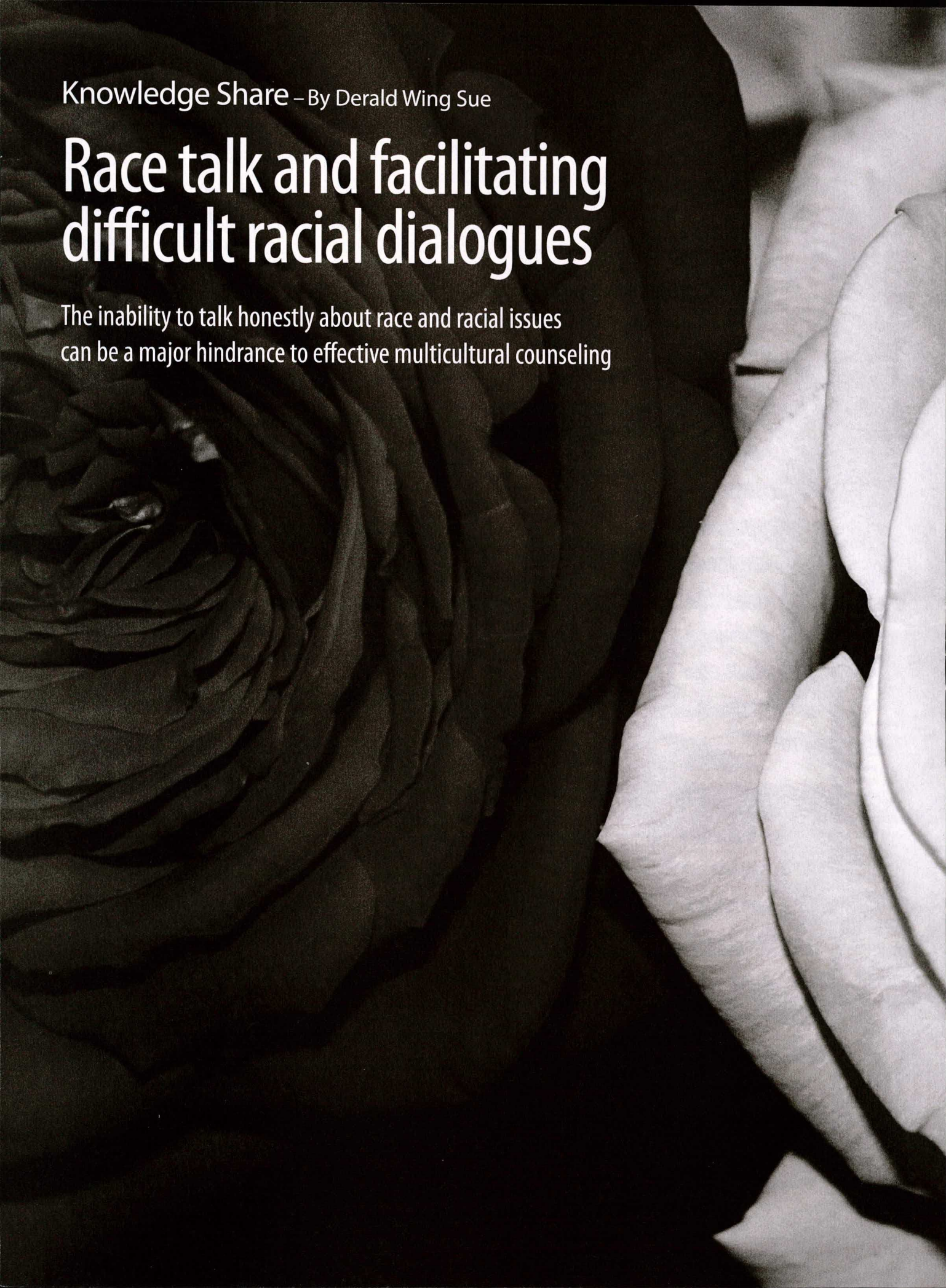




Knowledge Share – By Derald Wing Sue

Race talk and facilitating difficult racial dialogues

The inability to talk honestly about race and racial issues
can be a major hindrance to effective multicultural counseling



Over a five-year period, my colleagues and I have conducted a series of studies to explore the psychology of racial dialogues or “race talk” in the training of counselors and other mental health professionals. As we become an increasingly diverse society, it is impossible for counselors not to encounter clients who differ from them in terms of race, ethnicity and cultural background. The inability to honestly dialogue about race and racial issues can serve as a major hindrance to effective multicultural counseling. Although our research has been conducted in an educational and training context, I believe our findings are equally applicable to all racial dialogues, whether they occur in education, employment, health care, public forums, the media or among neighbors.

