

DERALD WING SUE

RACE TALK

AND THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE



UNDERSTANDING AND
FACILITATING DIFFICULT
DIALOGUES ON RACE

WILEY

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*Understanding and Facilitating
Difficult Dialogues on Race*

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*I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Paulina Wee;
my son, Derald Paul; my daughter, Marissa Catherine;
my daughter-in-law, Claire Iris; and my granddaughters,
Carolyn Riley and Juliette Daisy.*

*I have been truly blessed in having such a loving
and supportive family, and they bring such joy to my life.*

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Preface

Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence is a sequel to the highly successful book *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Sue, 2010). It was developed over a 10-year period of research and observation of participants engaged in difficult conversations on race, racism, Whiteness, and White privilege. Our research team, for example, discovered that almost all difficult dialogues on race were triggered by racial microaggressions that were often invisible to the perpetrators during race talk. We found that difficult dialogues on race are most likely to occur when interpersonal encounters (a) highlight major differences in worldviews, personalities, and perspectives; (b) are challenged publicly; (c) are found to be offensive to others; (d) may reveal uncomfortable personal racial biases and prejudices; (e) arouse or trigger intense emotional responses; (f) are more difficult when they involve an unequal status relationship of power and privilege between the participants; and (g) contain a hidden disparaging message to people of color (racial microaggression) who find these interactions offensive, triggering intense emotional responses. The explosive nature of race talk makes it hard for participants to understand one another's points of view. Any individual or group engaged in a difficult dialogue feels at risk for potentially disclosing intimate thoughts, beliefs, or feelings related to the topic of race.

It goes without saying that race talk between individuals from different racial/cultural groups is often filled with strong powerful emotions, misunderstandings, accusations, and negative outcomes. How our society perceives race is centuries old and is filled with ambivalence, confusion, misunderstanding, conflict, and intensely powerful feelings. The way we engage in

race talk is reenacted daily in worksites, community forums, media, neighborhoods, churches, and classrooms. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, for example, difficult dialogues on race have often served to polarize students and teachers alike, rather than to clarify and increase mutual understanding about race and race relations. Our studies suggest that most well-intentioned teachers, trainers, and facilitators of race talk find themselves ill prepared to deal with the often explosive race-related emotions that manifest themselves in the classroom and places of employment. Poorly handled by teachers and trainers, such dialogues may result in disastrous consequences (anger, hostility, silence, complaints, misunderstandings, blockages of the learning process, etc.); skillfully handled, they present an opportunity for growth, improved communication, and learning.

The primary purpose of writing this book is fivefold: (1) to uncover the reasons that race talk is difficult, (2) to expose the explicit and hidden rules that govern how race is discussed in U.S. society, (3) to illuminate the detrimental consequences of a failure to honestly dialogue about race, (4) to outline the benefits of successful conversations on race, and (5) to propose solutions in overcoming obstacles to honest racial dialogues. In essence, this book is about the psychology of racial dialogues and the meaning, importance, and benefits they have for our society. It is written for educators who teach and work in academic and school settings; trainers and facilitators in business, industry, governmental agencies, and health settings concerned with improving race relations through honest conversations on race; and parents who must help their children (White and children of color) navigate the contradictions and hidden messages of racial prejudice, bias, and discrimination. These objectives are extremely important for several reasons.

First, it has been shown that honest race talk is one of the most powerful means to dispel stereotypes and biases, to increase racial literacy and critical consciousness about race issues, to decrease fear of differences, to broaden one's horizons, to increase compassion and empathy, to increase appreciation of all colors and cultures, and to enhance a greater sense of belonging and connectedness.

Second, research suggests that the inability of teachers, trainers, and parents to facilitate a successful dialogue on race has major consequences for persons of color because being unheard and silenced (a) assails their mental health, (b) creates a hostile and invalidating campus, work, or societal climate, (c) perpetuates stereotype threat, (d) creates physical health problems, (e) saturates

the broader society with cues that signal devaluation of social group identities, and (f) lowers classroom and work productivity and problem solving abilities.

Third, a failure of successful race talk has negative effects on White Americans as well. The inability or reluctance to dialogue openly and honestly with people of color on topics of race and racism leads to a lack of checks and balances to their worldviews. It (a) lowers empathic ability, (b) dims perceptual awareness and accuracy, (c) lessens compassion for others, (d) leads to self-denigration and a sense of failure, and (e) allows many to live in a world of false deception about the nature and operation of racism and their complicity in the perpetuation of silence.

