

## CHAPTER ONE

# 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



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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,



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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.



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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

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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



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by respondent 3 that Zimmerman was a person of color contains two erroneous beliefs: (1) persons of color cannot be biased against one another, and (2) a failure of critical consciousness that Latinos/as/Hispanics are an ethnic group and not a racial one. In fact, Latinos/as can be of any racial group (Black, Native American, White, etc.) depending on geographical origin and/or cultural immersion. All the reactions made to Obama's comments represent racial microinvalidations. They are commonly experienced by people of color when they try to tell their stories of discrimination, prejudice, and suffering, often-times at the hands of well-intentioned White Americans.

Returning to the story of the Asian American journalist who was mistaken for a Chinese delivery person, Thomas Lee describes telling the story to his friends and colleagues, expecting them to share in the humor, to laugh and to sympathize. He was stunned, however, that they seemed to imply his interpretation was incorrect and that he was oversensitive. Instead of what seemed obvious to Lee (that it was a stereotype), they offered several alternative explanations: It was his backpack; it was his sunglasses; it was his age. Even worse was colleagues' offering Lee tips on how he could avoid these problems in the future. They suggested he wear a jacket, carry a briefcase, or behave differently. One suggestion was for Lee to even walk differently. Lee incredulously responds: "Walk differently? I wasn't aware that I walked like a deliveryman. I'm not even sure how a deliveryman walks. Just to be safe, maybe I should don a tuxedo, speak in a faux British accent, and goose-step my way to the front desk." He did find solace in the words of a close friend who offered a meaningful insight. White people, according to his friend, don't view things in terms of race, while people of color normally do (Lee, 2009).

Should, however, more liberated White people entertain the possibility of bias in their actions or the behavior of others, it is generally dismissed as unintentional and a minor offense: "Both the African American and Asian American (including President Obama) should just 'get over it.'" In other words, racial microaggressions are oftentimes considered by perpetrators to be relatively insignificant slights and that the person of color is overreacting. "Mistaking the Chinese American journalist for a service worker may be insulting and offensive, but what great harm has been done?"

Research, however, shows that while racial microaggressions might seem to be micro acts or small slights, they oftentimes have devastating macro harmful consequences (Sue et al., 2007; Zou & Dickter, 2013). For example, believing Black males are prone to violence and a menace to society can result in



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situations of racial profiling, more severe or greater likelihood of death sentences given to Black defendants than to White ones, and greater inclination to shoot Black suspects (Correll, 2009; Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2007; Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006; J. M. Jones, 2013a, 2013b). In the case of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, sadly to say, it may have resulted in their deaths.

Second, it goes without saying that the racial reality of people of color is different than that of White Americans. Dialogues on race seldom bridge these worldviews as they are often antagonistic to one another. The racial reality of most White Americans is of a nation that has conquered racism, that we now live in a postracial era, that racism is a thing of the past, that equal access and opportunity are available to everyone, and that we should be a color-blind society (Bell, 2002, 2003; Bolgatz, 2005; Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013; Pollock, 2004). Herein lays one of the major dilemmas attributed to the invisibility of Whiteness and the racial reality embedded in it. In the George Zimmerman trial, the judge ruled that the phrase *racial profiling* could not be used, but the word *profiling*, without *racial*, was allowable; both the prosecution and defense emphasized that this was not a race issue throughout the trial and in their summations; and finally one of the five White jurors (B-37) said that “race” never arose in the jury deliberations. Nevertheless, it is clear that race was the 800-pound gorilla in the room that everyone pretended not to see.

In other words, considering race was taboo and bringing it into the conversation was playing the race card. The result was that all the key White players (the judge, defense, jurors, and even the prosecution) cooperated in a conspiracy of silence. As the earlier quote from the Chinese American journalist indicates, Whites “don’t initially view things in terms of race, while people of color normally do.” Even this statement, however, belies the real truth; Whites do view race issues through the prism of their own race and culture (Whiteness), and thus race is always a factor. Whiteness in terms of race is just invisible to them because it represents a default standard from which to compare everything else.

When teachers complain that students of color should not bring their cultural baggage into the classroom, they are unaware that is precisely what they, themselves, are doing (bringing in their cultural baggage and perspectives—White Euro-American norms related to education and teaching, curriculum, history, etc.). Whites view race as residing in others, but not themselves. They may not realize that Whiteness is the background from





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which the figure of difference emerges. The fact is that race is a function of each and every one of us. As long as Whiteness is invisible, it can be imposed innocently upon people of color with harmful consequences.

