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Race Talk: The Psychology of Racial Dialogues

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Constructive dialogues on race have been proposed as a means to heal racial and ethnic divides, reduce prejudice and misinformation, increase racial literacy, and foster improved race relations. Studies on the psychology of racial dialogues indicate social and academic norms that dictate against race talk between White Americans and persons of color: (a) the politeness protocol, (b) the academic protocol, and (c) the color-blind protocol. These protocols discourage race talk and allow society to enter into a conspiracy of silence regarding the detrimental impact oppression plays on persons of color. Facilitating difficult dialogues on race requires educators to recognize what makes such discussions difficult. For people of color, engaging in race talk exposes them to microaggressions that invalidate and assail their racial/ethnic identities. For Whites, honest discussions are impeded by fears of appearing racist, of realizing their racism, of acknowledging White privilege, and of taking responsibility to combat racism.

Keywords: race talk, racial dialogues, politeness protocol, academic protocol, color-blind protocol

Teaching a class in urban education, I was analyzing brief biographical sketches of Black Americans who described how race impacted their lives and the special hardships they encountered. Contrary to the usual class involvement, the responses were brief, tepid, and guarded. It was like "pulling teeth" to get any type of response. Finally, a White female student observed that it was not a "race" issue and that, being a woman, she had also experienced low expectations. . . . Immediately, a White male student chimed in and asked, "Isn't it a social class issue?" Another White female student agreed and went into a long monologue concerning how class issues are always neglected in discussions of social justice. She asked, "Why is everything always about race?"

I could sense the energy in the classroom rise when one of the few Black female students angrily confronted the White female student with these words: "You have no idea what it's like to be Black! I don't care if you are poor or not, but you have White skin. Do you know what that means? Don't tell me that being Black isn't different from being White." A Latina student also added to the rejoinder by stating, "You will never understand. Whites don't have to understand. Why are White people so scared to talk about race?

The two White female students seemed baffled and became defensive. After an attempt to clarify their points, both seemed to only inflame the debate. One of them began to cry, and the other one indignantly got up, stated she was not going to be insulted, and left the classroom. At that point, many of the students tried to comfort

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the crying student, while the few students of color appeared unmoved.

As a White male professor, I felt overwhelmed with anxiety and paralyzed. I was fearful of losing control of the classroom . . . and didn't know what to do. Finally, I told everyone to calm down, not to let their emotions interfere with their learning, and to respect one another. I suggested that we table the discussion and go on to another topic. (adapted from Sue, 2010, pp. 231–232)

Welcome to "race talk," dialogues and conversations about race that touch upon topics of race, racism, "whiteness," and White privilege (Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010; Watt, 2007; Young, 2003). Such interactions are reenacted daily in classrooms, places of employment, neighborhood events, boardrooms, and any situation where race becomes the focus of conversations between people who differ in race, ethnicity, and culture (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Race talk is generally filled with intense and powerful emotions (Bell, 2003), creates a threatening environment for participants (Sue et al., 2011), reveals major differences in worldviews or perspectives (Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012; Young, 2003), and often results in disastrous consequences such as a hardening of biased racial views (Zou & Dickter, 2013). Unless such topical discussions are instigated in some manner, the majority of people in interracial settings would prefer to avoid them and/or to minimize and dilute their importance and meaning (Valentine, Prentice, Torres, & Arellano, 2012).

In the past, the President's Initiative on Race (1998) encouraged a "national dialogue on race" and indicated that constructive conversations have the potential to heal racial and ethnic divides, reduce prejudice and misinformation, and foster improved race relations. On a cognitive level, many have observed that cross-racial interactions and dialogues are a necessity to increase racial literacy, expand the ability to critically analyze racial ideologies, and dispel stereotypes and misinformation about other groups (Bolgatz, 2005; Pasque, Chesler, Charbeneau, & Carlson, 2013; Pollock, 2004; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). On an emotive level, participants in successful racial dialogues report less intimidation and fear of differences, an increased compassion for others, a broadening of their horizons, appreciation of people of all colors and cultures, and a greater sense of connectedness with all groups (American Psychological Association [APA], Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, 2012; Bell, 2003; President's Initiative on Race, 1999; Sue, 2003). Yet, it is ironic that race talk is often silenced, ignored, diluted, and/or discussed in very superficial ways for fear of offending others or creating potentially explosive situations.

