



JOURNAL OF CRITICAL THOUGHT AND PRAXIS

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY DIGITAL PRESS & SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Volume 6

Issue 2 *Everyday Practices of Social Justice*

Article 8

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Bridging the Racial Divide through Cross-Racial Dialogue: Lessons and Reflections from my Experiences as a Facilitator

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One of the most difficult things about talking about race in the United States, is talking about race, particularly in cross-racial dialogues. One reason for this is because as a society, we tend not to do it, and when we do, we do not do it well (Johnson, 2006; Simpson, 2008), with attempts often ending in increased polarization (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2011). After reviewing reasons for the relative lack of cross-racial dialogue and the ways these dialogues benefit individuals and contribute to social justice, I trace my inspiration and preparation for facilitating cross-racial dialogues about race in a community, using a pop-in style (no advanced registration required) through a social media website, as a form of social justice action. I also share strategies, protocols, and lessons learned from challenges I encountered. My hope is that my experiences as a facilitator will serve as inspiration, provide some humor, and most importantly, provide some action steps for the reader who chooses to be a leader and begin cross-racial dialogues as a way of increasing communication, understanding and relationships across races.

Keywords: Cross-racial dialogues | Facilitation | Social Justice | Group Norms | Group Working Agreements

One of the most difficult things about talking about race in the United States, is talking about race, particularly in cross-racial dialogues. One reason for this is because as a society, we tend not to do it, and when we do, we do not do it well (Johnson, 2006; Simpson, 2008), with attempts often ending in increased polarization (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2011). In an article in which they identified the need for improved cross-racial dialogue skills in the health professions, Murray-Garcia, Harrell, Garcia, Gizzi, and Simms-Mackey (2014) asserted, “abundant evidence suggests that we simply need to be better at talking with people from other races and cultures” (p. 591).

Intra-racial dialogues about race occur more often, but are still not common practice for most people. Studies show that non-Whites¹ acknowledge and discuss the significance

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¹ I prefer the term “non-Whites” over the term “people of color” to describe the combination of racial groups that are not White. One of the main tenets of anti-racism is to examine White privilege and the ways in which White people’s experiences are different because of their skin color. Kivel (2002) noted, “...racism keeps people of color in the limelight and makes whiteness invisible. To change this, we must take whiteness itself and hold it up to the light and see that it is a color too” (p. 9). As someone who finds meaning in this statement, I choose to allow my language to align with this thinking. In other words, if White is a color too, then the construct “people of color” includes White people. Therefore, the term “non-Whites” more accurately distinguishes Whites from those who are not White. However, this term is also

of race more than Whites. For example, White social justice educator Paul Kivel (2002) explained,

Racism affects each and every aspect of our lives all the time, whether people of color are present or not. People of color know this intimately. They know that where they live, work, and walk; who they talk with and how; what they read, listen to, or watch on TV; their past experiences and future possibilities are all influenced by racism. As white people we also know this, but most of us do not talk about it. (p. 7)

While Black² families report discussing race and discrimination with their children, there is little evidence that indicates that those conversations occur among White families in a purposeful manner (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). In fact, a 2015 survey of 997 respondents by YouGov, showed that 57 percent of Whites, compared to 49 percent of Hispanics³ and 18 percent of Blacks, think people talk too much about race (Moore, 2015).

As the YouGov (2015) survey demonstrates, Blacks as a group talk about race or think the amount of race talk is appropriate more than Whites and Latinas/Latinos, although the majority of people within these groups either do not report talking about or find value in cross-racial dialogues. For example, a 2016 study by Pew Research that examined racial dialogue and content among whites and blacks on social media found that “28 percent of black users say they share posts about race and race relations” compared to 8 percent of White users and 20 percent of Hispanic users (Stahl, 2016). Another Pew Research survey of 3,769 adults from the same year revealed that 41 percent of blacks compared to 34 percent of Whites “say it would be very effective for groups working to help blacks achieve equality to bring people of different racial backgrounds together to talk about race” (Pew Research Center, 2016).

To be sure, discussion of race is a national issue in which people from all racial/cultural/ethnic backgrounds must engage. It is not solely a White, or non-White issue. Researchers at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2011) explained the need for everyone to discuss race: “We need to talk about race because we are often thinking about race in ways that profoundly impact our decisions and understandings” (Kirwan Institute, p. 2). In order to do this, we must first collectively address the barriers that limit our discussions about race.

Researchers have found that two related reasons for the absence of dialogue about race are emotional discomfort and fear. For example, if someone makes a mistake, expresses a

problematic, in that it still categorizes everyone except White people in one large group, which limits the exploration of the unique experiences of individuals and groups within the larger category.

² I use the terms “Black” and “African American” interchangeably in this essay. If I were discussing Black people’s experiences within the global context of the African Diaspora, I would use the term African American to specifically identify Blacks in the U.S. However, since this essay is about U.S. relations, I use both terms. I prefer to capitalize Black and White to identify racial groups, the same way the generalized terms for race/ethnic/nationality identification for Asians and Latinos are capitalized. Any use of the identification of black and white with lower case is due to a choice by the cited author/s.

³ As I continue to learn more about Latina/Latino critical race theory, or LatCrit theory (For example, see Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) I prefer to use the term Latina/Latino, as opposed to Hispanic to recognize the pan-ethnic identities of peoples in the many nations within Central and South America (see Alcoff, 2005). Any use of the term “Hispanic” is due to a choice by the cited author/s.

racist or oppressive thought, or speaks out of privilege that they do not recognize, conversations are derailed as hurt feelings and animosity increase. Some people resent talking about race and feel talking about it makes whatever racial problems that do exist, worse (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Fear is often at the root of a refusal to participate. Participants are often reticent to share personal experiences in this context for fear of the vulnerability associated with sharing personal thoughts (Manglitz, Guy, & Merriweather, 2014; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009) and Whites report feeling defensive (Johnson, 2006; Kivel, 2002), fear of being attacked or blamed for racism (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Nishi, Matias, Montoya, & Sarcedo, 2016). Data from a CBS poll complicated these findings, in that respondents reported they are more comfortable talking about race in cross-racial dialogues than they perceive most Americans to be:

Majorities of both blacks (71 percent) and whites (60 percent) think most Americans are uncomfortable discussing the issue of race with someone of another race. But they are much more positive about their own comfort level: most blacks and whites say they themselves are comfortable having a conversation about race with someone of another race. (Dutton, De Pinto, Salvanto, & Backus, 2016)

