

# Knowledge and Emotions in Cross-Racial Dialogues

## Challenges and Opportunities for Adult Educators Committed to Racial Justice in Educational Settings

Elaine Manglitz, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Talmadge C. Guy, EdD<sup>2</sup>, and Lisa R. Merriweather, PhD<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** Our society reflects a kaleidoscope of differences in terms of race, ethnicity, class, religion, and gender identity. These differences are evident from the boardroom to the classroom in higher education and can result in impaired communication when race is the topic of discussion. To effectively facilitate race-based dialogues, adult educators must deliberately and intentionally build their cognitive and emotive capacity. Capacity building involves adult educators acknowledging their privilege and systems of advantage, attaining cultural knowledge, taking emotional risks, and developing the ability to better organize formal learning and capitalize on informal learning opportunities, to engage in more genuine and appropriate racial dialogues. As we are ushered through the 21st century, issues of race and racism will remain as salient as ever as long as the disturbing silence, surrounding them in our work and school spaces, is allowed to persist. Considerations for the development of cognitive

and emotive capacities are described to assist adult educators in contributing to a more just society.

**Keywords:** race, cross-racial dialogues, counterstories, cognitive capacity, emotional capacity

“CROSS-RACIAL  
DIALOGUES OFTEN  
INCLUDE A MIXTURE OF  
STOCK AND  
COUNTERSTORIES, WHICH  
MAY FUNCTION AS A  
SOURCE OF CONFLICT AND  
SILENCE.”

Cross-racial dialogues are difficult and challenging for even the most seasoned adult educator. Yet, the capacity to engage students and colleagues in constructive dialogues that further our understanding of each other, our institutions, and how privilege and oppression continue to work to shape our experiences and understandings is needed, now as much as ever. Higher education's changing demographics with regard to race, ethnicity, age, gender, and other facets of identity provide an added impetus for adult educators to advance their abilities to engage in constructive cross-racial dialogues. Creating conditions under which meaningful discussions can

DOI:10.1177/1045159514534193. From <sup>1</sup>Clayton State University, <sup>2</sup>University of Georgia, and <sup>3</sup>University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Address correspondence to: Lisa R. Merriweather, PhD, College of Education, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223, USA; email: lmerriwe@uncc.edu.

For reprints and permissions queries, please visit SAGE's Web site at <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>.

Copyright © 2014 The Author(s)

occur requires examining how racism operates at an individual, institutional, and societal or structural level. This requires a deep understanding and knowledge of barriers to creating those conditions. Many barriers relate to individuals' discomfort with talking about race and their own racialized identity. While all participants in cross-racial dialogues may find it difficult to engage in meaningful exchange, this is an especially salient point for individuals within the dominant White culture, due to the power disparity in which cross-racial relationships are embedded.

The development of a racially inclusive pedagogy involves crossing boundaries of racial difference through effectively facilitating cross-racial dialogues. This requires adult educators to build their capacity in two key areas—cognitive and emotive—and demonstrate it through formal and informal praxis. Cognitive and emotive capacities are relevant across a range of adult education contexts, including traditional face-to-face instruction, online and virtual interactions and instruction, and in administrative roles. Crossing boundaries to create change through understanding is central to our work as adult educators.

In this article, we attempt to address the challenge of reaching across boundaries of racial difference. This is a tentative step, pitched ever so modestly at a half-tone on the scale of racial justice, such that reflection on practice among social-change-oriented educators might focus on addressing difficulties faced in confronting racial divides in adult educational settings. As Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2008) suggest, common reactions to attempts to bridge difficult divides in the classroom often include (a) agreement and consent, (b) denial, or (c) resistance. Bridging the racial divide means acknowledging the existence and impact of racism, addressing the underlying power of White privilege, and identifying how it operates in the classroom, the workplace, and our communities.