What exactly is race talk? What characteristics form the basis of a difficult dialogue on race? What makes it so difficult for people to honestly dialogue about race? If racial dialogues are an important means to combat racism and discrimination, how can we make people more comfortable and willing to explore racial topics? Answering these questions in education is especially urgent as difficult dialogues on race become unavoidable, and well-intentioned teachers find themselves unprepared to deal with the explosive emotions that result in polarization of students (Valentine et al., 2012). Poorly handled, race talk in the classroom can result in increased antagonism among students, misunderstandings, and blockages in learning. Skillfully handled, however, race talk can improve communication and learning, enhance racial harmony, increase racial literacy, and expand critical consciousness of one's racial/cultural identity (Pasque et al., 2013).

Over a five-year period, my colleagues and I have conducted a series of studies to explore the psychology of racial dialogues or race talk in higher education in an attempt to answer some of these questions (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2010, 2011; Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009). We specifically focused on (a) the characteristics of race talk, (b) ground rules or guidelines that explicitly and implicitly dictate how and when race is discussed, (c) whether people of color and Whites perceive these ground rules differently, (d) the impact of race talk on participants, and (e) how educators could create conditions conducive to successful outcomes.

What Are Characteristics of Race Talk?

In our four studies, we ran focus groups and conducted individual interviews on four different populations, (a) students of color, (b) White students, (c) faculty of color, and (d) White faculty, in order to ascertain the convergence and divergence of perspectives on racial dialogues in the classroom. We found nearly uniform agreement among participants as to the characteristics of race talk but major differences in how it was experienced by Whites and persons of color. The opening vignette in this article includes prime examples of many of the common themes that we extracted from our four studies.

- First, when a racial topic is broached in a mixed racial group, there is a disinclination to participate, and the dialogue in the classroom may be brewed in silence (Young, 2003). Oftentimes, the responses by students become tentative, obtuse, abstract, and filled with nonsensical utterances (Bolgatz, 2005). The apprehension about a racial dialogue can result in *rhetorical incoherence*, a term coined by Bonilla-Silva (2006) in reference to difficulty in articulation, barely audible speech, voice constriction, trembling voices, and mispronunciation of common words associated with race.
- Second, once race talk begins, it triggers and heightens powerful uncomfortable emotions such as defensiveness, anxiety, anger, helpless-

ness, blame, and invalidation (Utsey, Gernat, & Hammar, 2005; Willow, 2008). The dialogue can become quite heated, evoking personal attacks, and in rare cases participants may feel threatened by physical retaliation.

- Third, participants in race talk often feel that their perspectives or worldviews are being challenged and invalidated (Bell, 2002, 2003); the result is that they feel compelled to defend their positions. Rather than a dialogue (listening and exchanging ideas), race talk becomes a monologue in which the participants simply state and restate their initial positions, oftentimes with greater intensity and conviction.

- Fourth, as race talk becomes increasingly uncomfortable and threatening, there are attempts to dilute, diminish, change, "mystify," or terminate the topic (Pasque et al., 2013). For instance, in the example vignette, the White students avoided acknowledging race as a legitimate topic by equating the issue with gender and/or social class, one student walked out, and the professor invoked his authority to "table the discussion," thus ending further debate on the topic.

- Fifth, because race is such an important aspect of their identities, students of color may find the avoidant behaviors of Whites offensive and interpret them as racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007) that negate their racial identities and assail their integrity. On the other hand, when confronted with their avoidant behaviors, White students may feel equally offended, misunderstood, insulted, and unjustly accused of being racist.

- Sixth, in the example vignette, when the situation threatened to get out of control, the professor (although well intentioned) colluded with the White students by admonishing them to "respect one another" and to "calm down" (indirectly suggesting that emotions had no role in the classroom) and then moved on to another topic, thus reinforcing a conspiracy of silence (Sue, 2005).

- Last, the greater authority and power of the professor to determine appropriate dialogue behavior in the classroom supported and reinforced the White students' ability to define racial reality (Sue, 2010) and allowed them to determine the manner in which race talk could be addressed and processed in the classroom.