One benefit of ongoing, facilitated dialogues about race where participants value listening and respect, is the creation of a culture where the fear of saying the wrong thing or being blamed for racism and discrimination is minimized (Johnson, 2006; Kivel 2002; Newkirk & Rutstein, 2000). Facilitated dialogues about race offer the opportunity to collectively define and understand words and apply them in ways that allow us to first internally examine our own biases and prejudices, and second limit the tendency to categorically exonerate or condemn others. For example, Johnson (2006) asserted that reclaiming words such as racism, privilege, or oppression, “begins with seeing that they rarely mean what most people think they mean. Racist isn’t another word for ‘bad white people’” (p. 10). His assertions confirm the collective responsibility to address racism: “You’d never know such words could be part of a calm and responsible discussion of how to resolve a problem that belongs to all of us (Johnson, 2006, pp. 10-11).

Admittedly, it may be difficult to conceive why discussion about a socially constructed concept which is based on arbitrary characteristics such as skin color should be important to those who claim a desire to move beyond the meaning of these artificial categories. It is also fair to wonder whether talking about race reifies the essentialist categories upon which racism and oppression are sustained, that those who seek racial justice problematize. However, Higginbotham (1992) explained why the simultaneous understanding of race as both unreal (biologically) and real (socially and politically) is important: “To argue that race is myth and that it is an ideological rather than a biological fact does not deny that ideology has real effects on people’s lives” (p. 255).

Given the importance of this type of dialogue, our collective inability to productively discuss race is a barrier to social justice because talking about race is one way to heal racial divisions in our society (Newkirk & Rutstein, 2000). Sue (2013) reviewed research-based benefits of cross-racial dialogue to individuals and society. They include: the potential to heal racial divides, reduce prejudice, dispel stereotypes about other racial groups, decrease fear of differences, increased appreciation and sense of connectedness with others. As all of these outcomes are markers for social justice, it behooves leaders for social justice to

acquire the skills to facilitate cross-racial dialogues to these ends.

This article serves as a roadmap for those committed to social justice who may be searching for a way to “do something” but do not know where or how to start. In his farewell speech on January 10, 2017, President Obama stated,

If you’re tired of arguing with strangers on the Internet, try talking to one in real life. If something needs fixing, then lace up your shoes and do some organizing. If you’re disappointed by your elected officials, grab a clipboard, get some signatures, and run for office yourself. Show up, dive in, stay at it. Sometimes you’ll win. Sometimes you’ll lose (Obama, 2017).

There may be people who want to have dialogue, but do not know how to contribute, or are fearful that they may do more harm than good. Maybe you will not know how to handle hurt feelings, anger, fear or guilt. I present some successes and mistakes in my endeavor in a series of dialogues as a way of exploring how to start.

This passage from author and educator Beverly D. Tatum (2007) serves as a call to action, or at minimum a provocative question that challenges the tendency to remain silent:

Can we talk about race? Do we know how? Does the childhood segregation of our schools and neighborhoods and the silence about race in our culture inhibit our capacity to have meaningful dialogue with others, particularly in the context of cross-racial relationships? Can we get beyond our fear, our sweaty palms, our anxiety about saying the wrong thing, or using the wrong words, and have an honest conversation about racial issues? (p. xiii)

My answer to Tatum’s questions is yes. I believe we can talk about race in productive ways, with commitment, patience, practice, and courage. By sharing my experiences, I aim to contribute to the literature about how to enact one aspect of social justice based on my experiences facilitating cross-racial dialogues. I contribute strategies and protocols that are practices tested through experience, so that the reader will have confidence in trying them (or not trying the things that did not work).

Regarding taking action for social justice, people have often told me, “I know why this is important. I just don’t know what to do.” Several times after attending a conference, my friends, colleagues and I lamented about how we were inspired by a powerful conference session, only to watch the energy dissipate because we did not know how to apply it in our context (or at least that was the excuse we were comfortable believing). I hope to offer new readers and activists interested in social justice a starting point for engaging in one very important aspect of social justice work – facilitating cross-racial dialogues. In addition, my reflections and experiences are intended to provide comfort in knowing that with resilience, you may overcome the inevitable discomfort that goes along with starting something new.

My hope is that my experiences as a facilitator for these dialogues will serve as inspiration, provide some humor and most importantly, provide some action steps for the reader who chooses to be a leader and begin cross-racial dialogues as a way of increasing communication, understanding and relationships across races. To those ends, I trace my inspiration and preparation for facilitating cross-racial dialogues about race in a community, using a pop-in style (no advanced registration required) through a social media

website, as a form of social justice action.

Inspiration

I grew up in a midwestern city that is also home to a major university. Underneath the veneer of liberal politics espoused by the university elite and many of the city politicians and P-12 educators, there are racial disparities. For example, my hometown maintains one of the largest educational gaps between Whites and non-Whites, and has one of the largest incarceration rates for African American males in the country. City and school leaders regularly talked about race, hosted community dialogues and diversity trainings, but little institutional change took place once White “liberals” expressed discomfort about being labeled racist, or reacted to their perceptions that equity might harm the privileges afforded them and their families.

While I was employed as a teacher in the school district, the superintendent hired an anti-racism trainer to facilitate dialogues about race, inequity and education. The trainer was met with resistance and vitriolic personal attacks by many faculty and community members and his contract was abruptly ended. I remember thinking, what was the point of engaging in “courageous conversations” if we don’t have the courage to sustain them? I also questioned what living in a liberal, progressive university town really meant, if anything. Is the collective “we” only liberal until the discourse about race, privilege and discrimination challenges certain people’s elite, privileged status?

Indeed, I saw my community as an example of the White liberal community that would have accepted the intellectual provocations about racism from James Baldwin. Baldwin was an African American writer and social critic “who offered his white debaters a relatively ‘safe’ yet ‘authentic’ black man with whom they could engage” (Aanerud, 1999, p. 57) because he valued authentic relationships with White people. However, this does not mean that Baldwin somehow minced words or catered to those who wished to ignore racism. For instance, in his speech turned essay, “A Talk to Teachers” (1963)⁴, Baldwin unabashedly and directly explained how he confronted and resisted the racist beliefs about Black people in society:

In order for me to live, I decided very early that some mistake had been made somewhere. I was not a “nigger” even though you called me one. But if I was a “nigger” in your eyes, there was something about *you* – there was something *you* needed. I had to realize when I was very young that I was none of those things I was told I was. (p.44)

It is very likely that the relative tolerance of Baldwin’s sociopolitical critiques among the White, self-proclaimed intellectual elite was *not* due to any pandering by him in order to make Whites feel comfortable.

