

## CHAPTER 8

# Antiracist Approaches for Shaping Theoretical and Practice Paradigms

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Regardless of the setting or circumstance, addressing intense interpersonal racial interactions remains a monumental endeavor. Whether these interactions are between colleagues, family members, or estranged racial groups hopelessly divided and unable to find common ground, progressive conversations involving race remain a major challenge. This chapter will provide a framework for conducting progressive conversations about race within the workplace and beyond. Establishing antiracist approaches for facilitating effective engagement around the difficult issues of race is one of the key elements in transforming health and human services systems. Demonstrating the willingness and skill to effectively navigate conversations about race that circumvent the usual paths of polarization and rapid escalation are central to the process of transforming health and human services systems.

### THE PRIVILEGE AND SUBJUGATED TASK (PAST) MODEL

The prevailing views regarding racial conversations are either that they should be avoided completely or they should just happen spontaneously. Unfortunately, neither of these perspectives appears to be very effective. The “not talk about it” strategy is ineffectual because it contributes to an undercurrent of racial tension that sabotages most racial encounters. It also promotes the flawed assumption that we live in a “colorblind society.” The “let’s just dive into it” approach seldom renders positive outcomes and usually quickly disintegrates into a type of interpersonal spontaneous combustion. Given the history of strained race relationships in the

United States, it is virtually impossible to have a spontaneous conversation about race that doesn't explode, implode, or spiral into a cauldron of suppressed anger, rage, and divisiveness. These typical and predictable reactions highlight the necessity for creating a more methodical and structured approach to talking about race.

The PAST Model is a power/privilege-sensitive framework designed to defuse contentious conversations and to facilitate constructive engagement across the divides of race and other dimensions of diversity. The model is predicated on the notion that power and privilege are two salient factors underpinning the creation, maintenance, and resolution of racially based conversations. These interlocking and overlapping principles undergird the PAST Model and serve as the basis for how it is constructed and implemented. The actual implementation of the model requires participants to do a racial self-analysis and to determine where their racial identities and broader cultural narratives regarding their identities locate them in the current conversation. Each participant must be clear whether his or her racial identity places him or her in a privileged or subjugated position (Berman Cushing et al., 2010). The outcome of this process should not be dictated or determined by whether the person in the privileged position "feels" or believes he or she is privileged or whether the person in the subjugated position personally feels privileged. It is common for many whites to denounce their racial privilege because they never felt privileged or because they simultaneously occupy other social identities that are undeniably subjugated positions (e.g., class, sexual orientation, religion, nationality). Similarly, it is also challenging for some people of color to embrace their racial subjugation, either because such an admission is tantamount to claiming inferiority or because they simultaneously occupy one or more social identities that are highly privileged in our society (e.g., class, education). It is essential that race is the critical determining factor and must be the singular focus of the interaction. Failure to do so refocuses the conversation from one that is skewed toward race to a free-flowing, splintered, ill-focused shouting match regarding whose pain and suffering is worse. This preparatory work is crucial because it helps to thwart many of the predictable and common pitfalls associated with having constructive and progressive conversations about race.

A central premise of the model is that each of us has multiple identities, one of which is a racial identity, which is the focal point of this chapter. Through a host of socially constructed messages and practices, race and more specifically racial identity is either associated with value and therefore privileged, or devalued and subsequently assigned to positions of inferiority and subjugation. In the United States, being white is a racially privileged position and being a person of color is a racially devalued position. The entire U.S. social structure has been and remains organized around a white supremacist ideology that unrelentingly reifies the reality that white is good, pure, better, and so forth, while black and other hues are inferior, animalistic, barbaric, and threatening. For this reason, within the framework of the PAST Model it is widely assumed that whites will be routinely assigned to the privileged position.

For the purposes of constructive conversations, the PAST Model recognizes two positions among those engaging to talk about race: (1) privileged and (2) subjugated. Each person or group occupying a given position is expected to perform certain tasks to facilitate a constructive conversation. The PAST Model posits that racial conversations can be constructive and progressive if one or more of the following conditions are adhered to:

1. Those in the privileged and subjugated positions rigidly adhere to performing their assigned tasks during an intense conversation about race.
2. Those in the privileged position rigidly adhere to performing their assigned task but those in the subjugated position fail to perform theirs.
3. Those in the subjugated position rigidly adhere to performing their tasks but those in the privileged position fail to perform theirs.

