

# Race Talk And The Conspiracy of Silence

**White Talk vs. Back Talk**

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By

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# A TALE OF TWO STORIES

## African Proverb

*“The true tale of the lion hunt will never be told as long as the hunter tells the story.”*

The Rest of the Story:

*“Telling on Racism”*



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# RACE TALK

AND THE  
CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE



UNDERSTANDING AND  
FACILITATING DIFFICULT  
DIALOGUES ON RACE

WILEY

Race Talk

January

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# How We Learn About Race

- ▶ *“Recently after interviewing a potential nanny, I asked my daughter Chloe, 4, what she thought. ‘I don’t like her brown skin?’ my daughter replied, phrasing it like a question in that hesitant way she does when she knows she’s testing. I was shocked – and horrified. She’d never mentioned skin color before, despite having good friends of different ethnicities, and I naively believed she was colorblind. Now, faced with the fear that I had inadvertently raised a pint-size racist, I biffed it. ‘That’s not a nice thing to say,’ I scolded her. And then, unsure of what else to say, I said nothing at all.” (Emmons, 2013).*
- ▶ **What do you see happening in this scenario? Can anyone truly be color-blind? Has the mother raised a “pint-size” racist? What lessons do you think Chloe is learning from her mother’s response? If you were the mother, how would you respond?**

# How We Learn About Race

- ▶ *As an Asian mother, how do I console my 6-year-old daughter who wants so much to be White, like all the other children in her class? June came home crying yesterday about kids teasing her over the shape of her eyes and other physical features. I told her she was beautiful, although different from the other kids, but it didn't seem to help. I remember going through the same thing, but I can't remember what my own mother told me. I suffered in silence, wishing to be like my other classmates. I don't want June to suffer in silence, but what can I say? How do I tell her there is nothing wrong with being Chinese? Should I just ignore it and hope she will eventually understand?*
- ▶ **What do you make of June's desire to be White? What does this say about our society? Why is she ashamed of her physical features? How did the mother handle similar situations? What lessons is she teaching June? If you were the mother, what would you do?**

# How We Learn About Race

- ▶ *“It was a late summer afternoon. A group of white neighborhood mothers, obviously friends, had brought their 4 and 5 year-olds to the local McDonald’s for a snack and to play on the swings and slides provided by the restaurant. They were all seated at a table watching their sons and daughters run about the play area. In one corner of the yard sat a small black child pushing a red truck along the grass. One of the white girls from the group approached the black boy and they started a conversation. During that instant, the mother of the girl exchanged quick glances with the other mothers who nodded knowingly. She quickly rose from the table, walked over to the two, spoke to her daughter, and gently pulled her away to join her previous playmates. Within minutes, however, the girl again approached the black boy and both began to play with the truck. At that point, all the mothers rose from the table and loudly exclaimed to their children, ‘It’s time to go now!’”(Sue, 2003, p. 89–90)*



# The Stories We Tell: White Talk Vs. Back Talk

(A Group Conversation On Race)

- ▶ **Jack (White American):** *I know this may sound racist, but we have been tiptoeing around being honest for too long. I don't like to feel like everything I say has to be politically correct. I know I'm White...but what is the big deal about that? I don't like how minorities seem to be blaming all their problems on us [Whites].*
- ▶ *My parents and grandparents weren't responsible for slavery! We didn't own slaves! We treat everyone the same, like human beings. What's so big about being a color? I'm White, isn't that a color?*
- ▶ *You're not the only ones [reference to people of color in the group] that has experienced discrimination. My father told me stories about how we Irish were discriminated against when we came to America. My great grandparents sacrificed and worked 24 hours a day to provide a good living for their kids.*
- ▶ *No one gave them any handouts. But they adjusted and did what it took to succeed. They came over to this country, made a home for their family, and never whined about hard work.*

# The Stories We Tell: White Talk Vs. Back Talk

- ▶ **Mal: (Visibly angry)** *Are you implying that people of color are lazy and don't work equally hard as your family? Are you implying that being White is no different than being Black?*
- ▶ **Jack: (Interrupting)** *I knew this would happen. You are misinterpreting what I am saying. I think that too many Blacks believe White men are obstacles to them...because, because we're not! I haven't placed any limits to what you can do in this society. You may be blocking your own progress by clinging to those false beliefs.*
- ▶ **Mal: (Incredulous)** *I block my own progress?*



# The Stories We Tell: White Talk Vs. Back Talk

- ▶ **Jack:** *Yes, by believing that you are not equal to me. You are stuck in the belief that Whites are the obstacles to your progress. Yes, racism happened in the past, but it's a small thing now. It's a different world we live in. You don't realize that the world is wide open to you. Don't we have a Black president now?*
- ▶ *Look at Asian Americans, for example. They have made it in our society by hard work and their dedication to their families.*
- ▶ *Look at my great grandfather. He stood on his own ground, settled it, and made something of his life in the face of much prejudice. Every man can stand on his own ground. Why do you people [**people of color**] always have to fight being part of this country. What is that saying? Oh yeah, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Can't we all just be Americans?*