Yet, I could also imagine that there might be a few households that were sources of real-life scenes in the classic film, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. In the film set in 1967, Joey (Joanna) Drayton, the daughter of an upper middle-class White liberal family brings her African American fiancé, Dr. John Prentice, home to meet her parents. Her mother’s

⁴ Baldwin’s essay was first delivered as a speech to New York City teachers on October 16, 1963. The speech was titled, “The Negro child: His self image” (Baldwin, 1963).

first response is complete shock, horror, and silence. To which, Dr. Prentice advises her to sit down. Joey states, “He thinks you’re going to faint because he’s a Negro” (the term for African Americans used during that era). Mrs. Drayton does not faint, but the rest of the movie chronicles how both sets of parents grapple with their racial prejudices and fear during the time period.

This contradiction between the public espousal of liberal beliefs and prejudice on a personal level inspired me to work towards a deeper understanding about implicit racial bias. In addition, my own evolving understanding of race as more than a binary construction between White and Black, which requires continual learning about and from Latina/os, American Indians, and Asians, inspired me to stop waiting and start learning through cross-racial dialogues.

Cross-Racial Dialogue as Social Justice

I committed to facilitating cross-racial dialogue because I view it as foundational to my emerging work as an educator for social justice. It is vital to developing culturally responsive educators, primarily because one key aspect of that work requires educators to examine their core beliefs and previously held assumptions about race through exploration of their biographical experiences with and perspectives about race (Davis, 2007; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Grant (2009) described this process as investigating one’s own “multicultural attitudes” (p. 63) while Howard (2010) referred to this as “ongoing critical self-reflection” (p.114).

It is helpful for educators and others interested in racial justice to engage in dialogue about one’s power, social position, privilege, perspectives, and experiences in relation to others within and outside of one’s racial group because as Tatum (2007) explained, in many ways, our public schools have become more segregated than they were during the civil rights era of the 1960s. This racial segregation, accompanied by racial disparities in achievement, access to equitable resources, and a lack of discourse about race “rarely turns to the way our conceptions of race, intelligence, testing, and expectations might impact those disparities” (Tatum, 2007, p. xii).

Although I was troubled at the district’s lack of commitment to ongoing racial dialogue, I saw spaces and places where I might contribute to social justice by developing my skills as a participant and trained facilitator. It was crucial that I develop my skills as a facilitator because the honest reflection and examination of one’s core beliefs and biases is at once critical to this work and extremely difficult because when we do this work, we may confront experiences where we benefitted from a privileged position and/or marginalized others. This examination of conscious and unconscious, implicit and explicit bias and other forms of discrimination and privilege are foundational to the work of social justice (Kivel, 2002; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Training and Experience with Others Involved in This Work

I found that it was very important to have training in facilitation skills and experience with cross-racial dialogues as a participant. The more experienced the facilitator is in making sure the structure for the dialogue has integrity through creating group commitment to norms or working agreements, the more likely the dialogue will not dissolve into chaos and

personal attacks (Garmston & Wellman, 2009). If the conversation does dissolve, it is likely that a facilitator who is able to refocus the group on its working agreements (such as no personal attacks, which tends to make people angry) will be able to foster the group's resilience to stay committed in order to process what happened and commit to the conversation beyond what is hopefully a temporary derailment.

To be sure, it is likely that there will be pitfalls. Knowing that, it is the facilitator's job to help the group navigate those pitfalls, and when possible, learn from them. It is important to note that I did not say it is the facilitator's job to "teach" everybody. The facilitator guides discussion. The facilitator is not responsible for knowing and teaching everything.

Now, having said this, *not* having access to any of these opportunities or having formal training is *not* a reason to give up. There are ways to thoughtfully plan and prepare for a dialogue by using the ever-increasing resources that are available online or in print. These include Race Dialogue training manuals, videos (Community Relations Service, 2003; Crossing Borders Education, 2017⁵; YWCA Madison, n.d.), resources cited in the references for this article, and reflective articles such as this. Since it is best practice to avail oneself of the opportunity for training, I will explain some of my experiences as a participant in cross-racial dialogues and in as a trainee in facilitation skills that developed my confidence and skills to facilitate cross-race dialogues.

My first experience was as a participant in a series of weekly community sessions that was hosted by a prominent African American university professor in his home. The professor ran the group once or twice throughout the year and the "class" consisted of about twenty people from all areas of the community. Our two major texts focused on racial healing (Newkirk & Rutstein, 2000) and the origins of racism (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). The professor provided an extensive bibliography of resources in addition to films, community speaking events including a book talk by diversity trainers who recounted their journey facilitating race conversations and racial healing (Unterschuetz & Unterschuetz, 2010).

While the leader of a school-based Equity Team, I was trained in the facilitation methods of The Adaptive Schools, whose purpose was to build educator's capacity for "developing and facilitating collaborative groups to improve student learning" (Garmston & Wellman, 2009, p. xii). While the training was not specific to leading cross-racial dialogues, it was foundational for my work in this area because a significant part of the four-day training involved developing group facilitation skills such as establishing working agreements and norms for collaborative work.

As a district lead teacher for professional development for cultural relevance, I led an eighteen-month long series of ongoing learning for secondary teachers on increasing achievement for African American students. All of the teachers were White. As a result, I was able to really hone my skills as a facilitator who must value the contributions of people, none of whom had similar racial experiences to mine. In that sense, I had to stay committed as the facilitator, and not participant seeking validation or comfort in a common experience when sharing, because my role was not to share, it was to facilitate the sharing and dialoguing among the teacher participants. During that same time-frame, I attended a two-day workshop on Courageous Conversations led by Glenn Singleton. As a participant in the predominately White but racially mixed workshop, I was able to dialogue and

⁵ There is a fee to use some of their resources.

participate in activities that deepened my understanding about a variety of racial issues, and challenged some of my own presumptions about race. In addition to witnessing the modeling of a very experienced facilitator, I was able to reflect on similar and common experiences with other African Americans, and express myself in ways a facilitator typically does not. This experience helped me to further distinguish between the two roles.