In our studies, we specifically focused on:

- ❖ The characteristics of race talk
- ❖ Ground rules or guidelines that explicitly and implicitly dictate how and when race is discussed
- ❖ Whether people of color and Whites perceive the rules differently from one another
- ❖ The impact of race talk on participants
- ❖ How educators could create conditions conducive to successful outcomes

Each of these areas has formed topics in my most recent book, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* (2015).

What is race talk?

Race talk is a dialogue or conversation that involves topics of race, racism, “whiteness” and White privilege. Race talk is generally filled with intense and powerful emotions, creates a threatening environment for participants, reveals major differences in worldviews or perspectives and often results in disastrous consequences such as a hardening of biased racial views. Unless instigated in some manner, the majority of people in interracial settings would prefer to avoid such topical discussions or to minimize and dilute their importance and meaning. Our findings suggest that difficult dialogues on race:

- ❖ Are potentially threatening conversations or interactions between members of different racial and ethnic groups
- ❖ Reveal major differences in worldviews that are challenged publicly
- ❖ Are found to be offensive to participants

- ❖ Arouse intense emotions such as dread and anxiety (for Whites) and anger and frustration (for people of color) that disrupt communication and behaviors
- ❖ Are often instigated by racial microaggressions
- ❖ Involve an unequal status relationship of power and privilege among participants

In 1997, President Bill Clinton’s national dialogue on race concluded that open and honest conversations about race lead to positive race relations. If racial dialogues are an important means to combat racism and discrimination, how can we make people more comfortable and willing to explore racial topics? And if racial topics arise in counseling sessions, how can counselors and clients engage in an honest therapeutic dialogue rather than avoiding it? Answering these questions is especially urgent as difficult dialogues on race become unavoidable and as well-intentioned people of all races find themselves unprepared to deal with the explosive emotions that result in polarization and hard feelings.

Poorly handled, race talk can result in misunderstandings, increased antagonism among trainees and students, and blockages in learning. Skillfully handled, however, race talk can improve communication and learning, enhance racial harmony, increase racial literacy and expand critical consciousness of one’s racial/cultural identity. In this article, I share some of our findings regarding a few of the ineffective and effective strategies in facilitating difficult dialogues on race. Space does not allow discussing the other many strategies I have identified in my book.

Ineffective and successful strategies

Race talk is often not about the substance of an argument but rather a cover for what is actually happening. To facilitate difficult dialogue about race in a productive manner, instructors and trainers need to understand not only the content of the communication but also the process resulting from the interpersonal dynamics. Exploring ineffective and effective race talk strategies will lead to more positive outcomes in workshop and classroom settings.

Five ineffective strategies

- 1) Do nothing
- 2) Sidetrack the conversation
- 3) Appease the participants
- 4) Terminate the discussion
- 5) Become defensive

Our studies indicate that instructors and trainers who have not developed a good sense of who they are as racial and cultural beings tend to use ineffective race talk strategies. These behaviors generally lead to negative outcomes in race talk but are of value in demonstrating *what not to do* and revealing possible solutions.

Do nothing

Many people will commonly opt for silence in the midst of heated race talk. In classrooms or a supervisory situation, for example, they allow students or supervisees to take over the conversation, exhibiting behavioral and emotional passivity in their own actions. Studies suggest that although facilitators are experiencing powerful emotions and anxieties when dialogue on race occurs, they attempt to conceal these feelings for fear of appearing inept. Feeling paralyzed, lacking racial consciousness and experiencing confusion about how to intervene leads instructors and facilitators to a deep sense of personal failure. More problematic is that their actions or inaction suggest to students and trainees that race talk should be avoided.

