

Debunking mainstream anti-racism in the Spanish context: “Anti-rumour” strategies as a case of psychology-based anti-racism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Luca Sebastiani** 

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Abstract

Racism is hardly discussed in Spanish public debates: however, when approached through policy, it is generally understood either as violent acts committed by extremists, or as a matter of stereotypes/prejudices/lack of information about cultural Others. This article focuses on the latter understanding, as performed by Spanish “anti-rumour” strategies, a varied ensemble of initiatives aimed at dismantling stereotypes of migrants and racial minorities, mainly by encouraging better knowledge and empathy. By approaching these initiatives as a representative case of mainstream, psychology-based perspectives on anti-racism and drawing on fieldwork conducted in relevant Spanish locations, I focus on their main assumptions and theoretical/political implications. Despite the heterogeneity of such initiatives, the fieldwork analysis points to common flaws; particularly in the ways their “positive” narratives and allegedly inclusive approaches might foster narrow definitions of racism, silencing its institutional/structural/governmental dimensions and potentially normalizing racist power relations.

Keywords

(anti-)racism, psychology-based anti-racism, institutional racism, anti-rumour strategies, Spain

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Contextualizing anti-rumour strategies in Spain and their relationship with (anti)racism

In this article, I analyse Spanish “anti-rumour” strategies (ARS), a label encompassing a wide range of initiatives aimed at dismantling false beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices against, but not limited to, migrants and racial minorities. Specifically, I delve into definitions of “race” and “(anti)racism” as performed by such initiatives. To this end, it must be stressed that not all ARS explicitly define racism as their main target, nor do they openly call themselves anti-racist. However, some ARS are expressly anti-racist: for example, the Council of Europe (CoE) programmes implemented in many Spanish cities were conceived as a tool for “working hard to prevent discrimination and racism and making the most of the ‘diversity advantage’” (De Torres Bardeni, 2018: 70). Even if other strategies do not directly commit to the fight against racism, there is an evident connection between the debate on racism and the deconstruction of prejudices about migrants/racialized people. Thus, independently from their declared objectives, these initiatives are implicitly drawn into recognizing, or denouncing “race” and “racism”, as well as countering it (“anti-racism”), according to specific understandings.

Within Spanish polity, a policy area specifically addressing “(anti)racism” does not exist. From the 1990s on, most racism-related issues have been subsumed under the umbrella of immigrant integration policies. To a lesser extent, under pressure from Roma organizations, Roma inclusion policies (launched in the late 1980s) have recently started to address anti-Roma racism. Also, national law no. 62/2003 transposed European Union (EU) directives 2000/43/CE against discrimination on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin (which established a national equality body with limited competencies) and 2000/78/CE, addressing discrimination at the workplace on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion, age, disability and sexual orientation. (Anti)racism is approached by Spanish policies at intersections of diverse, sometimes overlapping policy fields, which cannot be analysed as discrete entities. While previous articles derived from this research project have approached immigrant integration (Sebastiani and Martín-Godoy, 2020) and anti-discrimination (Sebastiani, 2021), with future ones to focus on Roma inclusion, this manuscript complements the previous studies by adding specific knowledge on ARS. Given their short history – the “oldest” ARS were launched approximately a decade ago –, there is not yet much empirical data regarding such initiatives (one exception being Casademont Falguera et al., 2018).

By approaching “(anti)racism” as constructed across different policy areas, this research also acknowledges the trans-scalar connections through which policies are formulated and implemented. In fact, whilst the law transposing the EU directives was approved at state level, immigrant integration and Roma inclusion policies crosscut both the state and regional scale. In a highly decentralised state like Spain, central authorities are held responsible for the elaboration of general programmes/frameworks, while regions (called Autonomous Communities) maintain important competencies over social policies. In this context, ARS have mostly been promoted by mainstream actors involved at local level (regional/local administrations, NGOs, experts). Therefore, while the analysis of (anti)racism cannot be reduced to ARS alone, their study is useful to “decentre” the focus

on larger-scale policies and offer a wider, more complete view of how (anti)racism manifests across multiple policy-scales in Spain.

In the next sections, I analyse the main features of ARS and conceptualize them as a representative case of psychology-based approaches to anti-racism. The main questions of this study ask: how do the knowledges/practices promoted by ARS affect the debate on (anti)racism? How do they contribute to its definition? Which specific interventions do they promote or hamper? Which actors do they legitimize, and which do they invisibilize?

Mainstream understandings of (anti-)racism versus racism as a matter of power/history

The great spectrum of theories about racism cannot be summarized in a few lines. However, for the purposes of this article, I will outline the main features of mainstream approaches that developed in Europe in the aftermath of World War II, when “something approaching a consensus was established among Western nations that racism was unacceptable” (Bonnet, 2000: 47). Marked by the experience of Nazism and openly opposing scientific racism, international institutions such as UNESCO began to conceptualize racism in a way that would strongly influence subsequent policies: racism was problematized as “a behaviour born of individual prejudice. Although such attitudes may be conditioned by situations of colonial domination or racist repression, they may be overcome only with greater education and individual knowledge” (Lentin, 2004: 310). Social psychology has linked racism to stereotypes – simplifying/incorrect beliefs or images of reality – and prejudices – previous judgements about specific groups of people¹ that are generally biased and irrational (Allport, 1954; Delamater and Myers, 2011). Finally, discrimination – an unfavourable, unjustifiable treatment of specific categories of people – is understood as the ultimate consequence of racism.