While a school administrator, our school partnered with a local non-profit organization to establish restorative circles. We were trained in restorative practices by Kay Pranis, a renowned writer on peacemaking circles and restorative circles. A significant aspect of this training was the commitment to using a talking stick, which ensures balanced participation and provides structured opportunity for listening because the person who holds the talking stick is the only person who can talk. The stick is passed around the circle and participants can choose to speak or pass. But, everyone is given the opportunity to speak or pass.

All of the aforementioned experiences were formative in that the skills I developed and continually practiced in my work honed my ability to lead discussions about race. In addition to the formal training and workshops, my life experiences as I struggled with race, law and social justice surrounding events that dominated the media starting in 2012, shaped my desire to talk about race. Specifically, the killing of Black men that seemed unjustified, by was deemed lawful, made me question the meaning of racial justice or racial progress.

Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in 2012. Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder in 2013. Martin's death was followed by a string of police shootings of African Americans that seemed unlawful to many, but were not deemed criminal. Cries for "we need to talk about race" were heard in the media.

In 2014, journalist Seth Freed Wessler reported:

In the months since Michael Brown was killed, we've heard a flood of calls for a renewed dialogue about race. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof proposed a commission to "jump-start an overdue national conversation." Cultural critic Jeff Chang observed on Saturday that "every time toxic, tragic events" lay bare our country's persistent racism, "we talk about having a productive conversation. But we never really have it."

Even though African Americans have suffered by unjust policing practices for generations, a new generation of activists, led by the group Black Lives Matter, revived collective demands for racial justice in policing and criminal justice. In 2013, I was stunned at Zimmerman's acquittal, as were many of my colleagues. We saw Trayvon in our African American boys and were stunned at the devaluation of their precious young lives. I wanted to process this with my staff so I organized a restorative justice circle for racial healing in response to that incident. This was my first attempt at a cross-racial dialogue that was not tied to a specific professional development objective.

By the time I moved to a southern city to start my career in academia, the number of shootings and deaths of African Americans by police increased along with increasingly toxic and unproductive racial dialogues. Pundits sparred over whether "Black lives" or "all lives" matter. Competition over whether police shootings of African Americans were more or less significant than Black-on-Black homicide. Calls for meaningful cross-racial dialogue continued. I discussed my sense of urgency about wanting to "do my part" with

my husband. *Why not start my own cross-racial dialogues? If I see a need, then fill it.* My husband supported me and I went about creating a plan.

Other Models for Community Dialogues About Race

As I researched possible formats for engaging in community dialogues about race, I found several examples of the work being done. There were several community panels, especially between police and community that discuss race and community policing. My university hosted one such session. However, those sessions are question and answer sessions, distinct from dialogues. It was a panel that included the deputy mayor and the chief of police and an African American pastor and White pastor. There were over 200 people in attendance. A combination of the set-up (rows and not people sitting at tables) and the number of people prohibited dialogue. The chancellor also held regular meetings with faculty where we discussed issues of race. It was encouraging to see the university's leader engaging weekly on the issue of race. However, I felt that views of Whiteness dominated the discussion, likely due to the majority of members being White.

There are other models of cross-racial dialogue across the country. In the fall of 2015, Miami Shores People of Color (PoC), an organization created to promote “people of color on boards and commissions in Miami, Florida,” started cross-racial dialogues based on a variety of readings about race. Roni Bennett, one of the cofounders of PoC wrote, “whites who have dialogued say that the act of listening, speaking, and being heard across the racial divide – perhaps for the first time – has been life-changing” (Bennett & Hart, 2016). The YWCA has made tremendous investments in cross-racial dialogues in cities throughout the country such as Austin, Baltimore, Boston, and Madison, Wisconsin. The organization's “Racial Equity Toolkit” provides detailed information about racial disparities in each city and a guide for facilitating conversations about ways to eliminate racial inequity (See ywcagreaterbaltimore.org). A final example is in the community of Montgomery County, Virginia which in 2013 held its first “Dialogue on Race Community Summit” after several years of planning (see <http://www.dialogueonrace.info/>).

Finally, I found several organizations that provide resources for cross-racial dialogues, although there were not specific examples of groups engaging in the work such as the Community Relations Service component of the U.S. Department of Justice published a manual for facilitating community dialogues on race for the purpose of helping the “community resolve its own problems” (Community Relations Service, 2003, p. 2).

My Process

For my version of cross-racial dialogues, I tried a drop-in style because I wanted to eliminate the formality of needing to plan ahead to attend. I thought that perhaps the spontaneity of being able to attend when you want, would encourage people to come out in a welcoming atmosphere with no pre-registration required. I subscribed to a social media website that is created for people who want to join different social groups because I didn't want to limit the conversation to educators and I was hoping for the largest cross-section of people in my new community.

The purpose of the group was to engage in interracial dialogue about race. The group met monthly at a public library on Saturday mornings. In my role as facilitator, I provided

a brief summary of my experience and position as an assistant professor and created a structure in which each session started with a review of the ground rules, introductions, and a particular focus. I brought readings, showed various videos, and solicited input from participants about what topics or content they wanted to discuss. The group met for a total of six months. Over fifty people joined the group online, I received on average twelve RSVPs, and never had more than eight people and averaged four people per session. I ended the group after six months because it became evident that the Saturday morning time slot was not attracting people so I wanted to assess and retool my approach.

I will now turn to some lessons learned from my experience as the facilitator of Dialogues about Race (DAR) and speak in the second person, with the hope that if the reader is considering a similar approach for social justice work, my experiences might speak to you and be helpful as you develop your program. The issues raised are by no means exhaustive. A final word, the lessons and subsequent traps that are discussed are not listed in a hierarchy. I find that they are best conceptualized as equally important and interlocking elements for the productive facilitation of meaningful cross-racial dialogues.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Understand That Race is Complex

Race is both biologically unreal and socially real, meaning that the consequences of the creation of race as a social construct are very real (Nishi, Matias, Montoya, & Sarcedo, 2016). While there are some generalities that might be made about race experiences, race cannot be summed up in simple, essential experiences. In other words, not all Black people, or White people, or Latinas/Latinos think alike. Within individual racial groups there is a lot of diversity. It is also important to acknowledge that people of “mixed race” or bi-racial or multi-racial heritage, have a variety of experiences and perspectives regarding how they see themselves and how others have treated them. Finally, racial dialogues are about more than Black and White experiences. Be open to considering how a dialogue in the binary concept of Black and White silences the experiences of participants who do not identify as Black or White. You can model the deconstruction of a Black-White binary by openly acknowledging the complexity of race with a statement such as the following: “Our race dialogue acknowledges that race is a social construct and is not simply a Black-White issue. One purpose of this group is to explore the many different ways that people identify racially and understand that race is not just one thing.”

