

**U.S. College Students' Norms in Communicating about Race**

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Recently, a white professor reported on a discussion she had had with her students about Band-Aids. "Why aren't there any black or brown Band-Aids?" the professor said. "Don't Black people want Band-Aids that match their skin color?" (Herakova, Jelac, Sibii, & Cooks, 2011, p. 378). I had never thought about this. However, this Band-Aid example exposed to me the existence of racism in U.S. society and made me think about the openness of race talk on campus.

I grew up in China where racial topics are not a main issue to people. The limited ways for me to gain knowledge of racial problems in the United States were reading American history books and watching films. Moreover, my American friends and professors have shown me that there are many taboos when talking about race. For example, people should not talk about race in certain situations and should avoid inappropriate comments when talking to people from different racial groups. I learned this when a friend warned me against sending a text message to a black friend wishing her "Happy Martin Luther King Day." I found these taboos difficult to navigate when people believe that race no longer matters in a "post-racial," post-Obama era. (Herakova et al., 2011).

This paper will review current research on race talk by exploring and analyzing the following questions: How is U.S. college students' willingness to communicate shaped by their racial identities and contexts of interaction? What are the contexts they will talk about when they touch on race talk? And to what extent are they impeded by *de facto* segregation?

### **Race Talk on Campus**

Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Sale (1999) defined race talk as "a complex articulation of

arguments that blend egalitarian and tolerant views with discriminatory and prejudiced ones” (p. 97). This definition can be interpreted as an intense interaction, which involves a two-way communication strategy. Effective race talk integrates both moderate views and extreme statements, which allows people to express their opinions and emotions on race relatively freely. However, Sue (2013) states that race talk usually stimulates negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, blame, and defensiveness, which will turn the conversation into a monologue on defending the racial group that the speakers stand for. Other consequences of race talk can be silence or stronger racial bias. Race talk between interracial groups is risky since it exposes participants to an unpredictable environment, and the low level of “communication satisfaction” on race talk can also cause avoidance (Cargile, 2010; Buttny, 1997).

Even though there are negative effects of race talk, many scholars and schools encourage openness regarding race talk on campus. The openness of talking about race on campus reflects one group or an individual’s attitude on racial issues; it also reflects prevailing campus climates. Orfield & Whitley (1999) found that the racially diverse campus climate benefits students’ subjective assessment by their interacting with their peers from various racial groups. Other research also supported the idea of encouraging more racial interactions and race talk on campus. Living on-campus and participating in racial or cultural activities has a positive impact on students’ openness toward racial and cultural diversity (Sanner, Baldwin, Cannella, Charles, & Parker, 2010). For example, at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), there is a program called Conversation Partners, which aims to match international students with local students to promote more interactions among students from different cultures. This program creates freedom to talk about race by helping people of different races establish friendships. Conversations about race at universities are reenacted daily in classrooms and extend to places of

employment and any situation where race becomes the focus (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

### **The Voice of Race Talk**

Presently, universities hold events celebrating students of color's cultures and traditions, giving students of color more chances to express themselves. For example, UTSA offers Fiesta celebration week, Asian Festival Day, and Black Heritage Month to learn about history and discuss current issues. Additionally, UTSA occasionally invites speakers to share their ideas about race, which encourages students of color to express their needs and opinions. During race talk happening around the country, Asian, Latino, Native American, and African American students tend to share their thoughts, experiences, and emotions about being minority students in white majority universities (Herakova et al., 2011). The continuance of this race talk reveals that race is still relevant.

However, other research indicates that when students of color talk about race, silence and talking exists at the same time. For instance, Covarrubias (2008) found that students of color consider teachers' lack of response to race talk to be supportive of racism and white privilege. This study demonstrates that reactions to race talk are complex for students of color. This comment is supported by research done by Sue et al. (2009), which found that students of color concentrate on their own identities more than white students do. When whites avoid race talk, students of color perceive such avoidance as racial microaggressions. This study provides an illustration of the outlooks prevalent among racial minority students.