The framing of anti-racism – that is, the actions to be taken to dismantle racism – is obviously dependant on how racism is understood. However, while racism has been discussed by a great number of scholars, anti-racism has been much less scrutinized in literature; which is striking, given the variety of practices that can be implemented under its umbrella (Bonnet, 2000; Lentin, 2008). Furthermore, existing literature points to a complex relation between racism and anti-racism, which are terms that cannot be considered merely as antithetical concepts. In fact, operationalization of the “solutions” for racism depends on who are deemed to be its perpetrators and victims, which may vary depending on the theoretical approach (Kyriakides, 2015). What some scholars might consider an anti-racist stance, others could even deem compatible with the reproduction of racialized power relations – that is, the perpetuation of relational dynamics of privilege/oppression, which is experienced differently by White versus racialized people – (Bonnet, 2000; Lentin, 2008). For the aims of this article, two specific state-led interventions have been particularly relevant, derived from the hegemonic approach to (anti)racism: “multicultural/intercultural anti-racism” and “psychological anti-racism” (Bonnet, 2000). The first conceives “the affirmation of multicultural diversity as a way of engaging racism” and promotes “cultural inclusion” and “empathetic imagination” (Bonnet, 2000: 88, 97). The latter assumes that “to change how people feel about others and themselves is

tantamount to changing society” (Bonnet, 2000: 100), fostering attitudinal change by prioritizing “racism awareness training” and promoting positive images of discriminated groups (Bonnet, 2000); this type of intervention has been defined as an “agenda of moral reform” by Maeso and Cavia (2014). By focusing on empathy and feelings, both approaches are strongly influenced by psychological knowledge. In this regard, Kyriakides’ (2008) analysis has provided interesting insights on the status of empathy. The author focuses on hegemonic anti-racism, specifically, the type of “Third Way anti-racism” promoted by New Labour in Britain, which he considers strongly influenced by the “emotional governance” (Kyriakides, 2008: 599) of neoliberalism. The premise of this type of anti-racism is that British citizens are particularly anxious about globalisation and feel threatened by the growing presence of culturally different, “un-integrated migrants” (Kyriakides, 2008: 601). Thus, their need for “ontological security” must be attended to through “a therapeutic intervention” (Kyriakides, 2008: 605) on their cognitions. Therefore, to enable a feeling of security, equality policies must combine community cohesion and trust building (empathy), whilst simultaneously regulating the presence of unwanted migrants through restrictive migration policies and integration measures. Kyriakides (2015) also analysed the “One Scotland, Many Cultures” awareness-raising campaign, launched by the Scottish Executive in 2002, which aimed at fostering positive race relations in a context of political disaffection. Its promoters hoped that it would help state institutions regain legitimacy in the face of an increasingly diverse constituency, fragmented along racial lines. However, whilst most racialized supporters considered the overt questioning of racism a priority, large sectors of the racial majority either did not consider racism as a priority on the political agenda or disapproved of it entirely. To manage these contradictory demands, the authorities promoted quite a “blurry” understanding of racism (Kyriakides, 2015: 33). Thus, the marketing materials of the campaign did not approach the systemic roots of racism, but rather, depicted it as a “dangerous emotion” based on prejudice, sometimes even replacing the word “racism” with less disruptive terms, such as “inter-ethnic conflicts” (Kyriakides, 2015: 43). Racial tensions were understood as the result of “mutual distrust” and were presented as equally detrimental both for the White majority and racialized minorities (Kyriakides, 2015: 34).

Following from critical approaches to mainstream anti-racism, this study assumes that a thorough understanding of (anti)racism must be situated within historical processes and power dynamics, in order to illustrate its contextual and subjective variations. Drawing on an established body of literature, I locate racism in the colonisation of America, which entailed the creation of the capitalist market and articulated it with a newborn idea of race. In this process, the first racial categories – “Indians” and “Blacks” on one side, versus “Spanish”, “Portuguese”, “Europeans” or “Whites” on the other (Quijano, 2000) – were used to classify non-European populations and grant them different positions in labour, social and human hierarchies. The narratives for their inferiorization were provided first by the Christian religious discourse, followed by Enlightened rationalism and, eventually, through modern social sciences (Grosfoguel, 2016; Hall, 1996; Wallerstein, 1997). In this view, racism was created *geopolitical*; aimed at managing the asymmetry between “Europeanness” and “non-Europeanness” (Sayyid, 2017), “the West” and “the Rest” (Hall, 1996), some 350 years before turning into an explicit scientific theory. This