ORGANIZATION

Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence is divided into five sections.

Section I: The Characteristics, Dynamics, and Meaning of Race Talk is composed of three chapters.

Chapter 1: What Is Race Talk?

Chapter 2: The Characteristics and Dynamics of Race Talk

Chapter 3: The Stories We Tell: White Talk Versus Back Talk

All three chapters introduce readers to the manifestation, dynamics, meaning, and impact of race talk for both White Americans and people of color. One of the primary goals of these chapters is to help readers recognize when a difficult dialogue on race is occurring, the psychological and societal barriers preventing honest dialogue, and more importantly the hidden meanings (oftentimes disparaging) being transmitted between different individuals and groups. Race talk is truly a clash of different racial realities in which people of color and Whites perceive race issues in opposition to one another.

Section II: The Constraining Ground Rules for Race Talk is composed of two chapters.

Chapter 4: "The Entire World's a Stage!"

Chapter 5: Color-Blind Means Color-Mute

These chapters bring to light the hidden ground rules embedded in society, in academia, and in ourselves that serve as barriers to honest race talk. The politeness protocol, a powerful ground rule in race talk, is exacerbated because of impression management strategies we all use. In academia, the academic

protocol reveals Western European norms (how we learn and ask/answer questions about the human condition) that allow educators to avoid and/or dilute the meaning and importance of race talk. More importantly is the discussion and analysis of color blindness and how it silences race talk. Color blindness, rather than enhancing race relations, seems to be harmful and detrimental to those who profess it and to those who experience it.

Section III: Why Is It Difficult for People of Color to Honestly Talk About Race? is composed of two chapters.

Chapter 6: "What Are the Consequences for Saying What I Mean?"

Chapter 7: "To Speak or How to Speak, That Is the Question"

These chapters are unique in that they discuss the fears, constraints, and concerns from people of color about honest race talk. In this case, issues of power and oppression, forced compliance, fear of the consequences for honestly saying what they mean, and concern whether their communication styles will make them misunderstood are the central issues covered in these chapters. In addition to the effects power inequalities have on race talk, these chapters explore the damaging consequences they have on people of color.

Section IV: Why Is It Difficult for White People to Honestly Talk About Race? contains two chapters.

Chapter 8: "I'm Not Racist!"

Chapter 9: "I'm Not White; I'm Italian!"

Complementing the last section on why people of color find race talk difficult, these chapters explore why Whites find honest racial dialogues anxiety provoking. These chapters explore in depth why Whites find race talk frightening. As a result, they use many forms of denial to keep from concluding that they possess racist attitudes and biases and that they ultimately benefit from White privilege. Race talk threatens to unmask the hidden secrets of racism and potentially forces Whites to consider their responsibility in the perpetuation of racism.

Section V: Race Talk and Special Group Considerations contains two chapters.

Chapter 10: Interracial/Interethnic Race Talk: Difficult Dialogues Between Groups of Color

Chapter 11: Race Talk and White Racial Identity Development: For Whites Only

These two chapters discuss unique race talk issues specific to people of color and Whites. Few scholarly works address the issue of interracial/interethnic relationships and the difficult racial dialogues that ensue from them. Chapter 10 specifically deals with the hot-button issues of bias and prejudice among groups of color, and the difficulty they have talking about them with one another. The chapter makes a distinction between race talk between groups of color and of that between Whites and people of color. This distinction can be a subject of a difficult dialogue as well. Chapter 11 has the subheading “For Whites Only” and is meant to alert White Americans to two things: (1) the need to develop a nonracist and antiracist White identity, and (2) how White awareness is related to race talk. Both chapters cover topics usually avoided in racial discourse.

Section VI: Guidelines, Conditions, and Solutions for Having Honest Racial Dialogues includes two last chapters.