Sidetrack the conversation

Consider the following scenario of an unsuccessful racial dialogue.

The context: An educator-training workshop

The topic: Past discrimination and oppression against people of color

White female trainee (stating her thoughts angrily): Why aren't we also addressing issues like sexism? We women are an oppressed minority group as well! I always feel training like this makes women invisible and that our needs are ignored. Women are paid less than men, we are treated as sex objects ... I mean, everything is about race and racism, but what about us? What about our situation?

Instructor: Yes, I ... I ... I ... can understand that, but I can't cover every single group that has been oppressed, and this training is about the oppression of people of color and the harm they experience from oppression.

Trainee (raising voice): Women are harmed too. Why does it have to be like that anyway? Why use an arbitrary decision in deciding which group to address? I just don't believe you can relate to my situation as a woman!

Instructor (becoming defensive and attempting to appease the trainee): Well, it's ... it's ... not really arbitrary. There are many reasons why I concentrate on racial oppression ... but, let me see ... OK, maybe we can ... let's talk about the plight of women as an oppressed group. It's not my intent to ignore discrimination against women. In fact, many of our studies on discrimination have dealt with gender microaggressions like sexual objectification.



The preceding difficult dialogue displays a prime example of a trainee, in this case a White female, attempting (most likely unwittingly) to sidetrack the conversation from the topic of race to gender. In classroom settings, race talk is often uncomfortable for trainees and instructors alike. Avoidance takes many forms, and an instructor may unintentionally collude with the participant in avoiding race talk for many reasons, the ultimate result being diversion from discussing the real issues.

Appease the participants

Some trainers and instructors avoid deep discussions of race to maintain what they perceive as group or classroom harmony. They are sensitive to how the school, college or organization perceives

the workshop or class and attempt to elicit positive feelings and opinions from participants at the expense of productive discussion.

Appeasement may take many forms:

- ❖ Allowing the conversation to be sidetracked
- ❖ Not confronting the points being made by the participant
- ❖ Stressing commonalities and avoiding differences
- ❖ Discussing superficial issues without exploring deeper personal meanings

Maintaining harmony can negate deeper explorations of biases, stereotypes and deep-seated emotions.

Terminate the discussion

When instructors are concerned that a racial dialogue threatens to get out of control and are unable to determine how best to handle the situation, one of the most common actions is to terminate the dialogue. It may not be intentional, and it may involve the following strategies:

- ❖ Placing conditions on how the dialogue should be discussed, thereby quashing the natural dynamics involved
- ❖ Tabling the discussion and not carrying through on the promise to return to the issue in the future
- ❖ Asking the parties involved to discuss the matter with him or her outside of the workshop or class
- ❖ Stressing that the parties involved should calm down, respect one another and discuss the topic in a rational manner (negating the expression of feelings)

Become defensive

Race talk between instructors and trainees operates on the principle of reciprocity. Whether instructors are White or people of color, defensiveness or having one's buttons pushed is a common phenomenon. To deflect perceived criticism or uncomfortable feelings, trainees may directly or indirectly attack the content of the communication or the credibility of the communicator. When confronted with a defensive challenge by trainees, instructors of race talk may also

become defensive, especially when they find their message being invalidated or their credibility assailed.



These ineffective reactions provide us with clues about the facilitative conditions that need to exist and the types of interventions most likely to help trainees move from racial obliviousness to racial consciousness of themselves and one another.

Five successful strategies

- 1) Understand your racial/cultural identity
- 2) Acknowledge and be open to admitting your racial biases
- 3) Validate and facilitate discussion of feelings
- 4) Control the process, not the content, of race talk
- 5) Validate, encourage and express admiration and appreciation to participants who speak when it feels unsafe to do so

Dialogues on race commonly exhibit clashes between the racial realities of one group (people of color) and another (generally Whites). The conflicts between racial groups and their hidden meanings tend to emerge in the context of race talk. Having critical racial consciousness formed from a nonracist/anti-racist orientation is key to developing and using successful race talk strategies.