In summary, our findings suggest that difficult dialogues on race (a) are potentially threatening conversations or inter-actions between members of different racial and ethnic groups, (b) reveal major differences in worldviews that are challenged publicly, (c) are found to be offensive to participants, (d) arouse intense emotions such as dread and anxiety (for White students) and anger and frustration (for students of color) that disrupt communication and behaviors, (e) are often instigated by racial microaggressions, and (f) involve an unequal status relationship of power and privilege among participants (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Young, 2003; Young & Davis-Russell, 2002).

How Do Societal Ground Rules (Norms) Impede Race Talk?

Many scholars have likened race talk to "storytelling" in which a master narrative ("White talk") depicts historical and cultural themes of racial progress, of a fair and just society, of equal access and opportunity, of meritocracy, and of color-blindness (Bell, 2002, 2003; Bolgatz, 2005; Pollock, 2004). For people of color, however, their own tales represent a counternarrative, or "back talk," that challenges and disputes the stories told by Whites. The stories of people of color contain themes of past and continuing discrimination, of the pain of oppression from well-intentioned Whites, of the power and privilege of the dominant group, and of the myth of meritocracy (Accapadi, 2007; Bell, 2003; Bryan et al., 2012; Sue, 2005). In describing the master narrative, Feagin (2001) used the term *sincere fictions* to describe the sincere beliefs of Whites that they are fair, moral, and decent human beings who are not responsible for inequities in the lives of people of color, that racism is no longer a detrimental force in society, and that our nation should be color-blind. They are fictions in that White talk ignores and denies the realities of racism and its harmful consequences for marginalized groups. Not only is race talk a clash of racial realities, but it reenacts the differential power relationship between a dominant group master narrative (that of Whites) and the less powerful, socially devalued group counternarrative (that of persons of color; Sue et al., 2007).

The counternarratives of race talk are extremely threatening to Whites and to our society because they may unmask the secrets of power and privilege and of how the public transcript of a master narrative justifies the continued subordination of people of color (Bell, 2003; Sue, 2005). If racism is considered a thing of the past and no longer a force in the lives of people of color, for example, it allows Whites to maintain their innocence and naïveté while absolving them from taking personal responsibility to rectify injustices (Accapadi, 2007; Feagin, 2001; Frankenberg, 1997; Sue, 2005). Thus, our society implicitly and explicitly discourages race talk through normative ground rules that ignore and silence honest discussions about race and its impact on the lives of people of color. Three of these ground rules are the politeness protocol, the academic protocol, and the color-blind protocol

(APA, Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, 2012; Sue, 2010; Young, 2003).

Race Talk Violates the Politeness Protocol

When and how we talk about race is often dictated by the politeness protocol, a ground rule stating that potentially offensive or uncomfortable topics should be (a) avoided, ignored, and silenced or (b) spoken about in a very light, casual, and superficial manner. Addressing topics of race, racism, whiteness, and White privilege is discouraged in favor of discussing friendly and noncontroversial topics. In mixed company (social gatherings, public forums, classrooms, and neighborhood events), race talk is seen as improper and impolite and potentially divisive, creating disagreements, offending participants, and working against social harmony (APA, Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, 2012; Zou & Dickter, 2013). In social interactions, the focus is generally on "small talk" and pleasantries that do not result in conflicting opinions or beliefs. In its extreme form, the politeness protocol considers race topics socially taboo and generally to be avoided by participants, even when they are considered relevant and important to the dialogue.

If race enters the public discourse, however, explorations of the topic remain on a very superficial level. The taboo against race talk and the rules for how race is discussed are often enforced through social means; people may be told that the topic is not a proper one, they may excuse themselves from the conversation, they may be labeled as socially insensitive, and they may be isolated socially. Violating these conversation conventions can have very negative consequences for how one is perceived (e.g., as rude or complaining) and treated in future interactions (dismissed and retaliated against; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickter, 2013). Depending on the stance they take, Whites who violate the politeness protocol may be accused of being a "racist" or a "bleeding heart liberal." Although people of color appear more comfortable and willing to dialogue on topics of race, it is important to note that social pressures to follow the politeness protocol are placed on them as well. Depending on their stance, people of color may be accused of being an "Uncle Tom" ("playing along to get along") or of "playing the race card."

