

Talking About Race

Productive conversations in a post-racial society

Present narratives about race and culture define what we can say, what we see and what we believe we can do in transforming ourselves, our communities and society. Racial problems seem impossible to resolve. When they come up, we throw up our hands in dismay. What can we do about race? If we engage race in the same way that we have done historically we will continue to get the same results. In order to get different results we must change the narrative associated with the ideas, concepts and beliefs on race. The concepts of racial identity and sense-making about race are embedded in the stories told in our daily lives. Current racial narratives both accentuate old dilemmas related to race and create new paradoxes in what we may consider a post-racial society. Conversations about race most often appear in the form of dilemmas and disturbing problems. We repeat old stories about racial groups. "You know how white people are? You know how black people are?" Important questions include:

- How can we relinquish our historical grasp of race and, at the same time, embrace a new perspective on racial equality and justice?
- How can we change or transform the current racial dialogues into ones that avoid the common traps, and support individuals, communities and organizations going in a positive, proactive and preferred direction when it comes to race and racial issues?
- How can the dominant culture and narrative be shifted to be more empowering and inclusive toward all citizens' participation and, at the same time, maintain the exclusionary nature of privilege associated with

race and racial categories?

- Can society reject concepts of whiteness and white privilege and still continue to enforce cultural representations of whiteness and white privilege on white and non-white performers?
- Can we maintain a racial society that embraces racial equity and a high level of performance, accountability and fairness?

When racial identity is viewed as reified and fixed, it is often due to a limited knowledge and understanding of race. This viewpoint is made necessary by historical, political and social practices related to the false conception of biological race. Centering a false definition of race in the racial logic of society produces dilemmas and paradoxes necessary to maintain the false construct of race. This resulted in different representations of race having little to do with biological race. Thus, we see racial difference embedded in the structures of society, yet strained to be viewed as non-racial. The limited language and lack of critical conversations about race and racial representations result in a stark and impoverished dialogue about race and racial politics and categories. In this context, the use of dialogue and narrative language has a highly innovative potential.

So what can we do to help facilitate more effective and productive conversations about race and racial representations? How can we move forward in a conversation about a post-racial society? Some answers include:



- Closely listening to ourselves and each other in racial dialogues
- Critically examining the subtle and not-so-subtle articulations of race and culture
- Re-examining the multiple daily narratives on race
- Re-thinking and challenging everyday conclusions based in racial identity
- Broadcasting new and different preferred stories rather than old narratives
- Building strong relationships across racial and cultural boundaries

If we can engage in honest and authentic conversations about race and racial representations we can develop powerful approaches and solutions that will help in bridging the intersection between professional conditions and personal values and actions. By doing so it is possible to co-create new, rich narratives that build bridges and scaffolds from the negative, problem-oriented stories commonly reported about race and culture to the more positive, necessary and preferred stories. Through sharing our stories about race and culture we can enrich, explore and accurately interpret the modern racial landscape and we can develop a more authentic perspective and language about race and identity that can empower us to face the dichotomies, complexity and dilemmas as participants in a post-racial society. Racial and cultural diversity and honest racial and cultural dialogue will be important components in creating a climate for change. Encouraging and supporting a critical dialogue about race and culture, as well as a developing a more flexible, creative and diverse approach to race and racial identity is essential if this society is to actually move toward and function as a post-racial society.

Johnny Lake has lived, worked, studied, taught, administered schools, raised several children and survived intact in the Willamette Valley as an African-American scholar for more than 25 years.

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