None of the participants in the DAR openly identified with a race other than Black or White. However, even if participants identify as Black or White, it is still important to acknowledge that there are multiple racial groups in our society that face particular stereotypes and challenges that should be addressed.

Lesson 2: Establish Group Norms, Working Agreements, or Guidelines and Facilitate Group Self-Assessment of Adherence to Them

Regardless of what the organization called them, the necessity of creating agreements for how the group will function was an essential component of every group dialogue I have ever researched or been a part of. The YWCA Madison explains the importance of

establishing guidelines for group discussion for its Race to Equity conversations in the following way: “It is important that everyone feels welcome and every voice is heard” (YWCA Madison, n.d.). Guidelines are intended to promote honest and open communication in a respectful environment where the group takes responsibility for its adherence to those guidelines.

The establishment of group norms is vital for creating the security required for people to engage in the risk-taking necessary to discuss a topic which is incredibly uncomfortable. Since people are taking the risk to engage in the conversation, it behooves the facilitator to ensure that the infrastructure exists to which you can continually turn to when the inevitable moments of discomfort and insecurity arise. Your faithful facilitation of the norms will result in increased trust and relationship among the group members.

In this respect, it is crucial that the facilitator not be the “norms police.” Instead, you facilitate and model the group owning and checking its progress on its commitment to the norms. This can happen in three ways. First, facilitate the norms creation process as a group. Spend time asking the group what norms they would like to commit to. I have witnessed activities where the group creates all of its guidelines from scratch. This can take a significant amount of time, sometimes thirty to forty-five minutes. The benefit is that it helps to establish relationships. A drawback is that it takes a lot of time, especially when there are some popular norms that emerge in every group such as various iterations of “be respectful, avoid personal attacks and monitor your speaking time.” In lieu of creating norms from scratch every time, there are some norms such as the ones from YWCA that you can start with, and then ask if anyone would like to add or modify anything.

Second, review the norms at the beginning of each session. In my experience, reviewing the norms reestablishes a sense of community and expectations. Norms should always be visible. I left them at the center of the table, or I could have printed them on a large poster board. This way, you can refer back to them throughout the conversation and re-center people on these key principles and actions for productive dialogue.

Reviewing the norms at the beginning of each meeting may be new for some people because we do not see that modeled in our society that often. In the DAR, it was evident that some people were unfamiliar with this process. It took time to establish that the group was responsible for the norms and not just me. One way to create a culture for group responsibility of maintaining the norms is to direct the group to the norms which you have placed visible in the room and periodically ask, “How are we doing as a group in maintaining these norms?”

For the DAR, I started with the “Suggested Guidelines” from the YWCA Madison’s Race to Equity ToolKit (see ywcamadison.org) after reviewing several options because I found that the YWCA provided extensive facilitator resources including a very accessible handout with the guidelines. I provided a handout with the seven guidelines from the YWCA, and I added two. Next, I will highlight guidelines that I found particularly important for DAR.

Listening. The YWCA states this norm as “Listen with curiosity and the willingness to learn and change, resist the desire to interrupt” (YWCAMadison, n.d., p.4). As a society, we say we do not know how to talk about race, but in large part we do not know how to *listen* about race. Our typical behavior when confronted with language or perspectives with which we do not agree is to interrupt, shut down or figure out what we are going to say

next. Kee, Anderson, Dearing, Harris, and Shuster (2010) explained that committed listening is “the most essential of all essential skills” (p. 94) because committed listeners convey the message, “I care about what you have to say, and I’m listening with all my senses so that I fully understand an issue from your perspective” (p. 95). This requires that participants be fully present in a conversation and resist the desire to interrupt.

The facilitator’s role is to support the dialogue process according to the established norms. It is reasonable to expect that you will play a significant role in supporting the practice of committed listening, again, because people generally have little experience in doing so. A way to navigate this is to remind people of the norm by directing people’s attention to it. Another strategy which might work if you want to avoid calling out specific people, and to illicit shared responsibility for managing the group agreements, is after no longer than two minutes of an exchange where interruption is occurring, ask people to assess how the group is managing the norms. This is risky because I have witnessed conversations rapidly deteriorate if the norms are not reestablished immediately.

Presume positive intentions. Once those in attendance have agreed to the norms, you do not have to be afraid of what most of us have worried about regarding leading race discussions: *What if someone says something that is totally destructive or tries to undermine the group’s efforts?* These concerns are examples of how the fear of the unknown can hinder our engagement in these conversations. Overcoming this fear requires courage and a shift in thinking. If you presume positive intentions, you don’t have to worry that a saboteur is coming to your group to derail a productive discussion about race because you interact with the participant out of a positive presupposition that they want to engage in productive inquiry. Garmston and Wellman (2009) asserted that people “tend to act as if such presuppositions are true” (p. 39). For example, during the DAR, a participant stated that he thought that the real issue with equality was about class and not race. (This will likely come up in any race dialogue you will have. It has certainly been the case in every conversation I have ever had). I immediately had to rely on my training on facilitation and committed listening to self-assess my emotional reaction to what I heard as racial erasure.

Others in the group nodded and another participant proceeded to talk about why poverty was more significant than race. My immediate response was frustration because, first, I have heard that same rhetoric a thousand times before and I see it as a barrier to discussing race. I had to shut down my internal thinking which was, *I am so sick of hearing this. Now we are going to talk about class instead of race. What was the point of me organizing this conversation about race, if we are just going to avoid the issue. Woe is me! I work so hard only to have my efforts thwarted by well-meaning White people who can’t or refuse to focus on race.* That was clearly neither productive internal thinking or presuming positive intentions! Thankfully, I was able to quickly shift my own thinking so that I could be the facilitator I have been trained to be. I presumed that the participants did not conspire to thwart a discussion about race but were curious about the intersection between race and class in society.