Chapter 12: Being an Agent of Change: Guidelines for Educators, Parents, and Trainers

Chapter 13: Helping People Talk About Race: Facilitation Skills for Educators and Trainers

These chapters pull together lessons learned from the previous ones to derive implications as to how educators, facilitators, and parents can break the silence of race, to help trainees, students, and children not fear discussions of race, and to point out that parents and educators are in unique and vital roles to help their charges understand issues of race and racism. It outlines specific actions and experiences both trainers and trainees must undergo in order to benefit from race talk. The last chapter was especially written for teachers and trainers who are concerned with how to facilitate difficult dialogues on race.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although this book is on the psychology of race talk, it is really more than that. The attitudes, beliefs, and fears inherent in race talk symbolize our society’s resistance to unmasking the embedded inequities and basic unfairness imposed on citizens of color. We avoid honest racial dialogues because innocence and naïveté could no longer serve as excuses for inaction. Race talk potentially makes the “invisible” visible and opens gateways to view the world of oppression through realistic eyes. It has the possibility of helping

us becoming nonracist and antiracist. But silence and inaction only serve to perpetuate the status quo of race relations. Will we, as a nation, choose the path we have always traveled, a journey of silence that has benefited only a select group and oppressed others, or will we show courage and choose the road less traveled, a journey of racial reality that may be full of discomfort and pain, but offers benefits to all groups in our society? It would be unfortunate, indeed, to look back one day and echo the words of poet John Greenleaf Whittier, who wrote, "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: It might have been!"

Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been another labor of love, and finishing it has provided me with a deep sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Ironically, as I experience the sense of happiness and fulfillment, I am also deeply saddened by the passing of Maya Angelou. Her life, how she lived it, and her powerful voice in the face of oppression helped many of us to find the courage to speak against bias, bigotry, and racism. She was a true inspiration and I (we) will all miss her. But the legacy and writings she has left behind assure us she will not be forgotten, and she will continue to impact many generations to come. It is people like Maya Angelou, who, despite my never having known them personally, have been responsible for helping me write this book. In mind and spirit, she will always be with me (us). So thank you, Maya.

About the Author

Derald Wing Sue is Professor of Psychology and Education in the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. He also has a courtesy appointment with the Columbia University School of Social Work. He served as president of the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues, the Society of Counseling Psychology, and the Asian American Psychological Association. Dr. Sue has served and continues to serve as consulting editor for numerous publications. He is author of over 160 publications, including 18 books, and is well-known for his work on racism/antiracism, cultural competence, multicultural counseling and therapy, and social justice advocacy. Three of his books, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*; *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*; and *Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation*, are considered classics in the field. Dr. Sue's research on racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions provided a major breakthrough in understanding how everyday slights, insults, and invalidations toward marginalized groups create psychological harm to their mental and physical health, and create disparities for them in education, employment, and health care. His most recent research on the psychology of racial dialogues represents breakthroughs in identifying why race talk elicits so much anxiety among participants. Two national surveys have identified Derald Wing Sue as "the most influential multicultural scholar in the United States," and his works are among the most frequently cited.

SECTION ONE

**The Characteristics,
Dynamics, and Meaning
of Race Talk**

What Is Race Talk?

It gets so tiring, you know. It sucks you dry. People don't trust you. From the moment I [African American male] wake up, I know stepping out the door, that it will be the same, day after day. The bus can be packed, but no one will sit next to you. . . . I guess it may be a good thing because you always get more room, no one crowds you. You get served last . . . when they serve you, they have this phony smile and just want to get rid of you . . . you have to show more ID to cash a check, you turn on the TV and there you always see someone like you, being handcuffed and jailed. They look like you and sometimes you begin to think it is you! You are a plague! You try to hold it in, but sometimes you lose it. Explaining doesn't help. They don't want to hear. Even when they ask, "Why do you have a chip on your shoulder?" Shit . . . I just walk away now. It doesn't do any good explaining. (Sue, 2010, p. 87)

Questions: Is life as hard as this Black man describes? Is he exaggerating or misreading the action of others? Is he oversensitive or paranoid? Is he right in concluding that others don't want to listen to his explanations? Why is he so angry and resentful? Do you believe him or not? If not, what are your reasons?

Thomas Lee was a Chinese American award-winning journalist for the *Star Tribune* who went to interview the president of a large manufacturing company. He arrived a few minutes late and informed the receptionist at the

front desk that he was looking for the president's executive assistant. She responded by asking whether he was delivering food from a local Chinese restaurant. Lee recounts that this wasn't the first time he had been mistaken for a Chinese food delivery person. In college he had similar experiences when he would arrive at his girlfriend's dorm with dinner and the attendant would assume just that. Embarrassed by such encounters, he generally let them go, but it consistently left him feeling like a second-class citizen. Writing about this experience in the *Star Tribune*, he provides insights into the internal dilemma of Chinese Americans who are frequently stereotyped as service workers. The experience was even more stunning to him because he was wearing a dress shirt, black slacks, and black dress shoes. True, he also wore sunglasses and was sporting a backpack, but Lee asked how many food delivery guys carry kung pao chicken in a Gap bag? When the receptionist realized her error, Lee said she offered a clumsy explanation and said her boss always ordered food for lunch. He sarcastically wrote that he was grateful she didn't speak extra slowly to him, or offer a tip (Lee, 2009).