Obviously the first is the ideal option and holds the greatest promise for meaningful transformation. While the other options can be instrumental in promoting a positive shift in racial interactions, they can also be quite challenging and are not casualty-proof.

Whether in the workplace or other contexts, whites interested in having more progressive, less polarizing conversations with people of color can take a huge first step by exercising the tasks of the privileged. People of color also have a significant role in ensuring that conversations are constructive and progressive and can accomplish this feat by adhering to the tasks of the subjugated.

## THE TASKS OF THE PRIVILEGED

The tasks of the privileged are not specific to race, although this is the context in which they are presented in this chapter. These tasks, instead, are applicable to any situation, circumstance, or identity where one holds a position of power and privilege that is superior to that of those with whom one shares a relationship. The tasks are systemic and thus gain considerable potency and poignancy from their confluence. The tasks of the privileged are as follows:

### 1. Differentiate Between Intentions and Consequences and Always Start with an Acknowledgment of the Latter

It is common for whites, when discussing race and particularly after feeling attacked, misunderstood, or unappreciated by a person of color, to enter the conversation by clarifying and at times restating (even overstating) their intentions. When a conversation focuses on the (pure) intentions of the white person who

feels misunderstood, it obscures, possibly even “unintentionally” ignores, the original disclosure advanced by the person of color. Although “unintentional,” a conversation that highlights the pure and good intentions of whites merely becomes another privileged conversation. The implication is that “having the good intentions” of the white person clarified takes precedence over whatever concern, hurt, or slight has been expressed by the person of color. This dynamic unfortunately and unwittingly reinforces a broader societal perception about who is valued and who isn’t.

The hope is that the person in the privileged position would use his or her privilege responsibly and do so on behalf of (repairing) the relationship. When intentionality is introduced too quickly into the conversation, it primarily serves the person in the privileged position in lieu of the relationship. This is not to suggest that the intentions of the person in the privileged position are irrelevant, but it instead sounds a cautionary note regarding the significance of the timing of the disclosure. Once space (verbal and emotional) has been created (by the privileged position) and acknowledgment and validation have been extended, there may be a point where the clarification of intentions can be shared and received in a manner that appears less intrusive, evasive, and dismissive.

**Tactic #1:** Focus conversations on the consequences experienced by the subjugated person.

## 2. Avoid the Overt and Covert Negation of Subjugated Conversations and Disclosures

Conversations and disclosures that negate are never intended to do so, yet they do—and seldom inconsequentially. In conversations where whites and people of color have obvious differences in perceptions and experiences, it seems difficult for some whites to embrace, entertain, or authentically hold the position of the person of color without dismissing, correcting, reinterpreting, or attempting to expand their worldview by “teaching” them. All of these seemingly benign, innocent, and benevolent acts are tools of negation. The process of negation is a rather complex and sophisticated one. It is relatively easy to negate without knowing that it has happened. The most frequent acts of racially motivated negation are (a) challenges disguised as questions; (b) challenges disguised as advice; (c) silence; (d) “privempathy,” and (e) undisguised challenge.

*Challenges disguised as questions* negate conversations/disclosure by appearing to seek information but really challenge the validity of a disclosure that has been made by a person of color.

Mulani, an African American therapist, reported to her white supervisor, Helen, that she thought her white client, Rita, was racist as she continually made racially hostile comments throughout her sessions. Helen responded by asking, “Do you really

think she is racist, which is a very strong word, or do you think she just struggles with authority? . . . Do you think it is possible that she may be triggering an emotional memory for you of someone in your family?"

The supervisor's questions were irrefutably clinically relevant, especially for clinical supervision. However, the timing of the questions and the invalidation of Mulani's perspective were problematic. The interaction would have been infinitely more effective and less racially charged had Helen validated Mulani's sentiment. She could have first invited Mulani to share more of her thoughts and feelings before posing "questions" that essentially called into question her version of the clinical experience. Mulani's response was to withdraw from the conversation and to conclude, as she later reported to her black colleagues, "white people always protect each other when it comes to race. Why should I have expected anything different from Helen just because she is a supervisor? At the end of the day she is still white!" Unfortunately, the conversation between Helen and Mulani was painfully reminiscent of most conversations about race that end prematurely and without resolution.

*Challenges disguised as advice* are also used to negate conversations about race.