### **The Silence of Race Talk**

Unlike most students of color, white students balk at talking about race. Based on my experience attending an American history class and an intercultural communication class, most

white students showed extreme silence during the class discussions on the history of slavery or racial issues in American society. They never tried to defend their own racial identities during the race talk either. White students tend to be cautious and reticent talking about race with students from different racial groups (Buttny, 1997). Similar statements from other researchers also reflect the limited feedback from white students on race talk. Herakova (2011) observed, “as educators, we often found this colorblind sentiment echoed in our classrooms. At a predominantly white university, where, in our experience, most White students had for years resisted discussions of their own racial identities, silence now had the perceived blessing of the most powerful position of the land” (p. 373). As Herakova noted, keeping silent is a priority choice for white students when they encounter racial topics. For example, several white students in my intercultural communication class chose to sit in the back of the class and always kept a low profile.

It is important to examine why white students fall silent when they encounter race talk. Sue (2013) has analyzed that the most important reason is their fears. Most white students are afraid to realize their racism, to confront their white privilege in front of other students. White students seem face more pressures during race talk than students of color. These pressures come from historical issues, stereotypes, politeness protocol, and public opinions. Politeness protocols have inhibited white students from talking about race openly (Sue, 2013).

Previous literature has focused on the characteristics of race talk, the importance of race talk on campus, and the issues between white students and students of color. Many articles show the negative impact of race talk as a trigger as well as the positive effects of race talk as a catalyst for creating an open campus climate. Having a racially diverse campus that promotes openness is important to talking honestly about race. As suggested earlier, researchers, to date,

have concluded that students of color tend to play more active roles during the race talk than white students. White students usually tend to be silent and avoidant because they have fears of admitting their own identities and showing their white privilege.

Even though prior research has focused on race talk from various perspectives, there are still gaps about the contexts on race talk between students in cross-racial interpersonal communication. This study aims to understand how U.S. American college students communicate about race, especially in interracial interactions. For example, how is students' willingness to communicate shaped by their racial identities and contexts of interaction? What kinds of contexts enable such conversations and to what extent are they impeded by *de facto* segregation?

### **Method**

I interviewed 11 students from diverse racial and gender groups. The shortest interview lasted 20 minutes and the longest interview lasted 60 minutes. Of the 11 participants I spoke with, six were male and five were female, three were Hispanic, two were white, two were black, and one was Asian. The rest of the participants were mixed race. All the participants are current college students, and they ranged in ages from 19 to 31. Among the participants, four of them had taken or were currently taking race-related classes on campus. Two of them are very active on racial justice issues. For example, one Hispanic interviewee and one black interviewee had leadership positions in the Black Lives Matter student organization.

All the participants are students at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). Texas is a majority-minority state in the U.S, and the Hispanic/Latino population in this area is over 1,400,000 in 2016. UTSA, the largest state university in the city, is a Hispanic-Serving Institution. According to the student demographic survey, only 27.6% of all students are White-

Non-Hispanic (UTSA, 2014).

Grounded Theory was applied to conducting and analyzing the interviews. The Grounded Theory is an inductive method. It is used for developing empirically grounded theories by simply starting with a question or the collection of the data. It requires researchers to find the relationships between data and categories. The use of Grounded Theory brings researchers new ideas and surprises (Charmaz, 2006).

Three steps were used to analyze data. First, I transcribed all the interview recordings in Microsoft Word. I played the recordings several times and read through my transcripts to ensure the accuracy of transcriptions. I intentionally marked the change of my participants' tones and the special pauses and paid extra attention to their non-verbal language.

Next, I conducted open, axial, and closed coding by identifying themes, organizing them into categories, and finding relationships among them, as advised by Mackey and Gass (2012) and Keyton (2006).

### **Findings**

The interviews show that during race talk, there are huge misunderstandings between students of color and white students on different topics. Participants' perceptions about race talk revealed several main themes. First, environmental forces and educational backgrounds shaped participants' perceptions on race talk. Second, the lack of mutual communication on racism causes misunderstandings between students of color and white students about each other's racial identities and racial problems. The misunderstandings are based on three aspects: (1) perceptions of white privilege, (2) attitudes about colorblindness, and (3) willingness to engage in race talk. Third, both inner struggles and outside forces, such as the social structure (*de facto* segregation) and the power relations (system), impeded students' talk about race.