I asked a refocusing question about the purpose of our discussions: “Knowing that our purpose in meeting is to discuss race, and we have shifted our discussion to class and poverty (I did not say you because as part of the group, I owned the shift in the discussion), how are race and class linked? In what ways is racial inequity evident within the same class categories?” After a long pause, the group agreed that we needed to know more about that

question, which became the focus of the next session.

There are other ways to handle the class issue. You could include focusing on race as a singular topic in your group norms. That way, if the conversation shifts to class, the group is collectively responsible for focusing on race. You can ask, “How are we doing at maintaining our agreement to talk about race?” One of the conditions for having “Courageous Conversations About Race” is to keep the spotlight on race “while acknowledging the broader scope of diversity and the variety of factors that contribute to a racialized problem” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 88). The authors point out that without a committed focus on race, it is likely the conversation will “drift off into topics that are less emotional” (Singleton & Linton, p. 88) such as class. The purpose of a race dialogue is to discuss race. This must be the sustained commitment of you as the facilitator to ensure the structures allow for this focus. The benefit of this singular focus is that participants “not only discover new meaning in race but also more authentically recognize the intersection of race and other aspects of human diversity and culture” (p. 88).

Another strategy is to explore the intersection of race and class with various resources (See Nisha et al, 2016). Finally, you might find quotes from scholars and activists in the field who speak about the importance of staying focused on race, or create your own, such as “In order for us to get comfortable talking about race, we actually have to talk about race.” Visibly post those quotes around the room. If the discussion starts to veer away from race, direct people to one of the quotes (as you would with the norms) to refocus the discussion.

Have grace with others and yourself. Grace is different than “niceness.” Morgan Guyton (2014), the director of the NOLA Wesley United Methodist Campus ministry in New Orleans, articulated this distinction. Guyton’s explanation of the differences between niceness and grace is rooted in his Protestant Christian faith. As a Protestant Christian, my concept of grace is also rooted in my faith yet I see non-Christian applications of the concept. According to Guyton,

niceness refers to the complex dance of smiling, posturing, innuendo, laughter, self-deprecation, etc. that keeps a conversation pleasant and easygoing. Niceness doesn’t always mean that you’re being loving. One of the exquisite arts of the Southern white culture I was raised in is the use of niceness as a mask for vicious cruelty. . . Grace is a space in which truth and love are fully welcome and present. It is like niceness in its posture of welcome; it is unlike niceness in its unwillingness to airbrush over the unpleasant.

After linking grace to the religious context of God’s grace to us as we become transformed by Him, Guyton explained:

we could say that grace happens among people who assume that they often do wrong, know that they’re forgiven, and want to learn how to be better. Niceness prioritizes pleasantries and the avoidance of conflict; grace prioritizes complete acceptance and thus complete openness to unpleasant truths.

Guyton (2014) wrote from his position as a White male and much of the quoted article

focuses on how White people need to have grace when confronted with criticism. I also conceptualize grace to mean the complete acceptance on the part of all participants to be open to the reality that mistakes will be made in the unpleasant and uncomfortable expression of deeply held beliefs that for many people have gone unexplored, in a first attempt to unpack racism. In this context, the concept of grace as forgiveness applies. If we approach cross-racial dialogue with the perspective that we have all made mistakes, held, and acted out of racist beliefs and assumptions, we have all clumsily attempted to discuss race and have likely been misunderstood or challenged, and we want to be forgiven, then it is our responsibility to forgive others who make the same mistakes. In essence, we treat others with the grace that God grants us.

As I stated earlier, it is not necessary to be a Christian to have grace. This concept of grace can be applied outside of the Christian context if you remember that there are going to be mistakes but we must continue to be open, honest, and willing to change our minds and hearts collectively. The Golden Rule (which can be found in many belief systems) states, "Treat others as you want to be treated". You can employ the concept of grace as a facilitator by upholding the norms of listening, which as previously described requires being fully present and eliminating barriers such as criticism and judgment to committed listening, and suspending judgment, which requires that the listener sustain fully listening without the criticism which leads to language that is accusatory, presumes negative intentions and is a barrier to honest dialogue.

You must also have grace with yourself. If you don't have grace when reflecting and assessing your progress as a facilitator, it might be difficult to go back and continue your work, remaining open to the possibility of growth through learning, the resilience of participants to sustain even as you make mistakes and the possibility of using your mistakes as learning opportunities for next time. Without grace, you are likely to self-talk yourself into discouragement. As you facilitate a process where grace becomes part of the group culture, have faith that participants will have grace with you, as you extend it to them. Grace means that you can be transparent about your mistakes, and the group will afford each other the gift of patience to grow.

Lean into discomfort. One of the biggest sources of discomfort regarding inter-racial dialogues language. David. J. Leonard, an Associate Professor of critical culture, gender, and race asserted, "Lacking the language to talk about race and to engage cross-racially will impact white people's ability and willingness to develop these friendships" (Bennett & Hart, 2016). We do not have cross-racial dialogues about race, so we do not have the opportunity to learn from other racial groups or practice verbally processing our beliefs and working with the tension that arises when we are challenged, without becoming defensive to the point where we can no longer stay focused, self-assess and change our way of thinking. This is in large part because as Singleton & Linton (2006) noted, "Typical diversity trainings are focused around not getting participants upset or too uncomfortable" (p. 63). However, engaging in a dialogue about personal core beliefs about race, position, privilege and inequity requires that "participants need to be personally responsible for pushing themselves into a real dialogue – the kind that may make them uncomfortable but also will lead to real growth" (p. 63).

Knowing that language is a main reason people are either too scared, frustrated or don't see the point in having honest conversations, it behooves the facilitator to support the

group's leaning into the discomfort when confronted with language that makes someone uncomfortable.

Susan Scott (2002) explained that the success of our work and relationships are dependent on "one conversation at a time" (p. 2), which makes how we have our conversations central to our well-being. This is particularly informative for race dialogues because your job as facilitator is to support the group in having conversations that have the power to change the lives of those who engage in them. Every exchange matters because as Scott asserted, "While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a business, a marriage, a life, any single conversation can. The conversation is the relationship" (p. xiv). This is why a commitment to the norms that provide structure and safety is fundamental to the cross-racial dialogue process.

