

HOW TO START A WHITE-ON-WHITE DIALOGUE

Roles We Can Play

by Jennifer Holladay

*In November 2000, the Center for the Study of White American Culture (www.euroamerican.org) published Jennifer Holladay's White anti-racist Activism: A Personal Roadmap as the fourth volume of its series *The Whiteness Papers*. The following excerpt focuses on intraracial conversations about racism and white privilege and is reprinted with permission of the author.*

As an anti-bias trainer with the Southern Poverty Law Center, I have worked with hundreds of white people who want to combat systems of oppression. Often, my white peers specifically want to challenge racism, but they are uncomfortable with their own understanding of racial oppression. Key among the barriers is uncertainty about how white skin privilege impacts the roles that white people can and should play in the anti-racist struggle.

Like all anti-racist activists, white people engaged in anti-racism have a primary responsibility to identify conditions or situations that advance white privilege or maintain racial or ethnic inequalities and then to challenge them. Because we are white, we have two specific duties. First, we must create alliances with white peers, educating them about racism and bringing them in to the cadre of white anti-racist activists. Second, we must ally ourselves with and rally behind leadership from individuals and organizations of color.

The primary leadership role for white people in the anti-racist struggle is to educate other white people about issues of racism and privilege and to bring them into the cadre of anti-racist activists. Whites expect people of color to talk about racism, but we don't expect it from ourselves. Further, white people often dismiss conversations with people of color about racism because people of color have a

"vested interest" in the topic. This type of dismissal does not work when it is a white person talking to fellow whites. It may even confuse some people, leaving them with an open-ended question: why does this white guy or gal care so much about racism? In this way, we can use our white privilege to the advantage of the anti-racist struggle.

When we work with other white people, there are several tactics we can use to convey the anti-racist agenda. First and foremost, we use white privilege as our primary communication tool. We do not speak for people of color. For example, when talking about the "driving while black" phenomenon, an anti-racist white person might say, "As a white person, I never have to worry about being pulled over because of my skin color" rather than "black people get pulled over a lot because of their skin color." A white person who is just getting to know racism and privilege *will* question the validity of the "black people" statement, but he or she cannot question the statement based on white privilege, because your experiences—and probably his or her experiences—demonstrate its truth.

If talking about white privilege isn't working, another technique might help. We can use other forms of privilege or oppression as a bridge to discussions about racism. For example, when talking with a white woman, we might first work with her on male privilege and sexism. With a gay man or lesbian, we might first explore heterosexism. With a person with disabilities, we might explore ableism. Once our peer begins to identify these forms of oppression and privilege, he or she may well make the leap and begin to see how similarly racism operates. This technique should be used carefully, however,

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because it is full of pitfalls. Different forms of oppression are born out of different histories and are not necessarily comparable. Further, this approach sometimes serves to minimize the impact of intersectionality—does a white lesbian, for example, experience sexism the same way that a heterosexual Asian woman does?

If neither of these techniques work, we can use the lowest common denominator. We can talk about how racism hurts white people; self-interest is a great motivator. In

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Uprooting Racism, Paul Kivel provides an easy-to-use checklist of 23 ways in which racism hurts white people. They generally fall into four categories:

1. White people have been asked to assimilate into the dominant white culture, thereby giving up their own various ethnicities (Irish, English, Scottish, German, what have you);

2. White people are taught a distorted view of history and politics, one that negates racism, excludes people of color and modifies white history;

3. Racism alters our sense of danger and safety (a white person is more likely to become a crime victim at the hands of another white person than at the hands of a person of color); and

4. Racism is bad for our self-esteem because we feel guilty, ashamed or inadequate when it comes to racism and/or our responses to it.¹

Regardless of the methods we employ, we should prepare for the expected. When we start working with other white people on these issues, we will begin to identify some frequent techniques that whites use to minimize or negate racism and privilege.² The tactics generally fall into four categories: "of color" responsibility, equal opportunity, compare the isms, and compare the groups.

Tactic #1: "Of color" responsibility

White people sometimes try to focus attention on "of color" responsibility rather than look at how racism and privilege might be impacting a situation. A statement like "Blacks need to become more ambitious" might deflect attention away from the way racism impacts the distribution of small business loans. "Latinos in my community need to take education more seriously" might deflect attention away from how racism impacts school funding in the district. This type of exchange deflects responsibility from racism and privilege. It also assumes that communities of color are not concerned about or engaged in addressing the problems like the small number of black-owned business in urban environments or unequal educational attainment.

Tactic #2: Equal opportunity

White people often treat "of color" groups as if they are completely in control of their situation and really do have equal opportunities. This is the bootstrap argument, and it denies the complexity and prominence of racism and privilege.

For example, in October 1995, I sent a resume to the Southern Poverty Law Center hoping to get a job. I was perfectly qualified for any entry level job; I had a college degree in a subject area relevant to the Center's work, decent writing and public speaking skills, a strong work history and a demonstrated commitment to the Center's anti-bias agenda. Weeks went by, and I never heard anything. So, I pulled out my Rolodex (and my father's Rolodex) and began pulling strings.

I called one of my mentors from my predominantly white college (my mentor is a white man) who knew someone (another white man) who knew someone who worked at the Center, who also hap-

WHITE ALLIES AND FEEDBACK

As white people engaged in the struggle to end racism, we provide leadership of color with feedback. It is part of our responsibility as allies. We must, however, learn to give criticism responsibly. To do this, we might ask ourselves these questions:

- Does my comment or question further racism or systems of privilege?
- Does my question or comment minimize, negate or ignore racism?
- Does it try to shift the focus away from racism or white privilege?
- Is my question or comment generated from and phrased within the anti-racist context?
- Am I taking care to look at the big picture?

