims that changes in the law result in permanent and positive societal changes. It does not account for the ways in which unequal racial outcomes continue despite legislative changes. A third

misconception of racism is what Desmond and Emirbayer (2009) refer to as the tokenistic fallacy, the notion that positioning select people of colour in prominent roles confirms the elimination of racism. This perspective is flawed because it celebrates the few at the expense of the many, and offers little regard to the overall structural positioning of people of colour.

The fourth fallacy is the ahistorical fallacy, the belief that histories of colonialism, enslavement, indentured servitude, and legal segregation no longer shape the contemporary social order. The ahistorical fallacy treats ongoing social phenomena as devoid of historical context, limiting an understanding of the origins and operations of racism. Finally, the fixed fallacy holds racism as a singular phenomenon across time and space. The fixed fallacy does not account for the changing character of racism, and maintains that unless behaviours and actions take the form of aggressive racial violence, then they do not reflect racism. Such flawed reasoning overlooks other subtle, quotidian forms of racism (Wallace, in press). Collectively, these fallacies remain considerably important in our social and political interactions because they limit the quality and kinds of strategies we deploy in the pursuit of anti-racism.

Despite the issuance of statements condemning anti-Black and anti-Asian racism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the political strategies and discursive toolkits students need to actively challenge racism are seldom embedded in curricular and co-curricular life. To the extent that racial dialogue figures in university classes, such statements can instead become strategies for marketing the university rather than transforming it. This is how racial fallacies evolve and expand even in institutions putatively committed to "anti-racism" (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009). In subsequent sections, we illuminate the view that the principal purpose of discussing race is not the talk in and of itself, but rather, its ability to make interpersonal and institutional transformation possible when accompanied by actionable steps.

The present study

Nationwide, attention to issues of race and racism highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic and increases in racially-motivated violence were palpable at U.S. colleges and universities as the 2020–21 academic year approached. The present study emerged from a research collective of undergraduate and graduate students and faculty at an elite university in the U.S. Northeast concerned with how race and racism are taught on college campuses during a time of racial reckoning. To that end, the research team examined how two semester-long courses taught in our university's education programme could help students at this predominantly white institution debunk racial fallacies.

Given the fraught nature of national conversations around race and racism leading up to the 2020 Fall semester, we sought to understand whether purposefully teaching students about race and racism could help students acquire the skills and confidence necessary to actively address and combat racism in their academic and personal lives. In seeking to dismantle the racial fallacies that undergird much of the teaching and learning at elite institutions of higher education, this research examined the impact of four key instructional approaches taken by the instructor in the two courses included in this study: (1) providing consistent opportunities for students to talk about race and racism; (2) incorporating reflexivity into class assignments; (3) convening racial affinity groups in break-

out discussions; and (4) identifying ways students would take action inspired by class content and discussion.

To accomplish these goals, the instructor first structured class sessions to minimise lectures, emphasising one-on-one, small-group, and whole-class discussions about issues of race in every class meeting. Second, students were expected not to simply absorb and regurgitate information, but to practice reflexivity throughout the course. Through writing assignments and discussion norms modeled and taught by the instructor and teaching assistants, the courses sought to help students understand how their own lives and educational experiences have been mediated by race. As part of the expectation that students pay attention to their own racialised social locations, these course discussions emphasised the importance of positionality (Collins, 2000). Third, instead of anchoring discussions in a race-neutral or "colourblind" epistemology, students were asked to consider how, despite personal intentions, their own race mattered to their educational trajectories, long before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. This required providing students with opportunities to participate in both racially heterogeneous small-group discussions and in race-based affinity groups.

Fourth, these approaches sought to build students' relational and conversational skills and to give them the opportunity to practice developing coalitions with students from similar *and* different racial backgrounds. Students were encouraged to develop rapport with their peers and were asked to move from classroom-based activities to real-world settings to meet the fifth and final instructional aim of the courses: moving from talk to action. Students became involved in action-oriented steps to address race and racism beyond the classroom, leading campus-wide trainings about race and racism, participating in anti-racist affinity groups, and initiating discussions with the university's chief diversity officer.

