

**RACE TALK
AND THE CONSPIRACY
OF SILENCE**

*Understanding and Facilitating
Difficult Dialogues on Race*

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managed more carefully. The husband dutifully complied, and as indicated in the scenario, never brought up the race topic again.

The dynamics and outcomes in this vignette are telling and shine a light on the incompatibility of honest racial dialogues with many situational social norms. On a broader level, the culture and norms of our society offer cues for impression management; and, on a societal and organizational level, policies and practices instruct, support, and demonstrate appropriate social behaviors on racial interactions and race talk. These norms and our need to present a pleasant and agreeable front (image) mean that race talk is to be avoided or to be discussed in only the most superficial manner. Avoiding conflict, being noncontroversial, and preserving group harmony are rewarded while those who violate the politeness protocol are punished through social isolation, rejection by the group, and/or having negative attributions made about them; they are troublemakers who lack social skills and are offensive, impulsive and disagreeable, mean and hurtful, too emotional, or oversensitive. The politeness protocol is a powerful and inflexible norm and transgressing it brings on major condemnation.

It would be irresponsible not to note that impression management is a natural and inherent strategy employed by everyone. The strategies are also used by people of color and women to achieve certain goals. For these groups, however, the strong power differential between them and majority group members means they must exercise caution and restraint when confronted with topics or situations with racial or gender implications. For example, employees of color are often placed in situations where they must adapt or mold their behaviors to conform to the norms of the organization in order to advance or receive favorable ratings while employed. Whether impression management tactics are functional or dysfunctional, adaptive or maladaptive depends on the short- and long-term consequences to the individual employing them and for the ultimate good of our society.

THE ACADEMIC PROTOCOL AND RACE TALK

Studies suggest that the majority of educators claim to value diversity in classroom settings, and believe it represents a potential learning environment where cross-racial interactions and racial dialogues can present opportunities to develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills to function in a pluralistic society (President's Initiative on Race, 1998, 1999). Despite this strong belief, most teachers report making few changes to facilitate race talk, and feel

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uncomfortable and unprepared to deal with potentially heated exchanges on the topic (Pasque et al., 2013; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). Indeed, most teachers report they are motivated to help students dialogue on race and racial topics, but feel limited, fearful, and constrained from doing so. What accounts for this large discrepancy between the desire of teachers to facilitate discussions and their inability to take effective action or produce the conditions that would evoke positive outcomes? Part of the answer seems to lie in the values and assumptions inherent in academia and the teaching profession itself.

Just as the politeness protocol sets standards and norms for discussions on race in social situations, the academic environment, especially the classroom, can also be likened to a different theatrical stage in which scripts for race talk are implicitly followed by faculty, and by default, their students (hooks, 1994; Valentine et al., 2012). The conditions that would facilitate a meaningful difficult dialogue on race, for example, may be at odds with learning assumptions, policies, and practices of the academic environment (hooks, 1994; Palmer, 2007). What has been called the academic protocol, for example, emphasizes a learning environment characterized by objectivity, rationality, and intellectual thought and inquiry (APA Presidential Task Force, 2012; Young, 2003). Race talk, however, is highly subjective, is intense, relies on storytelling, and is emotive in nature. The academic protocol is deeply rooted in our educational system and arises from White Western notions of science as exemplified in the scientific method (Highlen, 1996; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). In Western science, the experimental design is considered the epitome of methods used to ask and answer questions about the human condition or the universe. The search for cause and effect is linear and allows us to identify the independent variables, the dependent variables, and the effects of extraneous variables that we attempt to control. It is analytical and reductionist in character. Extraneous variables that need to be controlled or eliminated are often the emotions, opinions, and preconceived notions of researchers, teachers, and participants.