approach emphasizes the political character of racism, intended not merely as a matter of misinformation or due to prejudiced attitudes, but as a power dynamic, propelled on a global scale, that relegates entire peoples to a dehumanizing “Zone of Non Being” (Fanon, 1967), while promoting others to the heights of “civilisation”. Racism is therefore *relational*, as it differentially produces both privilege and domination. It can be defined as “ongoing sets of political relations that require, through constant perpetuation via institutions, discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, technologies, sciences, economies, dreams, and cultural artifacts, the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west” (Weheliye, 2014: 3). A structural/institutional dimension also traverses racism; it is affected by in-depth, sometimes impersonal, dynamics that (re)produce the inferiorisation of racialized people in the labour market, schooling and housing, among other areas (Ture and Hamilton, 1992). It is characterized by a *governmental* logic (Hesse, 2007), which crosscuts the functioning of institutions, laws, regulations, practices of bio- and necropolitical control, without necessarily performing explicitly racist acts. In summary, while I assume that racism is *also* fuelled by stereotypes and prejudices, the relationship between the two is neither linear nor transparent, as clarified through Fassin’s ethnography (2013) of urban policing in the *banlieues* of Paris. According to the author, racialized youths from low-income neighbourhoods are not harassed by police officers mainly out of prejudice, but due to the impersonal logic of audit culture. In fact, the internal assessment mechanisms of the French police encourage the detection of a given number of illegalities each month, as evidence of efficacy and effectiveness. Against this background, ID checks based on racial profiling aimed to detect drug possession or irregular immigration status are an easy way to reach targets, and abuses frequently go unpunished (Fassin, 2013). In short, the understanding adopted here is focused on racist *practices* rather than racist people; it considers that the reproduction of racism does not necessarily need explicit actions, but might also happen by means of “collusion, passivity, inaction, or failure to combat prejudice and discrimination” (Van Dijk, 1993: 26).

Given the scale of most ARS, some important observations are made at the local level. For example, Rubio-Carbonero and Van Dijk (2015: 117–120) recommend that local administrations develop not only a non-racist discourse, but an anti-racist one, directed against both openly discriminatory attitudes and discursive constructions that, while seemingly neutral, communicate more subtle, implicitly negative representations of migrants. However, existing studies have observed that racism is often unrecognized by local authorities. For example, in her study on the Australian context, Nelson (2013: 93) has shown how racism is denied/downplayed by local administrators through a variety of discursive strategies; however, even when it is recognized, public administrators are likely to minimize its systemic/institutional dimensions and reduce it to an “individual pathology” (Nelson, 2015: 250), acknowledging only limited “‘pockets’ of racism”, ultimately moving racism away from the mainstream and reproducing “the status quo of white dominance” (Nelson, 2013: 102). Instead, public administrators prefer celebrating diversity and promoting positive, apolitical expressions such as “harmony, integration, understanding and respect” (Nelson, 2015: 350).

In the Spanish context, there is a historical paradox: although modern racial classifications were born out of Spain's colonisation of America (Quijano, 2000), the significance of these events for contemporary racism is not addressed by public discourse or mainstream academia (Azarmandi, 2017). Racism has not been an issue on the political or media agenda, save for specific moments related to violent events like the murder of the Dominican migrant Lucrecia Pérez Matos in Madrid's Aravaca district (1992) (Calvo Buezas, 1993) or the lynching of Maghrebian workers in the Andalusian town of El Ejido (2000) (SOS Racismo, 2001). Thus, racism has been discussed in close relation to the "migration issue" (see Azarmandi, 2017), an emerging topic after Spain's accession to the European Union (1986) and its transformation into a part of its "Southern Border". Accordingly, racist aggressions were understood as a pathological response to the "real" problem of migration "flows", while migration was depicted as a novel phenomenon, external to Spain's history and disconnected from geopolitical relations. This framing invisibilized other racist realities, such as the centuries-long persecution of Spanish Roma (Garcés, 2016), historically rooted anti-Muslim racism (Aidi, 2006), or the anti-Black racism against Afro-Spanish citizens from the former colonies (Toasije, 2009). Against this background, universities received public funds to study non-EU migration flows, focusing on their economic contribution or social integration and, to a lesser extent, specific entities were established to monitor and/or combat racism, the most important being the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE). In the same vein, the attitude of Spaniards towards foreigners has usually been considered welcoming, not predisposed to aggressive attitudes; at least, until recently. In fact, during the mid-2010s, specific anti-Roma/anti-immigrant stances saw electoral success in a limited number of cities and towns (the case of Catalonia is particularly relevant, see Hernández-Carr, 2013 and Casademont Casademont Falguera et al., 2019). In 2019, the electoral rise of the far-right, anti-immigrant party Vox at the state level raised public concern (Jones, 2019). However, recent years have also witnessed the emergence of anti-racist grassroots movements led by racialised youth, some of whom were born in Spain of immigrant parents, but still treated as migrants. While not reaching a larger audience in mainstream media, their struggle has fuelled discussion on racism from an activist, more radical perspective (see Garcés and Amzian, 2017). Within this context, a handful of recent studies have focused on hegemonic anti-racist practices as a critical object of analysis (see Azarmandi, 2017; Gil-Benumeña Flores, 2019; Johansson, 2017). In particular, Azarmandi (2017) analysed the understanding of race and (anti-)racism among civil society organisations, while Gil-Benumeña Flores (2019) addressed the problematization of race, (anti)racism and Islamophobia among leftist activists. Both have argued that a depoliticized approach that understands racism as a matter of stereotypes and prejudices, while discarding institutional/systemic/historical dynamics, is widespread in Spain. The analysis conducted here is largely inspired by these studies.