Because White culture is the dominant cultural norm in the United States, it acts as an invisible veil that limits many people from seeing it as a cultural system. . . . Often, it is easier for many Whites to identify and acknowledge the different cultures of minorities than accept their own racial identity. . . . The difficulty of accepting such a view is that White culture is omnipresent. It is so interwoven in the fabric of everyday living that Whites cannot step outside and see their beliefs, values, and behaviors as creating a distinct cultural group. (Katz, 1985, pp. 616–617)

## RACE TALK PUSHES EMOTIONAL HOT BUTTONS

When in mixed company, race talk often pushes powerful emotional hot buttons in people. The dialogue can become quite heated, evoking personal attacks, and in some cases participants may feel threatened by physical retaliation (Sue, 2013). The feelings and emotions may run the gamut of defensiveness, anxiety, anger, guilt, helplessness, blame, embarrassment, hurt feelings, and invalidation (Utsey, Gernat, & Hammar, 2005; Willow, 2008). These feelings are experienced by both Whites and persons of color, albeit the reasons may be quite different. Returning to the four opening case narratives, let's identify the types of emotions being experienced by the players in these four situations.

First, the Black man expresses strong **anger** and **resentment** toward Whites for how he perceives they are treating him. In interracial dialogues, these feelings are likely to form much of his interactions with others. His daily experiences of racial slights have made him believe that trying to explain to White Americans about these indignities would do little good. In fact, he expresses **pessimism**, rightly or wrongly, that Whites simply do not understand, and worst yet, they do not care to hear his thoughts and feelings about race and racism. He feels **hopeless** and **frustrated** about making White Americans understand and states, "Shit . . . I just walk away now. It doesn't do any good explaining." In an interracial dialogue, he is likely to have little patience in race talk and likely to have a short fuse and could be quite emotionally explosive in such encounters. Although he does not directly mention it, one can surmise that he is also **tired** and drained at having to constantly deal with the never ending onslaught of microaggressions.



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Second, the Chinese American journalist feels **embarrassed** and **insulted** for being mistaken as a Chinese delivery person by the dormitory attendant and the receptionist, and tries to make light of being treated as a second-class citizen. But his narrative indicates that he is deeply **disturbed** by these continual microaggressions as expressed through his **sarcasm** that at least the receptionist did not speak extra slow to him or offer a tip. What seemed to bother him greatly was the attribution that he did something wrong; that he walked like a delivery person, should not have carried a backpack, and so forth. He is **surprised** and **angered** by the fact that even his friends did not understand and seemed to imply that he was to **blame** for these insults. In his interracial dialogues with the receptionist when confronted with her mistake, she chose to cover up (make up an excuse) rather than recover (apologize) from the mistaken assumption. In his attempt to share his experience with friends, they minimized the events and implied the fault lay with the journalist (blaming the victim). His experience in interracial encounters is that **Whites just don't get it!**

The third example of race talk has major implications for conversations on race in the classroom and other public forums. If, as we have indicated, racial dialogues among students are a necessity for developing critical racial consciousness and improving race relations, then this scenario is discouraging. As can be seen, the interaction of the White teacher, White students, and students of color can **trigger intense and overwhelming emotions**. Indeed, the intensity of the interactions resulted in one student **crying** (generally a sign of becoming overcome with emotions). White students often feel unjustly **accused of racism** and become **defensive**. The female teacher also openly admits that discussing race in her classroom is one of her **greatest fears** and characterizes exchanges between White and Black students as incendiary, with the combination of both **anger** and **fear**. Her apprehension about discussing race and racism also appears linked to her feelings of **inadequacy** in facilitating a dialogue on race. The teacher appears **confused** about what was occurring in her classroom and **helpless** about how to manage the dialogue that threatens to get out of control. Thus, rather than facilitate a difficult dialogue on race and making the incident a learning opportunity, she avoids the topic. In interracial dialogues, Whites may choose to opt out or avoid any of the discussions.

Last, it is important to note Mark Kiselica's open admission to racist thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. As a White psychologist, he offers insights into the reasons why many Whites **fear** open dialogues on race; they may ultimately reveal unpleasant secrets about themselves. In his own racial/cultural



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awakening, he realizes that discussing race and racism is so difficult for many Whites because they are racked with **guilt** about how people of color have been treated in the United States, **fearful** that they will be accused of being a racist, and **blamed** for the oppression of others. Maintaining one's innocence by avoiding racial topics is a major strategy used to hold on to one's self-image as a good, moral, and decent human being who is innocent of racial bias and discrimination. Kiselica's reflection is a powerful statement that addresses a major question: Can anyone born and raised in our society not inherit the racial biases of our ancestors and institutions? When I pose this question to my students, surprisingly an overwhelming number say no. In other words, on an intellectual level they admit that we are products of our social conditioning and escaping internalizing biases and prejudices is impossible. Yet, when racial biases are discussed, they have great difficulty entertaining the notion that they have personally inherited racial biases; "racism resides in others, but not me!"