Race Talk Violates the Academic Protocol

Race talk, along with expressions of strong and intense emotions, is often discouraged in the classroom. In academia, intellectual inquiry is characterized by objectivity, detachment, and rational discourse; empirical reality is valued over experiential reality (bell hooks, 1994). In the social sciences, the Western tradition of mind–body dualism operates from several assumptions: (a) Reality consists of what is observed and measured through the five senses; (b) science operates from universal principles, and (until recently) cultural influences are minimized; and (c) reductionism, the separation and isolation of variables (objects or elements), allows for the determination of cause–effect relationships, the ultimate means of asking and answering questions about the human condition (Highlen, 1996; Sue & Sue, 2013; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). In many respects, these assumptions elevate the mind over the body (spirit and emotions) and dictate that a sterile, objective decorum, devoid of feelings, be observed in classrooms. Many educators thus view emotions as antagonistic to reason and conduct their classes according to the academic protocol.

Race talk violates the academic protocol for several reasons. First is the implicit assumption that expressing and discussing emotions are not in the realm of legitimate academic inquiry and advancement. When race issues are discussed in the classroom, however, they may push "hot buttons" in participants and evoke strong and powerful feelings so that discussion becomes very heated. When this happens, students are often admonished to "calm down," to respect one another, and to discuss the topic in a manner consistent with objective and rational discourse (APA, Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, 2012). There is a belief that dialogues on race should be purely intellectual exercises; this belief thereby minimizes the expression of emotions in race talk, and an opportunity to explore the meanings of those emotions is lost. Second, race talk on the part of students of color is about *bearing witness* to their lived realities, their personal and collective experiences of subordination, and their stories of racism. The academic protocol discourages these sources of information and considers such anecdotal materials as opinions and as less legitimate data (facts) to be explored (Bell, 2003; Bryan et al., 2012). Last, race talk is seldom simply a disagreement over facts or content. Disputes over whether women are as oppressed as people of color, whether race issues are more important than social class, or whether we now live in a postracial society mask the true hidden dialogue occurring between the students, which involves fears of disclosing intimate thoughts and beliefs related to race/racism and the personal meaning it has for the students (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2010).

Race Talk Violates the Color-Blind Protocol

A powerful social norm in our society is the belief that race does not matter, that we should be a color-blind society, and that people should be judged on the basis of their internal attributes and not the color of their skins (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). For Whites, to acknowledge or *see race* is to risk the possibility of being perceived as racist, so great effort is expended to avoid talking about race in order to appear fair and unprejudiced. Apfelbaum and associates (2008) coined the phrase *strategic color blindness* to describe the

pattern of behaviors used by Whites toward people of color to minimize differences, to appear unbiased, to appear friendly, to avoid interactions with people of color, to not acknowledge race-related topics, and even to pretend not to see the person's race. Statements such as "When I look at you, I don't see you as Asian American, I just see you as an individual," or "We are all the same under the skin, just human beings," or "There is only one race, the human race" exemplify this stance. In essence, race talk violates the color-blind protocol.

Ironically, the notion of color blindness was originally meant to combat institutional prejudice and discrimination and the person exhibiting it was portrayed as being free of bias, but paradoxically, it now seems to have the opposite effect. Social psychological research reveals that a color-blind orientation (ignoring or minimizing differences) and a multicultural one (recognizing and valuing diversity) have different institutional and personal consequences (Plaut et al., 2009). Organizations, for example, that profess a color-blind philosophy actually promote interpersonal discrimination among employees, adopt discriminatory policies and practices, and justify inequality (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008); organizations that espouse a multicultural philosophy, however, promote inclusive behaviors and policies (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). Further, strategic color blindness on a personal level seems to make those utilizing it appear more biased to people of color (APA, Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, 2012; Zou & Dickter, 2013). Others have concluded that pretending not to see color and avoiding critical consciousness of race lower empathic ability, dim perceptual awareness, maintain illusions, and allow Whites to live in a world of deception (Bell, 2002; Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009; Spanierman, Poteat, Beer, & Armstrong, 2006; Sue, 2005).

Why Is Race Talk So Difficult and Uncomfortable for Participants?

Our studies on racial dialogues in the classroom point to different reasons for why students/faculty of color and White students/faculty find them problematic. In general, persons of color are more willing to discuss topics of race than are their White counterparts (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). To persons of color, the actual avoidance of race talk in a situation where it is deemed important and appropriate tends to make them feel silenced and invalidated. On the other hand, Whites express apprehensions of opening up a "can of worms," the contents of which are not entirely clear to them.