## Racial Narratives

Critical race theory (CRT) is a useful tool for exploring how educators might approach cross-racial dialogue. A discussion of CRT is available in the extant adult education literature (e.g., Closson, 2010; Manglitz & Cervero, 2010; Peterson, 1999), so they will not be rehearsed here. Rather, it is important to acknowledge

that both adult education scholars of color, and White scholars, use CRT to explore the dynamics of race and racism. A central feature of CRT is understanding the interaction between different types of racial narratives: stock stories, concealed stories, resistance stories, and emerging/transforming stories (Bell, 2010; Merriweather, Guy, & Manglitz, 2012). This understanding is pivotal for the process of constructing dialogues. *Stock stories* are a “set of standard, typical or familiar stories held in reserve to explain racial dynamics in ways that support the status quo” (Bell, 2010, p. 29). They reflect a dominant racial position, serve to reproduce racial inequality, and work to suppress narratives challenging racism. *Concealed stories* document how racism positions Whites and people of color differently. They “narrate the ways that race differentially shapes life experiences and opportunities” (Bell, 2010, p. 43) contradicting the narratives advanced by stock stories. Stock and concealed stories exist in tandem, but concealed stories are revealed only by acknowledging and taking a critical view. *Resistance stories* are narratives that can both “inspire and mobilize people . . . to instruct and educate, arouse participation and collective energy” (Bell, 2010, p. 62). They counter the testimony of stock stories because resistance stories are explicit contradictions rooted in the lived experience of people who suffer the negative effects of racism. *Emerging/transforming stories* build on concealed and resistance stories to “catalyze contemporary action against racism . . . subvert taken for granted racial patterns and enable imagination of new possibilities for inclusive human community” (Bell, 2010, p. 75).

These stories tell the experiences of people in the present and identify the different ways their lives reimagine categories, boundaries, and relationships. The difficulty in creating cross-racial dialogue is rooted in the oppositional relationship between stock and resistance narratives and is grounded in a lived experience structuring both the cognitive as well as emotional aspects of life. Next, we outline the main features of cognitive and emotional capacity in relation to educators' positionality and lived experience.

## Cognitive Capacity

The meaning of race is embedded in the consciousness of every adult who grew up in a

racialized society regardless of his or her race or ethnicity. As children mature into adults, they develop intellectual categories for interpreting and evaluating racial phenomena. The messages children receive about race come from people—parents, family members, teachers, significant adults—and observations of experiences while interacting with public institutions such as schools and colleges, banks, realtors, health care providers, government, and media and provide ample evidence of how racism acts to create social inequities. This process of acquiring the racial categories effectively serves to close off critical examination of those categories. Discourse about race in the terms of Gee (1992) are ineluctably linked to and embedded within structured inequality and thus resistant to critique from within the discourse. In practical terms, adults find it difficult to see the assumptions they hold about race as partial, fragmented, incomplete, or wrong because stories recounting racialized experiences are part of an individual's entire being, including emotions and imagination. Consequently, the knowledge individuals claim to possess about race often goes unquestioned.

Little is factually known about race among the general population. The Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) "Race, Power of an Illusion" (California Newsreel, 2003) series asserts race is commonly misunderstood as a biological construct instead of being more appropriately framed as a social construct with roots in economic, political, and legally sanctioned institutional policies and practices. Yet, the meaning frames adults acquire take on the static property of invariant categories—White, Black, Asian, Mexican, Indian, and so on. Rather than seeing race as malleable, socially situated, and contextualized, the tendency of many is to resort to unsubstantiated assumptions. The individuals' cognitive capacity to understand beyond the boundaries of racialized discourse simultaneously presents a learning opportunity and challenge. One essential step is to acquire accurate knowledge about the social construction of racial categories. While better than having partial, incomplete, or incorrect knowledge, only possessing more accurate factual awareness runs the risk of developing a technical (narrow) rather than synoptic (broad) perspective (Merriweather et al., 2012) on racism.

Cross-racial dialogues require participants to articulate an analysis of racism and one's own

positionality in the racist structures defining society (Sleeter, 1996) because they are always grounded in and draw from racial narratives reflecting dominant and subordinate power relations. Hence, another aspect of cognitive capacity heightens awareness of the effects of racism at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. Individuals who occupy a dominant or privileged position often find it difficult to meaningfully entertain the *othered* perspective. Part of expanding cognitive capacity involves understanding and acknowledging, even if unable to share, the experience of the individual located in the subordinate position. Cross-racial dialogues occur in the moment and are embedded in socially constituted and historically evolving relations of power. Interrogating privilege and its societal impact help address power disparities and enlarge one's cognitive capacity.