One way to do this is to call out the likelihood of discomfort at the beginning. I added "lean into discomfort" to the list of YWCA guidelines at the beginning of the first DAR session and explained what it meant. Today, I would likely start off by saying welcome to everyone and boldly proclaiming, "Welcome to our dialogues about race. Get ready to be uncomfortable! Of course we are going to make mistakes! If we were comfortable talking about race without fear of judgment and criticism, we would do it more often." A bombastic approach such as this may not fit your personality, but the point is that however you do it, I think it's important to name discomfort and directly confront that not only is it to be expected, it is important for the group to acknowledge it and commit to working through it.

The facilitator's questions become, *What do I do if people feel uncomfortable? Things just got real tense and awkward. What do I do?* When people feel offended, a common response is to interrupt the person talking and argue the point. Many participants commonly feel uncomfortable and don't want to take shared responsibility for managing the group agreements. One strategy is to name the feelings of discomfort or ask if what you sense is discomfort is felt by other people. Based on their responses, you can explore where those feelings are coming from. For example, ask everyone to take a minute to reflect mentally or in writing, on what their thoughts are about the recent conversation and why they feel uncomfortable, using I statements: I am thinking about... I feel [uncomfortable] about... because... Next, ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner. Finally, ask participants to share their feelings using a talking stick with the option to pass, or another method such as allowing volunteers to share.

Another strategy is to model using inquiry, rather than criticism in the dialogue, what Garmston & Wellman (2009) described as "placing inquiry at the center" (p. 31), as opposed to judgment. Where there is judgment, there is less likely to be inquiry because we have already formed an opinion and criticism. There will also be less grace. With this style, questions are used to allow the speaker to clarify and examine their statements.

Inquiry is conceptually linked with presuming positive intentions and suspending judgment because the questioner is not asking questions to attack the speaker or make them look silly. Rather, the intent is to allow the speaker space to examine their thinking. Having an inquiry mindset minimizes the chances that our clumsy attempts at using language to describe our core beliefs about race become the barrier to dialogue. Questions might include, "What do you mean by that?" "Do you think all members of that group are like that?" to allow the speaker to clarify their language to truly represent their beliefs, rather than being bullied into guilt, shame and shut-down.

In my DAR, I talked about the visceral response I have to seeing the Confederate flag. It was quite common to see the flag on cars, trucks and in front yards throughout the state. After I shared my truth regarding the flag which is that I associate it with racism, slavery, and hatred, a White participant said that he understood that perspective but that he has harmless family members who see the flag as a sign of being rebels, like the Dukes of Hazzard – nothing racist. I was uncomfortable. The room was silent. I thought to myself, *Oh my gosh. I don't even know what to say. I have come to admire and respect this man and know that he has a good heart. Yet, I feel so minimized. But, I know that he is explaining another perspective and respects my feelings. How frustrating! How come White people can't see that what they consider to be harmless is actually very harmful...but he's not his cousins. He's not saying that he waves the flag himself.*

In that moment, I acknowledged that I was totally stunned and uncomfortable but that I understood that this is a prime example of how racial perspectives are very different and that it did not help me understand how they could ignore the sociopolitical implications of the flag. *I mean, even the Dukes of Hazzard took the flag off of their car!* However, in retrospect, I could have turned to inquiry and asked how the participant might balance the two perspectives. Or, I could have turned to others in the group to express their thoughts.

This incident also raised a very important issue regarding my role as the founder and facilitator of the DAR. Best practices state that the facilitator's role is to guide the process – not as a participant. In retrospect, I see that my role as the facilitator and as the person who organized the dialogue likely gave more weight to my contributions than was warranted.

Finally, two vastly underused tools to process discomfort are silence and paraphrasing. Consider allowing people to sit and process in silence about the discomfort. Next, ask someone to express their feelings or perspective and then ask someone else to paraphrase what the person has said. You could also do this in pairs. This allows everyone to think without having to talk and it requires the paraphraser to be fully present while listening to the speaker.

Lesson 3: Think Carefully About Your Methods for Publicizing and Organizing the Dialogue

I realized in retrospect that by promoting the DAR on a social media website where people seek social activities such as hiking, book clubs and girls' nights out, people are attracted to it for social things, without making a huge commitment. Based on the few number of people (average of four) who participated in a session, compared to the number of people who joined the group (over fifty), either people were interested in but not committed to putting forth the effort to engage in the dialogue or the Saturday morning time was not convenient. Whatever freedom is gained by people not feeling intimidated by enrolling in a "class," is overshadowed by the inefficiency of not being able to plan for an anticipated number of people, and not being able to create a consistent group community with the same people over time.

Lesson 4: Enact a Mindset of Continual Learning

Expect to be on a journey of continual learning about race and facilitation. During the year that I created the DAR, I was trained as a coach-leader by a nationally accredited organization and I learned how to be a committed listener as well as how essential language is to relationship. I took this new coach mindset into my work as a facilitator and am better able to reflect on areas for improvement. As I continue to avail myself of professional development, I am confident that I will further hone my facilitation skills and further examine my own core racial beliefs. Since the DAR, I have become aware of more resources that are great for serving as starting points for dialogues. For example, the podcast “Our national conversation about conversations about race” or “About Race” for short (showaboutrace.com), which has been airing since 2015 has excellent material.

Race Dialogue Traps

McKenzie & Scheurich (2004) defined equity traps as “patterns of thinking and behavior that trap the possibilities for creating equitable schools for children of color” (p. 603). Equity traps inhibit our ability to work towards equity. Likewise, I identified six race dialogue traps – patterns of thinking that inhibit possibilities for effective facilitation of race dialogues, which in turn, inhibits the group’s ability to work towards equity. I addressed these traps throughout the course of the DAR as I worked towards continuous improvement. In the next section, I briefly describe each trap and suggest a shift in mindset and strategies to address them.

Race Dialogue Trap 1: Focusing on Who Isn’t Present and Who Needs to Be There

No matter what the format and audience for the type of race or broader social justice work, participants always raise two points that reflect their uncertainty or pessimism at the group’s effectiveness, due to the low number of participants in the room. The first comment goes something like this: “Wow, there are not very many people here. If we understand and are working on this, what good will it do? How can we change the world in our own little bubble? It doesn’t seem like society is invested in doing this work.” The second sentiment is something like the following: “You know, we keep seeing the same people present at these types of functions. We all get it. The people who need to be here are the ones who won’t come. How can we make an impact on them?”