The Impact of Race Talk on Students and Faculty of Color

In our studies, students of color (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009) and faculty of color (Sue et al., 2011) were unanimous in describ-

ing that difficult racial dialogues were often triggered by racial microaggressions in the classroom. Racial microaggressions are common, everyday verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities and slights directed toward people of color by well-intentioned Whites who are unaware that they have committed a transgression against a target group (Sue et al., 2007). Students of color described frequent microaggressive themes related to ascription of intelligence, criminality, being an alien in one's own land, and denial of racial reality. For example, Black students often reported being asked how they were admitted into an Ivy League institution (implying that affirmative action and not merit was the reason); Asian American students reported how they were perceived as foreigners by classmates, who would speak extra slow to them; and some students of color described curricular content that implicitly portrayed them in a stereotypical fashion. In general, the informants in these studies were able to report multiple instances of frequent and common microaggressions directed toward them by White classmates and occasionally by a White professor. These racial microaggressions often triggered a difficult racial dialogue.

When microaggressions occurred, students of color reported emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions related to the impact of the slights. Emotionally, many felt incensed when they believed their integrity was being attacked, and they experienced strong feelings varying from annoyance and frustration to anger. Cognitively, many reported an internal conflict over whether to speak or not to speak, attempted to ascertain the level of emotional support they were likely to receive in such a dialogue, and more important, determined the consequences of their potential actions. Behaviorally, some reported losing it and said they would retaliate with anger and blame. Others, however, struggled with making sure that their actions would be received in the right way and worked hard to control their emotions and alter their communication styles (e.g., to speak with less passion in order not to be labeled the "angry Black woman or man"). Ironically, this tactic made them feel less authentic and resulted in a nagging sense that they had sold out their integrity.

Faculty of color described perceptions and dynamics very similar to those of students of color: (a) Microaggressions were often precipitators of race talk; (b) when they witnessed a microaggression in the classroom directed at a student of color or at themselves, it also evoked powerful emotional reactions; (c) they struggled with whether or how to address the topic of race in the classroom; and (d) they worried about the consequences for and reactions from both White students and students of color (Sue et al., 2011). The microaggressions they were most likely to experience were having their scholarship and research devalued, experiencing the campus climate as hostile and invalidating, and having White students question their qualifications to hold the status of professor (Harlow, 2003; Stanley, 2006; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008). Adding to the pressure for professors of color was the

unique role they played as the person in charge of the classroom. All expressed a great internal struggle involving balancing personal values and beliefs with attempting to be an objective educator and not taking sides between White students and students of color. They described this conflict as exhausting and overwhelming as they attempted to balance the flood of feelings and anger they experienced with helping students process the difficult dialogues. All struggled with a desire to correct racial misinformation while not taking sides with students of color. Interestingly, maintaining neutrality often enraged students of color, who looked to the professor of color for support and validation.

Additionally, people of color described how race talk is filtered through the lens of Western European norms that preside strongly in institutions of higher education, and specifically in classrooms, and that place them at a disadvantage. This latter effect is perhaps the most insidious and damaging of the outcomes. As an example, let us return to the opening vignette, in which the outcome of a heated exchange resulted in a White female student crying, followed by attempts from classmates to console her. It appears that the student felt hurt and misunderstood and was pained by false accusations. Her anguish was felt by the entire class, and fellow students rushed in to comfort her, to reassure and support her, and to make her feel better.

In an insightful article titled "When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color," Accapadi (2007) asserted that White standards of humanity often make their presence felt in racial and gender dialogues. These norms and standards work to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color when racial conflicts emerge. Accapadi contended that historically, White women were depicted as pure, chase, virtuous, and good, the embodiment of womanhood. Along with these positive qualities, helplessness, vulnerability, and emotional fragility call for protection. Contrast this picture with the ones portrayed for women of color; Black women are tough and aggressive, Asian American females are unfeeling, and there are many other stereotypical pictures associated with Latinas and Indigenous women.