Lupa, a first-generation immigrant from Columbia and one of two Latinas working in a low-income multiracial community steeped in racial conflict, stated to her African American coworker Marva: "As a Latina I feel disrespected here. I feel like me and Selena get no respect because we are not African American. I feel like we don't fit in here and you don't want us here. It's a terrible feeling and it doesn't feel fair: it's not our fault that we aren't black!" Marva, listening attentively but shaking her head disapprovingly throughout Lupa's entire disclosure, responded, "I really think you and Selena would feel better about all of this if you learned more English. I think it would be helpful for you to enroll in one of the ESL classes at Community College—and they are free!"

It is conceivable that Marva's "advice" was relevant and could have been helpful to Lupa and Selena. However, what she did under the (dis)guise of disseminating helpful advice was to effectively dismiss and negate the heartfelt claims that Lupa made about race and their relationship. At no point did Marva acknowledge or validate any aspect of Lupa's claim.

*Silence* is another powerful tool of negation that is often used as an instrument of disconfirmation. When a person in the subjugated position makes a comment, particularly one that is laced with affect, and it engenders no comment or (expressed) reaction from the person in the privileged position, the original disclosure is de facto negated. The unintentional underlying message that gets communicated is "your message was not worthy of recognition or response."

*Privempathy* is the term I have coined to refer to the empathy of the privilege. It often negates the disclosures of persons in the subjugated position by offering

parallels or similarities to the shared disclosure while simultaneously negating it by advocating false notions of equality.

In a graduate-level cultural diversity course, Jaipaul nervously stated: “As the only brown person in the class I often feel racially marginalized. I feel like when we talk about race it is always about black people. I have no objections about talking about blacks, but I just wonder why there isn’t space for people like me. I feel totally invisible, like I really don’t matter.” Both the tension and the silence in the classroom were deafening. Richard, the only white male in the class, nervously scanned the room and then stated: “Jaipaul, I know what you mean and I feel your pain. As a white male I have that same thought every class. It’s like I’m either invisible or demonized. When do I get to talk about all of the reverse racism that I experience from people of color, especially blacks? I always have to hear shit like ‘you’re white, YOU DID THIS, YOU DID THAT.’ You talk about being invisible—I am totally invisible in here!”

What commenced as Richard’s “empathy” for Jaipaul quickly shifted to a disclosure about his suffering as a white male. In the process there was very little, if any, overt acknowledgment of or attention devoted to Jaipaul’s painful disclosure. Richard made a number of painful disclosures in his own right that certainly warrant close and acute attention, but not at the moment he shared them and not at the expense of his classmate. Richard’s *equalization* of his and Jaipaul’s “suffering” essentially overshadowed and negated the latter’s experience as “a brown person” who felt uniquely marginalized within the class culture. The subtext of Jaipaul’s message was “this is how I am marginalized in this class based on my unique identity” and Richard countered by (indirectly and unintentionally) implying that the experience that Jaipaul considered unique was anything but, because it applied to him as well.

The tension in the classroom intensified as Monique, an African American student, passionately shared her perspective. She appeared to be oblivious to Richard’s comments and directed her comments to Jaipaul. Without seemingly taking a moment to breathe, she turned to Jaipaul and stated tersely: “In THIS country it IS about black and white. As black people we have had to deal with shit that no other group has ever had to deal with. Before some cultures ever came to this country, we were slaves, we were denied the right to vote, beaten up, hosed down, and raped. THIS is why we talk about black and THIS is why we SHOULD keep talking about black issues!”

Unlike her classmate Richard, Monique did not engage in *privempathy*; instead, her negation of Jaipaul’s disclosure was a direct rejection of his point of view. It was an *undisguised negation*. Jaipaul’s perspective was completely and categorically rejected. As in the case with Richard’s disclosure, what reasonable-thinking human being could deny the cogency of her remarks? Yet her disclosure and

subsequent negation of Jaipaul's comments were just as problematic as Richard's. Both responses demonstrate some of the inherent complexities in discussing race and avoiding conversations that negate.