Methodology and data

The research project that this article is based on addresses the social construction of "race" and "(anti)racism" across different policy areas and scales. The overall fieldwork

materials included a large number of written documents and observations, as well as 38 interviews conducted between January and October 2019, mostly in the communities of Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia, which are the three most populated regions of Spain, politically relevant and with a significant migrant presence, with Madrid being the location of central government institutions. The interviewees were comprised of: a) grassroots, non-mainstream anti-racist activists (five interviews), b) employees of mainstream NGOs involved in policymaking, consultations and recipients of public funds (fifteen interviews), c) institutional actors at the state/regional/local level (eleven interviews), d) experts and consultants (five interviews), e) legal actors (two interviews).

This article is specifically based on the analysis of sources that have been most closely related to ARS:

- (1) Written/visual materials, such as handbooks, brochures, promotional videos and other documents emanating from twelve anti-rumour initiatives, selected according to their public impact and presence in press and social media. The initiatives considered were (in no particular order): “#LibérateDePrejuicios” (<http://www.libresdeprejuicios.org/>), “Stop Rumores” Andalucía (<https://stoprumores.com/>), “Red Vasca Antirrumores” (<https://zurrumurrurikez.eus/>), “Getxo Antirrumores” (<https://www.getxo.eus/es/antirrumores#/>), “Bilbao Antirrumores” (https://www.bilbao.eus/cs/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1279137009670&language=es&pageid=1279137009670&pagename=Bilbaonet%2FPage%2FBIO_Listado), “Guía contra incendios - CEAR Euskadi” (<https://www.cear-euskadi.org/cear-euskadi-propone-herramientas-para-que-la-ciudadania-haga-frente-a-los-discursos-politicos-xenofobos/>), “Red antirrumores Barcelona” (<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/bcnacciointercultural/es/estrategia-bcn-antirrumores/redbcnantirrumores>), “Red antirrumores Andalucía” (<http://www.redantirrumores.org/inicio>), “Fuenlabrada antirrumores” (<http://www.ayto-fuenlabrada.es/index.do?MP=2&MS=17&MN=2&TR=C&IDR=2850>), “Usera antirrumores” (<https://useraantirrumores.com/>), “Maldita migración” (<https://migracion.maldita.es/>), “Guía Dosta! Para combatir los estereotipos sobre la comunidad gitana” (https://www.gitanos.org/centro_documentacion/publicaciones/fichas/102983.html.es). While not all the initiatives defined themselves expressly as “anti-rumour”, the existence of a common guiding philosophy and similar strategies make it possible to analyse them as a relatively coherent ensemble
- (2) Eight interviews with mainstream NGOs, institutional stakeholders and experts were particularly relevant because their organizations were involved (to different extents) in seven of the aforementioned anti-rumour campaigns. In addition, many other interviewees were aware of ARS and shared their aims/understandings and generated discourses on them. Overall, these research materials help contextualize the practices undertaken under the umbrella of ARS.

All the interviews were transcribed and, together with the campaign materials, were systematized and analysed with the help of a qualitative data processing software, used to construct broad thematic nodes according to specific key topics (such as the definitions of

racism, the existence/absence of specific psychological/institutional/systemic narratives, the anti-racist practices promoted). While the written/visual materials helped better frame the general assumptions underlying anti-rumour initiatives, the interviews were useful to fill specific gaps in knowledge and to complement/contrast general statements from the campaigns with the lived experience of the interviewees.

Anti-rumour strategies as a form of psychology-based anti-racism

ARS implemented by regional/local administrations, NGOs and citizens' networks, aimed at dismantling fake news about migrants/racialized minorities and improving their social/media representation through training courses, awareness-raising and other activities, have reached a certain level of visibility in mainstream media (see [Precedo, 2015](#); [Rumores, 2020](#)). The first strategy was launched in Barcelona in 2010, as part of the city council's Intercultural Plan. Promoted by the CoE, the initiative was later replicated in other Spanish locations and European cities ([De Torres Barderi, 2018: 8](#)).² Given their decentralization and variety, ARS do not share a unique organisational model; some are more institutionalized whilst others are more activist, some encompass small territories (municipalities or districts), whereas others have a regional or trans-regional character. Usually, each campaign held periodic meetings among its promoters, to both coordinate and evaluate progress made. However, although the administrations involved generally have a progressive orientation, it is difficult to sketch out an ideal type of "anti-rumour administration", partly because of the different scales implied, but also because the effort invested is uneven. Cities like Barcelona, Bilbao and Getxo (Basque Country), which belong to the "Intercultural Cities" network promoted by the CoE, were seemingly more proactive than Madrid. On occasion, the leading forces of ARS are civil society organizations – like the NGO "Andalucía Acoge", which spearheads the Andalusian "Stop Rumours" strategy – while in other instances they resemble more bureaucratic "box ticking" exercises – which perhaps is the case of the "Anti-rumours Network" launched by the Autonomous Community of Andalusia. Furthermore, strategies at the district (sub-municipal) level appear in closer contact with grassroots concerns, as is case of Usera's initiative (Madrid).