The two courses included in this study have long focused on race and racism and the ways in which educational opportunity is differentially distributed based on race, making them apt laboratories for identifying best teaching practices. In slowing down the process of teaching undergraduates how to read race in the moment of the pandemic, both courses emphasised the importance of dialogue and sought to disrupt the silences that often emerge in college classrooms when race is discussed (Kelly & Gayles, 2010; McGowan et al., 2021). Both courses, therefore, focused on giving students the opportunity to practice discussing race in ways that go deeper than perfunctory disavowals of racism and "colourblind" claims of not seeing race. Additionally, they examined the ways in which race shapes the experiences and life chances of Americans, and helped students develop the creativity and knowledge to address racial inequity.

Method

In this section, we describe our methodological and analytical approach for assessing survey data compiled during the Fall 2020 semester from students enrolled in the two focal courses in the university's education programme. Both courses centred issues of race and racism and prioritised teaching students how to engage in authentic conversations about these topics. The survey instrument was developed by the study team in consultation with the literature on "racial literacy" (Guinier, 2004; Twine, 2004), "race talk" (Sue, 2016), and with input from the university's Center for Teaching and Learning. As

the instrument was designed to gauge whether the courses' approaches were successful in improving students' facility with discussing race and racism, we used a pretest-posttest design.

Students completed an anonymous online survey during the first week of the semester and again after the final class meeting. Surveys included 16 questions that asked students to rate their skills and their confidence with respect to talking about race and racism in a variety of contexts. The final data set includes 82 undergraduate students who completed the pretest assessment at the beginning of the semester and another 76 who completed the posttest assessment at its end. Absence on the exit assessment reflects both attrition from the two courses as well as survey non-response. The response rates, calculated separately for the pre and posttests, included 93% of students at the beginning of the semester and 86% at the semester's end, accounting for student attrition. In accordance with the university's Institutional Review Board, surveys were administered online and anonymously in order to protect students' privacy and to encourage honest self-appraisals; for this reason, we did not examine individual change over time, nor did we ask students to share demographic information, as this would have made students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups personally identifiable in the data. Undergraduate enrolment at the university in 2020–21 was 44% white, 15% Asian, 8% Latinx, and 5% Black; additionally, 20% of the student body is international.

Results

Our analysis focused on understanding whether students in our sample, as a whole, improved their confidence and skills related to talking about race over the course of the semester during the first full academic year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that student assessments of their skills related to discussing race had improved overall, as had their self-rated confidence in doing so. Broadly, at the beginning of the semester, 70% of students agreed (*somewhat* or *strongly*)[2] that they had skills that helped them talk about race in a classroom setting; by the end of the semester, 100% of students agreed that they had these skills. Students demonstrated the greatest margin of growth across the six items that asked them to assess their *skills* related to talking about race in different scenarios. While they still made large gains, students demonstrated marginally less growth in their *confidence* related to discussing race. We interpret this lag to stem from the fact that students may require more practice engaging in conversations about race before they might be expected to feel confident about doing so. Recognising that individuals' assessments of their skills and confidence are often context-specific, we asked students to rate themselves with regard to talking about race in different settings and with different people. Students, as a whole, demonstrated growth across all settings with important differences described in Tables 1–2.

With regard to their ability to talk about race in informal social settings, nearly all students agreed that they had the skills to engage in these sorts of unstructured conversations about race by the end of the course. On the pretest, 77% of students agreed that they had the skills necessary to talk about race with their peers in a social setting; posttest results showed 98% of students agreeing that they possessed this skill. In responding to a parallel question about their confidence, 77% of students agreed they felt confident talking about race with their peers in a social setting at the beginning of the semester.

Table 1. Frequencies for students' pre- and post- assessments of skills, in percents.