### Experiencing Emotions When Crossing Racial Boundaries

Another capacity that should be developed to facilitate cross-racial dialogues is emotive, an increased ability to hold one's own emotional responses in abeyance while listening to others who are just as emotionally laden. Dimensions of emotive capacity include confronting silence, negotiating tension and anxiety, and dealing with privilege. Avoidance through silence is a form of resistance and a sign of diminished emotive capacity. It is a primary barrier in cross-racial dialogues. White silence and silencing by the educator or learner on racial matters expresses dominant views about the significance of race as a factor shaping lives. Consider a recent Pew poll on the Trayvon Martin case that indicated that Whites would like to see the discussion of racism cease (Pew Research Center, 2013). Remaining silent on the issues of racism and inequity by consciously avoiding the dialogue risks reinforces the status quo:

I think I need to speak up because the stakes are so high. Learning how our society can better communicate across difference is one of our most crucial questions . . . I need to take apposition even if I may not be right. . . . Throughout history, horrible things have happened because the people who have the power to change things don't speak

up. (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2010, p. 152)

Several years ago, we witnessed this phenomenon while presenting a paper at the adult education research conference. The topic was racial narratives. We asked the conferees in attendance, approximately 30 adult educators, to reflect on their experience of race as a child. When asked to report their experiences, a *very* long pause ensued, tension elevated, emotional stress was very high, and the silence was palpable until someone spoke up. There seemed to be a collective sigh of relief that someone *else* was going to speak. As facilitators of dialogues about race, we recognized immediately the emotional resistance produced by asking such a question.

We interpreted the extended period of silence as avoidance. Avoidance was also seen in the soft selling of the narrative, couching of issues in non-racial terms, and hedging of honesty around their personal meaning making of the racialized reality of their lived experiences. Avoidance was accompanied by anxiety, sense of crisis at the rising awareness of unmerited privilege, and feelings resulting from the threat of losing unilateral power to control and endorse the discourse as valid. Educators are also prone to resisting active participation in cross-racial dialogues which stymies the growth of the emotional capacity of the adult educator. Resistance thwarts the ability of educators to effectively facilitate cross-racial dialogue.

This experience of avoidance in relation to a request to engage in cross-racial dialogue is, in our experience, all too commonplace. Adult educators often avoid initiating or engaging in such dialogues because the emotional toll is too high given the meager payoff. In discussions involving sensitive topics, such as race and racism, emotions are bound to surface. Internally, learners may feel guilt, shame, and helplessness. Allowing the open expression of strong feelings— anxiety, anger, and defensiveness—in response to a subject can be difficult for many adult educators (Brookfield & Preskil, 1999). Whether intended or unintended, internally felt or externally visible, emotional awareness and sensitivity within the learning space are required to develop productive cross-racial dialogues. Undoubtedly, both learners' emotions and facilitators' reactions are critical components in

cross-racial dialogues. How educators react is an indicator of their emotive capacity.

It is important for adult educators to acknowledge their emotional life and well-being in cross-racial dialogues. The intersection of identity, power, and privilege implicate adult educators as much as learners. In teaching race, the way in which identity, power, and privilege work in tandem with the affective dimension of the teaching is a point of serious reflection. Brookfield's (2003) recommendation to check in with peers about one's teaching experience is a useful injunction, particularly if the peer is a racial *other*. As a co-learner and instructional guide, adult educators in cross-racial dialogues are uniquely positioned because they experience a range of emotions, but are also responsible for facilitating interactions such that all learners, including themselves, are poised to make meaning from cross-racial exchanges.

