

Racism and White Discomfort: The Problem and the Solution

Amanda Udis-Kessler, PhD

(Colorado College Director of Assessment and
Program Review)

An Excel@CC workshop

March 30, 2022

Land Acknowledgement

I recognize that, in Colorado, we learn, teach, and live on or near the ancestral homelands of the Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Pueblo, Shoshone, and Ute Peoples. We at Colorado College are specifically situated on the traditional territories of the Southern Ute Nation, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and the Northern Ute Peoples. We have a responsibility to acknowledge our Indigenous connections, as well as the histories of dispossession and forced removal that have allowed for the growth and survival of this institution. We also have a responsibility to recognize and highlight the continued social, intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions of Indigenous Peoples to Colorado College, Colorado Springs, and all of society.

Today's Agenda

- Lecture: Racism and white discomfort: the problem (35 minutes)
- Individual writing (5 minutes)
- Breakout room: pairs discussion (10 minutes)
- Lecture: Racism and white discomfort: the solution (10 minutes)
- Reading, reflection, and individual writing (10 minutes)
- Breakout room: pairs discussion (10 minutes)
- Last questions and thoughts (10 minutes)
- NOTE: Please have something to write with and something to write on handy

Starting Assumptions

- Everyone in the room accepts the reality of systematic historic and current racism and how it hurts members of BIPOC communities
- Everyone in the room knows at least a little about how racism works on a day-to-day basis
- Everyone in the room accepts that white people and people perceived as white benefit from racism even if we have the best intentions and are nice people
- “White people” includes people perceived as white and treated as white who do not identify as white

Warning: Discomfort Ahead!

- Talking about racism makes people uncomfortable
- Talking about racism particularly makes white people (including white-appearing people) uncomfortable
- **Discomfort is not danger**
- Being uncomfortable about racism is a good thing if we handle our discomfort effectively; it means that:
 - We are acknowledging a reality that should make us uncomfortable
 - We are emotionally present and engaged with the topic
 - We may be ready to work actively against racism
 - We are willing to be uncomfortable in service of helping members of BIPOC communities to flourish

July 4, 2021: Amanda Gets Called Out

How did this story make you feel? Could you see this happening to you? If something like this has happened to you, how did it make you feel? (Hold onto your answer – we'll come back to this.)

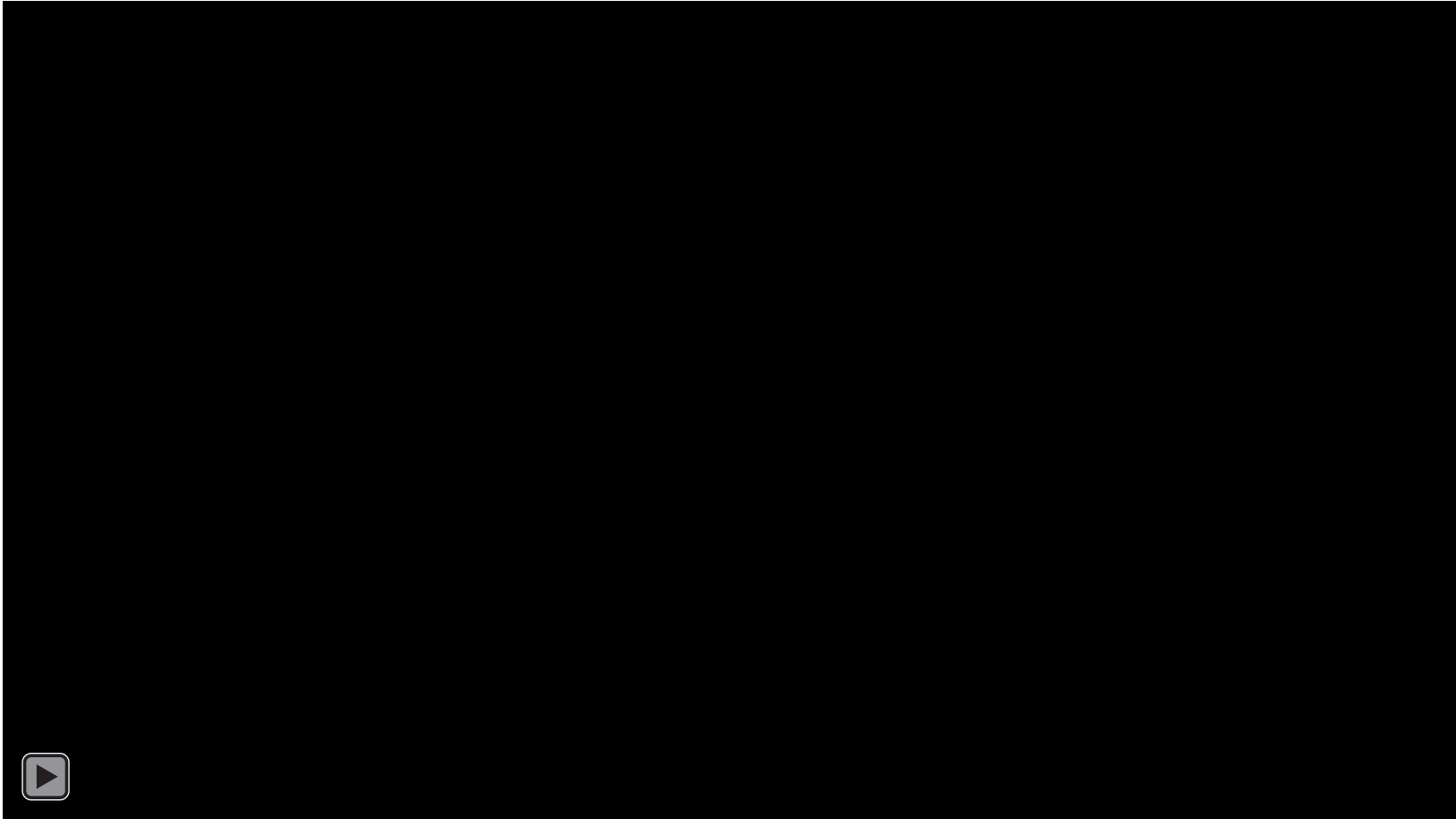
James Baldwin on White Discomfort (1979)