I have the skills that help me to talk about race …	Strongly Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Strongly Agree
In a classroom setting***					
Pre-test	1.2	9.8	19.1	58.5	11.0
Post-test	0	0	0	38.2	61.8
With peers from different racial groups in a classroom setting***					
Pre-test	2.4	15.9	26.8	46.3	8.5
Post-test	0	1.3	2.6	54.0	42.1
With my peers in social settings***					
Pre-test	1.2	7.3	14.6	54.9	22.0
Post-test	0	0	1.3	43.4	55.3
With peers from different racial groups in social settings***					
Pre-test	1.2	23.2	14.6	46.3	14.6
Post-test	1.3	1.3	4.0	59.2	34.2
In conversations on race that bring up strong feelings in a classroom setting***					
Pre-test	1.2	17.1	28.1	39.0	14.6
Post-test	0	2.6	9.2	35.5	52.6

Note: ***$p <= .001$

Table 2. Frequencies for students' pre- and post- assessments of confidence, in percents.

I feel confident talking about race …	Strongly Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Strongly Agree
With peers from different racial groups in a classroom setting**					
Pre-test	2.4	15.9	26.8	46.3	8.5
Post-test	1.3	5.3	13.2	56.6	23.7
With my peers in social settings***					
Pre-test	0	8.5	14.6	47.6	29.3
Post-test	0	4.0	6.6	54.0	35.5
With peers from different racial groups in social settings					
Pre-test	4.9	20.7	18.3	40.2	15.9
Post-test	2.6	5.3	13.2	54.0	25.0
In class even when I'm concerned with how others will view what I say***					
Pre-test	9.8	29.3	19.5	26.8	14.6
Post-test	206	4.0	17.1	44.7	31.6
In conversations on race that bring up strong feelings in a classroom setting***					
Pre-test	1.2	12.2	26.8	45.1	14.6
Post-test	1.3	2.6	13.2	43.4	39.4

Note: *$p <= .05$, **$p <= .01$, ***$p <= .001$

At the end of the semester, this number had increased to 90% of students – slightly fewer than the proportion who agreed they had the skills necessary to do so.

Increases in students' capacity to engage in conversations with peers from different racial groups were marked. At the beginning of the semester, 56% of students agreed that they had the skills to talk with peers from different racial groups in a classroom setting; by the end of the semester, 96% of students agreed that they possessed these skills. Again, students were less likely to agree that they were confident in having these conversations. However, the group demonstrated significant gains from the beginning

to the end of the semester – while just over half of students (55%) agreed that they were confident talking about race with peers from different racial groups in class at the beginning of the semester, this proportion increased to 81% of students by the end of the course.

Students demonstrated more growth in their capacity to engage in dialogues about race with peers from different racial groups in the structured context of a classroom setting than in informal conversations with peers. Students did, however, show increased confidence in their skills in social settings. At the start of the semester, 61% of students reported that they had the skills to talk about race with peers from different racial groups in social settings and by the end of the semester this number increased to 93%. In terms of students' confidence in talking about race with peers from different racial groups, there were also notable gains. While 56% of students agreed that they felt confident having conversations with peers from different racial groups in social settings, this proportion increased to 79% by the end of the semester.

Reflecting on the emotional tenor that conversations about race may often take, we asked students to assess their capacity to navigate tense conversations. At the beginning of the semester, 54% of students agreed that they had the skills to participate in classroom conversations about race that bring up strong feelings. By the end of the semester, this had increased to 89% of students. Relatedly, we asked students to rate their confidence talking about race in the classroom even when they were concerned with how their peers would view their statements. At the semester's start, 42% of students agreed that they were confident participating in discussions on race even when worried about what others might think; by the end of the semester, this proportion had increased to 77%.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic, often regarded as a public health crisis in the U.S., is also a racialised phenomenon. By the end of 2021, data showed that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people were three times as likely to be hospitalised because of a COVID-19 infection and twice as likely to die from the disease compared with white people in the U.S. (CDC, 2021). Public health scholarship has long observed that health and wellbeing are not simply matters of biology, but are, in fact, socially determined (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005). In a society structured by white supremacy, key predictors of health – from socioeconomic status to employment to housing – are disparately distributed based on race. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, centuries-old racial inequities in the U.S. have resulted in communities of colour shouldering disproportionate, and avoidable, shares of both serious illness and death.