How do ARS understand racism? [Azarmandi \(2017\)](#), [Flores \(2015\)](#), [Gil-Benumeya Flores \(2019\)](#) and [Johansson \(2017\)](#) observed that terms like "race" or "racialization" are mostly absent from the argot of mainstream Spanish anti-racism. Accordingly, throughout the written materials reviewed, I have observed a strong tendency to avoid the use of racial categories, denying not only their biological/scientific value but also their relevance as political/historical constructs.³ Similarly, such terms have been absent from most interviews, replaced with categories of nationality, ethnicity or expressions such as "minorities", "immigrants", or "cultural diversity".⁴ Sometimes, even "racism" has been considered a troublesome word and has been replaced with less disruptive terminologies, such as "discrimination", "ethnocentrism" or "multicultural conflicts" ([Junta de Andalucía, 2015: 3](#)). However, independently of the preferred term, racism has been addressed mostly as a matter of stereotypes and prejudices. The handbooks from

Barcelona's, Getxo's and the CoE's strategy even sketch a relational progression using unidirectional arrows: Stereotypes → Prejudices → Discrimination (Antirumores, 2015; De Torres Barderi, 2018; Xarxa, 2016). Furthermore, the CoE's handbook specifically states, "the real problem with stereotypes and prejudices is their potential to influence our attitudes and behaviours toward other people" (De Torres Barderi, 2018: 13). Similarly, Fuelabrada's strategy (Madrid region) claims: "Discriminatory or racist behaviour is the tip of the iceberg, the result of previous thoughts and feelings. The sooner the circle is stopped, the better it is" (Ayuntamiento de Fuenlabrada, 2014). The theoretical frameworks developed by most anti-rumours handbooks are deliberately based on social psychology literature, with the partial exception of Barcelona's strategy, which also refers to anthropological knowledge (see Xarxa, 2016: 11–22). On a practical level, an NGO practitioner active in anti-rumour networks defined discrimination like this⁵: "We all have stereotypes and prejudices; then, on occasion, we adopt discriminatory behaviours, which are somewhat the tip of the iceberg" (interview with an NGO representative, 22 January 2019). As the previous excerpts show, a linear relationship is established between stereotypes, prejudices and racist conduct, sometimes even using the same iceberg metaphor. The logic goes: although not every attitude necessarily turns into a discriminatory practice, people's misplaced beliefs and prejudices are the inescapable starting point for racist progression.

The leading figures of ARS are "anti-rumour agents", defined by Barcelona's strategy as "people who are tired of hearing rumours about ethnically diverse groups and have decided to take a stance and act" (Xarxa, 2016: 7). By resorting to various toolkits (brochures, charts, stickers), they engage in a daily dialogue with ambivalent/prejudiced interlocutors, providing them with verified information and attempting to dismantle their wrong beliefs. Indeed, blatant racists are not the primary targets of anti-rumour strategies, but rather, individuals who express "subtle prejudices" and are often unconscious of their implicit biases (Xarxa, 2016: 41). Given the task of anti-rumour agents, an effective communication strategy is essential. To this end, the strategy of the Andalusian regional government envisions a process of "edu-communication", intended as "the combined action of education and communication" (Junta de Andalucía, 2015: 4). To establish effective communication channels, anti-rumour agents are encouraged to adopt a constructive attitude and always be open to dialogue. However, some strategies have increasingly focused attention on emotional aspects, fearing that a simple reiteration of "correct" data might not be sufficient to modify attitudes and might even end up reinforcing existing cognitive frames (interview with an anti-rumour agent, 6 February 2020). In the case of the CoE's framework-based initiatives, linked to the "Intercultural cities" network, recent debates have recognized the emotional biases underlying information processing and the difficulty "to weaken people's prejudice by using logical arguments" (Xarxa, 2016: 32). Instead, they have been paying a greater attention to "positive" narratives, where "rational" and "emotional" features are mutually supportive and dialogue and social interaction are enhanced. As the CoE's handbook claims, the aim is "attracting and seducing, rather than blaming, the 'ambivalent' majority" (De Torres Barderi, 2018: 19). With that aim, and as a first step towards establishing effective communication channels, feelings of empathy should be generated between anti-rumour

agents and prejudiced interlocutors. An example of this is Fuenlabrada's strategy, whose motto is "Make it with information, make it with heart" (Ayuntamiento de Fuenlabrada, 2014: np). Similarly, Barcelona's handbook invites anti-rumour agents to "treat people as equals", "keep a positive attitude", "show respect", "catch their attention", "stay calm" (Xarxa, 2016: 49–57). However, empathy is not only an entry point into the world of "ambivalent" citizens, it is the desired outcome of the interaction. Empathy is needed to engage the interlocutor in a conversation and should also be a result of the interaction, affecting how the Other is perceived:

Emphasize the positive aspects. Use a positive discourse, point out the positive aspects of living together and the improvements related to the coexistence of different cultures: gastronomy, traditions and habits that surely have a positive effect on our lives. Definitely, an exchange of knowledge that benefits us all (Ayuntamiento de Fuenlabrada, 2014: np).

We organize training courses to raise awareness, to encourage reflective practice and sensitivity, to generate empathy [...] We wish to emphasize that, at the end of the day, we are all human beings, we are all people and we all suffer, we all feel [...] The aim is to generate empathy so that you start reflecting and deconstructing your own way of thinking, and finally you can build something positive (interview with anti-rumour agents, 21 February 2019).