### **Education Background**

Education is one of the key factors that shape one's opinions about racism. For students of color whom I interviewed, their parents' fear about racism largely drove them to learn the "truth" of racism. Especially with the development of technology, students nowadays not only rely on educational institutions to learn about racial justice issues, but they also use different ways to achieve a racial education. That is, students tend to collect information and learn about racial oppression from different resources and perspectives they viewed on social media. They are more used to self-education by searching racial topics, sharing comments, and learning about others' comments through the internet.

### **Family Environment**

Environmental factors play an important role in shaping one's perceptions about race talk. I found that white students and students of color came to college with different orientations on interracial communication.

Most students of color in the sample had grown up in conservative families where their parents taught them to mind their own business and keep their head down. However, these students became very active about racially related issues, especially when they entered college. A Latino student, "Jose," said, "We are part of a minority as well. So, it's like we are at risk of these problems too. . . We are seeing it as a sad problem going on, where we could all be the victims too one day." Those physical and psychological fears, concerns, and anger drive the minority students to care more about racial issues than white students and take actions to solve the problem.

In contrast, white students in the sample said that their parents rarely talked about racial problems. Although some of them said that their parents had intentionally sent them to racially



diverse high schools, students were not active about racial issues until after they entered college. White students' parents were abstract about racial issues in the U.S., white students learned to be politically correct, respect others, and accept different cultures. They are barely involved in the discussion of racial issues directly.

### **Institutional education.**

A study by Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen (1996) showed that the racial diversity of colleges with a positive multicultural climate and diversity programming has a crucial impact on student's college experience and their perceptions. A relatively positive college climate provides students with opportunities to be engaged in racial justice issues.

In my study, most students of color believed that they have a relatively free environment to talk about race on campus because the university encourages and fully supports race-related student organizations. However, the participants suggest that the school should offer more race-related classes on campus to any students who are interested in this topic. Currently, the lack of race-related classes limits systematic study about race and constraints students' opportunities to talk about race. The students interviewed indicated that academic racial study courses can help students to better understand their own and others' racial identities to achieve mutual understanding. Most importantly, the academic class setting is relatively safe for students to discuss racial issues and break the restrictive chains of not conversing about political, racial, or religious topics in public.

Other than class settings, instructors play crucial roles in facilitating students' discussion. However, the participants in the sample thought that most professors did not value racial education and intentionally avoid it in class. A black student named "Denzel" said, "UTSA has very diverse programs, very diverse groups of people, types of people to have conversations like

this. But outside of that, we have a more *mainstream academic curriculum*.” The professors show avoidance, ignorance, and fear of teaching or discussing racial oppression in class. As previously noted, students that I interviewed believe universities should add more race-related courses, set a better racial climate on campus, and encourage students to have an open dialogue with their professors over racial issues. A Hispanic student, “Jose,” said, “I think it comes to people who are in power, who made the rules. At school, like teachers and leaders. They need to talk about this stuff for sure.”

### **Self-education and social media.**

As noted above, students of color in the sample could only get limited information about racial oppression from their parents. Most of them tend to research racial topics online. Self-education largely formed students' perceptions of racism and challenged the conservative beliefs of their parents. A successful self-education is a process of self-awakening. Some students of color experienced a self-awakening about their racial identity especially after entering college. They became more accepting of and comfortable with their racial identity. Regarding labels, for example, “Nikki” said, “When I was younger, I preferred black. Because I thought I am not African. I was born in America. . . But I think now I tend to lean a little more towards African American because I have *pride* in that African heritage that I didn't have before.”

Social media became Nikki's main tool to achieve self-education. Social media has not only changed people's way to communicate, but also changed their way of thinking. Social media allows millennials to educate themselves on the topics in which they are interested. Students I interviewed emphasized that social media plays a crucial role in opening their eyes, helping them practice critical thinking on racial topics and driving them to face racism openly. Also, social media provides cyber citizens a relatively safe and fair place to talk about

discrimination they experience in real life.