“White people go around, it seems to me, with a very carefully suppressed terror of Black people – a tremendous uneasiness. They don’t know what the Black face hides. They’re sure it’s hiding something. What it’s hiding is American history. What it’s hiding is what white people know they have done, and what they like doing. White people know very well one thing; it’s the only thing they have to know...They know they would not like to be Black here.” (from an ABC interview, originally buried, newly released)

Robin DiAngelo on White Discomfort (2021)

“We [white people] need to build the capacity to just sit with the discomfort and heartbreak of bearing witness to expressions of pain about racism rather than try to block them, explain them away, or co-opt them with expressions of our own pain.” (p. 87, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm*, Boston: Beacon Press)

Stephen Colbert on White Discomfort (2022)



White Discomfort: The Stakes

- Fox News mentioned Critical Race Theory 1300 times in less than four months
- A right-wing Republican won the VA governor's election, in part by using the CRT "controversy" to mobilize white parental resentment
- Multiple states have sought to limit teaching about systematic US racism through legislative bans or by state-level school boards banning or discouraging teaching about historic or current US racism
- Dozens of local school boards have enacted similar bans (including District 49 here in Colorado Springs)

White Discomfort as a Key to Racism

- White discomfort (including the discomfort of people who pass as white) with the topic of racism plays an important role in the maintenance and reproduction of racism
- White discomfort and defensiveness around racism (what Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility”) play a role in the unwillingness of white people to work against racism and the willingness of white people to act in racist ways
- If white people are not willing to address racism with courage and the readiness to change themselves and society, racism will continue unabated

Addressing Racism is Uncomfortable for White People

- Fully accepting the reality of racism, both historically and in the present
- Fully acknowledging the pain and harm racism has caused and still causes people from BIPOC communities
- Expending time, physical and emotional energy, and money educating oneself about the history and present reality of racism
- Acknowledging the many ways in which one benefits from racism on a regular basis, from not being stopped for speeding to getting loans more easily to being given the benefit of the doubt over and over
- Acknowledging how much easier one's life is because one benefits from racism (even if/as we suffer from other forms of inequality)

Addressing Racism is Uncomfortable for White People

- Acknowledging one's complicity in the continuing reproduction of racism even if one has the best of intentions (unless we are actively working against racism, we are reproducing racism)
- Acknowledging the ways in which racism diminishes the humanity of white people who otherwise benefit from racism
- Accepting that much of what one has learned about race and about people of “different races” is not merely inaccurate but also harmful
- Focusing directly on and problematizing whiteness, which is usually unmarked, unremarked upon, and normative

Working against Racism is Uncomfortable for White People

- Centering the experiences of people from BIPOC communities when white people are used to centering their own experiences and being the center of attention
- Listening when one is used to doing the talking
- Learning when one is used to being the expert
- Being emotionally present for the pain and rage of people from BIPOC communities without minimizing that pain and rage, managing it, or tone-policing it
- Being called a racist or accused of doing something racist can feel like being called a murderer (Robin DiAngelo's words)

Why is Working against Racism So Uncomfortable for White People?

