



## Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race

By Derald Wing Sue (Wiley, 2015)

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### What are the main ideas?

*The main ideas of the book are:*

- ~ People from all backgrounds find it difficult to talk about race, albeit for different reasons.
- ~ Talking about race can be uncomfortable and difficult, but these conversations are necessary and can be effective if appropriately facilitated.

### Why would a school leader want to read this?

Whether your school's demographics have been shifting, or you have a teaching staff that is mostly white while your students are predominately of color, or your students of color are graduating at a lower rate than your white students, the impact of race and racism permeates our education systems. Identifying these inequities and their root causes, and then addressing them, requires having real honest conversations about race. School leaders play a crucial role in creating a school culture in which these conversations can happen in both staff meetings and classrooms. However, as author Derald Wing Sue, professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, writes in *Race Talk*, these conversations are hard for both white people and people of color, but in different ways and for different reasons.

In this enlightening and practical book, Sue shares some of his extensive research on race conversations and offers real-world stories of how they sound in different situations and among different groups of people, helping readers understand the perspectives of people different from themselves. He explains that "racial microaggressions," which he defines as the everyday slights, insults, indignities and invalidations made toward people of color because of their visible racial characteristics, make conversations about race particularly difficult. A microaggression can cause a person of color to shut down, while a white person might be unaware of the insult he just made.

Dr. Sue provides practical strategies for becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable in race conversations and offers insights into how white people and people of color can engage in these hard conversations in ways that move the discussion, and our society, forward. A school leader can use this book for his own growth as an anti-racist leader as well as for professional learning with his team. This text has been essential for me both personally and professionally. As a designer and facilitator of equity-focused professional learning for school and school system leaders, I have used *Race Talk* to prepare for race-based conversations as well as for reflection after facilitating race-based conversations. It has helped me pinpoint missteps I might have made that caused a conversation to go differently than I had planned.

### **Section 1 – The Characteristics, Dynamics and Meaning of Race Talk**

Dr. Sue opens the book by defining “race talk” and delving into its complex dynamics and how white people and people of color perceive and engage in these conversations. To help readers develop a common language for race talk, he offers key terminology such as “white privilege,” “colorblindness,” and “backtalk.”

#### *Suggestions for professional learning*

- Pull out the key vocabulary and discuss and debate the book’s definitions as a way for your team members to come to their own understanding of the vocabulary and the common language that your team can use for discussing race.
- Select one or two vignettes and ask your team to read them. Then break the team into small groups to discuss the stories and answer the questions provided in the book. These are likely to spur some rich conversation.

### **Section 2 – The Constraining Ground Rules for Race Talk**

These two chapters examine why society has pushed up against race talk and why it has become taboo for a lot of us to talk about race. Dr. Sue dives into the concepts of “colorblindness” and the “melting pot” and how so many of us were raised to believe that it is better to be colorblind than to talk about race. Through his vignettes and research, he shows that colorblindness actually inhibits our ability to talk about race and prevents us from seeing, valuing, and understanding differences. He also discusses how meritocracy, the idea that we can all succeed if we just work hard, contributes to our avoiding conversations about race.

#### *Suggestions for professional learning*

- Use this section to make some personal connections. Consider how you were raised -- How, if at all, did you interact with people different from yourself, and how have those early interactions affected how you interact with others now? How do the ways you interact with people of different races align or not with concepts of colorblindness and the melting pot? How and when do you engage in race conversations personally and professionally? Do your race conversations change depending on the race of the people you are talking with? How, if at all, has your perspective on race evolved over time?

### **Sections 3 and 4 – Why is it difficult for people of color to honestly talk about race? Why is it hard for white people to talk about race?**

Dr. Sue takes the time to unpack the white and person of color perspectives and communication styles, examining where our fears and concerns about talking about race come from. These chapters offer language for sharing your perspectives.

In Section 3, focused on people of color, he addresses the questions, “What are the consequences of being honest and transparent in our race conversations with people of a different race? Will we be misunderstood or seen as angry?” He also looks at how power plays into these conversations. In Section 4, he examines the white person’s perspective, the fear of not wanting to be perceived as unknowledgeable or racist.

#### *Suggestions for professional learning*

- Create race affinity groups within your team and encourage each group to unpack the chapters about their own race. Each group can discuss together the challenges in talking about race.
- Then facilitate across-race conversations about the challenges of race talk.

## Section 5 – Race talk and special group considerations

In these two chapters, Dr. Sue brings together the two sections about race talk among white people and people of color, looking more closely at the challenges of both interracial and intra-racial conversations. He talks about colorism, internalized racism, male-female interactions, and breaks down nicely how different groups of color have had challenges interacting with each other. He introduces the idea of “divide and conquer,” and how society has pitted some people of color against each other.

In Chapter 11, he breaks down the idea of “nonracist” and “antiracist.” Some people are pushing themselves to be antiracist and how that can create conflict within white populations.

### *Suggestions for professional learning*

- If you have a diverse staff, unpack how these dynamics are playing out among your team. If you don’t have a diverse team, focus on your team’s interactions with and treatment of your students. How are you supportive and understanding of students’ backgrounds? How can you have conversations with your students about race and its impact?

## Section 6 – Guidelines, conditions and solutions for having honest racial dialogues

This section offers concrete strategies for how, as a teacher, parent, or facilitator, you can lead effective conversations on race without shutting down discussion or causing more harm than good. In Chapter 12, Dr. Sue explains why it is important to take on these conversations. Chapter 13 outlines and offers examples of things to do and not do in race conversations and very helpfully juxtaposes successful and unsuccessful dialogues to help illustrate what works and what doesn’t. This chapter is particularly useful to reference after engaging in race talk, to help you assess why aspects of your conversation did not go well.

### *Suggestions for professional learning*

- This section offers a clear toolkit for thinking and preparing for race-related conversations with staff or students.

## Additional Materials

- Teenage girls describe microaggressions they have experienced: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/8RfwnibEd3A?autoplay=1&controls=1&hd>
- The company P&G produced a short film to display the struggles of black men to promote its diversity efforts, “The Look.” <https://adage.com/creativity/work/pg-goes-talk-look-illustrate-unconscious-bias-plagues-black-men/2179996>
- Devine, P.G., Forscher, P.S., Austin, A.J., & Cox, W.T. (2012). Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(6), 1267-1278 provide concrete strategies for counteracting microaggressions.
- In her blog “[The Racially Responsive Facilitator](#),” Mary Rice-Boothe offers clear guidance for facilitating conversations about race.
- The NYC Leadership Academy’s [Equity at Work](#) tool offers school and school system leaders a guide for equity-focused strategic planning. <https://www.nycleadershipacademy.org/resources/equity-at-work-strategic-action-planning-guide/>