Truth seeking in Western science operates from several basic assumptions: (a) Empirical reality is valued over experiential reality; (b) the mode of knowing is accomplished through breaking down phenomena into distinct and separate units or objects; (c) data, facts, and knowledge (truth) exist when they can be observed and measured via one of the five senses; and (d) universal principles are the hallmark of science so that cultural influences and differences are minimized. The concepts of separation, isolation, and even individualism in human relationships are hallmarks of the Euro-American worldview and, thus, not surprisingly, are foundational to our educational system.

RACE TALK

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From the perspective of education, learning and the acquisition of knowledge takes a reductionist approach to describing data, facts, information, and phenomena. The attempt to maintain objectivity, autonomy, and independence in understanding the physical world and human behavior is strongly stressed. Such tenets have resulted in separation of the person from the group (valuing of individualism and uniqueness), science from spirituality, man/woman from the universe, and thoughts from feelings. Within this framework exists a mind-body dualism in which the mind is legitimized in education while the body (spirit, emotions, and feelings) is not considered important in intellectual inquiry (Tatum, 1992). The road to knowledge and enlightenment in education is manifested in three major characteristics of Western science and education: focus on (1) empiricism, (2) reason and rationality, and (3) reductionism. All three tend to work against meaningful and successful race talk in classrooms.

Empirical Reality Versus Experiential Reality

The scientific way of knowing is based upon empirical tests that establish verifiable facts that represent the building blocks of knowledge and ultimately truth (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008). In one form or another, most educators are trained to value scientific thinking that is data driven, supported by empirical evidence, and gathered through objective systematic means. The material taught in classes and the information imparted by teachers are theoretically based upon objective facts or truths, rather than upon subjective opinions, beliefs, and potentially contaminating biases (C. J. Goodwin, 2003). Thus, opinions, beliefs, feelings, knowledge, ideas, and information have credibility and reliability only when put to an empirical test. As we have seen in previous chapters, race talk is about storytelling or bearing witness to one's lived reality or experience (Bryan et al., 2012; Willow, 2008). Oftentimes, race talk from the perspective of people of color is inherently anecdotal and includes stories of the pain and suffering of racism, and is subjective in nature, experiential, and unverifiable in the immediacy of the moment.

Most professors and many teachers conduct their classes, however, in a manner that values a sterile decorum in which topics of race, gender, and sexual orientation are discussed in a businesslike manner and in a highly intellectualized fashion (hooks, 1994; Tatum, 1992). This feature of the academic protocol evaluates and judges the legitimacy of classroom information and learning through empirical evidence rather than experiential evidence. Empirical evidence is the source of knowledge that is required in determining

reality and truth (observation and experimentation). The *senses* (what is seen, heard, smelled, or touched) are the primary source of empirical evidence. Although talking or testimony about past experiences, memories, feelings, and observations also serve as sources of evidence and derive from some sensory experience, they are considered to be secondary or indirect ways of knowing.

Thus, when dialogues on race occur in the classroom, experiential reality is not considered as reliable and valid information because it is contaminated by opinions, idiosyncratic experiences, emotions, and personal values. As a result, knowledge acquired and accepted through storytelling is considered to be an inadequate source of information and generally false. Many educators perceive dialogues or conversations on race as an exchange of opinions and ideas that are not necessarily grounds for the advancement and accumulation of knowledge. They stress the need for empirical reality and attempt to downplay experiential reality (it is less credible, trustworthy, valid, and reliable). The terms *hard science* and *soft science* exemplify this clash or division between the status of disciplines associated with the physical sciences and the social sciences. Physical sciences adhere strongly to empirical reality, whereas the social sciences (psychology, sociology, and anthropology) are considered less scientific; as a result, social sciences often attempt to mimic the higher status of physical sciences by adopting quantification, objectification, and logic/rationality to studying the human condition. In many respects, such an approach ultimately distances "ways of knowing" or renders the means of asking and answering questions about the human condition to an abstract hypothetical level that dilutes, diminishes, and disconnects empirical reality from experiential or lived realities. The following story illustrates this disconnection.