# The Stories We Tell: White Talk Vs. Back Talk

- ▶ **Mal:** *(Obviously agitated and raising his voice)* No, no, no, you listen....your great grandfather and you are not standing on your own ground! You stand on the heads and bodies of Native Americans. America was a red nation, not a White one! Australia was a Black nation until Whites took it by force! Africa is a Black nation.....You enslaved the people and brought them to this country.
- ▶ And, yes, you say you did not enslave Africans and now you tell me that you didn't take the land of American Indians, but, you know what.... you still benefit from the actions of your ancestors!
- ▶ When you say that I block my own progress...ha....I think the police set limits on where I can go and do, I think society tells me what neighborhoods I can live in.....No, I don't block my own progress. **[Shouting]** That's what being White means...to stand on someone else's ground, and then mystify it by saying you are not!.....And, when you say that everything will be alright if we all just become Americans....that's a bunch of bullshit!
- ▶ **Jack:** Sits in silence...appears uncomfortable and surprised by the outburst. Pushes his chair back and turns away from Mal.

# This is “Race Talk”

## The Outcome

Unsuccessful racial dialogues can create **ruptures** in both new and old relationships:


1. Result in multiple **racial microaggressions** against clients of color.
2. Lead to an intolerable and **oppressive environment**.
3. **Stop** the free **flow of conversations** around **race**.
4. Create an “elephant in the room” that negatively impacts the client and the formation of a working relationship.
5. **Blame the client of color** (victim).
6. **Invalidate** the importance of race in the life of the client.
7. Result in **premature termination**.

# White Talk: The Master Narrative

- ▶ We are a democratic society.
- ▶ We are good, moral and decent human beings.
- ▶ Egalitarian relationships are valued.
- ▶ Truth and justice should be valued.
- ▶ We live in a meritocratic society.
- ▶ Anyone who works hard enough can succeed in society.
- ▶ Equal access and opportunity are hallmarks of society.
- ▶ People should be color-blind and not judge one another by the color of their skin.
- ▶ Racism is abhorrent, but is now a thing of the past (post-racial era).

**In other words, the stories told by White people (especially “race talk”) are filled with these themes.**

# Function of the Master Narrative For White Americans

1. Reassures them that they are good, moral, and fair people.
  2. Prevents them from being conscious of their biased cultural conditioning.
  3. Allows them to live in a world of false deception.
  4. Maintains their innocence and naiveté.
  5. Perpetuates the racial status quo.
  6. Act as blinders about the inequities that exist for people of color.
  7. Justifies inaction.
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# Transmitting the Public Transcript (Keeping White Secrets)

The shaping of racial realities from the White Western European perspective comes through three channels:

**1. Schooling and Education**

**2. Mass Media**

**3. Significant Others, Peers, and Social Groups**



# Back Talk: **Telling on Racism** (Revealing Ugly White Secrets)

Back talk in a racial dialogue threatens to **decode the racist assumptions of the master narrative.**

It represents a **clash of racial realities** or duel between two opposing belief systems with much at stake for personal, institutional and societal realities.



# Back Talk: The Counter-Narrative

- ▶ We live in a society that advantages some groups while disadvantaging others.
- ▶ It is ordinary White people, not the White supremacist, who do the most harm to people of color.
- ▶ Whites often do not treat others with fairness and respect, but in prejudicial and discriminatory ways.
- ▶ White people seem adverse to seeking the truth about racism and engage in self-deception.
- ▶ Equal access and opportunity are falsehoods.
- ▶ Meritocracy is a myth.
- ▶ Color-blindness is impossible and it perpetuates inequities.
- ▶ Racism is alive, well and thriving in the current times.

**In other words, we do not live in a post-racial era. Back talk threatens to reveal the ugly racist White secrets of society.**

# Obstacles / Barriers to Honest Racial Dialogues

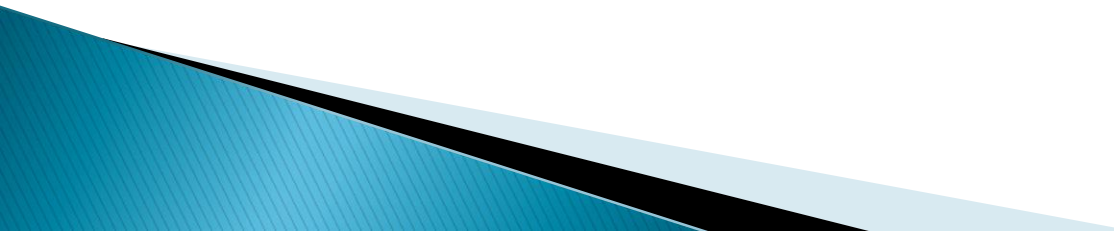
## ▶ External Protocols:

- ▶ The Politeness Protocol
- ▶ The Academic Protocol
- ▶ The Color Blind Protocol


## ▶ Internal Fears / Resistances

- ▶ Fear of Appearing Racist
  - ▶ Fear of Realizing One's Racism
  - ▶ Fear of Acknowledging White Privilege
  - ▶ Fear of Taking Responsibility to End Racism
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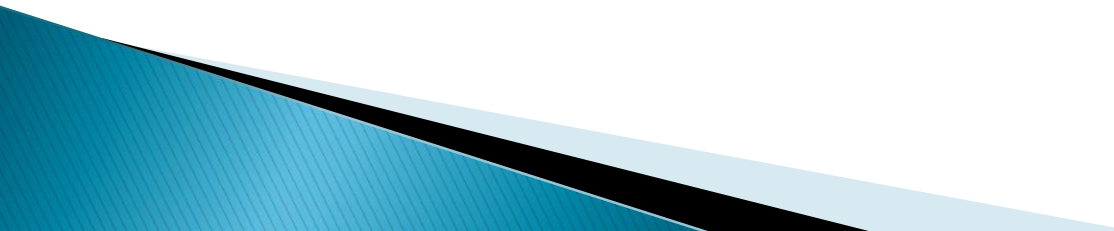
# Conspiracy of Silence: To Be Colorblind Is To Be Colormute

- ▶ 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 privilege is really a denial of personal benefits that accrue to White people by virtue of racial inequities.
  - ▶ The denial that Whites profit from racism is really a denial of responsibility for our racism.
  - ▶ Lastly, the denial of our racism is really a denial of the necessity to take action against racism.
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# Getting Comfortable with Racial Dialogues

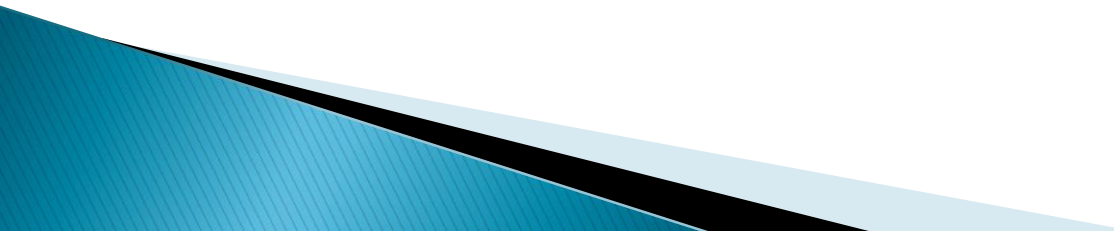
- ▶ 1. Acknowledge and accept the fact that you are a product of cultural conditioning and have inherited the biases, fears, stereotypes of your ancestors.
  - ▶ 2. Understand yourself as a racial/cultural being by making the “invisible,” visible. Race, culture and ethnicity is a function of each and everyone of us. It is not just a “minority” thing.
  - ▶ 3. Be open and honest about your vulnerabilities.
  - ▶ 4. Monitor and make sense of your emotional reactions.
  - ▶ 5. Everyone commits racial blunders. Don't become defensive. Recover, not cover up!
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# WHEN IS “RACE TALK” SUCCESSFUL?

- ▶ **Difficult dialogues are successful when individuals**
    - **truly listen to one another and engage in a “dialogue” rather than a “monologue”,**
    - **become less defensive,**
    - **are able to understand the worldview of others,**
    - **become increasingly comfortable with differences between themselves and others, and**
    - **achieve new insights about themselves, about others, and about how our society treats racial issues.**
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# OUTCOMES OF SUCCESSFUL RACIAL DIALOGUES

- ▶ Group Outcome
  - ▶ The President's Initiative on Race has found that constructive conversations have the following potential group impact:
    - ▶ Heal racial and ethnic divides.
    - ▶ Reduce prejudice and misinformation.
    - ▶ Foster improved race relations.
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# OUTCOMES OF SUCCESSFUL RACIAL DIALOGUES

## Personal Cognitive Outcome

On a cognitive level, cross-racial interactions and dialogues are a necessity

- ▶ to increase racial literacy,
- ▶ to expand the ability to critically analyze racial ideologies, and
- ▶ to dispel stereotypes and misinformation about other groups

# OUTCOMES OF SUCCESSFUL RACIAL DIALOGUES

## Personal Emotional Outcome

On an emotive level, participants of 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
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