The moment that the White female student in the opening vignette started to cry, she revealed gender-based vulnerability and pain; the norms of humanity pulled for protection and consolation from others. Although her crying was not intentional or conscious, it impacted the dynamics of the racial dialogue, changingits focus and outcome. First, the actual issue involved in the dialogue was sidetracked and no longer the center of attention. In most cases, such diversions ultimately prevent a return to the topic because of the discomfort that may again ensue. Second, the remainder of the class meeting was spent on consoling the female student, and by default, she was not seen as at fault or wrong. In other words, she was the one being supported and validated. Third, the outcome of the debate likely placed responsibility and blame

on the students of color. They were viewed as *so antagonistic that they made someone cry*. And, by sitting at their desks being *unmoved and unfeeling*, they were seen as demonstrating a lack of humanity and compassion for others.

The Impact of Race Talk on White Students and Faculty

One of the major findings from our studies on White students (Sue et al., 2010) and faculty (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009) was their inability to clearly identify and deconstruct racial microaggressions in the classrooms. They seemed oblivious to offensive microaggressive conduct in themselves and others although they could sense the tension in the classroom and knew something was wrong. Unlike people of color, who could readily name and identify the offensive behavior, the White informants had great difficulty recognizing it. This was true for both White students and White professors, although the latter felt greater responsibility for pursuing and clarifying the topic. As indicated earlier, when race talk for Whites is instigated in the classroom, it is accompanied by extreme anxiety and dread and followed by attempts to avoid further discussion. Our studies indicate a number of different ways in which White students and professors discourage race talk: (a) by remaining silent and refusing to participate, (b) by diverting the conversation to a safer topic, (c) by diluting or dismissing the importance of the topic, (d) by instituting restrictive rules for how the dialogue should take place, (e) by speaking about race from a global perspective or as a bystander and not an active participant, or (f) by tabling the discussion.

This last ploy was most often used by professors, who feared that such dialogues would produce unnecessary antagonisms between participants, result in a loss of classroom control, and reveal how unprepared they were to facilitate such heated exchanges (Pasque et al., 2013). They frankly admitted that they felt paralyzed and helpless and feared having the incident become the "classroom from hell." Ironically, by leaving racial offenses unspoken and untouched, they created an "elephant in the room" that interfered with learning and perpetuated a hostile, invalidating, and racially charged classroom climate for students of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yasso, 2000). Our studies and those of other scholars suggest the following four types of intersecting layers of fears that many White Americans possess when it comes to engaging in race talk (Bell, 2002, 2003; Frankenberg, 1997; Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006; Spanierman et al., 2006).

Fear of Appearing Racist

Earlier, I indicated how many Whites pretend not to notice differences in an attempt to appear nonracist. One of their greatest fears is that whatever is said or done during a race conversation may be misunderstood and deemed racist. Thus, when a race topic arises, they are likely to become quite

guarded and deliberate in their responses. The verbal exchanges are likely to be superficial and noncommittal as they engage in strategic color-blindness and other maneuvers to prevent the commission of unintended racial blunders. When topics of race or racism arise, they become anxious, constricted, and cautious in what they say. Remaining silent and consciously screening and censoring out anything they consider to be racially offensive become the hallmark of their communications. Unfortunately, research shows that such strategies are often unsuccessful and may have an effect directly opposite the one intended (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Vorauer & Turpie, 2004). In a laboratory experiment between Black and White volunteers, for example, Shelton and colleagues (2005) found that those who engaged in attempts to appear unbiased often made their stance very unclear and distorted, appeared inauthentic, and were perceived as being more racist! It appears that people who expend considerable energy to appear nonprejudiced make very poor conversational partners, and their efforts result in behaviors that communicate distance and phony friendliness.

Fear of Realizing Their Racism

Below the fear of appearing racist lies an even greater fear: that they will realize that they harbor biased and prejudicial attitudes, albeit unknowingly (Sue, 2005). Although it can be debated whether anyone born and raised in the United States is immune from inheriting the racial biases of their forebears, research on aversive racism and implicit bias supports the notion that most, if not all, have internalized prejudicial attitudes and behaviors (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Jones, 1997). These implicit biases are extremely resistant to change as they operate outside the level of conscious awareness and make their appearance in subtle ways (i.e., through racial microaggressions; Boysen & Vogel, 2008). Because most Whites experience themselves as good, moral, and fair-minded human beings who actively stand against overt acts of discrimination (hate crimes and obvious discriminatory acts), it is disturbing for them to realize that they possess racial biases. Race talk has the potential to open this "can of worms" by moving Whites beyond their fear of appearing racist to actually "being a racist." The teachings of democracy, equity, and equal access and opportunity which Whites profess to hold can be seriously challenged in race talk. The realization that one holds biased beliefs and attitudes and has acted in discriminatory ways toward people of color shatters the self-image of "goodness" that many Whites hold about themselves. To accept this fact is truly alarming because it means acknowledging responsibility for the pain and suffering of others. This realization is likely to be strongly resisted, and the feelings of anxiety, defensiveness, and anger that surface during race talk are indicative of this realization.