Instructors and trainers can conduct positive race talks with the aid of effective facilitation strategies. However, these suggestions and strategies are based on the assumption that instructors are enlightened individuals who have done the necessary personal work to develop nonracist and anti-racist identities.

Understand your racial/cultural identity

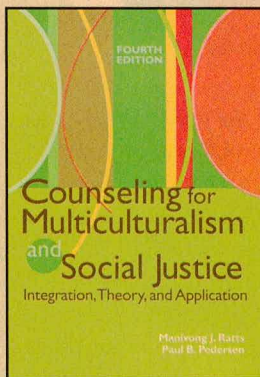
Effective facilitators must understand themselves as racial/cultural beings by making the invisible visible. A lack of insight and awareness will only perpetuate ignorance in the trainees they hope to help. Facilitators cannot be effective instructors unless they are aware of their own worldview, including their values, biases, prejudices and assumptions about human behavior.

For example, what does being White, Black/African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic

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American or Native American mean to them? How does their racial identity affect the way they view others and the way others view them? Understanding oneself as a racial/cultural being goes hand in hand with how well-grounded and secure one will be in a racial dialogue.

Acknowledge and be open to admitting your racial biases

On a cognitive level, facilitators must be able and willing to acknowledge and accept the fact that they are products of the cultural conditioning in this society, having inherited the biases, fears and stereotypes of the society. When facilitating a difficult dialogue on race, most instructors are wary about communicating their own prejudices and will respond in a cautious fashion that may be less than honest.

Publicly and honestly acknowledging personal biases and weaknesses to self and others may have several positive consequences:

- ❖ Experiencing freedom from the constant vigilance exercised in denying their own racism or other biases
- ❖ Modeling truthfulness, openness and honesty to trainees about race and racism
- ❖ Demonstrating courage in making themselves vulnerable by taking a risk to share with trainees their own biases, limitations and attempts to deal with their own racism
- ❖ Encouraging others in the group to approach the dialogue with honesty, seeing that their own instructors are equally flawed

Validate and facilitate discussion of feelings

Validating and facilitating the discussion of feelings is a primary goal in race talk. The facilitator must create conditions that make the expression and presence of feelings a valid and legitimate focus of experience and discussion.

Studies in classroom settings indicate, almost universally:

- ❖ The importance of allowing space for the strong expression of feelings
- ❖ That allowing participants to talk about their anxieties or anger helped them understand themselves and others better

- ❖ That it was important to create conditions that allowed for openness and receptivity to strong emotions

Trainees in these studies greatly appreciated instructors who were unafraid to recognize and name the racial tension and the feelings emanating from the discussion because it helped them demystify its source and meaning. It can be helpful for the instructor to ask, for example, “How are you feeling right now talking to or being confronted by this Black person?”

Control the process and not the content of race talk

When a heated dialogue on race occurs, the conversation between diverse participants is typically on the content level, but the true dialogue is taking place on a less visible level (White talk versus back talk). Common statements (content level) when White talk occurs include:

“My family didn’t own slaves! I had nothing to do with the incarceration of Japanese Americans.”

“Excuse me, sir, but prejudice and oppression were and are part of every society in the world, not just the U.S.”

“I resent you calling me White. You are equally guilty of stereotyping. We are all human beings.”

The substance of these assertions has validity, but to deal with them strictly on the content level will only result in having race talk sidetracked, diluted, diminished or ignored. Understanding the subtext that generates these statements is critical for both the instructors and trainees to deconstruct.

Consider the earlier vignette. The instructor attempted to control the content of the discussion rather than the process of the dialogue. An important education exercise is to practice analyzing these statements from both the content and process levels.

Validate, encourage and express admiration and appreciation to participants who speak when it feels unsafe to do so

Participants can feel threatened when engaging in race talk. Accordingly, instructors should express appreciation to those who take a risk and demonstrate courage, openness and the willingness to participate in this difficult dialogue.

Examples of what an instructor might say:

“Mary, I know this has been a very emotional experience for you, but I value your courage in sharing with the group your personal thoughts and feelings. I hope I can be equally brave when topics of sexism or homophobia are brought up in class.”