Questions: Have you ever mistaken a person of color for a service worker? Or, as a White person, have you ever been mistaken for a service worker? What were your reactions? How did you handle the situation? Did you make up an excuse? Were you offended? Why is it such a big deal? Is there a difference between being mistaken for a service worker as a White person or a person of color? What are the differences?

Discussing race issues in class is one of my greatest fears as a teacher [White female professor]. Nothing good ever seems to come from it. Last week, we discussed the intersection of race and law. New York City's "stop and frisk" policy came up. Some of the students of color called it "racial profiling" but one White student indirectly implied it was warranted because of crime statistics. He [White student] stated that most crimes were committed by Blacks, especially in Harlem. It was an incendiary moment, and the exchanges were explosive! Students of color accused certain classmates of being racially biased. Most of the White students were scared to death and refused to participate. One White female student began to cry. I tried my best to comfort her and admonished students to respect one another. When that didn't work, I tabled the discussion. For the rest of the semester whenever the topic of race arose we avoided it. I knew I was failing my role as the teacher,

but I didn't know what to do. When the semester ended, we were all relieved.
(Anonymous workshop participant's story)

Questions: What makes talking about race such a hot-button issue? What do you think was going on with the White students? What do you think was going on with the students of color? What makes racial dialogues so difficult? Can you picture yourself in this situation? What fears would you have as a White person? What fears would you have as a person of color?

You see, the subjects I [White psychologist] am about to discuss—ethnocentrism and racism, including my own racism—are topics that most Whites tend to avoid. We shy away from discussing these issues for many reasons: We are racked with guilt over the way people of color have been treated in our nation; we fear that we will be accused of mistreating others; we particularly fear being called the “R” word—racist—so we grow uneasy whenever issues of race emerge; and we tend to back away, change the subject, respond defensively, assert our innocence and our “color blindness,” denying that we could possibly be ethnocentric or racist. (Kiselica, 1999, p. 14)

Questions: Is Kiselica admitting to us that he is a racist? Is he a bad person or an honest person? What does the word *racist* mean to you? Is it possible for anyone born and raised in the United States not to have inherited the racial biases, prejudices, and stereotypes of our ancestors? Is it difficult for you to entertain this notion? How accurate is Kiselica's description of the strategies used to avoid talking about race?

These four vignettes introduce us to the psychology of racial dialogues, conversations that touch upon topics of race, racism, Whiteness, and White privilege (Sue, 2013). The purpose of writing this book is fivefold: (1) to uncover the reasons that make race talk difficult, (2) to expose the explicit and hidden rules that govern how race is discussed in U.S. society, (3) to illuminate the detrimental consequences of a failure to honestly dialogue about race, (4) to outline the benefits of successful conversations on race, and (5) to propose solutions in overcoming obstacles to honest racial dialogues. In essence, this book is about the psychology of racial dialogues, and the meaning, importance, and benefits they have for our society.

How our society perceives race is centuries old and is filled with ambivalence, confusion, misunderstanding, conflict, and intense, powerful feelings.

The ways that we perceive and talk about race are reenacted daily in work-sites, community forums, media, neighborhoods, churches, and classrooms. Current events in our society remind us that the election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, did not signal the beginning of a post-racial era and that racism would become a thing of the past. The killing of Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager, on February 26, 2012, and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman on July 13, 2013, have created a national uproar on the role of race and racism in our society and, especially, the law. This high-profile event was followed on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, with the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American 18-year-old, by a White police officer. The incident set off riots in Ferguson, allegations of racism and a local police cover-up, and calls for an independent investigation by the Justice Department and the FBI. Once again, as in many times in the past, calls for a national dialogue on race were echoed by many people of color and White allies. Once again, however, it was met by counter-arguments that race had nothing to do with the shooting of Michael Brown or Trayvon Martin or the outcome of the George Zimmerman verdict (CNN Staff, 2014; Eligon, 2013; Keita, 2013; Yankah, 2013). Once again, our nation witnessed angry debates that served to divide and confuse rather than bridge, clarify, and heal.

