

Excerpt from **Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence; Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race**

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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 counter-narrative or back talk in which their stories challenge and dispute the ones told by Whites. Their stories contain themes of past and continuing discrimination, the pain of oppression from well-intentioned Whites, power and privilege of the dominant group, and the myth of meritocracy (Accapadi, 2007; Bell, 2003; Bryan et al., 2012; Sue, 2005). In describing the master narrative, Feagin (2001) uses 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 to marginalized groups. Race talk is not only a clash of racial realities, but reenacts the differential power relationship between a dominant group master narrative (Whites) and the less powerful socially devalued group counter-narrative (persons of color; Sue et al., 2007).

The counter-narratives of race talk are extremely threatening to Whites and to our society because they may unmask the secrets of power and privilege, and how the public transcript of a master narrative justifies the continued subordination of people of color (Bell, 2003; Sue, 2005). If racism is 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 are the politeness protocol, the academic protocol, and the color-blind protocol (APA Presidential Task Force, 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 whose ground rule states 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 are discouraged in favor of 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, 2012; Zou & Dickster, 2013). In social interactions, the focus is generally on small talk and pleasantries that do not result in conflicting opinions/beliefs. In their extreme form, race topics are considered socially taboo and are generally 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 how it is discussed is often enforced through social means: being told that the topic is not a proper one, having people excuse themselves from the conversation, being labeled as socially insensitive, and being isolated socially. Violating these conversation conventions can have very negative consequences as to how one is perceived (rude or complaining) and treated in future interactions (dismissed and retaliated against; Rasinki & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickster, 2013). Depending on the stance they take, Whites who violate the politeness protocol may be accused of being "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 playing the race card.

Race Talk Violates the Academic Protocol

Race talk along with the 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 (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 were minimized; and (c) reductionism, separation, and isolation of variables (objects or elements) allow for determining 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 classrooms should be conducted in a sterile, objective decorum devoid

of feelings. 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 is 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 that become 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, 2012). There is a belief that dialogues on race are purely intellectual exercises, thereby minimizing the expression of emotions in race talk and losing an opportunity to explore their meanings. Second, race talk on the part of people 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 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. A dispute 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 post racial society masks the true hidden dialogue occurring between the students: fears of disclosing intimate thoughts and beliefs related to race/racism and the personal meaning it has for them (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 skin (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Neville, Lily, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). 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) have 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 seeing 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, color blindness was originally meant to combat institutional prejudice and discrimination and to portray the person as being free of bias, but paradoxically, it 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, use discriminatory policies and practices, and justify inequality (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008); a multicultural philosophy, however, promotes inclusive behaviors and policies (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & 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, 2012; Zou & Dickter, 2013). Others have concluded that the pretense of not seeing color and avoiding critical consciousness of race lowers empathic ability, dims perceptual awareness, maintains false illusions, and allow Whites to live in a world of false deception (Bell, 2002; Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009; Spanierman, Poteat, Beer, & Armstrong, 2006; Sue, 2005).