**Tactic #2:** Practice the art and skill of validation.

### 3. Avoid Reactive Reflexes: Acts of Relational Retrenchment, Rebuttal, and Retribution

Conversations about race, especially cross-racially, can be very emotionally taxing for all parties involved, and in some ways can be even more so for many whites. These conversations are often emotionally destabilizing for many whites and provoke a bevy of intense feelings ranging from sadness and guilt to anger and fury. Accordingly, it is also relatively easy for many whites to quickly feel personally attacked and/or hurt by the unbridled and expressed rage of many people of color. Under these emotionally evocative circumstances it becomes almost instinctual for many whites to reactively retreat toward self-soothing and/or self-protective strategies for coping. Unfortunately, these tactics do very little to facilitate the effective engagement of a progressive conversation about race.

In light of these dynamics, it is imperative for whites to avoid reactions that will either facilitate their withdrawal from the conversation (and ultimately the relationship) or contribute to the escalation of conflict. Comments such as "I have nothing else to say . . . I'm done with the matter . . . I can't convince you, so why bother" are all statements of *relational retrenchment*. These are statements of surrender. They become expressions of exasperation, frustration, and futility that justify retrenchment from both the conversation and the relationship. Relational retrenchment ultimately eradicates the *will* to stay in the conversation.

While staying in the conversation is critical to having a progressive conversation about race, its benefits can be quickly undermined if *rebuttal* is used as the primary tool for accomplishing the task. When those in the privileged position, in this case whites, rely heavily on *acts of rebuttal* to remain in the conversation/relationship, a dynamic analogous to a sparring match typically ensues. These types of interaction are often characterized by incessant talking, perhaps even yelling, blame-affixing, little listening, and a principal focus on who is "right." Other than offering an opportunity for the immediate release of underlying, deeply felt affect, these types of encounters seldom offer anything constructive.

*Acts of retribution* is another reactive reflex commonly used by those in the privileged position. These acts can range from thinly veiled threats directed toward those in the subjugated position to verbal disclosures deliberately designed to provoke strong affect or to emotionally injure in the spirit of revenge.

Although each of these acts has been presented here discretely, they are intricately intertwined, which makes their dynamics hard to identify and deconstruct

in the midst of conversation. Becoming more mindful of these “reflexes” and consciously avoiding reliance on them can be one of the most challenging and beneficial tasks executed by the privileged.

**Tactic #3:** Develop thick skin.

#### 4. Avoid the Issuance of Prescriptions

*The issuance of prescriptions* refers to a seemingly benign but often explosive dynamic that involves those in the privileged position offering what is believed to be value-free, “objective,” and benevolent advice to those in the subjugated group regarding their well-being. The underlying implication of the prescription issuance is that those in the privileged position know the needs of those in the subjugated position better than they do themselves. This dynamic reinforces extant broader societal messages regarding superiority/inferiority and who is intelligent and who isn’t. Although it clearly may not be the “intention” of the privileged to reify such polarizing and devaluing messages, the “consequence” is almost always to the contrary.

Awinita, a Cherokee social worker, stated to Stephanie, her white coworker, that she was frustrated with the lack of respect that the agency they worked for demonstrated toward Native people and their healing methods. “I’m sorry, but it’s the same old way it’s always been. It’s as if the ONLY way and the RIGHT way is always the white way,” Awinita stated with a sense of anguish. Stephanie, appearing slightly irritated, responded firmly: “Well, Awinita, I don’t know what to say. Maybe you and the other Native people here should just focus on learning how to be the best social workers you can be and stop worrying about whether it’s ‘Native’ or not . . . healing is healing. I think all of you will be less frustrated if you stop obsessing over whether it’s Native or not.”

Stephanie’s response to Awinita was to issue her a prescription for how she could be less troubled about their agency’s failure to expand its intervention practices to take into consideration the cultural needs of some of its clients. Implicit in Stephanie’s response was the notion that it was she, not Awinita, who knew what was in the best interest of the Native Americans in the agency.

**Task #4:** Supplant prescriptions with vulnerable disclosures about one’s self.

#### 5. Avoid Speaking from the KNOE (Knowledgeable, Neutral, Objective, Expert) Position

One of the major impediments to conversations between the privileged and the subjugated is the presumption that the former speak from a position of neutrality,

objectivity, and, in some cases, expertise. Thus, in conversations about race, the phenomenon and influences of whiteness are rarely if ever overtly acknowledged (Hardy, 2008). Positions taken by whites and the opinions they express are often considered knowledgeable, neutral, objective, and free of the influence of race. There is a persistent and predictable disconnect between the whiteness of whites and what they say. It is common to assume that the disclosures of many whites are free of racial contamination and bias. For example, a person of color makes a reference to race, and a white person responds, "Why are you playing the race card?" It is rarely commented on or considered that the mere asking of the question could also be construed as playing a race card. This rarely happens because exploring how race informs the attitudes and behaviors of whites in their execution of everyday life is a foreign concept. The unacknowledged, unexplored, hidden dimensions of whiteness (racial privilege) on whites are a major impediment to having effective conversations about race. It is this dynamic that provides the fuel for every task discussed in this section.