Although the excerpts above stress the significance of emotional aspects, they still depict a linear relationship between information, stereotypes/prejudices and racism. In fact, the first quotation reiterates the idea that knowledge of "different cultures", by itself, can generate a more respectful gaze towards the agents of those cultures, ignoring the fact that this knowledge (frequently exoticized) may be compatible with the belief in Western supremacy (Bonnet, 2000: 45). The second quotation, in turn, is an appeal to recognize the Other's humanity as a first step towards the deconstruction of racist stereotypes/prejudices. Both narratives suggest that the pure manifestation of solidarity towards racialized people can generate anti-racist effects, an idea that, according to Johansson (2017) and Gil-Benumeña Flores (2019), is well-spread among mainstream Spanish anti-racist actors.

The problematization of racism observable in the analysed material draws heavily on hegemonic understandings discussed in the theoretical section. While there are nuances among different approaches, from an overall perspective, by focusing on empathy, social interaction and the promotion of attitudinal change through awareness-raising actions, these initiatives clearly reflect the psychology-based approaches of "multicultural/intercultural" and "psychological anti-racism" (Bonnet, 2000) and are consistent with the "emotional turn" (Kyriakides, 2008, 2015). Also, the use of "positive" terminologies and the denial/replacement of "racism" with "softer" expressions elicits similar results to Nelson's (2013, 2015) discussion of local administrations.

The downplaying of racist power relations and institutional racism

In this section, I discuss the most important limitations of ARS according to my analytical approach.

To begin with, I focus on an anti-rumour argument taken from the “Antirumours Basque Network”, which is recurrent and representative of the discursive logic of many ARS. Facing the assertion that migrants would “steal” jobs from Spanish workers, it claims:

The labour insertion of migrant workers takes place in the toughest, unskilled and worst paid jobs, with high rates of unemployment, temporary employment or precarious working conditions. Overall, it is not true that migrants and nationals compete in the labour market. This is true only in specific sectors, marked by precarity, poor conditions and dangerousness ([Red Vasca Antirumores, 2015](#)).

What is the discursive economy of empathy? In this excerpt, empathy is implicitly triggered by the awareness of migrants’ low status: the reader is reassured that migrants do not compete with Spanish workers, save for the most precarious and vulnerable sectors. However, this argument does not dismantle racialized power relations, but rather strengthens them. Firstly, it could be argued that the racial segmentation of the workforce is itself a product of structural racism; as discussed in the theoretical framework, class and race were intertwined from the very inception of the capitalist mode of production ([Quijano, 2000](#)). Therefore, if racism is not a deviation from capitalism, but rather a constitutive element of its production rationale, discrimination in the workplace is not merely a matter of prejudices/dangerous emotions expressed by White lower-income workers. While such emotions might facilitate racist practices, racist power relations can still perpetuate through impersonal practices, governmental logics, or economic rationalities that do not explicitly reference “race”. Therefore, whilst focusing on the psychological/emotional features of racism might appear as an effective intervention, it runs the risk of ignoring underlying racializing structures. The acknowledgement that migrants generally experience worse working conditions than the rest of the population, without a clear denunciation of the racial privilege underlying this situation, ends up normalizing a power structure that, in itself, is the product of systemic/historical racism. However, this is not a paradox from an anti-rumour viewpoint, as their campaigns *do not* understand racism as a geo-political power system based on White dominance. Evidently, different framings of the “state of things” imply different actions to be taken. Thus, if the unfairness of racial segmentation were prioritized, substantial interventions in the labour market (such as a quota system) would have been inferred as a legitimate response. However, such interventions would probably entail unacceptable tensions for the “constructive” discourse of ARS and disrupt across racial lines their allegedly inclusive approach (see [Kyriakides, 2015](#)). In fact, if “ambivalent” people were made aware of, not only migrants’ low status, but also of their own racial privilege and the relationship between both things, then possibly, they would not feel much empathy. Definitely, in this

excerpt, empathy does not imply equality.⁶ Casademont Falguera et al. (2018) made a similar point: analysing Barcelona's strategy, they observed that emphasizing the migrants' lower access to social services "can convey the idea, implicitly, that their use of the service is not their inherent right, and that a more intensive use in comparison to a native is illegitimate" (Casademont Casademont Falguera et al., 2018: 47). Consequently, some of the most proactive ARS have recently started to revise their approach, fostering a narrative more focused on universal rights rather than on comparing the status of migrants/racialized people and the White majority. In addition, more emphasis has been put on intercultural/intersectional approaches (e.g. Barcelona's revised handbook; Xarxa, 2016).