Years ago a Nigerian educator told me a story about a White female teacher hired to teach elementary school subjects to White students in a community where a major multinational corporation had a plant in Nigeria. Many of the employees were U.S. Americans who lived near the plant and who brought their families over to the country. The classroom consisted of U.S. students and Nigerian students whose parents were also employed by the corporation. During one of the class periods the teacher posed a math problem to the class.

Teacher: There are four blackbirds sitting on a tree. You take a slingshot and kill one of them. How many are left?

Johnny, White U.S. student (raising hand excitedly): Teacher, teacher, I know the answer!

Teacher: Johnny, what is the answer?

Johnny: That is sooo easy . . . four take away one is three!

Nigerian student (interrupting): No, no, no . . . that's not right teacher! The answer is zero!

Teacher (puzzled): I'm afraid that is the wrong answer. Johnny is right! Four take away one is three.

In this case, both Johnny and the teacher are operating from empirical and hypothetical reality in how to ask and answer questions about the physical world and human condition. Teachers who teach hard sciences and math frequently operate under the assumption that math is math and that truth can be discerned through empiricism. From this framework, Johnny has come up with the correct answer. The Nigerian student, however, might be operating under experiential reality or lived experience. Were the teacher to inquire as to how he arrived at his answer, the Nigerian student might have explained in this fashion: "Teacher if you shoot one bird, the others aren't stupid enough to stay around. They will *all* fly away."

Whose answer is correct, the White or Nigerian student's? Empirical reality and experiential reality are only problematic in teaching when we pose an either/or dichotomy. Bridging both is important. In this case, the teacher might have asked the question differently: "There are four blackbirds seated on a tree. You take a slingshot and kill one of them. How many flew away?"

Reason Versus Emotion

Dialogues on race may ultimately push hot emotional buttons in students and teachers alike and may cause heated exchanges among and between them. We have already explored some of the reasons these strong feelings are generated, but when they occur in the classroom they are most often perceived by educators as the three Ds: disruptive, dysfunctional, and disrespectful. Emotions such as anger and frustration, for example, are disruptive to Western European classroom decorum where calm discussions filled with logic and reasoning are philosophically aspects of appropriate student and faculty conduct (Valentine et al., 2012). Classrooms are political spaces, microcosms of race relations in the broader society, and teachers represent the agents that enforce the types of interactions dictated by the norms of the learning environment (Sue, 2010; Valentine et al., 2012).

Most educators consider the strong expression of emotions, especially anger, as disruptive and not conducive to learning. In interpersonal relationships,

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anger is often manifested as blaming others, attacking their points of view, and/or belittling them. Even if such expressions of anger occurred elsewhere, most of us are uncomfortable and ill prepared to deal with any type of intense anger. Feelings of defensiveness often arise, for example, when hot racial topics make their appearance between students of color (who feel their points invalidated and silenced) and White students (who feel unjustly blamed or accused of being racist). The prevailing implicit assumption in academic circles is that emotions are antagonistic to reason, that learning occurs when topics are discussed calmly. When a discussion on race becomes heated, students are admonished by teachers to not let their emotions get the best of them, to calm down, and to speak to one another with respect (Sue, 2010). Anger is seen as dysfunctional (even pathological) during race talk, so instructors feel compelled to control its intensity and expression. To accuse, blame, or attack someone through the expression of anger is also considered disrespectful. Because classroom spaces are created by those in power, teaching and student learning are conducted through the lens of teaching norms, beliefs, and values that dictate what topics are educational and how they should be discussed.

