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Nothing to add: A Challenge to White Silence in Racial Discussions

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a common dynamic in interracial discussions on race: white silence. Using whiteness theory as the frame, I explicate the common white rationales for silence in discussions of race and challenge each of these rationales from an antiracist framework. These rationales include: "It's just my personality—I rarely talk in groups"; "Everyone has already said what I was thinking"; "I don't know much about race, so I will just listen"; "I don't feel safe / don't want to be attacked, so I am staying quiet"; "I am trying to be careful not to dominate the discussion"; "I don't want to be misunderstood / say the wrong thing / offend anybody"; and "I already know all this." I argue that regardless of the rationale for white silence in discussions of race, if it is not strategically enacted from an antiracist framework, it functions to maintain white power and privilege and must be challenged.

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As unconscious, habits of white privilege do not merely go unnoticed. They actively thwart the process of conscious reflection on them, which allows them to seem nonexistent even as they continue to function (Sullivan, 2006, pp. 5–6).

As a white person involved in national antiracist education in the United States for the last 15 years, I have had the unique opportunity to observe, across time and place, consistent patterns of white engagement in discussions about race. Although like most white people, I have been socialized to avoid explicit racial discussions, years of intentional commitment and practice have enabled me to continually challenge this socialization. On a daily basis, I lead or participate in racial discussions, working with both primarily white groups and cross-racial groups—sometimes alone and sometimes with a co-facilitator of color.[1] My position leading these discussions allows me a kind of concentrated exposure to the discourses and practices taken up in racial dialogues that function to support white domination and privilege ("whiteness"). Although these discourses and practices have been well documented by others (see Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Picca & Feagin, 2008; Pollock, 2004; Trepagnier, 2007), I focus on the group dynamics involved in the production of whiteness in "real time"; the unspoken, unmarked norms and behavioral patterns that bolster the advantageous social position of whites at the expense of people of color.[2]

In cross-racial discussions it is easy to be distracted by white participants who dominate; indeed, facilitators spend a lot of energy strategizing about how to rein these participants in. For example, in the educational film, The Color of Fear (1994), in which a racially diverse group of men discuss racism, the white man who continually dominates the discussion and invalidates the men of color receives the greatest amount of attention in every discussion of the film I have attended. Yet there is another white man in the film who is at the other end of the participation spectrum, one who rarely speaks and has to be asked directly to join in. This participant receives little if any attention following the film, but his role in the discussion is no less racially salient. In this paper, I want to direct our attention to the often neglected end of the participation continuum—white silence—and provide an analysis of and challenge to that silence. Using whiteness theory as the frame, I will explicate the various ways that white silence functions in discussions of race to maintain white privilege, and challenge common white rationales for this silence. These rationales include: "It's just my personality—I rarely talk in groups"; "Everyone has already said what I was thinking"; "I don't know much about race, so I will just listen"; "I don't feel safe / don't want to be attacked, so I am staying quiet"; "I am trying to be careful not to dominate the discussion"; "I don't want to

[1] Of course whites frequently engage in discussions of race, in both implicit and explicit ways, e.g., discourses on "good neighborhoods and schools" and racialized comments and jokes. I am not referring to this form of discussion on race. I am referring to intentional facilitated explorations of our racial socialization, feelings, and perspectives for the purpose of deepening cross-racial awareness, either in all-white or inter-racial groups.

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be misunderstood / say the wrong thing / offend anybody"; and "I don't have anything to add."[3] In so doing, I hope to provide an accessible challenge to silence for white participants in these discussions, regardless of the context in which it may occur—in the classroom, workplace, workshops, or professional development seminars. My goal is to unsettle the complacency that often surrounds this silence and motivate silent whites to break their silence.

Theoretical framework

Although mainstream definitions of racism are typically some variation of individual "race prejudice," which anyone across any race can have, whiteness scholars define racism as encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power among white people and people of color (Hilliard, 1992). This unequal distribution benefits whites and disadvantages people of color overall and at the group level (although individual whites may be "against" racism, they still benefit from a system that privileges their group). Racism is not fluid within the United States in that it does not flow back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting people of color. The direction of power between whites and people of color is historic, traditional, normalized, and deeply embedded in the fabric of U.S. society (Mills, 1999; Feagin, 2001). Whiteness refers to the dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color (DiAngelo, 2006a); whiteness is the relationship of dominance between whites and people of color. This domination is enacted moment by moment on individual, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels (Frankenberg, 2001).