Fear of Confronting White Privilege

To confront issues of race and racism is to confront whiteness and White privilege (Spanierman et al., 2006; Sue & Sue, 2013; Watt, 2007). McIntosh (2002) indicated that whiteness is an invisible veil and represents a default standard by which differences are seen and judged. She further defined White privilege as the unearned benefits and advantages that accrue to Whites by virtue of their skin color (and not necessarily because of their own efforts). The following statement is often used to illustrate privilege on the part of George W. Bush when he first ran for president of the United States: "George W. Bush was born on third base but believes he hit a triple." Like many White males who have attained positions of power and influence, the former president believes that he sacrificed and worked hard to attain the presidency. Invisible to him and many White Americans are two facts: (a) Many persons of color and many women have worked equally hard if not harder but don't even make it to the batter's box, and (b) Bush benefited from White privilege, male privilege, and economic privilege.

Confronting White privilege in race talk means entertaining the possibilities that meritocracy is a myth, that Whites did not attain their positions in life solely through their own efforts, that they have benefited from the historical and current racist arrangements and practices of society, and that they have been advantaged in society to the detriment of people of color. As Jones (1997) indicated, White privilege cannot exist outside the confines of White supremacy. Race talk threatens to unmask the hidden secret that the superior positions of many Whites were attained through the oppression of people of color and through current inequitable societal arrangements.

Fear of Taking Personal Responsibility to End Racism

Working through fears of appearing racist, acknowledging biased social conditioning, owning up to racist attitudes and beliefs, and realizing that one has benefited from White privilege are important changes, but they are not enough. Race talk ultimately asks White Americans a moral question that moves beyond these fears. If denying one's role in the perpetuation of inequities can no longer be blamed on lack of awareness or naiveté, and if one realizes that silence and inaction are tantamount to colluding in the oppression of others, one must ask: How is it possible to allow situations of oppression and injustice to continue without taking personal responsibility to end them?

In a study aimed at discovering participants' actual and anticipated responses to a Black racial slur, experimenters found that White participants who predicted they would be upset at witnessing a racist act and would reject the racist actually experienced little emotional distress and did little to change their behaviors toward the perpetrator (Kawakami et

al., 2009)! In other words, although White Americans are well-intentioned and honestly believe that in the face of racism they would act to end it, the tendency by most to do nothing is more the norm. Someone once said that the ultimate White privilege is the ability to acknowledge one's privilege but do nothing about it! And frankly, this is where I believe the last battle must be waged. Race talk reminds Whites that they have both the responsibility and the power to take action against racism and oppression. Accepting the existence of personal bias and utilizing this awareness to rectify injustices, however, is not an easy task.

How Can Educators Facilitate Constructive Racial Dialogues in the Classroom?

Because space does not allow for an extended discussion of my and my colleagues' specific findings on how teachers can create conditions conducive to honest and successful race talk, I refer readers to the specific recommendations in our studies (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2010, 2011). Only three of our recommendations are discussed below.

First, there was near unanimity among students and faculty that the most unhelpful and least effective strategy taken by professors was inaction: allowing race talk to be brewed in silence, being passive in the face of a heated exchange, allowing students to take over the classroom, or cutting off the dialogue. The dilemma faced by White professors was different than that faced by professors of color. For the former, their inaction was due primarily to an inability to recognize what triggered the difficult dialogue, and even when they did recognize it, they felt incapable of intervening effectively. For faculty of color, while they recognized and could deconstruct what was happening in the classroom, they also struggled with how to intervene effectively as they attempted to maintain neutrality and "not take sides." From these findings, it appears that some of the important qualities of facilitators are that they must understand themselves as racial/cultural beings; become aware of their own values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior; and develop awareness, knowledge, and expertise in race relations and racial interactions. When critical consciousness of race issues is absent, when there is low awareness and understanding of what is transpiring in the classroom, and when disorientation and confusion dominate one's grasp of the event, effective intervention cannot take place. Continuing personal education on race issues is an absolute necessity.