Thus, it is clear that race talk triggers intense emotions in people and the feelings expressed by participants are multiple and often confusing. These feelings and emotions can be overwhelming and painful, resulting in defensive strategies among participants to avoid, dilute, or sideline race talk. In a series of studies, Sue and colleagues (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010; Sue et al., 2011; Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009) found that nested or embedded feelings during race talk often hide the true reasons for these reactions, and that unmasking them can be painful to participants. We will return to this conclusion and discuss their implications and meanings in future chapters.

## RACE TALK EVOKES AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

As mentioned earlier, most people prefer to avoid discussing race for many different reasons. White Americans are fearful that whatever they say or do in a racial dialogue might make them appear biased and racist. Thus, as observed by Kiselica (1999), they may enter a conversation on race with great trepidation, be very careful about what and how they say things, remain silent and guarded, minimize or dilute the importance of the racial issues, profess color blindness, and voice their thoughts and opinions in politically correct language (Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012; Ford, 2012; Zou & Dickter, 2013). By these avoidance maneuvers, Whites are likely to present an inauthentic self, to be less



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than honest, and to be guarded in how much they disclose to others. In their attempts to appear free of bias, their communications often become convoluted and constricted (Bolgatz, 2005; Utsey et al., 2005) and contrary to their intentions, research indicates they have directly the opposite impact on people of color. In other words, these avoidance strategies actually make them appear *more* biased and prejudiced (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Vorauer & Turpie, 2004).

Although people of color are generally more willing than their White counterparts to engage in race talk, they are often prevented from doing so for a number of different reasons. Primarily, their experience has been that many White Americans are unprepared or unable to acknowledge race as an intimate factor in interpersonal interactions. In attempting to talk race, they are likely to be met with many resistances and/or punished for bringing up the topic. They may be accused of playing the race card, others may profess color blindness, or their racial realities may be assailed ("Race had nothing to do with it," "There is only once race, the human race," or "Why does everything have to do with race?"). For both the African American and Asian American males in the opening narratives, these are the complaints they are describing. As a result, many persons of color are placed in a situation where bringing up the topic of race may result in denial, interpersonal conflict, or isolation from coworkers, neighbors, or fellow students. In some respects, people of color are very aware how most White Americans are likely to react to racial topics so they may also minimize differences in order to assure acceptance from fellow White Americans. They must walk a tightrope between being true to oneself and at the same time not risk offending others. Let us use an example of this strategy.

In 2004, a young candidate for the U.S. Senate in Illinois, Barack Obama, stood before a national audience at the Democratic National Convention and delivered an eloquent and inspiring speech that catapulted him to political stardom and ultimately the presidency of the United States. The phrase most remembered and cited was when he declared, "There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America." The speech, however, that has won him critical acclaim was the one he delivered in 2008, "A More Perfect Union," in response to his relationship to the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who made what many White Americans claimed to be highly inflammatory racist comments against Whites. As a candidate for the highest office in the land, Obama tried to reassure the American public with two important messages: (1) that being



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a product of a Black father and White mother “has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one” and (2) that race is an issue that the nation cannot afford to ignore.

On the one hand, in both speeches he downplayed differences and stressed the commonality and unity of the human condition, and on the other hand, he pointed to the need to discuss and educate one another about race. Ironically, as president of the United States, Obama has largely been silent about race except during ceremonial occasions or when a highly visible racial incident makes avoiding the topic difficult. The unwarranted arrest of a well-respected Harvard Black scholar, Henry Louis Gates, by a White police officer who mistook Gates for a burglar breaking into his own home is such an example. And the 2013 not guilty verdict for George Zimmerman in the killing of Black teenager Trayvon Martin has compelled President Obama to address the issue of race. Up until the death of Trayvon Martin, however, Obama seldom initiated discussions of race on his own.

In many respects, President Obama would probably lose his credibility and be marginalized were he to directly address or initiate discussions of race. He would be accused of being a president for Black America rather than president of everyone (as we saw in one of the blog comments). To maintain his credibility, he has to dilute acknowledging differences, stress commonalities, and play the role of a unifier rather than a divider. Avoiding direct discussions of race and attempting to transcend race has been a strategy he has used to maintain his authority as president. Unfortunately, these maneuvers tend to have a major downside: They maintain the superficiality of race talk and implicitly suggest that racial discussions are divisive and deviant.