One of the major obstacles to race talk is the common assumption that different cultural groups operate according to identical speech and communication conventions. Black styles of communication are often high key, animated, heated, interpersonal, and confrontational. Many emotions, affects, and feelings are generated (Hall, 1976; Shade & New, 1993; Weber, 1985). In a debate, Blacks tend to act as advocates of a position, and ideas are to be tested in the crucible of argumentation (Banks & Banks, 1993; Kochman, 1981). White middle class styles, however, are characterized as being detached and objective, impersonal and nonchallenging. The person acts not as an *advocate* of the idea, but as a *spokesperson* (truth resides in the idea). A discussion of issues should be devoid of affect because emotion and reason work against one another. One should talk things out in a logical fashion without getting personally involved. African Americans characterize their own style of communication as indicating that the person is sincere and honest, while Euro-Americans consider their own style to be reasoned and objective (Irvine & York, 1995).

Unfortunately, blanket discouragement of heated expressions serves to discourage students from honestly expressing their true thoughts, attitudes, and feelings about race and racism as well the true thoughts, attitudes, and feelings from others as well. Studies reveal that difficult dialogues on race are filled with heated and oftentimes explosive emotions, and that attempts to suppress

or limit their expression actually lead to detrimental learning consequences for White students and students of color (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2010). With respect to White Americans, Sara Winter (1977) provides us with insights as to the types of emotions likely to be elicited in race talk, the bases of the reactions, and why well-intentioned Whites prefer not to talk about race or racism. Yet, as she explains, experiencing embedded or nested feelings associated with our beliefs and memories about different groups are preconditions to dealing with our anxieties associated with race and racism. Using Black Americans as an example, she states,

Let me explain this healing process in more detail. We must unearth all the words and memories we generally try not to think about, but which are inside us all the time: "nigger," "Uncle Tom," "jungle bunny," "Oreo"; lynching, cattle prods, castrations, rapists, "black pussy," and black men with their huge penises, and hundreds more. (I shudder as I write.) We need to review three different kinds of material: (1) all our personal memories connected with blackness and black people including everything we can recall hearing or reading; (2) all the racist images and stereotypes we've ever heard, particularly the grossest and most hurtful ones; (3) any race related things we ourselves said, did or omitted doing which we feel bad about today. . . . Most whites begin with a good deal of amnesia. Eventually the memories crowd in, especially when several people pool recollections. Emotional release is a vital part of the process. Experiencing feelings seems to allow further recollections to come. I need persistent encouragement from my companions to continue. (p. 3)

Such a journey in the classroom cannot be accomplished in a manner devoid of feelings and without emotional release. Indeed, to close off the expression of these feelings leads to a sterile discussion that separates the head from the body and soul. In many classrooms, for example, debates or dialogues on race adhere to the academic protocol, which is dispassionate and objective, devoid of emotions and affect. The challenge for education as we shall see in the later chapters is not that one way of knowing and learning is better than the other, but for educators to integrate both to make education, self-knowledge, and understanding meaningful and life changing.

Objectivism Versus Subjectivism

One of the most basic tenets of scientific thinking is *objectivity*, which is intended to be the cornerstone of establishing universal laws and truths devoid of human factors that may contaminate the acquisition of facts and

knowledge (C. J. Goodwin, 2003; Heppner et al., 2008). These human factors involve the personal opinions, values, and biases of researchers, scholars, and teachers that are viewed as impediments to seeking truth. The roles of investigators and by extension effective teachers are ones of maintaining objectivity, being detached, and controlling emotions that may unduly compromise or undermine logic/rationality. The extreme extension of this role is that the scientist, scholar, and educator can be characterized as business-like or machine-like in their search for knowledge and in their teaching. In reality, we recognize that no person can completely separate himself/herself from his/her beliefs, attitudes, and values and be completely objective.

When topics such as race, racism, Whiteness, and White privilege are discussed in classrooms or any other situation for that matter, they become deeply personal, emotional, and subjective (McIntosh, 2002; Willow, 2008; Young, 2003). According to Palmer (2007), objectivity in teaching is the major culprit that creates disconnection between teachers, their subjects, their students, and the ability to learn from lived experience:

For objectivism, the subjective self is the enemy most to be feared—a Pandora's box of opinion, bias, and ignorance that will distort our knowledge once the lid flies open. We keep the lid shut by relying exclusively on reason and facts, logic and data that cannot be swayed by subjective desire. . . . The role of the mind and the senses in this scheme is not to connect us to the world but to hold the world at bay, lest our knowledge of it be tainted.