In both cases, people express discouragement because they feel the greatest impact for making changes is fundamentally based on an “us” versus “them” paradigm, consisting of those of us who stridently and outwardly attend social justice groups (“the social justice junkies” versus “the apathetics.” First, this mindset contributes to a ‘holier than thou,’ superior mentality. Second, it takes the focus off of the work that each participant must engage in internally.

Suggested Mindset and Strategy. Racial justice work must start with change from within. Each of us must work internally on excavating our racial biases. We change the world by being our best selves and modeling anti-racist behaviors. Quotes that exemplify this point that you might display around the room include “Be the change you want to see

in the world” (a liberal paraphrase of Gandhi), or “We are the ones we have been waiting for” (attributed to June Jordan and also an unknown Hopi elder). Or, as my mom used to say, “Clean out your own house before you try to clean someone else’s” although this might be a little too direct for some. If discussion turns to focusing on others, use the quotes to re-center the dialogue to the internal excavation and processing required to sustain racial transformation.

Race Dialogue Trap 2: “Gettin’ Preachy with It.”

It is common for people who are self-labeled “gurus” in racial justice, have gone to a plethora of retreats and workshops, and consider themselves enlightened, to get long-winded about the “right way to achieve justice” which usually includes thinking like them. The more they talk, the more others roll their eyes or slump in their chairs and check out. I realized that a trigger for me is when those very same people continue to talk about fixing things which unearths their deficit thinking about other racial groups. Then I might have a tendency to get preachy.

Suggested Mindset and Strategy. As the facilitator, you can manage “preachiness” by encouraging and guiding participants to respond and engage in inquiry of the ideas presented in respectful ways. If you tend to get preachy as the facilitator, shift your thinking from telling to guiding. Your purpose as the facilitator is to guide participants – not teach them a lesson. As I reflect on the times that I have witnessed tirades of righteous indignation, I conclude that those tirades are for the benefit of the speaker to make him or herself feel good by unloading. It certainly is not for the benefit of the target of the tirade. How could it be? Who among us has ever learned by being the subject of a tirade? If you are feeling a tirade coming on, exchange that emotion for some grace. Rely on the tools of inquiry and grace to address thinking and actions that are disturbing to you.

Race Dialogue Trap 3: Treating Participants Like Academic Students

I was so excited to start this journey and I wanted to ensure that I had adequate materials. As people asked questions, I wanted to ensure that they would not look to me to be the fountain of knowledge but would see the group as a place where we collectively seek more information and understanding. I used to be a high school teacher and my favorite lessons were ones in which students constructed knowledge through exploration and inquiry. This was the approach I used for one of the DAR sessions. I spent several hours collecting facts on various topics of Black life such as housing, employment, education, and criminal justice. I had packets of materials! I arranged them on the table and asked each participant to pick a topic, read the material, take notes and then discuss one or two takeaways from the materials. I was proud of my lesson!

The participants indulged me, but I noticed some of their eyes get a little wider like, “Are you serious?!” When they saw the packets. First, all of the information was extremely text-heavy and required a high level of academic language that was also all in English. Sadly, I designed that “lesson” for people like me – English speaking, highly literate, academically-oriented people. Anyone who didn’t fit that description would have been

marginalized. It was probably anxiety-producing to some to have to read and then be accountable for information, even though they had the option to pass.

Suggested Mindset and Strategy. While there are some general principles for learner-centered activities, there is a delicate balance between engaging in people’s individual experiences as well as research and other published materials. The purpose of a dialogue is to engage in conversation. If people spend the majority of time reading or feeling marginalized because they cannot access the materials, the purpose cannot be achieved. It is best practice to design activities so that they are universally acceptable for anyone. If you facilitate sessions that require signing up, you will be able to prepare materials based on the individual needs of the participants as you get to know them. Finally, if you market the group as dialogues about race, plan for dialogue. There are many protocols for discussion in many of the books in the references list. Many models of cross-racial dialogue are based on texts, such as book studies. That is where you would mindfully plan for more discussion of the texts. My point is, since my dialogues were advertised as such, it was probably a shock for some people to walk into a room full of packets of materials!

Race Dialogue Trap 4: Facilitator as Fountain of Knowledge

This trap is manifested in two ways. First, it is easy to assume the role of “expert” because you will likely feel a great responsibility for your role in helping to maintain a process that is supportive and equitable. Also, people may assign you additional “power” or influence in the discussion and may turn to you as the expert, if they know you have experience.

Second, you may find yourself easing into the role of “expert” and feeling pressured to know everything and need to answer everything. People may look at you when there is silence in the room, and expect you to fill the void. Before long, you are willingly filling that role.

Suggested Mindset and Strategy. In order to resist the tendency to be the group expert, continually review the purpose of the facilitator role. Your role is to guide the group process, not be the expert. You are not supposed to have the final word of expertise on topics. Even so, you might feel insecure because a new situation arises every time that you didn’t feel prepared for. First, be certain that there will be new situations every time because you are dealing with people. People are unpredictable. Your job is to rely on the security of the group agreements that have been established and to be transparent about what is challenging you. The norms will help the group navigate discomfort. It is okay to say, “I am uncomfortable” or “I need some time to process that” or “Does anyone have any thoughts on how we might address this situation?”

I hope that I have contributed food for thought, inspiration and tangible action steps to start a would-be cross-race dialogue facilitator on his or her way. Your biggest asset comes from your commitment to facilitating the conversation - not providing answers. The norms become your security blanket, as opposed to you having all the answers. You will develop confidence in your role, skills to ensure the process is maintained and all voices are heard, and supporting the group to manage the norms.

First Steps

Are you ready to take the plunge? There are several ways to get started:

1. Seek out opportunities, even if they are not ongoing dialogues, to be a participant in a dialogue about race.
2. Become acquainted with racial content and dialogues available on the Internet. The podcast “About Race” (showaboutrace.com) is a great place to start.
3. Seek out opportunities for facilitator training. It is likely that regardless of the specific content, some of the skills will be transferrable to race dialogue.
4. Finally, practice being a facilitator. If there are no obvious opportunities around you, create one. Ask for volunteers among your circle of family and/or friends to spend an evening or two with you dialoguing about race. Make the effort to create a racially diverse group. If no one in your circle is a race other than your own, ask a friend of a friend. Surely someone you know has a “best friend who is Black.”

That last line is kind of a joke. However, I am African American and my best friend is White...and yes, we do talk about race.

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