In summary, racial dialogues are very difficult for White people. They are often overwhelmed with powerful emotions such as anxiety, fear, anger, betrayal, or defensiveness. They are fearful that they will be misunderstood and unjustly accused of being biased. They are ambivalent about engaging the topic and employ avoidance maneuvers (remaining silent, actively diluting, dismissing, or negating its importance in conversations that touch upon race). Nervousness, fear, and discomfort are frequently manifested in telltale behavioral signs: White people increase their personal space between themselves and people of color, become fidgety, avoid eye contact, and blink excessively (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008). On the other hand, people of color in race talk often experience a denial and invalidation of their racial realities, feeling



that their racial integrities are being assailed, and frustrated that their White counterparts are so unaware of their biases and privileges. This discomfort is likewise indicated by impatience, disinclination to believe what the White person says, and fidgety behaviors (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008).

## WHY IS SUCCESSFUL RACE TALK IMPORTANT?

In the past, Bill Clinton's Presidential Initiative on Race (1998) encouraged a "national dialogue on race" and indicated that constructive conversations have the potential to heal racial and ethnic divides, reduce prejudice and misinformation, and foster improved race relations. Unfortunately, his initiative promised much, but failed to materialize when it was sidetracked by the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Nevertheless, an overwhelming body of literature suggests that, under the right conditions, interracial and intergroup interactions and dialogues have positive benefits and evoke constructive changes among participants (APA Presidential Task Force, 2012; Ford, 2012; Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, & Maxwell, 2009; Valentine, Prentice, Torres, & Arellano, 2012). This has been acknowledged by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 2003 ruling of the University of Michigan's use of affirmative action in their admissions process (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 [2003]). Speaking on behalf of the majority, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote about the positive benefits of the affirmative action program used by the law school:

The . . . claim is further bolstered by numerous expert studies and reports showing that such diversity promotes learning outcomes and prepares students better for an increasingly diverse workforce, for society, and for the legal profession. Major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints.

But exposure is not enough, especially if diversity does not lead to interracial contact and dialogue (APA Presidential Task Force, 2012; Sorensen et al., 2009). For example, it has been found that interracial contact as a means to dispel stereotypes and biases is one condition that must prevail to have a positive effect (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). But in spite of being a diverse society, we are not an integrated one despite living and working next to one another. I frequently ask students in my classes on race, for example, the following question: "How many of you live in an integrated neighborhood?" Because Columbia University is in Harlem and because



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apartments and housing are less expensive than in other parts of Manhattan, a good percentage of students raise their hands eagerly to show that they practice nondiscrimination. I generally respond with this statement: "There is a difference between living in Harlem and *how you live in Harlem*." When I explore the meaning of this statement with them, the following facts about their lived experiences arise. First, although students live in the Harlem neighborhood, they seldom participate in community events, seldom shop in the local retail outlets or grocery stores, seldom attend the Black churches, seldom socialize with their Black neighbors, and only engage in the most casual and superficial conversations about race. So, although they live near African American neighbors, their whole orientation is toward the Columbia University campus, Midtown, Downtown, and the Village. So, although we may live next to people who differ from us in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity; work side-by-side with one another; or go to school with classmates of color, sadly, we do not engage in meaningful racial dialogues with one another.

A whole body of literature supports the belief that encountering diverse racial points of view, being able to engage in racial conversations, and successfully acknowledging and integrating differing perspectives lead to an expansion of critical consciousness (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Jayakumar, 2008). On a cognitive level, many have observed that cross-racial interactions and dialogues are a necessity to increase racial literacy, expand the ability to critically analyze racial ideologies, and dispel stereotypes and misinformation about other groups (Bolgatz, 2005; Ford, 2012; Pollock, 2004; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). On an emotive level, participants of successful racial dialogues report less intimidation and fear of differences, an increased compassion for others, a broadening of their horizons, appreciation of people of all colors and cultures, and a greater sense of belonging and connectedness with all groups (APA Presidential Task Force, 2012; Bell, 2002; President's Initiative on Race, 1999; Sue, 2003).

Yet it is ironic that race talk is often silenced, ignored, diluted, and/or discussed in very superficial ways for fear of offending others or creating potentially explosive situations. In future chapters, we will have more to say about the educational benefits of race talk and how educators, trainers, and parents are uniquely situated to create learning opportunities that facilitate difficult dialogues on race.