Frankenberg (1997) defines whiteness as multidimensional: "Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (p.1). Race is conceptualized as a constellation of processes and practices rather than as an isolated entity. These processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but that are actually only afforded in any consistent way to white people. Thus, to name whiteness is to refer to a set of relations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and that are intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of white racial domination (Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 1999;; Frankenberg, 2001; Roediger, 2007).

Whiteness is both "empty," in that it is normalized and thus typically unmarked, and content laden or "full," in that it generates norms and reference points, ways of conceptualizing the world, and ways of thinking about oneself and others, regardless of where one is positioned relationally within it (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 2001). This definition counters the dominant representation of racism in mainstream education as isolated in discrete incidents that some individuals may or may not "do," and goes beyond naming specific privileges. Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels. Whites are theorized as actively shaped, affected, defined, and elevated through their racialization, and their individual and collective consciousness formed within it

[3] A special thank you to Anika Nailah and John Kent for invaluable feedback on earlier drafts.

(Thandeka, 2000; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002; Morrison, 1992; Tatum, 1997).

Within the current racial construct, white racial comfort and sense of racial equilibrium are rooted in norms and traditions that uphold relations of inequality; one of these norms is to avoid talking openly about race, especially in mixed-race groups. When white normative taboos against talking directly about race are broken, especially within the context of deliberately challenging the norms that hold racial inequality in place, it is uncomfortable and destabilizing for many whites, and they will seek to regain their comfort and sense of racial stability (DiAngelo, in press). Therefore, whatever moves whites make in a racial discussion that are intended to regain or maintain racial comfort or the racial equilibrium that has been interrupted by the discussion itself necessarily work to maintain traditional racial relations. In this context, when whites employ silence to maintain some degree of comfort, that silence functions (albeit seldom explicitly) as a means to regain white dominance.

Antiracist education

Antiracist educators, like whiteness theorists, conceptualize racism as a multilayered, multidimensional, ongoing, adaptive process that functions to maintain, reinforce, reproduce, normalize, and render invisible white power and privilege. Antiracist education deliberately goes beyond the "celebrating differences" approach common to most diversity training and centers the analysis on the social, cultural, and institutional power that so profoundly shapes the meaning and outcome of racial difference. Antiracism education recognizes racism as embedded in all aspects of society and the socialization process; no one who is born into and raised in Western culture can escape being socialized to participate in these relations (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002). Antiracist education seeks to interrupt these relations of inequality by educating people to identify, name, and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, structures, and institutions that keep racism and white supremacy in place. A key aspect of this education process is to "raise the consciousness" of white people about what racism is and how it works. To accomplish this, the dominant conceptualization of racism as isolated to individual acts that only some (bad) individuals do, rather than as a system we are all enmeshed in, must be countered.

Race is a dynamic and ongoing production; there is no race-neutral space. As Dyer (1997) states, race is "never not a factor, never not in play" (p.1). Focusing on specific incidences of racism rather than on racism as an all-encompassing system makes a personal, interpersonal, cultural, historical, and structural analysis difficult (Macedo & Bartolome, 1999). Using a relational and systematic definition of whiteness and racism allows whites to explore their own relationship to racism and move beyond isolated incidences and/or intentions.

In the following section, I focus on one key way that whiteness is reproduced within the context of antiracist education: white silence. I discuss common white rationales for white silence in discussions of race, and challenge these rationales from an antiracist framework. I acknowledge that silence can, of course, be a constructive mode of white engagement in racial discussions, by differentiating between the temporary and contextual silence that results from active listening and silence as the primary or only mode of engagement.

Overall effects of white silence

In racial dialogue, white silence functions overall to shelter white participants by keeping their racial perspectives hidden and thus protected from exploration or challenge. Not contributing one's perspectives serves to ensure that those perspectives cannot be expanded. While one can, of course, gain deeper understanding through listening, there are several problems with this being one's primary mode of engagement. Listening alone leaves everyone else to carry the weight of the discussion. And, of course, if everyone chose this mode no discussion (and hence no learning) would occur at all. On the other hand, one may have something to say that is insightful and contributes to everyone's learning, but if a lack of confidence can't be overcome, everyone loses.