**Tactic #5:** Always locate one's racial self in the conversation.

Several other tasks of the privileged cannot be discussed here due to space limitations, but the five that have been presented can have a powerful positive impact on otherwise difficult racial conversations.

## THE TASKS OF THE SUBJUGATED

It is equally important for people of color to use the tasks of the subjugated as a guide to their participation. The following is a description of these tasks and the tactics for implementation.

### 1. Challenge Silencing and Voicelessness

Silence is the hallmark of oppression. Regardless of the type or origins of oppression, "voicelessness" is a common denominator. Voicelessness is a hidden trauma wound that is a response to the process of "silencing," a principal tool used by those who oppress. Silencing is a powerful tool of oppression that teaches the oppressed that "speaking" and "self-advocacy" can have severe consequences. Thus, voicelessness, the counterpart to silencing, refers to an "inability" to speak on one's behalf, specifically in regard to self-advocacy. Voicelessness can be manifested as remaining silent when one *wants* to speak but *can't* or by assuming positions of subservience or hypercompliance, or adopting a sense of selflessness. The reticence or "inability" to speak or act on one's behalf is usually rooted in a fear of reprisal by whites or is a byproduct of a racial socialization process that teaches people of color that silence is not only golden but is integral to one's survival. "I don't want to come across as an angry black male," "I don't want to be perceived

as the minority who is always complaining about race,” and “I didn’t say anything when that racist comment was made; I just tried to ignore it and let it go” are all expressions of voicelessness. No matter how much these claims are rationalized or euphemized, they mask a deeply seated underlying pain for many people of color that contributes to the birth of other conditions that make healthy race relationships and conversations virtually impossible. One of the major detrimental and unintended consequences of voicelessness is that it is a prelude to rage, which is a strong emotion inextricably tied to experiences of degradation, devaluation, and/or domination. Once rage invades a relationship, it either overshadows or destroys the potential for trust, goodwill, and respectful engagement.

People of color cannot initiate or participate in constructive conversations about race if their voices remain muted. Attempts at conversations are often quickly short-circuited by trepidation and highly constrained disclosures on the one hand or emotional explosiveness and rage on the other. Either way the result is always the same: misunderstanding, polarization, and continued strained racial relationships.

Overcoming voicelessness and reclaiming and exercising one’s voice require risk taking. The process involves making a concerted effort to make just one comment more than one is comfortable making and not worrying about whether anyone is listening, whether anything will change, or how one might be perceived. After all, the principal purpose in speaking is to reclaim one’s voice and overcome voicelessness.

**Tactic #1:** Use “I” messages and embed all statements within the framework of “I think, I feel, and I wish.” Practice and take risks in making just one comment more than you are comfortable making.

## 2. Regulate and Rechannel Rage

Rage is a common and predictable byproduct of silencing and voicelessness (Cose, 2011). In fact, the two phenomena are very closely intertwined. The more one has been silenced, the greater the degree of voicelessness, which inevitably intensifies rage. As rage increases in intensity, the more difficult it is to manage effectively. Rage is a normal reaction to experiences of injustice and can be a powerful resource when it is appropriately managed and rechanneled (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). On the other hand, it also can be quite destructive when it is improperly managed and free-floating. In conversations about race, particularly cross-racially, it is often the intense semifiltered, free-floating, unmanaged rage expressed by some people of color that compromises attempts to engage in constructive dialog. Thus, it is the failure of people of color to appropriately manage and rechannel their rage, coupled with the failure of whites to exhibit “thick skin” (see “Tasks of the Privileged” #5) during these moments, that significantly hampers attempts to have productive conversations about race.