Wang (2008) reminds adult educators the central function of teaching about race in this regard is to serve as a cultural critic. A cultural critic seeks to holistically understand the context in which experiences occur. Understanding from political, social, and historical vantage points helps the educator to provide a broader framework for understanding, a framework encapsulating identity, positionality, privilege, and systematic disadvantage. The ability to surface and address one's own misunderstandings within the contexts of privilege and oppression is a precursor to creating and effectively managing cross-racial dialogues, especially in relation to feelings, emotions, and some of the negative responses that may arise. Developing empathy with others is key in this regard and often happens by providing emotionally challenging experiences that involve doing and feeling—not just thinking—to confront unconscious biases and patterns (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Through the strategic yet authentic integration of emotions, adult educators build emotive capacity.

### Implications for Practice

The importance of the development of adult educators' capacity for handling conflictual dialogue cannot be overstated for a pedagogy for teaching race. We have suggested two capacities pivotal to this endeavor: cognitive and emotive. Adult educators who have an awareness of the centrality of these capacities

in the process of facilitating cross-racial dialogues are better poised to do so effectively. Developing one's capacity to use both cognitive and emotive abilities then becomes the foundation for organizing formal learning as well as using informal learning opportunities, to expand adult learners' capacities to engage appropriately in cross-racial dialogues.

The ability to use stories and counterstories effectively in a classroom or workshop setting is enhanced by the educator's abilities to create the conditions necessary for constructive dialogues to occur. Being aware of the ways privilege and positionality influence narratives and stories is key to facilitating more effective dialogues. The ability to uncover and address assumptions embedded in unequal power relations and, thus, the stories inscribing them is furthered by the adult educator's efforts to develop one's own capacities and understandings. Central to cultivating those abilities is recognition of the importance of the elements of time, respect, and understanding.

### **Time, Respect, and Understanding**

Narrative and counterstories take time to tell, to unpack, and to address, especially when they contain components making them emotionally labile and invite resistance and denial. Honoring the voices of those who are telling and not rigidly adhering to pre-planned activities, thus allowing the time and respect for experience to be communicated and discussed, demonstrates the importance of what is being said. Addressing one's own capacity allows the adult educator to be able to stay in the learner's experience and not delimit the value of what is occurring in the moment.

Whether it is an administrator planning a meeting or an instructor planning a program, the lion's share of attention in adult education practice is given to the organization of formal learning opportunities. Well-developed cognitive and emotive capacities can be invaluable to planning these formal activities. For example, educators with limited emotional capacity may be more censored in what they choose to introduce into the classroom out of fear of acknowledging their own lived experiences are reflected in the ideas highlighted in the materials. Instead of choosing readings with a critical edge

questioning White privilege in a direct way, they may opt for readings skirting the most significant issues. Instead of visual media with more explicit content, they may choose media raising, yet glossing over, the essential elements. Instead of participating in activities like a privilege walk, they may just observe the students' participation. Adult educators with expanded capacities are more likely to select diverse materials such as readings, visual media, and learning activities. The cognitive capacity provides the avenue to develop a greater awareness of the range of activities, while the emotional capacity compels the educator to risk vulnerability, the same vulnerability to which they expose their adult learners.

Adult educators dedicated to expanded emotive and cognitive capacities will also be more likely to choose formal classroom structures speaking to a broader range of experiences. This could include a different setup for the classroom that positions the learners and instructor in a non-hierarchical arrangement to promote genuine sharing. Cross-racial dialogues often include a mixture of stock and counterstories, which may function as a source of conflict and silence. Positioning students as well as themselves to face each other and put a face to the *difference* extolled in the counternarratives engenders listening and meaningful participation. It is much easier to be dismissive of the storied other, when all one can see is the back of his or her head. Seating arrangements promoting interpersonal horizontal relationships negate the presumed neutrality or hegemonic valuing Whiteness commands within the majoritarian race discourse.