Although this might seem like a lot of work to do every time we open our mouths or draft a letter, when we evaluate ourselves critically, we are more effective allies.

Just as we have to examine the basis on which feedback is generated in our work with organizations, we also must look at the footing of the constructive criticism that we give in our one-on-one relationships. For example, one of the sticking points for many white people who do anti-racist work is the anger that people of color justifiably possess.¹ Last year, Teaching Tolerance went through a very difficult process. A Center

employee made a statement that many people—particularly one staffer of color whom I will call Lou—felt was racist. Lou was angry. Infuriated. And he shared that anger with the staff, saying things like, "We spend all this money tracking the Klan; we should start looking in our own hallways!"



I, like many other white staffers, was instantly put off by Lou's anger, and I began distancing myself from him—and from the issue itself. I kept asking: "Why are you acting like that? Why are you so angry?" And I also tried to dictate his behavior: "Calm down!" Upon closer examination, I realized that I was not supporting "of color" leadership; my reaction was not coming from an anti-racist perspective. It was coming partly out of the idea that black folks are "uppity" or "too vested in the issue of racism to see things clearly." I also had to ask myself a question: why wasn't I enraged? Lou's anger—and his leadership—was a gift to me and to the Center. Eventually, a broad alliance of Center staff demanded some significant changes in our work place; those changes are being implemented now.

—Jennifer Holladay

1. see hooks, bell. *Killing Rage, Ending Racism*, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

pened to be a white man. My father (a white man) was kind enough to call the editor of an Alabama newspaper (a white man) who wrote a letter on my behalf to the Center's co-founder, Morris Dees (also a white man). Now, several years before, my father had worked for Mississippi Governor Ray Maybus (undoubtedly a

stituted 30% of all persons living in poverty areas, but they represented only 7% of people living outside of them. Latinos represented 19% of residents in poverty areas, but only 6% of residents outside of them. Whites, on the other hand, who made up 83% of the overall population, represented only 56% of residents in poverty areas.³

racism, we might try to move the conversation from the individual to the aggregate level. This is particularly useful when discussing affirmative action programs. All white people at one time or another have thought they were the *victims* of affirmative action programs. We hear statements like: "If I had been Native American, I would have gotten into Harvard" or "If I had been a person of color, I would have gotten that job with the \$10,000 pay increase." When things like this happen—and they will—we should try to move the conversation away from individual examples and look at the big picture. In the big picture, white skin privilege carries white people much further than affirmative action programs will ever carry people of color.

In this excerpt, I have outlined techniques that anti-racist whites can implement to bring more of our peers into the struggle to end racial oppression. There is, of course, no magic formula for anti-racist dialogue. Gandhi once referred to his efforts as "experiments in truth." These are my experiments—the strategies that have worked most effectively for me. I hope that some of them will work for you. As you navigate the landscape of racism, privilege and activism, I encourage you to document your journey and to share your own experiments in truth.

1. Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1996.

2. For more information, see Harlon L. Dalton, *Racial Healing: Confronting the Fear Between Blacks and Whites*, NY: Doubleday, 1995.

3. See Bureau of the Census, "Resident Population Estimates of the United States by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin: April 1990 to November 1999," available from www.census.gov/population/estimates/nation/infile3-1.txt; and "Statistical Briefs: Poverty Areas" available from www.census.gov/80/socdemo/www/povarea.html.

4. See "Looking Beyond the 'Model Minority,'" May 1999 *Teaching Tolerance Classroom Activity*, available from www.teachingtolerance.org.

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white man). When my father was working for Gov. Maybus he met another white man who knew the Center's Executive Director (also a white man). They had met at what was essentially an all-white university in the '60s. So, my father called this other white man who then called the Center's executive director—who was the white man with the power to grant me an interview.

This is how I got my job at the Southern Poverty Law Center. Was I qualified for the job I got? Yes. Did I get the job based on my merits alone? Not by a long shot. It took a whole bunch of white men to open the door for me. This is white-skin, affirmative action at its finest.

Tactic #3: Compare the isms

To draw attention away from specific social issues, white people often compare the severity of one ism or phobia to another. We hear this tactic through comments like "the real problems facing folks of color today deal with class more than race." This type of comparison serves three purposes: 1) it attempts to downplay racism, 2) it makes the issues of race and class appear unrelated, and 3) it makes it seem as if we have to choose between race and class.

In June 1995, for example, blacks con-

Tactic #4: Compare the groups

As a way to minimize racism, white people often compare racial or ethnic groups to one another. "Just look at the success of Asians in this country! - Don't tell me blacks or Latinos can't get ahead because of racism - Look at the Asians! It's something else, cause it sure isn't racism!"

This tactic does a couple of things. First, it often perpetuates myths about the "successful group." Asian American and Pacific Islanders, for example, are often stereotyped as affluent citizens—the so-called "model minority." According to the U.S. Census, however, for every Asian American family that earns \$75,000 or more annually, there is roughly one that earns \$10,000 or less.⁴ This tactic also denies the diversity of racial and ethnic groups and the ways in which oppression impacts those groups differently. Third, it is an attempt to get people of color pointing at one another and not at racism. It is nothing short of "divide and conquer."

When we encounter these tactics as we work with other white people, we should first point out that the tactics are being used. Often, our white peers will be unaware that they are minimizing, negating or ignoring racism.

If simply identifying the tactic doesn't seem to bring the conversation back to