Second, White trainees in our study reported that instructors' openness and acknowledgement (regardless of race) of their own biases in class aided immensely in the trainees' own willingness to be forthcoming and honest. Such disclosure on the part of professors was perceived positively because it indicated a willingness to be vulnerable by sharing personal biases, limitations, and both successful and unsuccessful attempts to deal with racism. In addition, such disclosures had additional benefits

that created a positive climate for race talk: (a) Openness and truthfulness were being modeled by an authority figure for students, and (b) encouragement was provided for students to be honest because the professor was seen as equally "flawed." Interestingly, some professors found that self-disclosure about their own struggles with racism made it easier for them to facilitate race talk in the classroom because it freed them from the constant guardedness and vigilance exercised in denying their own biases.

Third, both students and professors seemed to agree that the ability to acknowledge, validate, and facilitate discussion of feelings was crucial to successful race talk. Much of this is related to the comfort level of professors in dealing not only with emotional reactions to racial dialogues but with any strong and powerful feelings that occur in the classroom. Students consistently talked about the importance of "allowing space for feelings," of having the professor recognize and name the feelings, and of having the racial tensions in the room directly addressed. Professors who ignored the feeling tone level of a dialogue or who tried to dilute or cut it off from further discussion only created greater anxiety and dread. Unaddressed feelings in racial dialogues have been characterized as emotional roadblocks to successful race talk (Sue, 2010). Because emotional reactions to race talk often don't make sense to students, deconstructing their meanings can result in greater awareness and understanding.

Finally, our studies identified many other helpful strategies used by professors to facilitate a successful difficult dialogue on race. Some of these include the following: understanding yourself as a racial cultural being; acknowledging and accepting the fact that you are a product of your conditioning and have inherited the biases of the society; being comfortable with discussing race issues and the emotions that may ensue; controlling the process and not the content of a difficult dialogue; expressing appreciation and validation to members in the class who make themselves vulnerable; using exercises, assignments, and role-plays to instigate race talk for educational purposes; understanding differences in communication styles; and teaching others to be open to racial blunders. With respect to this last point, it is how you recover, not how you cover up, that is important.

Conclusions

In general, studies indicate that factors working against race talk are significantly different for people of color and for their White counterparts. Although White participants are disinclined to engage in race talk and/or address race issues superficially, people of color appear more willing to bear witness to their racial thoughts and experiences because it is such an intimate part of their identities. They feel shut off from discussing how race impacts their daily lives in society by the reactions to and perceived consequences of doing so. Furthermore, the contextual norms of our society can hinder race talk by setting the

parameters for how it is discussed and interpreted, thereby placing people of color at risk for negative outcomes.

For people of color, race talk is difficult because they are placed in the unenviable position of (a) determining how to talk about the "elephant in the room" when Whites avoid acknowledging it; (b) dealing with the denial, defensiveness, and anxiety emanating from their White counterparts; (c) managing their intense anger at the continual denial; and (d) needing to constantly ascertain how much to open up, given the differential power dynamics that often exist between the majority group and the minority group.

For White Americans, the greatest challenge in achieving honest racial discourse is making the "invisible" visible. The conspiracy of silence allows them to maintain a false belief in their own racial innocence, lets them avoid personal blame for the oppression of others, and prevents them from taking responsibility to combat racism and oppression. Race talk threatens to unmask unpleasant and unflattering secrets about their roles in the perpetuation of oppression. Avoiding racial dialogues seems to have basic functions related to denial. The denial of color is really a denial of differences. The denial of differences is really a denial of power and privilege. The denial of power and privilege is really a denial of personal benefits that accrue to Whites by virtue of racial inequities. The denial that they profit from racism is really a denial of responsibility for their racism. Lastly, the denial of racism is really a denial of the necessity to take action against racism. Understanding the psychology of race talk from the perspective of White Americans and people of color has major implications for how educators can use this knowledge to facilitate difficult dialogues on race.

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