The role of silent whites is critical to protecting whiteness, for white dominance depends, in part, on the silence of other whites (Mura, 1999; Picca & Feagin, 2007). In the context of particularly difficult discussions, white silence serves to embolden explicitly resistant participants because it establishes that no challenge will be forthcoming, and can even imply agreement. Even if whites who are silent find the behavior of their peers problematic, their silence allows explicitly resistant participants to continually dictate the agenda of the discussion and rally resources around themselves as facilitators (and others) work to move them forward. At the minimum, the resistant participants receive no social penalty from other whites, and the silence effectively maintains white solidarity. Although silent whites might recognize and be troubled by the behavior of some of their white cohorts, they ultimately maintain their white privilege by not contesting this behavior. An internal awareness of whiteness is a necessary start, but if it isn't accompanied by a change in behavior, alliance with whiteness remains intact.

Silence has different effects depending on what move it follows. For example, if white silence follows a story shared by a person of color about the impact of racism on their lives, that silence serves to invalidate the story. People of color who take the social risk of revealing the impact of racism only to be met by white silence are left with their vulnerability unreciprocated. Whites could offer validation, for example, by sharing how the story impacted them, what insight they gained from hearing it, or what questions it raised for them. Conversely, when white silence follows a particularly problematic move made by a white participant, that silence supports the move by offering no interruption; in essence, white silence operates as a normative mechanism for these tactics. When white silence follows a white, antiracist stand (such as challenging one's fellow whites to racialize their perspectives), it serves to isolate the person who took that stand. This isolation is a powerful social penalty and an enticement to return to the comfort of white solidarity. In this context, white silence denies the support that is critical to other whites working to develop antiracist practice.

When is white silence a constructive move in racial dialogue?

White silence, when used strategically from an antiracist framework, can be a constructive move in racial discussions. Indeed, too much white participation simply reinscribes the white dominance and centrality embedded in the larger society. I am arguing that white silence based on the rationale I will discuss in this article is not a constructive move. I am also arguing against white silence as

one's default mode of engagement. What differentiates constructive use of white silence from a reinforcement of white racism is that the person is using his or her best judgment, based in an antiracist framework and at each phase of the discussion, of how to engage with the goal of deepening racial self-knowledge, building antiracist community, and interrupting traditional racist power relations. No one way for whites to engage is likely to be effective in all contexts, but antiracist white engagement asks that one continually grapple with the question of how best to interrupt white power and privilege. The following are generally good times for whites to just listen when in inter-racial groups:

- When people of color are discussing the sensitive issue of internalized racial oppression.
- When one tends to take up a lot of airspace and, in recognition of the history of white dominance, is trying to pull back and have a less dominant voice.
- When other whites have already spoken first and most to an issue in the discussion.
- When intentionally trying not to speak first and most in the discussion.
- When a person of color has spoken and one feels drawn to re-explain, clarify, or "add to" his or her point (and thereby "say it better" and have the last word on the matter).
- When a facilitator asks for whites to just listen, hold back, or not go first.

The above list addresses silence in the context of racially mixed groups. In all-white settings, the dynamics are different because whites are not navigating their relationships to people of color in the group. In the context of all-white groups, white silence functions to pass up the opportunity to explore one's racial perspectives, feelings, blind spots, and assumptions without fear of causing microaggressions[4] to people of color. To not take advantage of a structured discussion in an all-white group prevents community building and antiracist alignment among whites, and fails to support those whites who are actively taking risks and being vulnerable in the pursuit of antiracist growth. In this context, the main reason for white silence should be for periods of personal reflection, to provide time and space for other more reticent whites who need a slower pacing to speak up, and because the person is someone who tends to speak often. These forms of silence can more authentically be seen as active listening.

Rationales for white silence and an antiracist challenge

"It's just my personality; I rarely talk in groups."