I consider that the major problem regarding ARS is how they approach institutions, in ways that are likely to lead to an underestimation of institutional/systemic racism. Even if nuances can be found throughout the analysed materials, they share some important features. Firstly, it is worth noting that, in recent years, both grassroots anti-racist movements, the national equality body and international organizations have focused attention on institutionally racist practices, such as police raids/stops based on racial profiling or discrimination in/by social services (see Consejo para La Eliminación De la Discriminación Racial O Étnica, 2014; Open Society Justice Initiative, 2012). Against this background, many ARS are still focused on fostering an optimistic representation of official institutions, rather than questioning the "bad practices" happening within them. It is the case of law enforcement agencies or social services: hence, if there is a well-circulated rumour that immigrants are more easily granted social benefits, the handbook of the Getxo strategy suggests denying this fake news by stressing the impartiality and professionalism of social workers (Antirumores, 2015: 33). If, according to social media, the police are searching for a gang of foreign criminals, the strategy of the Regional Government of Andalusia suggests refuting this rumour by checking verified information on the official Web site of the police (Junta de Andalucía, 2015: 7–21). An alternative way to address these rumours would have been to question the "innocence" of institutions and argue precisely the opposite; the existence of mechanisms that, far from privileging, put more burden on migrant/racialized people in various areas of public administration. However, the adoption of this discourse would generate division along racial lines (see Kyriakides, 2015) and end up damaging the "positive spirit" of ARS.⁷ As we have seen, anti-rumour narratives attempt to visibilize "good" examples rather than to condemn "bad" ones, they express "a desire to hear 'happy stories of diversity' rather than unhappy stories of racism" (Ahmed, 2007: 164); with the partial exception of media/social networks which, being the source of rumours par excellence, are depicted somewhat less favourably.

It is important to note that not all ARS discard institutional change: the most proactive ones (such as Barcelona's strategy or the Andalusian "Stop Rumours") pursue the creation of "spaces free of rumours", a designation reserved for organisations (public institutions, professional associations, civil society organisations) that have arranged anti-rumour training courses for a significant percentage (around 80%) of their members. The expansion of such spaces, sought through the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders – networks of social organizations, individuals, neighbourhoods, schools, universities, hospitals, companies, etc. – is understood as an intermediate step towards

broader social change and the promotion of critical thinking. Moreover, some ARS present a more nuanced view of extant institutional practices; for example, the CoE's handbook recognizes that "public administrations themselves can be strong disseminators of rumour. For this reason, apart from leading the process, we should also start looking at 'ourselves' in the mirror, and identify our strengths and weaknesses" (De Torres Bardeni, 2018: 18). While this observation is appropriate, its underlying logic overlooks other specific, perhaps more relevant discriminatory practices (for the ones who suffer them), which do not necessarily happen at a discursive level. For example, Black street vendors from Barcelona have long been denouncing the persecution they suffer at the hands of local police officers (see Europa Press, 2011). However, no trace of these denunciations appear in Barcelona's handbook (2016), despite their endeavour to go beyond mere fact-checking to promote more profound critical thinking. Overall, within ARS, institutions appear mainly *in the background*; they inhabit neutral battlegrounds where the fight against discrimination takes place, not as assemblages of practices that are able to affect the very result of the struggle. In other words, institutions are mostly intended as a reflection of the individuals working there, rather than being influenced by more systemic/structural dynamics.

Another example from the CoE's handbook recognizes the need to address "the root causes of inequality, discrimination and lack of cohesion", which it subsequently defines as "– the natural tendency of in-groups, defined by ethnic or cultural criteria – to secure benefits for the members of the group at the expense of other groups" (De Torres Bardeni, 2018: 11). This narrative of "in-groups" versus "out-groups", presented as something universal and inherent in the human condition, disregards the historical roots of racism, its connection to colonialism and the uneven power relations that constitute White dominance (as discussed in the theoretical framework), ultimately flattening the asymmetries of racism. Therefore, within the framework of ARS (even the most proactive ones), discriminatory practices that occur regardless of pre-existing stereotypes/prejudices, frequently go unnoticed. Institutional practices are more likely to be condemned if they are discursively expressed and their agents are clearly identifiable as specific individuals *within* institutions (public officials, politicians). While the importance of this condemnation should not be underestimated, it is not the same as acknowledging the structural/institutional/governmental dynamic through which systemic racism and racist power relations are (re)produced, often without the need for a clearly identifiable perpetrator.

Finally, who are the ultimate recipients of anti-rumour narratives? At first sight, ARS are open to anyone. However, their implicit rationalities are more suitable for a white agent (for a similar analysis in the Finnish context see Seikkula, 2019). For example, when anti-rumour handbooks refer to migrants and racialized people, they tend to use the third person. Thus, despite advocating for the inclusion of minorities in mainstream society, the underlying discourse constructs them as external to it and ultimately contributes to their "objectification". Such practices are consistent with the internal logic of psychological approaches: if solidarity is generated because of better knowledge, then the status of minorities is "nothing but information" until the "ambivalent" interlocutor recognizes their humanity. This framing is not one of dialogue, but rather an interrogation, in which racialized people are constructed as in constant need of "explaining" themselves

(see Kilomba, 2010: 40), whilst simultaneously not being entitled to speak for themselves. As Barcelona's handbook for anti-rumour agents claims: "It is difficult for people to be convinced by those who are involved in the rumour itself simply by offering them information [...] In contrast, if the opinion comes from someone who might be considered 'one of theirs', [...] they might be more predisposed to accept the information" (Xarxa, 2016: 37–38). In the same vein, a practitioner in charge of one renowned strategy claimed that anti-rumour interventions are more effective when the agents belong to the racial majority, because they are more easily acknowledged by the "ambivalent" interlocutor (interview with an anti-rumour agent, 8 February 2019). Therefore, even if the contradictory need for ARS to appeal to a racially diverse audience is managed through an inclusive appeal (Kyriakides, 2015), when it comes to daily interactions, the practices enabled by this framing seem more appealing for the White population. However, if the establishment of fairer power relations is made dependent upon white people's awareness/empathy (the privileged side of the racist power relation), anti-rumour discourses run the risk of re-centring white agency, hindering the political self-organisation of racialized people⁸ and contributing to the reproduction of White dominance. That does not mean that racialized people are rejected as anti-rumour agents; rather, it means that whiteness is the "ideal" and most comfortable position from which anti-rumour targets can be attained. Thus, despite their inclusive rhetoric, many practices undertaken under this umbrella might be traversed by ways of being and thinking that Ahmed (2007) calls "institutional whiteness", which reproduce a comfortable situation for white bodies while disciplining non-white bodies.⁹