- Setting one's own agenda aside and putting the agendas of people from BIPOC communities first
- Offering one's own resources (including money), time, energy, skills, gifts, and passion to BIPOC communities
- Practicing humility, vulnerability (not fragility), and sacrifice

Resisting Discomfort: White Fragility

- White liberals and progressives often respond to this discomfort with what Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility” (defensiveness, tears, storming out of the room)
- White fragility is not actually a weakness but rather a weaponizing of white discomfort in defense of white privilege and power
- White fragility is a way of resisting any analysis of racism in which a given white person is implicated as being part of the problem or in which a claim is made that the person has ever acted in racist ways

White Fragility as Racism

- Results from white comfort and ease being more important than the physical, mental, emotional, moral, financial, social, and political well-being of members of BIPOC communities
- Re-centers white people and white comfort
- Directs attention away from the reality and impact of racism
- Allows white people to feel oppressed or like victims

White Fragility as Racism, cont.

- Directs attention away from the role of white people in creating, maintaining, and reproducing racism
- Directs attention away from how, and how much, white people benefit from racism
- Places various burdens on members of BIPOC communities:
 - Put their needs aside and focus on white people
 - Take care of white people's anger/shame/guilt
 - Reassure white people that they are the “good white people”
 - Stop talking so much about racism, which is uncomfortable for white people...

The White Fragility of Others

- Another type of white discomfort arises in speaking up as a white person when another white person says something racist:
 - Something that denies BIPOC people the benefit of the doubt with regard to their intelligence, competence, morality, dangerousness, or humanity
 - Something that blames the victim of racist violence (by police, vigilantes, etc.)
 - Something that treats BIPOC people as outside the “moral community” of those who deserve fair treatment, justice, or even the opportunity to have a good life
 - Something that does not hold white people accountable for racism
 - A racist joke or a comment that uses racialized language in ways that reproduce racism (blackness as bad or dirty, for example)

Five-Minute Writing Exercise

Consider the example I gave of being called out earlier. Write down how it made you feel to hear that story. If you are willing, also write down an example of a time when you were called out directly or otherwise made to feel uncomfortable about racism. (This could either be a situation in which you were accused of doing or saying something racist, or a situation in which you confronted a white person doing or saying something racist.) Write down what happened and how you felt in as much detail as possible.

Breakout Rooms: 10-Minute Pairs Discussion

- Share what you wrote with the person in your breakout room. Otherwise, simply have a conversation about your experiences with and thoughts about white discomfort as it relates to racism. (You will not have to share this with the rest of the group.)
- Divide your time fairly, so that both of you have a chance to talk.

The Solution: Comfort with Discomfort

- To work effectively, white people must become comfortable with their discomfort and find ways to tolerate and manage it
- This means being present for such discomfort and learning how to discharge it
- The bad news: this is a difficult, long-term process
- The good news: there are many helpful resources

Discomfort Is Not Danger but Can Feel a Lot Like It

- I mentioned before Robin DiAngelo's point that in a society with a good/bad binary such as ours (racists are bad people and we are good people so we can't be racist), being called a racist can feel like being called a murderer
- Discomfort feels like danger when our amygdala (lizard brain) is triggered
- Our amygdala's job is to keep us safe by identifying danger so we can flee or prepare to fight
- Our amygdala cannot distinguish between the discomfort of being accused of racism and the discomfort of being in actual danger
- It's up to our higher-order brain to make the distinction and to initiate actions to calm our amygdala in the moment

Grounding Practices

- Adapted from the work of trauma therapists such as Resmaa Menakem
- Breathing exercises
- Sensory engagement grounding techniques
- Other grounding techniques (movement, making sounds)
- Menakem's "Five Anchors"
- Your handout on grounding practices includes examples

Other Approaches

- Beyond grounding practices to calm us in moments of deep discomfort, we need to build resilience and tolerance of some level of discomfort in order to better work against racism.
 - Therapy and therapeutic exercises
 - Spiritual practices, if relevant (practices such as meditation may be secular or spiritual/religious, depending on the context)
 - White accountability pairs/circles/groups
- Practice builds resilience

10 Minutes for Reading

- Please read the handout on grounding practices.
- If you finish early, feel free to start the writing exercise (for which you might want more than five minutes) or look at either of the other two handouts, *Where We Start* or the *Racism Resources* document.

Five-Minute Writing Exercise

- Please use the grounding practices handout and any other ideas or insights you have from the session to develop two or three strategies you would realistically use to address racism-related discomfort in order to enable you to work more effectively against racism.

Breakout Rooms: 10-Minute Pairs Discussion

- Share what you wrote with the person in your breakout room. If you are not comfortable doing so, talk about other steps you could take to build more work against racism into your life. You will not be asked to report back to the rest of the group.
- Divide your time fairly, so that both of you have a chance to talk.

In Closing

- Be resources for one another! We need each other in this work!
- Please fill out the Excel@CC feedback form when you receive it so I can improve this workshop
- Thanks for attending
- Thanks to Dr. Dwanna McKay for the language used in the Land Acknowledgement and for permission to use it

Thoughts? Comments? Questions?