Our personalities are not separate from the society in which we were raised. All whites are socialized in a white-dominant society. Seeing one's patterns of engagement as merely a function of a unique personality rather than as sociopolitical and coproduced in relation with social others is a privilege only afforded to white people (McIntosh, 1988). By focusing on ourselves

[4] Microaggressions are the myriad slights that people of color endure on a daily basis, most often from well-intended whites. Consistently being met by white silence in an inter-racial discussion, even when well intended, often functions as a microaggression towards people of color. See Sue et al. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. *American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271–286.

as individuals, whites are able to conceptualize the patterns in our behavior that have a racist impact as "just our personality" and not connected to intergroup dynamics. For example, I might be an extrovert and talk over people when I am engaged in a discussion. I can say, "That is just my personality, I do that to everyone. That is how we talked at the dinner table in my family. And because I do it to everyone, it can't be racism." However, when I talk over a person of color, the impact of that behavior is different because we bring the racial history of our groups with us (DiAngelo, 2006c). While white people tend to see themselves as individuals, people of color tend to see us as white individuals, thus the meaning of cutting off or talking over a person of color is very different. Conversely, remaining silent in an inter-racial dialogue also has a cross-racial impact. Antiracist action requires us to challenge our patterns and respond differently than we normally would (Thompson, 2001). The freedom to remain oblivious to that fact, with no sense that this obliviousness has any consequences of importance, is a form of white privilege. In effect, we are saying, "I will not adapt to you or this context, I will continue to act the way I always act and you will have to adapt to me." Participants of color seldom see themselves as having the option to disengage or withdraw from the discussion based solely on their personal preferences for engagement (DiAngelo, 2010). They understand that dominant culture does not position them as individuals and has a different set of stereotypical expectations for them. If they hold back, they reinforce these expectations, a concern that puts constant pressure on them. Two people of color in a recent cross-racial discussion express these expectations:

RICH (POC): Well, in terms of putting ourselves out there, I think I put myself out there too. But if I was to come into this group and not put myself out there, everybody would look at me kind of strange, because I'm a person of color. So, oh, my god, this person of color is not putting himself out there. What's up with that? This is a dialogue about race; you're supposed to put yourself out there. So, I mean, Tiffany has put herself out there, but I don't know how much Tiffany should be commended—well, I guess she should be commended in the sense that she is like probably the only white person that put herself out there. But I think everybody should be putting themselves out there.

LAURA (POC):. I feel frustrated by the fact that white people can just choose to disengage, where I'm supposed to say something, and like if I don't say something, then I'm the quiet Asian one or something like that. And so, I feel like I need to put myself out there even more just to contradict that. And that gets really tiring to me … to constantly feel like I have to display something, when—even if I don't feel like saying anything; I might want to step back, but I'm conscious all the time of what that looks like to people.

As these two participants make clear, the pressure of being seen as people of color compels them to speak up, even when they don't want to. Not speaking up because one doesn't want to—without penalty—is a privilege they are not afforded; if they remain silent they don't challenge the racism that constricts their lives. Their comments also illustrate the difference in the way white people and people of color often conceptualize themselves. Whites tend to

see themselves as unique individuals and not members of a racial group whose actions represent that group. People of color, who don't have that luxury, want whites to meet them half way—to understand white patterns at the group level and push through the temporary discomfort of not engaging in their "preferred" mode in order to challenge those patterns. Challenging whiteness requires, as Rich expresses above, "putting ourselves out there" and engaging differently in order to break problematic racial dynamics.

"Everyone has already said what I was thinking" or "I don't have much to add."

Perhaps others have expressed our sentiments, but no one will express them the way that we will. It's essential to the discussion to hear everyone's voice, and even vocalizing one or two sentences makes a difference. Further, it is important to support those who have voiced our perspective—to validate it and give people of color a read of the room; they cannot assume everyone has already said what we are thinking. In fact, given the history of harm between white people and people of color, people of color may assume whites haven't spoken because they are not aligned with what has been said and don't want to reveal that misalignment. It is important for us to contribute our thoughts in order to demonstrate to people of color that what they have shared has made a difference in terms of helping increase our understanding. If we are moved or gained insight from what someone shared, we should say so, even if others have also said it.

Sometimes the reticence to speak is based on a perception that those who have expressed similar thoughts are far more articulate, and that we won't be as eloquent. In my experience, openness, humility, and vulnerability are the most important aspects of participation, not perfection. Positioning ourselves as having less of value to contribute than others in the group may be rooted in dominant culture's expectation that knowledge should be a form of "correct" information. Yet sharing what we are thinking, whether "right" or "wrong," articulate or clumsy, is important in terms of building trust, conveying empathy, or validating a story or perspective.

"I am trying to be careful not to dominate the discussion."