As one white student said when asked about how often he talks about race, "When Black Lives Matter started popping up, we talked about it almost daily. [Race talk] usually starts out when somebody brings up the topic based on something due on Facebook. Usually, it gets more emotional and angry," a mixed (White and Asian) student named "Jimmy" said.

In addition, social media provides more details and various perspectives than traditional news outlets when racial oppression happens. Students consider reading the comments and discussing racial topics on social media as a self-learning process as well. Since social media is not limited by time and space, unlike traditional TV news, it provides follow-up stories and in-depth perspectives to readers. Its contents are relatively informative about racial oppression, especially when news such as police brutality, comes out.

Last, social media provides a relatively safe public sphere for students to express their thoughts about racism. One student who rarely talks about race often in real life, says she would use social media more to educate others about racial oppression.

Social media, however, sometimes is biased, which is another factor that drives students of color to educate others about race. A black student, "Denzel," said, "Because if I don't tell them what is like to be to be black, they are going to think that being black means other things, which are the stereotypes from hip-hop, bad reality TV shows. They are going to think the stereotypes are right. . . But that's how you find out the white people who *want* to learn and the people who *need* to learn."

White students that I interviewed told me that social media is their main resource of race talk. They have experienced self-education on racial topics through the internet as well.

However, they would rather keep silent in a real-life conversation even though they are exposed

to the diverse cultural environment. The purpose for them to learn from others was mainly about self-investment. Unlike the students of color, white students in the sample did not intend to educate others about racial justice. They mainly worried that other people would put a “racist” tag on them if they said anything wrong.

Students of color, on the contrary, tend to be more willing to educate others about racial oppression. They are active in race-related student organizations to educate people about racism through tabling or other events. They believe that educating other people will arouse people’s attentions on racial oppression. A biracial participant, “Kayla,” said “I think everyone needs to learn about it (racism) and think where I stand.”

### **White Privilege and Power Relations**

One difficulty for communication about race concerned the concept of white privilege, Kendall (2012) explained, “Privilege, particularly white or male privilege, is hard to see for those of us who were born with access to power and resources. It is very visible for those to whom privilege was not granted” (p. 1). LeBlanc and Smart (2005) noted that “although extremely complex, with numerous facets and ramifications, white privilege is based primarily on three basic elements: power, privilege, and perception” (p.13).

Based on my study, most white students in the sample admit the existence of “white privilege” in U.S. society. However, they tried to interpret “white privilege” in various ways. White students believe that they share the rights that everyone has in this country. Even though a white student named Tom acknowledged that white privilege exists, he would prefer to call that privilege a “lack of bias”: In his words, “Instead of privilege, I probably have to say the lack of bias, which is a different angle to look from.”

Different from white students, students of color in the sample believe that white people in

U.S. society enjoy more privileges than the minority groups. Currently, minority people would experience more *de facto* discrimination than white people regarding slander, inappropriate actions, and psychological attacks.

In modern society, power relations contribute a set of social and racial inequalities due to conflicts of interest. Social hierarchy determines the distribution of power in American society. Based on my participants' reflection, ascendant groups, such as white groups, have an interest in sustaining the economic, political, and social power that they originally exploited. Since many people in the important leaderships positions in the country are white, they automatically create a system that favors their own interests and need to suppress resistance or threats from subordinate groups.

In contrast, the subordinate groups in the social hierarchy have limitations and impediments to power in the U.S., and this often provokes them to anger. A biracial student, "Andrea," said, "because the whole system is kind of around it, like don't talk about it." I interpreted her comment to mean that the reason race talk is not encouraged in American society is that the whole system is trying to avoid it to save white people's face and protect them from feeling shameful or embarrassed. When talking about the system, a white/Hispanic student named "Kayla" got very emotional and angry to the point of not being able to finish her thoughts cohesively. She exploded, "I felt really upset. I felt really frustrated with the system we now have. It is frustrating, upset, and sad. I would have to say our primary emotions."