Conclusions

As I have shown, ARS are not homogeneous, as significant differences exist in terms of commitment over time, range of actors involved and their conception, as either limited actions or part of a broader policy. Debates conducted within some strategies have also led to important revisions – such as the shift from a purely rational/informational approach to more emotion-based one. However, certain limitations that traverse (to different extents) these initiatives should be considered. Some features are not specific to ARS, but derive from the hegemonic approach to racism: they are the denial of racial categories and the replacement of "racism" with less divisive terms or, according to a "narrative of the 'true racist'" (Maeso, 2018), its reduction to a matter of hateful extremists. The minimization of institutional racism, understood as a matter of prejudiced individuals *within* institutions, is a consequence of the hegemonic approach; by establishing a linear relationship between stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, the ARS psychology-based approach is likely to strengthen it. Other issues, related to the ambiguous status of empathy, seem to be more specific to ARS. Some strategies have recognized that certain narratives, based on the recognition of migrants' lower status, could end up naturalizing social/racial injustice, detracting from a rights-based approach (Casademont Falguera et al., 2018). However, the most problematic aspect of many ARS is the assumption that anti-rumour agents should belong to the (White) racial majority, because they will be more effective in convincing their interlocutors. Although this reasoning might be factually correct, it normalizes the

fact that empathy is not “neutral”, but traversed by racialized assumptions (see Kyriakides, 2008). ARS themselves are traversed by racial power relations – some of their participants are affected by racism, others are not. However, in order to maintain their “inclusive” approach, they are propelled to omit this fact, with the result of implicitly enabling White activists to speak “on behalf of” migrants/racialized people.

The above approach contrasts starkly with the emergence of grassroots movements led by racialized people that question hegemonic understandings of racism based on the denial of “race”. Such movements reject optimistic narratives; increasingly denouncing institutional racism and critically questioning Spanish nation-building (see Garcés and Amzian, 2017). By doing so, they have shifted attention from the attitudes/sentiments of the racial majority, to focus on more systemic features of racism which they have personally experienced (i.e. police stops, migrant detention centres, unjust imprisonments), but are usually ignored by ARS. Contrary to the “positive” spirit of ARS, they have put racism at the centre of their political agenda. Rather than conforming with a secondary role, they have prioritized the self-organization of racialized people. The reader must not necessarily agree with such vindications, but the points raised by these movements should be taken seriously. I do not question the good intentions of ARS promoters and I am sure that they are sensitive to the issues discussed here. However, is there a risk, within this context, that anti-rumour interventions (at least some of them) could backfire? Future research will hopefully contribute fresh knowledge and help answer this and other questions.

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Notes

1. Ethnicity and race are not the only grounds of discrimination. However, given the focus of this paper, whenever I mention “prejudices”, “stereotypes”, “discrimination” or “majorities/minorities”, I am referring to their ethnic/racial content.

2. For a similar campaign in the UK context, see [Finney and Simpson \(2009\)](#).
3. The denial/downplaying of “race”/“racism” is not a specific feature of ARS, it more broadly expresses how racism is discussed in Spain and Continental Europe. However, these theoretical differences must not necessarily be assumed; as [Möschel’s \(2014\)](#) criticism of European colour-blindness has argued, this approach is not always effective when it comes to recognizing/countering systemic racism.
4. Sometimes, my interlocutors have used the word “Black”, but mostly in a colloquial sense. On the other hand, the term “White” – which expresses the privileged side of the racist relation – has appeared only a couple of times, being criticized for its analytical/political uselessness (this observation does not apply to non-mainstream anti-racism actors).
5. To ensure anonymity, I have randomly modified the gender of some interviewees, the date of the interview and other non-relevant data.
6. According to [Anderson \(2013\)](#), the figure of the migrant is constructed as a “Tolerated Citizen”: their presence is tolerated, but not welcome and they must constantly exhibit the will to be a “Good Citizen” to gain legitimacy ([Anderson, 2013: 3](#)). Otherwise, they could descend into the realm of “Failed Citizens”, those who are incapable of living an autonomous life according to liberal ideals. Interestingly, a way of doing this is by presenting themselves as hard workers, committed to the economic wealth of the Nation ([Anderson, 2013: 28](#)).
7. Also, the fear of losing electoral weight by ruling parties in local administrations (in the face of mainly White constituencies) might explain their refusal to address institutional racism ([Casademont Casademont Falguera et al., 2018: 48](#)).
8. I consider the self-organisation of racialized people as a very desirable objective. While some people might not share this perspective, visibilizing the underlying assumptions of anti-rumour strategies and the possibilities for action that they open/close remains an analytical task of primary importance.
9. Being a white researcher, I have not been external to such power relations during the fieldwork.

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