While it is important not to dominate discussions in general and, as a white person, not to dominate an inter-racial discussion in particular, the problem with this strategy is that it is inflexible. Antiracist practice asks us to think strategically—to be racially attentive to who is talking, when, how much, and for how long. As a white person in the discussion, we need to ask ourselves when it is a constructive time to speak up and when is it most constructive to just listen. The more practiced we become in racial discussions, the more easily we will be able to make sound strategic judgments about where and when to enter. When we remain silent we leave the weight of the dialogue on either people of color or other, more dominant whites. If these dominant whites are expressing hostility, we aren't challenging them; if they are taking risks, we aren't supporting them. When one is trying not to dominate the discussion and so never joins in, one errs on the opposite side of domination—ineffective passivity.

"I feel intimidated by people in this group who have power over me."

Complex sociopolitical power relations circulate in all groups, and there are other identities besides race at play in any discussion. While one is in a power position as a white person, there are other

identities that may obscure that sense of that power because they position us in a subordinated (or "target") position—i.e., gender or class. Because we "swim against the current" in our target identities, they are generally more salient to us. However, not being salient does not mean inoperative; indeed, much of the power we derive from our dominant identities is in its unremarkable, taken-for-granted status. In a setting in which I feel intimidated because my target identities are more salient to me, this feeling of intimidation may indeed be coming from a place of internalized inferiority. But, in practice, my silence colludes with racism and ultimately benefits me by protecting my white privilege and maintaining racial solidarity with other white people. This solidarity connects and realigns me with white people across other lines of difference that separate us, such as gender or class. When I work to keep my race privilege salient and speak up in this context, I not only break white solidarity, I simultaneously interrupt (and thus work to heal the "lie" of) my internalized inferiority where I am also in a target position.

In situations in which we may share key identities such as race and gender with someone but fear there may be repercussions because he or she holds more power in the specific context than we do—e.g., I am a staff worker and my supervisor is in the room, or the professor who is grading me is in the group—a different kind of courage is needed. This is the courage to put our integrity to do the right thing above the possibility of repercussions. Ultimately, we have to make a decision. Do I protect myself and maintain white solidarity and power, or do I authentically engage in antiracist practice?

"I don't know much about race, so I will just listen."

Dyer (1997) states: "There is a specificity to white representations, but it does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception" (p. 12). One of these narrative structural positions is that of racial innocence. This position functions as a kind of blindness; an inability to think about whiteness as an identity or as a "state" of being that would or could have an impact on one's life, and thus be a source of meaning. Because whites are socially positioned as individuals, or "just people" (the writer, the man, the friend) while people of color are always positioned as members of a racial group (the Latino writer, the Asian man, the black friend) we have the privilege of seeing ourselves as outside of race and thus unfamiliar with it (DiAngelo, 2006c). The white claim that one does not know much about race is particularly problematic because, while it positions whiteness as "innocence," it simultaneously reinforces the projection of race onto people of color—they have race, not us, and thus are the holders of racial knowledge. In so doing, we position ourselves as standing outside of hierarchical social relations—as if the oppression of people of color occurs in a vacuum. White obliviousness is not benign; it has material consequences because it allows us to ignore the impact of racism on people of color while enjoying its benefits at their expense.

Many whites have not thought about race in the way that antiracist education conceptualizes it, but once we are introduced, it's important to share our thoughts. If I have never thought about these issues before, what am I thinking about them now as a result of the discussion? What specifically is new to me? What questions

do I have? What insights am I having? What emotions am I feeling? Why might I have never thought about these things before, and what role might this play in keeping racism in place? In other words, how might racism depend on white people not thinking about these issues? Being new to the concepts is not an end point or a pass to only listen and not speak; it is a key entry point into the discussion and into furthering self-knowledge.

While as white people we may not have thought explicitly about race from an antiracist perspective, we do have knowledge of how we are socialized into denial of ourselves as racialized. We can speak to why we believe we don't know anything about race—for example, if we don't know much about it, who do we believe does and why do they have this knowledge when we do not? Further, why have we not sought out this knowledge prior to this conversation? Many white people who grew up in segregated neighborhoods and attended segregated schools with primarily white teachers often believe that they were completely unaware of race until later in childhood. I have found a series of reflection questions helpful at unpacking this belief: At what age was I aware that people of color existed, and black people in particular? (Most whites acknowledge that they knew by age five, if not earlier.) What was I told about them? Where did they live? Why did they live there and not in my neighborhood? What was it like where they lived? Was it considered nice and was I encouraged to go to the places where they lived? Was I taught that I had lost anything by their absence? If I was not taught I had lost anything by not knowing people of color, what has that meant for my relationships with them? While these questions were not likely explicitly addressed in childhood, somehow we had to make sense of our racially segregated worlds. Explorations such as these have the potential to reveal our racial paradigms, an essential precursor to antiracist action; they are a great place to start engaging in the discussion without depending on people of color to teach us.