The goal for those who are “enraged” is to mobilize their energy to become “outraged” (Hardy, 2013). The latter requires overcoming voicelessness and establishing the ability to express rage proactively and constructively. The goal is never to eradicate rage, but to use rage appropriately, people of color must *identify, embrace, and ultimately rechannel* rage. Since rage is often entangled with a host of other feelings and experiences, people of color need to sharpen their rage-detection abilities to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how rage infiltrates their lives. Rage can be manifested in a number of expressions and experiences, ranging from sadness and depression to self-destructiveness and violence. Identifying rage is an essential and fundamental step to moving toward effective management of it.

Once rage has been identified, the next crucial step is to embrace it. When people of color begin to embrace rage, they inevitably begin to develop a clearer understanding of the distinctions between rage and anger. They become willing to relinquish their preoccupation about whether they are reinforcing the stereotype of “being angry.” Instead, embracing rage enables people of color to own these complex feelings without shame or disavowal. This is an important developmental step because repudiating one’s anger is often an attempt to counteract a description of people of color that has been predominantly promulgated by whites (see “Tasks of the Subjugated” #3). Finally, embracing rage allows people of color to be more fully integrated. No longer will it be necessary to be enraged by assaults on one’s dignity, and then have to deny them to avoid “appearing angry,” and then being left to live with the “anger” of being angry but not being “allowed” to express it. This is the perfect recipe for the buildup of destructive rage.

**Tactic #2:** Use rage as an energy source to foster and reinforce your voice and self-advocacy. Resolve to stay engaged in difficult conversations. Attack ideas, not people.

### 3. Engage in a Process of Exhaling

The process of embracing rage is directly related to the task of exhaling. Part of the privilege of privilege is that those who possess it are empowered to define others’ experiences, behaviors, and realities. As a result, it is more common for those in the subjugated position to “be defined” than it is to “define their being.” The process of defining, which often leads to the “manufacturing of other,” creates a series of narratives regarding who and what (in this case, people of color) are and are not. Since such definitions are usually based on limited and skewed data and devote scant attention (at best) to social context, they are often negative, stereotypical, and psychologically damaging. Unfortunately, these narratives become not only “internalized noise” for many people of color, but very potent life-shaping organizing principles as well. Many people of color live with a consciousness of these narratives while simultaneously remaining unconscious

to the ways in which they become internalized. The everyday life experiences of most people of color are profoundly organized (controlled) by the internalized noise. If the external narratives are that people of color are angry, dangerous, and violent, this becomes an organizing principle that is hard to ignore, especially when the external world often responds as if it were factual. Consequently, it becomes the burden of people of color to prove that they are exceptions to the narrative. Like silencing, being defined often leaves people of color feeling powerless, helpless, and trapped between spurious choices: they choose either to ignore the internalized noise and risk reinforcing broader narratives or to make a concerted effort to disprove them and ultimately be controlled by them.

People of color must engage in a process of exhaling as a prerequisite to having effective conversations about race. The process will enable them to identify all of the racially debilitating toxic messages that they have internalized and that ultimately interfere with their full participation in meaningful conversations about race. Through the process of exhaling, people of color can expunge from their psyches and soul many of the internalized messages that constrain them, such as those about whether they are smart enough, articulate enough, or good enough. The process is self-liberating and allows for a much freer and more uninhibited participation in challenging conversations about race.

**Tactic #3:** Focus on *being* congruent and communicating accordingly. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

#### 4. Cease and Desist Caretaking of the Privileged

Many people of color have been historically and systematically “socialized” to provide caretaking for the privileged (Diller, 2007). This phenomenon has been reinforced by the systematic assignment of disproportionate numbers of people of color to positions as maids, butlers, janitors, nannies, cooks, and other servants. Along with these positions of servitude was an informal code of conduct that required the subjugated—people of color—to be deferential, self-sacrificing, nonconfrontational, and hypercompliant in order to be considered good citizens. Since the code of conduct also allowed many whites to enjoy their lives free of a sense of injustice, guilt, or compassion for the suffering of others, the failure of people of color to uphold and adhere to it often resulted in some form of a punitive consequence that had to be endured.