These two opposing viewpoints represent divisions much deeper than just a difference of opinion, but point to why dialogues on race are so difficult to bridge; they inevitably evoke a clash of racial realities (Sue et al., 2007). The four narratives presented at the beginning give us some idea of the manifestation, dynamics, and impact of race talk. Discussions of race between people with differing racial realities (Bell, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Sue, 2010) are likely to engender strong feelings of discomfort, anger, and anxiety; most people prefer to avoid the topic of race, to remain silent, to minimize its importance or impact, or to pretend not to notice it. It is not far-fetched to say that talking about race is one of the most difficult conversations to undertake as it is potentially filled with accusations and/or possible unpleasant revelations about oneself and others. But, we are still left with the nagging question: Why are honest conversations about race such a difficult undertaking? The opening four quotes provide clues to the psychology of racial dialogues. Let us briefly use them to analyze some of the dynamics and principles that underlie race talk that I hope to cover in this book.

RACE TALK REPRESENTS A POTENTIAL CLASH OF RACIAL REALITIES

First, quotes from the African American and Asian American men in our opening narratives represent a racial reality that Whites seldom experience. In the former, the Black American is telling a story of a life filled with incidents of racial microaggressions that deem him “a dangerous Black male,” “up to no good,” a potentially violent criminal, untrustworthy, and someone to be avoided. In the latter case, the Asian American journalist is lamenting the fact that well-intentioned Whites continue to perceive him as a service worker (delivery boy) and that such stereotypes follow him everywhere and are constant and continuing across situations. Sue et al. (2007) have labeled these as “racial microaggressions”—the everyday slights, insults, indignities, and invalidations delivered toward people of color because of their visible racial/ethnic minority characteristics.

In a historic moment in American politics, President Barack Obama in an impromptu speech on July 19, 2013, made the following statement in the aftermath of the Zimmerman verdict:

There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often. (Obama, 2013)

President Obama is describing three manifestations of microaggressive behaviors that communicate a common theme directed at Black Americans: They are criminals and potentially dangerous. Being served last, asking for more identification, and mistaking a person of color for a service worker are all racial microaggressions because they contain a hidden message to targets: “You are a second-class citizen,” “You are up to no good,” and “You are a lesser human being.” Studies show that racial microaggressions may appear harmless and trivial, but they are detrimental to mental and physical health, and create disparities in employment, education, and health care (American Psychological Association [APA] Presidential Task Force on

Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, 2012; Sue, 2010). Yet, despite personal experiences of oppression and discrimination described by people of color, despite President Obama's own reflections of the reality of racism, and despite accumulating evidence in the social-psychological literature that well-intentioned White Americans may harbor unconscious biases (APA Presidential Task Force, 2012), many White Americans continue to deny or to minimize its existence and impact. Here are some responses on the Internet to President Obama's remarks:

"I thought the President of the United States was president for everyone, not just Black Americans."

"My mother was attacked by three Black men and beaten and kicked. The injuries stayed with her until the day she died. She was scared of Black men not because they were Black, but because she was nearly killed by 3 Black men."

"The President is wrong! This is not a race thing. If I am not mistaken Zimmerman is Hispanic 'n' White."

"The President cannot presume to be a spokesperson for all minorities. My Black friend says these examples are exaggerated. So, Mr. President, control your paranoid self."

"Why would/should/could there be separate versions of laws based on skin color? What specific thing about stand your ground don't you understand? It's for everyone. Separate but equal was a failure, remember?"

"Let's see, Blacks get arrested more and people of other races are weary because statistics prove that Blacks are more likely to commit violent crimes. Don't tell me to turn the other cheek and not be vigilant."

Most of these posted responses were taken from the National Journal Staff (2013), and the overwhelming numbers were negative reactions to President Obama's racial narrative and excoriated him for making what they considered biased statements. In essence, they denied his racial reality and appeared to only consider race issues from their own ethnocentric lens. Each of these reactions may seem logical from a White perspective, but when their basic assumptions are unmasked they reveal a one-sided view of the situation. For example, the second quote suggests that the mother's fear of Black men was not prejudice, but the result of being nearly beaten to death by three African American men. It begs the following question: If the mother had been nearly beaten to death by three White men, would she fear all White males? The belief