"I already know all this."

While the previous rationale positions the listener as racially innocent and thus only able to absorb the discussion, this rationale positions the listener as so sophisticated as to be beyond the discussion. This claim gives the message to the people of color in the group that there is nothing to be gained from what they might share—their stories, experiences, perspectives, or feelings. This claim is particularly problematic because it conveys superiority; reinscribing the historical invalidation of people of color as not having any knowledge of value to white people, elevating oneself above other whites in the group and the potential to work together with them against racism, and accomplishing all of this by presenting oneself as so advanced as to be beyond the discussion.

The antiracist framework undergirding these discussions holds that racism is a deeply embedded, complex system that will not end in our lifetimes, and certainly not end through our complacency. If one sincerely believes one's understanding of racism is more advanced than the discussion allows for (which can happen when the majority of the white participants are very new to the concepts and the facilitators assess that they must move at a slower pace), then the antiracist way to engage is to make strategic points that will help guide the other white people. Whites who have more knowledge than the majority of the group are in an excellent position to "mentor from the sidelines."

They can share their process and how they came to their current understanding, validate the struggle while reinforcing its worthiness, take the discussion deeper, and back up the facilitators and participants of color.

We may have an intellectual grasp of the dynamics, but awareness of racial inequity alone is not enough to trump our participation. White people, while served well by the dynamics of whiteness, are simultaneously in a prime position to interrupt it, yet to do so we must take unambiguous action. Claiming that we already know is meaningless without demonstration of that knowledge, and remaining silent is not a demonstration of antiracist action or understanding. People of color involved in antiracist endeavors generally assume that all whites have a racist perspective unless demonstrated otherwise (Sue, 2003; hooks, 1995). To not explicitly take up an antiracist stance in such a context can only reinforce the perception that we are actively choosing to align with whiteness. Being "advanced" is not a reason for us to disengage; the disengagement itself makes the claim unconvincing.

"I need time to process."

In my experience, participants who use this rationale seldom return after processing and share the results, suggesting that this may be a deflection against "putting ourselves out there," rather than an expression of a sincere difference in how people process information. We may indeed need time to process, but taking the time we need is still a privilege not everyone can afford. At the minimum, we can try articulating what we are hearing that we need to process, and then let the group know that these are new ideas, that we are feeling overwhelmed, and we want to let things settle in. At the minimum, we can let the group know why we need the time to process and what we will be processing, rather than remain silent and leave others to wonder. When we have had time to process, we can share the results with the group.

It's also helpful to distinguish between the need to process and the need to sound controlled, correct, and coherent. If composure is what we are waiting for, we are working at cross-purposes to the discussion. Emotions, confusion, inner conflict, and inarticulation are all usually welcome in racial discussions. Vulnerability and openness build trust, and while thoughtfulness and respect are critical, control and composure are not necessary and can be counterproductive.

"I don't want to be misunderstood."

To not speak up in case we are misunderstood is to protect our perspective from deepening or expanding. It is not possible, given the embeddedness of racism in the culture, for white people not to have problematic racial assumptions and blind spots. Of course, it is uncomfortable and even embarrassing to see that we lack certain forms of knowledge, but we can't gain the knowledge we lack if we don't take risks. It is imperative that we enter the discussion with a willingness (even enthusiasm) to have our assumptions uncovered so we can increase our knowledge and cross-racial skills, for how will we realize that we have misconceptions and only a partial view if we don't share our views and open them up to exploration?

When whites do feel misunderstood in a racial discussion, it is usually because we were given feedback on an assumption we made or a blind spot we have in our racial awareness. Sadly, pointing out gaps in a white person's understanding is often experienced as being attacked or judged. When we insist that the issue is that we were

misunderstood, rather than engage with the possibility that we are the ones who don't understand the feedback we have received, we close ourselves off to further learning. By insisting that the problem is that we have been misunderstood, we place the responsibility for the "misunderstanding" onto those who we believe have misunderstood us—usually the participants of color. There is no opening in this position for the possibility that the lack of understanding could be ours. If we are unable or unwilling to consider this possibility, or the corollary possibility that people of color might have information that we do not, we cannot gain new insight into how racism functions. If the only way one will engage in cross-racial discussion is to never be challenged, there is minimal point to the discussion.