Understanding these disparities requires knowledge of the complex and often unacknowledged legacy of racism that has textured U.S. society for centuries. Without grasping how race and racism influence the material circumstances and life outcomes for those in the U.S., we argue that future leaders and everyday people will remain ill-equipped to remedy pressing social inequalities like those revealed in the current pandemic. We view the silence around the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities to reflect a broader deficit in U.S. education and, at the collegiate level, a failure to teach students how race and racism shape life

chances in this country. This, we contend, is the product of a hegemonic racial ideology that overlooks and conceals the continuing impact of white supremacy on all members of the population. At a time when teaching the realities and histories of race and racism has come under attack with outrage over Critical Race Theory (Lerer & Peters, 2021), we suggest that debunking racial fallacies (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009) in the undergraduate classroom is more important than ever.

Our results suggest that the deficiency in systematically teaching students the skills to meaningfully talk about race and racism may aid in thwarting the reproduction of racial fallacies. Extending Desmond and Emirbayer's (2009) conceptualisation of racial fallacies, we theorise two additional fallacies long overlooked in analyses of higher education institutions: the diversity fallacy and the discourse fallacy. The diversity fallacy holds racial and ethnic diversity on university campuses as an antidote to institutional racism. The erroneous assumption that demographic diversity is indicative of structural change does not account for the fact that students often do not have the same capacity to negotiate power and access to resources fairly on university campuses. Like sociologists Natasha Warikoo (2016), Ellen Berrey (2015), and Carson Byrd (2017, 2021), we find that while racial diversity may change the face of the university, it does not in and of itself transform the core function of the university—especially when universities fail to marshal diversity as an invitation to pedagogical innovation and curricular transformation.

Instead, when university students, faculty, and staff trust that talking about race and racism is the desired and most feasible solution to racism, or overemphasise talk as evidence of social change, they reinforce the second fallacy we theorise in this work: the discourse fallacy. The discourse fallacy is a belief that more dialogue *about* race and racism necessarily means positive racial change. In the modern university, "diversity,' "equity,' "inclusion," and "decolonization" have become cultural and political signifiers used to rebrand the university as a space of higher education for all (Hall, 1993). Such terms represent aspirational targets, so popular that announcing them can seem equivalent to achieving them. Instead, they operate to replace action steps toward changing racialised systems, thus allowing the institutional mechanisms that (re)produce racial inequalities to remain entrenched (Ahmed, 2012). The discourse fallacy is often a convenient, short-sighted perspective that places weight on the power of dialogue for effecting structural change. Discussing race and racism is a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. Our study cautions against the diversity fallacy and the discourse fallacy as ideological frames.

Dialogue on race and racism matters—not only to describe structural inequalities, but also to motivate action to eradicate them. To that end, we acknowledge that racial discourse and racial literacy are not synonymous with racial justice—or the structural transformation and economic redistribution racial justice demands. Scholars and pundits alike have identified racial capitalism[3] as a significant force shaping racial inequalities across a range of social institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we do not explore the impacts of racial capitalism within higher education in this paper, we recognise that it is encoded in a set of casual, everyday forms of erasure that constrain discussions on, and the meaningful pursuit of, racial justice as structural redress—even, and especially, amidst the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To disrupt the racialised social structures that facilitated the COVID-19 pandemic's devastating impact on communities of colour, we must counter fallacies obscuring the

role of race and racism in U.S. society. College classrooms play an integral role in the intellectual development of young adults. Therefore, we argue that universities are an important site for dismantling dominant ideologies that minimise the importance of race in the U.S. While the results of our research are encouraging and suggest that students can learn how to talk about race and racism, our data also show that students need more opportunities to practice these skills in order to feel confident in their capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue about race and racism.

Undergraduate students need numerous opportunities to learn and practice these analytical skills. Therefore, we argue that attention to race and racism cannot be the feature of stand-alone courses. McGowan et al. (2021) suggest that pedagogical strategies for facilitating dialogues on racism require institutional investment. In other words, college and university leaders must prioritise faculty training and development in order to prepare educators to engage in conversations about race and racism in the classroom. Increasingly, evidence suggests that teaching students about race better equips them with the tools needed to identify, process, and confront systemic racism (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013); such competencies have even been suggested as serving as inspiration for young people to take action to promote racial justice (Grayson, 2019).