Formal classroom structures could also include the infusion of more student-directed inquiry, allowing learners more voice and autonomy. Sharing authority in this way, within the classroom space, models more appropriate and inclusive interaction for those who expect to have and assert privilege. These changes to the formal structures of the classroom create risks for the adult educator. They risk *losing* control of the power in the classroom, the direction of the conversation, and the carefully crafted lesson plan. The greater fortitude accompanying increased capacity changes the meaning of the risk. That is, greater capacity—cognitively and emotionally—does not eliminate the possibility of risk or vulnerability; rather, it better positions the adult educator to deal with the

risks in positive and effective ways. Being willing to confront and wrestle with one's own privilege, disadvantage, positionality, and identity through the formal structure and planned activities are prerequisites to setting the conditions by which dialogues, often difficult, on race and racism can transpire.

While the benefits for the formal learning environment are clear, there are also implications for informal learning opportunities as the result of increased cognitive and emotive capacities. Informal learning opportunities often arise within the setting of formal learning and planned meetings as well as in chance or infrequent encounters. The ability to be prepared and attentive to situations begging for the deconstruction of the majoritarian narrative is critical to capitalize on those informal teachable moments. To illustrate, we draw from the environmental context of higher education administration and policy setting. Adult and higher education administrators are thrust, by virtue of the changing demographics of higher education such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, and class, into cross-racial dialogues. They can come prepared for some of the dialogues much like the adult educator instructor does for planned instruction in the class. Within task forces and working groups, for example, in which adult education administrators often find themselves, it is possible to work toward at least a common understanding of equity and social justice. PowerPoints with relevant statistics, archival documentation of institutional dimensions illustrating a long history of policies and practices working to advantage some students and disadvantage others, and pre-formulated argumentation and rationales can be used to provide a starting point to examine not just individual understandings about race but also institutional ones.

Because counternarratives and majoritarian narratives are complex and multi-dimensional and occur at unpredictable times in unpredictable places, adult and higher education administrators need to have sufficiently developed cognitive and emotive capacities to negotiate informal race dialogues. Many of their interactions occur in hallways, around the copier, before or after formal meetings, with the unexpected visitor who pops into the office, through unsolicited emails, and in the parking lot. These spaces and circumstances of race dialogues are especially

challenging because they lack the continuity and time necessary to create relationships between the *educator* and the *learner*. Continuity and time are essential, but not the sole elements, for developing a climate in which issues around race can be effectively explored. Administrators must be prepared *on the fly* to make connections between the personal, the socio-cultural, and the positionality of the storyteller and the story receiver, to increase the probability of those in the dominant culture overcoming their resistance to hearing, understanding, and, often, accepting the stories and experiences of those not positioned within the dominant culture.

Increased cognitive capacity from deliberate and intentional investigation and personal reflection on racialized discourses through scholarship and deep listening with individuals with diverse lived experiences can help equip administrators for the inevitable chance encounters with resistance and constricted thinking. Individuals with racialized and non-privileged experiences can serve as coaches and confidants for helping to sensitize administrators to their hot buttons and personal blind spots. These purposeful attempts help create nuanced understandings that can, in turn, educate others and promote productive conversations on race.

Having such knowledge and sensitivities, front and center in the administrator's awareness, also provides the benefit of administrators being able to think more critically, systematically, and quickly during those unplanned encounters with colleagues, students, and public representatives, whether political officials or community members. Administrators committed to social justice cannot afford to miss opportunities to meaningfully engage in race-based dialogue because of a failure to think on their feet. Missed opportunities become forfeited opportunities to dispel the basis of majoritarian stories preserving the status quo. Instead, the silence or avoidance of the topic serves as acceptance and de facto agreement and confers greater credibility to the majoritarian narrative and its power to marginalize the students we are working to educate and empower. Administrators and community members often have the power to establish policy and set the public agenda, and the lost opportunity can lead to the entrenchment of institutional practices continuing to disenfranchise and marginalize those who have been oppressed.

Through an enlarged emotional capacity, administrators develop tolerance for difference, enabling them to deal with a range of behaviors and attitudes. Responding with hostility to racial discrimination, prejudice, and privileged attitudes and sense of entitlement are rarely productive. Some administrators need to develop the capacity to recognize these within themselves and appreciate the emotional journey they undertook to arrive at a place of increased understanding. Affording understanding to others will do more to bridge the divide than self-righteous, pious gestures demeaning and demonizing those who have yet to be convinced of the harm induced by a system that selectively by race advantages some while disadvantaging others. Administrators committed to establishing and teaching through informal relationships, brief or prolonged, have an added tool for reaching those in the dominant racial group. Seizing each opportunity, whenever presented, creates conditions whereby the administrator gets to know people on a personal level, develops continuity across time in terms of the message delivered, and gains credibility for the position espoused. Through each encounter, relationships are strengthened and cross-racial dialogues are provided another pathway to reach and crush the intended targets of racism and prejudice.