To pursue justice for all, some biracial participants said they would use their "white privilege" to protect minorities. A Latino student named Sofia said, "I want to stand up for [minorities] with *whatever* privilege I have in America." Even though she could not name a privilege that she has, she will still fight for the people suffering racial oppression. "Kayla"

explained, "I chose instead of picking one side than another, I figured the best thing for me to do for other Latinos is to use my 'white privilege' to benefit and help other Latinos." This student seemed like she was a soldier committed to a cause, she is determined to fight for what is right.

### **Color-blind**

The second major difficulty for communication about race refers to the concept of Color-blind. As Williams (2015) found, "color-blind ideology approaches White supremacy not merely as a system imposed through force (i.e., by government, judiciary, police, military, etc.), but as an ideological agent masking itself as 'the natural order of things'." As Williams described, "People's internalization of color-blind ideology provides them with understandings and frames for making and dispensing a sense of their experiences."

White students in the sample are proud to be color-blind. They interpret being "color blind" to be "understanding, accepting, respecting, and non-judgmental." This idea mostly came from their parents. A white student, Tom, explained, "I tend to be fairly neutral on this subject. I try to interact with people as an individual, even though it is out of fashion to say you are race blinded in the twenty-first century. But I consider that ... [being color blind] ... I just...hey, this is the person. Let's talk." Another white student, Ben, even felt proud of being color-blind, and he believed that he was right. "When it comes to race. I am very comfortable talking about it because I know my views stand up very color-blind, very accepting, non-judgmental. I hope one day I could be able to punish those who are not going to follow to modern society.

On the contrary, all the students of color that I interviewed considered "color blind" as "nonsense, disrespectful, and wrong." They believed that being color blind is rude because it ignores differences and racial identities that people are proud of. "Kayla," a biracial student, said, "I think color blind is a little crap. I think by white people saying, 'oh, I'm color blind' that's

their way to ensure themselves that they are not racists. I think everyone tends to be racist inside. I think the best way for white people to be 'color blind' is for them to acknowledge the fact of the racial oppression." "Nikki," who is African American, even considered colorblindness to be "a dangerous thing." She added, "I love being black. I don't want people to erase that or pretend that I am not black."

### **Discussion**

On a personal note, I observed a different variety of communication dynamics in interviews with white students than I did with students of color. During the interviews, I could feel that white students were extremely cautious wording what they said and the way they said it. They tended to take time thinking before answering each question and pause to find the "right" words. I interpreted this thoughtfulness as the result of pressure to appear "politically correct" by conforming to rules and norms that specifically restrain what white people can or cannot say.

White students and students of color in the sample have fundamentally different understandings of racial identities and their implications because they inhabit different social locations and standpoints. According to the Standpoint Theory, Griffin (2006) explained that "different locations within the social hierarchy affect what is seen. The standpoints of marginalized people provide less false views of the world than do the privileged perspectives of the powerful. Strong objectivity requires that scientific research start from the lives of women, the poor, gays and lesbians, and racial minorities" (p. 447). In this research, white students and students of color presented mostly opposite views on race talk because of the differences in their personal experience, parenting educational influence, and racial justice activities. Without effective mutual communication between and among these groups, each group can see only one side of the issues. Consequently, the misunderstandings will always be like a wall isolating

people from each other's truths.

### **Conclusion**

Race talk across racial groups is inhibited by white privilege and color-blind ideology, which are reinforced by socializing institutions, such as families and schools. Other institutions, such as social media, present opportunities to learn independently and share with others.

Several changes should be made to enhance the mutual understanding between white students and students of color in regard to racial oppression. First, open dialogue is urgent and necessary when white students and students of color have framed an issue differently. Second, it is crucial to continue self-educating and educating others about racial justice. Social media provides a valuable forum for students to explore different perspectives in a non-threatening environment. Third, a freer racial climate on campus will encourage students to talk about race. Non-judgmental race-related classes or activities can provide students a relatively safe environment to discuss race to reduce misunderstandings among each other.

Last, reducing racial oppression can be a long and arduous journey for everyone living in the U.S. For everyone, being patient is as important as being productive. As one of my participants "Andrea" said, "You know there's always a saying that sometimes you have to break things down to the core, you have to demolish it before you rebuild to something more beautiful."



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