“As a group, we have just experienced a difficult dialogue. I admire you all for not ‘running away’ but facing it squarely. I hope you all will continue to feel free to bring up these topics. Real courage is being honest and risking offending others when the situation is not safe. Today, that is what I saw happen with several of you, and for that, the group should be grateful.”

Let’s return to the earlier vignette. As you recall, we opened with a dialogue that was less than successful. Let’s close with an example of a successful racial discussion.

Female trainee (stating her thoughts angrily): Why aren’t we also addressing issues like sexism? We women are an oppressed minority group as well! I always feel training like this makes women invisible and that our needs are ignored. Women are paid less than men, we are treated as sex objects ... I mean, everything is about race and racism, but what about us? What about our situation?

Instructor: I’m glad you brought that up. You make excellent points. Yes, women are definitely an oppressed group, and we can talk about that as well. (Instructor acknowledges legitimacy of comment and lowers potential argument on the issue.) Before we do that, however, I’m picking up on lots of strong feelings behind your statement and wonder where they are coming from. (Instructor controls the process by refocusing exploration on the trainee.)

Trainee: What do you mean?

Instructor: You seem angry at something I’ve said or done.

Trainee: No, I’m not ... I’m just upset that women get shortchanged.

Instructor: I can understand that, but the intensity with which you expressed yourself made me feel that my points on racism were being dismissed and that issues of racism were unimportant to you. (Instructor indirectly distinguishes between intention and impact.) Being a

woman, you clearly understand prejudice and discrimination. Can you use the experience of having been oppressed to better understand the experience of people of color? (Instructor aids trainee in using common experiences of marginalization to bridge, rather than dismiss, another group's oppression.)

Trainee: I guess so ... I ... I guess racism is important.

Instructor: You don't seem very sure to me. You still seem upset. (Instructor makes a process observation.) What is happening now? Can you get into those feelings and share with us what's going on?

Trainee: Nothing is going on. It's just that, you know, it's a hot topic. I guess, talking about racism, it seems like you are blaming me. And I don't like to feel wrong or at fault or responsible.

Instructor: Tell me about feeling blamed. In what ways do you feel blamed?

Trainee: Well, maybe there are feelings of guilt, although I'm not to blame for slavery or things of the past. (Trainee begins to address real issues related to her defensive reactions.)

Instructor: Good, let's all (referring to entire workshop group) talk about that. Now we are getting somewhere. (Instructor turns to entire group of trainees, who have been transfixed by the interaction.) I wonder if some of you can tell me what you see happening here. Do any of you feel the same way? What sense do you make of the dialogue we just had here? (Instructor involves the entire group.)



As educators and counseling professionals involved in racial conversations, whether spontaneous or planned, we will continue to be confronted in our teaching, training and counseling with challenges about how to turn tricky discussions into teachable moments rather than failed exercises. Will we opt for a journey of silence, avoiding honest racial dialogues? Or will we choose to effectuate real change — starting in our classrooms, workshops, supervisory sessions and counseling sessions — by following the path of racial reality and honesty, which may be full of discomfort but guarantees to offer benefits to all groups in our society? ♦

Knowledge Share articles are developed from sessions presented at American Counseling Association conferences.

Derald Wing Sue is professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is author of *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* (2015), *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation* (2010) and *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice* (2013).

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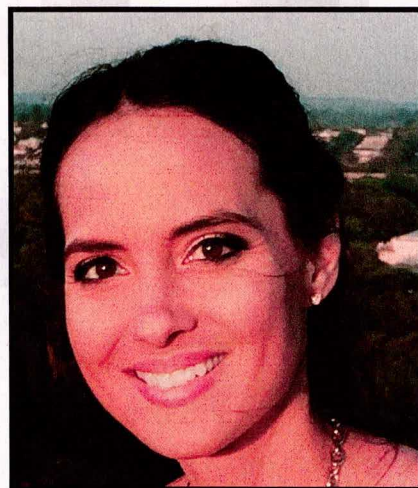
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