U.S. colleges and universities should ensure that students are taught to read the role of race in the distribution of opportunity such that this knowledge not only informs discussions inside the classroom but those outside the classroom as well. As U.S. colleges and universities respond to the dual racial crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and state-sponsored police violence by convening committees and creating positions charged with addressing racism, our results underscore the importance of teaching students *how* to talk about race and racism. Such work can be an effective step in building an anti-racist university. Without changing curricular practices pertinent to universities' condemnations of racism, public statements decrying racial injustice amount to marketing innovations in an unsettled time rather than necessary structural change.

Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study are worth noting. First, our sample of undergraduate students is likely subject to selection bias. Students who enrolled in the two courses included in this study may have done so because of their own interest in or commitment to anti-racist work during an extended moment of racial reckoning. Both course descriptions and syllabi detailed how race and racism would be foregrounded in the two courses' explorations of contemporary educational issues. Second, while psychometric research suggests that college students' self-rated assessments of their learning are correlated with objective external assessments, the correspondence is not perfect (Pike, 1996). Even though the assessments were administered anonymously to protect students' privacy and to discourage any inflation of students' progress, we expect that some students may have rated themselves more highly at the semester's end to provide socially-desirable feedback to the university and the instructor. Third, because these courses were taught at a majority-white institution, it is also possible that student self-ratings may have diminished their gains on self-reports as a mode of retaliation against what some white students see as an undue or "excessive" focus on race and racism on college campuses (McGowan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, our findings reflect the short-term impact of two semester-long undergraduate courses. While students made sizable gains during their time in the course, we cannot comment on how they used these skills going forward, nor whether these gains were maintained, improved upon, or diminished. Presently, the authors are embarking on a follow-up study using peer-to-peer interviews to understand whether students' skills and confidence in talking about race and racism shifted in the year after they participated in the two courses examined in this paper. Former course participants will be interviewed by fellow undergraduates in order to gain students' candid feedback on participating in courses that centred discussions of race and racism. Further research should not only examine best practices in anti-racist teaching, but also identify approaches that can develop institutional support for the broader adoption of anti-racist teaching in undergraduate classrooms.

Conclusion

The unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. has underscored how race and racism shape social, economic, health, and educational outcomes in ways that are hard to ignore. While the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a public health emergency, it has quickly evolved into a racial justice crisis. Both realities have profound implications for U.S. higher education. In this paper, we suggest that developing undergraduates' capacities to talk about race and racism is a critical first step in strengthening their toolkits for dismantling systems of racial injustice in schools and society. Our use of a pre – and post-test design revealed that undergraduates made significant improvements over the course of the semester. Students reported growth in their capacity to discuss race and racism with their peers in social settings, among diverse racial groups, and while navigating potentially tense dialogue.

The results of this study point to the need for robust, anti-racist curricula in higher education that teach students how to discuss and address racism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as the pandemic's impact on U.S. higher education is likely to persist for years to come. Furthermore, contextualising race and racism amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic and state-sponsored police violence allows for a deeper consideration of the ways in which race matters in schools and society. When U.S. colleges and universities refrain from teaching students about race and racism – or, more precisely, refrain from teaching students *how* to talk about race and racism – they inadvertently perpetuate racial fallacies. Given the pronounced and harmful impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, implementing anti-racist curricula and pedagogies is a critical initial step for promoting racial justice and for positioning higher education as a key site for social transformation.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, the term "indigenous" will refer to the populations the Centers for Disease Control Prevention identify as native to the lands which encompass the present-day United States; this includes people of American Indian or Alaska Native backgrounds, who are non-Hispanic.
2. Henceforth, all references to "agreed" include responses of both "somewhat agree" and "strongly agree".

3. Racial capitalism, as defined by Cedric Robinson (1983), refers to the state-sponsored exploitation of racial subjects as a fundamentally unequal economic system rooted in racial hierarchy.

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