"I don't feel safe."
Sub-discourses: "I don't want to be attacked." "I don't want to be judged."

The safety discourse, while one of the most familiar and understandable, is also one of the most problematic. On the surface it conveys a kind of vulnerability and desire for protection. Unfortunately, it rests on a lack of understanding of historical and ongoing institutional, cultural, and interpersonal power relations between white people and people of color. While the feelings may be real for white people struggling with a sense of safety, some reflection may help clarify the difference between actual safety and what is more realistically a concern about comfort. To help differentiate safety from comfort, one might ask what safety means from a position of social, cultural, historical, and institutional power? If one does not fear that one is in actual physical harm, then some reflection on what one fears is actually at risk can offer much insight. Often, it is our self-image: Because we have been taught that only bad people participate in racism, we often fear that if it is somehow revealed that we participate in racism, we will lose face and be judged. Indeed, many white people feel very uncomfortable in racial discussions, but this discomfort is actually a positive sign, for it indicates that the status quo (unnamed and unexamined racism) is being challenged. It is therefore critical that we feel uncomfortable and not confuse discomfort with danger. As for being judged, there is no human objectivity—all people judge and we cannot protect ourselves from judgments in any context. But feeling judged, while dismaying, should not be confused with safety.

Further, the language of safety is not without significance in this context. By employing terms that connote physical threat, we tap into the classic discourse of people of color (particularly African Americans) as dangerous and violent. This discourse twists the actual direction of danger that exists between whites and people of color. The history of extensive and brutal violence perpetrated by whites; slavery, genocide, lynching, whipping, forced sterilization, and medical experimentation, to mention a few, is trivialized when we claim we don't feel safe or are under attack when in the rare situation of merely talking about race with people of color. By implying potential victimization, we obscure the power and privilege we wield and have wielded for centuries. The safety discourse also illustrates how fragile and ill equipped most white people are to confront racial tensions, and our subsequent projection of this tension onto people of color (DiAngelo, 2006b; Morrison, 1992). People of color seldom have the luxury of withdrawing because they don't feel safe. It doesn't benefit people of color to remain silent, as it does us. To not put themselves "out there" makes them complicit in their

own oppression, as Rich and Laura express above. If people of color are not self-advocating and pushing back against whiteness, they can't depend on white people to do it for them, as has been amply demonstrated time and again in racial discussions—often via white silence. While the pushing back we might get from people of color can be very uncomfortable, that discomfort is a key way to unsettle our world views and create the stretching and growing that is necessary for authentic change.

"I don't want to offend anybody."

Similar to "I don't want to be misunderstood," this rationale allows one to protect oneself against alternative perspectives, responses, constructive conflict, or taking the risks that could potentially expand one's awareness. This rationale is unfair to people of color because, if we fear offending, it can only be assumed that is because we are having offensive thoughts or are hostile toward what is being said. If this is the case, to not put our disagreement into the room is to deny the group knowledge of where we are coming from and the ability for others to make any adjustments they might need in response to our hostility. If we are not hostile to what is being said but just worried that we may inadvertently offend someone, how will we learn that what we think or say is offensive if we don't share it and open ourselves up to feedback? In effect, by not taking this intentional opportunity to discover which ideas we hold are offensive, we protect these ideas and enable them to surface at a later date and offend someone else. In the unique and often rare learning environment of racial discussions, to remain silent so as not to offend is to offend twice—once through our silence and again in our unwillingness to discover and change racially problematic dimensions in our thinking. If unsure, we can simply offer our thoughts with openness and humility rather than as declarations of certainty or truth: "Please let me know if something is off in my thinking, but here is how I am responding to this … " Can you help me understand why … ?" "I have often heard … what are your thoughts on that?"

"Anything I say won't be listened to because I am white."