Although people of color occupy a broader and more diverse range of occupations in the workforce today, vestiges of the code of conduct largely remain with regard to the interpersonal interactions between many whites and people of color. The contemporary expressions of caretaking have shifted from physical tasks such as tilling the soil, preparing food, and caring for children to more subtle emotional-psychological manifestations. For example, in

cross-racial conversations, especially those involving race, many people of color will self-censor, use coded language, and resort to silence (voicelessness) to protect whites from experiencing discomfort. The motivation for the emotional caretaking is neither solely altruistic nor one-dimensional, as it serves the safety needs of both groups. It can be precipitated by the desire to pacify whites as a mechanism to avoid punishment or disapproval, or it can be a function of powerful internalized messages and voicelessness. Regardless of the motivation, it becomes virtually impossible to have effective and meaningful conversations when one party is not fully present, honest, or authentic in the relationship.

The prohibition against caretaking is not tantamount to being rude, disrespectful, or uncaring; instead, it means being authentic with oneself and others. It requires people of color to manage their anxiety and to remain emotionally centered and narrowly focused on the conversation even if whites are noticeably uncomfortable. There is a fundamental difference between being caring and caretaking; it is the latter that is under scrutiny in this section.

**Tactic #4:** Stay intimately engaged, but grant uninterrupted emotional space to whites to explore, understand, and experience the myriad of complex thoughts and feelings that race conversations are likely to provoke. Be caring without caretaking.

## 5. Maintain Investment in the Conversation

For many people of color, conversations about race are often fraught with frustration, emotional escalation, a sinking sense of futility, and withdrawal disguised as closure. For those in both the privileged and subjugated positions, the temptation to withdraw from the conversation is enormous. The importance of whites developing “thick skin” as a mechanism for staying in the conversation was discussed earlier. For people of color, maintaining investment in the conversation is an important key to effectively navigating it. Because racial conversations are often nonprogressive and symmetrical, many people of color often conclude that “white people just don’t get it and don’t want to get it.” This sentiment often breeds contempt as well as a sense of futility, the consequence of which is usually a resignation from the conversation once it fails to progress beyond a certain point. While withdrawal from the conversation is understandable, the cut-off, unexpressed, suppressed feelings associated with it neither dissipate nor diminish over time. Instead they become the seeds for rage and an accumulated sense of angst that make future conversations more difficult and truly futile.

It is important for people of color to *stay in the conversation* even when convinced that “whites will never get it.” After all, the purpose of the conversation should never be to convince whites or lecture or educate them. The purpose of the conversation and staying in it is to afford people of color the opportunity

to define, not defend, themselves; to overcome voicelessness; and to increase the possibilities of having a transformative cross-racial interaction. The demonstrated understanding by whites should not be a precondition for remaining invested in the conversation. There is tremendous healing and transformative potential in dialog and conversation, and maintaining investment in the process is essential.

**Tactic #5:** Refrain from analyzing “the other” while simultaneously speaking from the core of one’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

As noted earlier, these tasks are most effective and hold the greatest potential for promoting progressive conversations when they are executed simultaneously by the privileged and subjugated. They are not a panacea for racial injustice or transforming those who use them. Instead, the tasks are designed to provide a foundation for constructive engagement by outlining a set of rudimentary ground rules and principles for how we can begin to forge a different type of conversation across a vast racial divide and can actually dignify each other in the process (Smith, 1992). If we can do this, it certainly will place us on a promising path toward healing and transforming racial strife.

## CONCLUSION

Although race is, has been, and will be for the foreseeable future a major organizing principle in our society both inside and outside the workplace, conducting meaningful conversations remains a daunting feat. Attempts to discuss race often culminate in quickly aborted failed attempts, rapid escalation, and/or polarization. Our failure to engage in progressive conversations about race makes it difficult to address or transform antiracist practices in a thoughtful and productive manner. The PAST Model has been introduced as a semistructured framework for guiding conversations about race. Adherence to the model requires all participants to think critically about their racial positioning in a given conversation and then to execute the tasks associated with either their “privileged” or “subjugated” positions. Effective conversation is a precursor to transforming health and human services systems. Being a good steward of effective racial conversations requires one to “know thyself,” particularly in terms of the relative power and privilege that one holds in a relationship.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the vignette involving Mulani, the African American therapist, and her white supervisor, Helen, how could the PAST Model be used to help them effectively restart their conversation?

2. In the vignette involving Jaipaul, Richard, and Monique, if you were in a position to coach them through their contentious and failed conversation, using the PAST Model as your guide, where would you start? Whom would you start with and why?
3. Why do you think it is common during heated racial encounters for each of us to resort to our subjugated positions?

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