Creating the conditions for meaningful and effective cross-racial dialogues is difficult for adult educators, whatever their positionalities and within whatever varied contexts they teach, guide, and work. Yet, the commitment and courage to take the steps to develop the needed cognitive and emotive capacities may be the most important commitments one can make on the journey to greater inclusiveness, equity, and, indeed, humanity for all of us. Our world as we can reimagine it may depend on our ability to do so.

### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Baumgartner, L., & Johnson-Bailey, J. (2008). Fostering awareness of diversity and multiculturalism in adult and higher education. In J. Dirkx (Ed.), *Adult learning and the emotional self* (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 120) (pp. 45-53). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bell, L. A. (2010). *Storytelling for social justice: Connecting narrative and the arts in antiracist teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Brookfield, S. (2003). Racializing criticality in adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 53, 154-169.
- Brookfield, S., & Preskil, S. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- California Newsreel. (2003). *Race, the power of an illusion*. Retrieved from <http://newsreel.org/video/RACE-THE-POWER-OF-AN-ILLUSION>
- Closson, R. (2010). Critical race theory and adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60, 261-283.
- European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness. (2010). White on white: Developing capacity to communicate about race with critical humility. In V. Sheared, J. Johnson-Bailey, S. Colin, E. Peterson, & S. Brookfield (Eds.), *The handbook of race and adult education: A resource for dialogue on racism* (pp. 145-158). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gee, J. (1992). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideologies in discourse*. London, England: Taylor & Francis.
- Manglitz, E., & Cervero, R. M. (2010). Adult education and the problem of the color (power) line: Views from the whiter side. In V. Sheared, J. Johnson-Bailey, S. Colin, E. Peterson, & S. Brookfield (Eds.), *The handbook of race and adult education: A resource for dialogue on racism* (pp. 133-144). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriweather, L., Guy, T. C., & Manglitz, E. (2012, January). *Synoptic judgment: Constructing cross racial dialogues in a post racial society*. Proceedings of the 53rd Annual Adult Education Research Conference, Syracuse, NY. Retrieved from [http://www.adulterc.org/applications/ClassifiedListingsManager/inc\\_classifiedlistingsmanager.asp?ItemID=1740&CategoryID=177](http://www.adulterc.org/applications/ClassifiedListingsManager/inc_classifiedlistingsmanager.asp?ItemID=1740&CategoryID=177)
- Peterson, E. (1999). Creating a culturally relevant dialogue for African American adult educators. In T. Guy (Ed.), *Providing a culturally relevant adult education* (New Directions of Adult and Continuing Education, No. 82) (pp. 79-91). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pew Research Center. (2013). *Whites say too much focus on race: Black disagree*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

Sleeter, C. (1996). *Multicultural education as social activism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Stephan, W. G., & Finlay, K. (1999). The role of empathy in improving intergroup relations. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, 729-743.

Wang, H. (2008). "Red eyes": Engaging emotions in multicultural education. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 10, 10-16.

### Author Biographies

*Elaine Manglitz is the Interim Vice President for student affairs at Clayton State University. She has written and taught about White privilege and racism in the field of adult education.*

*Talmadge C. Guy is associate professor of adult education in the department of adult education at*

*the University of Georgia. His professional interests concern the issues of inclusion and equity in education, the social construction of race in media and pop culture, and socio-historical analyses of race and culture in the education of African American adults.*

*Lisa R. Merriweather, PhD, is an assistant professor of adult education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research interests focus on issues of racial equity and social justice within the historical discourse of adult education, informal education, and doctoral education. She has a special interest in the philosophy of race.*