In objectivism, subjectivity is feared not only because it contaminates things but because it creates relationships between those things and us—and relationships are contaminating as well. When a thing ceases to be an object and becomes a vital, interactive part of our lives—whether it is a work of art, an indigenous people, or an ecosystem—it might get a grip on us, biasing us toward it, thus threatening the purity of our knowledge once again.

So objectivism, driven by fear, keeps us from forging relationships with the things of the world. Its *modus operandi* is simple; when we distance ourselves from something, it becomes an object; when it becomes an object, it no longer has life; when it is lifeless, it cannot touch or transform us, so our knowledge of the thing remains pure. (p. 52)

Some have argued that concepts of objectivity are fueled by Western values strongly manifested in the Protestant work ethic. Basic to the ethic are the concepts of separation and individualism: (a) The individual is the psychosocial unit of operation, (b) the individual has primary responsibility for his or her

own actions, (c) independence and autonomy are highly valued and rewarded, and (d) one should be internally directed and controlled. Consistent with this orientation is our nation's heavy reliance on asking and answering questions about the human condition through sensory information as defined by the physical plane of reality (Western science). We are often told to be objective, that rationality is the ability to separate ourselves from the issues, and not to let our emotions get in the way. Our worship of science reveals the value placed on symbolic logic, analytical and linear approaches, and the ability to tease out parts from the whole. The results of this overriding philosophy of life are also reflected in our educational system, legal system (individual rights), standards of healthy development and functioning (autonomy, independence, and being your own person), definition of the family (nuclear family vs. extended family), and even religion (separation of church and state).

While individualism as a value has many positive components, is it possible that its extreme form may lead to an unhealthy separation between people? When you objectify others, see them as distinct from you, and perceive your relationships with people as less desirable than separation and objectification, is it possible that you may also be prone to dehumanize them? Because your world revolves around you, others are less important. Others become objectified, and in many cases dehumanized as well. You will have little regard for others, see them as separate from you, and experience little empathy for them. During World War II and the Vietnam War, for example, referring to the Japanese and Vietnamese in demeaning racial epithets such as Japs, Gooks, and Slants frequently dehumanized Asians. They were not seen as human beings, but rather subhuman aliens, evil, and animals that should be wiped off the face of the earth and destroyed. They were the true Yellow Peril frequently referred to in our historical relationship with Asians. Such an approach made it easier for our soldiers to kill them.

A similar analogy can be made to that of racial hatred in the United States. Persons of color are perceived as other beings: subhuman, criminals, untrustworthy, animalistic, uncivilized, aliens, dangerous, lazy, unintelligent, and the dregs of society. Thus, you have little empathy for them and believe that a civilized society would be better off without persons of color. Such a belief, whether spoken or not, makes it easy for outright racists to enact violence and cruelty upon persons of color without guilt or compassion. It also allows the majority of White Americans to sit idly by and bear witness to the cruelty and oppression inflicted upon a subhuman group of humans without protest.

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After all, as long as you do not feel connected to the other beings and do not perceive them as part of you, injustice and oppression are not disturbing.

If your disconnection from others allows racism to thrive, then the solution might lie in becoming connected with one another by viewing humanity as all-encompassing and inherently unifying. In that respect, if the *us-and-them* thinking is replaced by the collective *we*, then what happens to one person happens to all. If injustice were carried out against a member of another race, we would all feel the pain and bear the responsibility in rectifying the situation. Successful facilitation of race talk offers the potential for empathic understanding and connections to those we view as other beings, and it enhances our spiritual connection with all of humanity.