At the point that this discourse emerges, we have usually been challenged in the way we conceptualize race—either directly or via the content of the dialogue, and we are unable to rise to that challenge. Clearly we have not understood the objectives of the discussion or the theoretical framework that it rests on: There is a relationship of unequal power between white people and people of color that all of us have been taught to collude in, but that only white people benefit from. One way that antiracist education tries to interrupt this relationship is by acknowledging the power differential and affirming the perspectives of those whose voices dominant society seldom hears or validates (Schiele, 2000). In turn, challenging white perspectives is necessary because the way that dominant culture understands race actually functions to hold racism in place. The issue is not that we won't be listened to because we are white; the issue is that—counter to what we are accustomed to—our perspectives will be challenged at times and are not going to be affirmed just because we are white.

A note on the silence of people of color in racial discussions

Although this analysis is limited to a white person addressing white silence in racial discussions, I would be remiss if I did not at least raise the issue of the silence of people of color and offer some preliminary

thoughts. First, as should be clear via my argument thus far, the silence of whites has a very different foundation and impact than the silence of people of color, based on the unequal positioning of the two groups in society; these silences are not equivalent. For Laura and Rich, quoted above, silence is generally not an option. However, there are several key reasons why people of color, including Laura and Rich, may at times choose silence in a racial discussion, including: (1) in response to resistance or hostility expressed (consciously or not) by white participants (this unconscious expression of hostility could include silence based on many of the reasons discussed above); (2) a lack of trust based on well-founded experience that one will be penalized for challenging white perspectives; (3) a sense of hopelessness in the face of white denial; (4) taking risks and being vulnerable about ones racial experiences and perspectives and being met with silence, argumentation, or rationalization, all of which function as forms of invalidation; (5) being out-numbered in ratio to white people and assessing that there are no allies present for support were one to challenge white privilege; or (6) being acutely aware of the power differentials and choosing to protect oneself in the face of inevitable hurt.

It is important to keep in mind that so much of how white racism operates is invisible to and/or denied by white people; a room that seems perfectly comfortable to white people may not feel that way to people of color. In fact, given white racism as the status quo, the more comfortable a space is for white people, the more likely it is to be harmful to people of color. Further (and especially for well-intended whites) because we are deeply invested materially, psychically, socially, and politically as the producers and beneficiaries of white privilege, the very behaviors we think are benign or even supportive (as I have argued above) may be the very behaviors that are so toxic to people of color. Adding to these roots of our denial, our very identities as good people rests on our not seeing our racism. As Sullivan (2006) states, "As unconscious habit, white privilege operates as nonexistent and actively works to disrupt attempts to reveal its existence" (pp. 1–2.). In other words, whites work hard not to see white privilege, which is a key way we keep it protected and intact. In this context, it should be clear why people of color might choose silence.

In conclusion

It may be clear at this point that much of the rationale for white silence is based on a racial paradigm that posits racism as isolated to individual acts of meanness (McIntosh, 1988) that only some people do. This dominant paradigm of racism as discreet, individual, intentional, and malicious acts makes it unlikely that whites will see our silence as a function of, and support to, racism and white privilege.

To challenge one's most comfortable patterns of engagement in a racial dialogue, while it may be counterintuitive, is necessarily to interrupt one's racial socialization. From an antiracist perspective, we can assume that our racial socialization has not prepared us to be competent in cross-racial relationship building. Although consistent silence in racial discussions often feels benign to those who practice it, in this paper I have argued that no form of white engagement that is not informed by an antiracist perspective is benign. Going against one's "grain" for engagement, while difficult, is necessary and will result in the least harmful and most authentic and rewarding engagement. A white student expresses this powerfully in a class-assigned

journal entry. In response to a person of color in the class sharing the impact of a recent racist incident, she writes:

> As Jane finished speaking, and I raised my hand, I became completely overwhelmed by the enormity of what she had said. I was terrified that anything that I said would seem trivial or, even more frightening, would make things worse. I felt paralyzed by the moment, feeling in my stomach how utterly raw and open Jane seemed—but my need to speak, to address what she had said, despite the probability that I would mess it up, was greater than my guilt or my shame or my desire to remain quiet. I realized that the notion that I can make it worse—that I do have that power—requires that I speak. I realized that, in our silence, we are complicit. In my silence for the past four weeks of this course—and for a lifetime before it—I have been complicit. I no longer feel comfortable letting my silence speak for me—it is inarticulate and offensive. I would rather blunder along than stay silent. I hope the people around me, who witness my blundering, can see beyond the errors … because remaining silent—maintaining my complicity—is no longer conscionable (Student Journal, July 5, 2009).

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