

Reflections from Facilitating Difficult Social Justice Conversations: Utilizing African Concepts of Restorative Dialogue

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Abstract: Following the death of George Floyd, other racial killings that had preceded him and the others that followed, the USA and the world witnessed increased racially driven conflict and tensions. For us as Black immigrant professionals from Kenya now living and working in the United States, this specific incident was especially stupefying, mind jarring, and grotesque to say the least. We felt angered, enraged, and extremely upset by that violent incident. In our attempts to make sense and comprehend the dehumanizing racial violence displayed, the seemingly rising racial tensions around us, the vulnerability we felt, and what this act of violence meant to our own lives, we realized we could no longer remain silent and on the sidelines—we needed to act. This essay is our reflection of the journey we’ve taken since. We discuss some of the activities we’ve engaged in, the conversations we started, and the strategies we have embraced as we co-facilitated interracial conversations in various circles and continue to grapple with the social injustices we witness in this nation every day.

Keywords: immigrant women, Ubuntu, racism, social justice, restorative dialogue

Introduction

As two immigrant scholars who are originally from Kenya, we have experienced different facets of racism and discrimination, and have been victims of stereotyping, but we have also been in positions to teach courses on diversity at our respective universities. However, we were raised in communities that were homogeneously Black African, communities that shared the same ethnicity, traditions, language, culture, and values. As such, the color of our skin or racial discrimination was never an issue we had to think about or contend with growing up. In fact, our first encounters and interaction with a “White person” was in our early 20s when we moved to the city to go to college. There were no White people in the rural areas where we grew up; we had only seen them in books and television. As a result, overt and covert discrimination based on the color of our skin was something that we were first exposed to upon our immigration and arrival in the United States and it was a foreign and new concept for us. It has therefore been a journey of learning and re-learning about the nuances of racism and discrimination, and we expect to continue to learn. Overall, our experiences with racism in this country have not been any different from that of Black Americans who are born and raised in the United States. However, because of the difference in our experiences and upbringing, we have been on a learning curve that may slightly differ from that of our brothers and sisters who grew up here and who have experienced racism and discrimination since birth (and before).

As we grappled with the grotesque and violent murder of George Floyd and the racial violence we had just witnessed, this quote from Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King’s speech in Selma, Alabama in 1965 resonated with us: “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about

things that matter” (Human Coalition, n.d.). In our conversations with each other, we pondered questions such as: What are we going to do about this? What can we, two Kenyan immigrant Black women, contribute to this struggle? Do we know enough to do anything? How do we heal from this? We finally mutually agreed that we wanted to start a social justice conversation and invite others to join and engage with us. We felt the need and urgency to play an active role in advancing social justice for us and those who look like us, who also must contend with racism based on the color of their skin every day in this nation.

Additionally, as social work professionals, we are obligated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics to respond to social injustices in our communities and globally. The clearest and compelling evidence of our professions’ unique commitment to social justice is in the preamble to the NASW Code of Ethics (2021):

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. (para. 1)

Despite knowing this, we felt we were charting into new territory, as these were conversations we are not accustomed to leading or even engaging in authentically, except within our small social circles with friends who look like us. As such, we spent a great deal of time discussing how to approach these conversations productively and without losing ourselves. In our attempts to create a framework and structure, we examined and discussed our separate previous experiences in facilitated interracial trainings we’ve been part of. In reflection, our observation and experience are that these conversations are characterized by strong and powerful emotions and are approached ambivalently by most participants. We had observed that many interracial interactions leaned towards binary views, a dictated structure on how dialogue should occur and, in a few of them, we witnessed expressions of resentment, anger, shame, guilt, strong disagreements, and even racial conflict. Further, from our own experience living in the United States, we’ve observed that complex relationships exist between people in this nation based on racial and ethnic differences. This creates conditions that have resulted in structurally entrenched racial inequalities and power imbalances that influence and dictate ways of relating with one another.

We acknowledge that there are nuances and an intimacy to this dynamic that remains elusive to us as immigrant women, having arrived in this country as adults who grew up in a different environment. Growing up elsewhere means we experienced a different upbringing, worldviews, and beliefs about how we ought to relate to each other as humans, and we experienced no racial discrimination and interracial conflict and therefore had to learn about it as immigrant adults. Nonetheless, we mutually agreed we could no longer remain silent, accepted that we will probably lead these conversations in a manner that is different from what we’ve experienced previously, and that we will best serve this course by staying true to who we are and our ways of being. Without taking away from any of these past trainings and history, our conversations led us back to our upbringing and the customs, traditions, and practices that were familiar to us, in which we had grown up steeped in. We traveled back to the conversational tools that we had

witnessed our elders utilize repeatedly to deal with interpersonal conflict in our communities of origin. These were conversational and conflict resolution tools our elders utilized when situations that required to be addressed through difficult conversations to restore people's sense of well-being arose. It is within this context that we gathered our first interracial group of women with the goal of engaging in genuine and authentic social injustice conversations.

Background

According to Kendi (2019), "racial inequality occurs when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing" (p.18) and in such situations, conversations on these matters are likely to mirror and take on the same unbalanced footing. Further, Taylor (2013) asserted that discourses on social justice cannot be delinked from the contextual realities in which people exist. Social justice as a concept is underpinned by values of universal human rights, and there is a great need to focus on how people perceive and make meaning of issues of social justice/injustice and racial inequality. In our view as two Kenyan-born women, addressing social injustice calls for engagement in uncomfortable and often difficult conversations. This dialogue would only be fruitful when people practice and center humanness and respect for the human dignity and worth of the person. We envisioned a space where all individuals can authentically grapple with their feelings, perceptions, and belief systems with the goal of fostering honest connections with each other. We were however cautious to not ignore the wider attributes of the power differentials in the larger society. As noted by Kendi (2019), failure to acknowledge muted voices in conversation spaces tends to reproduce forms of exclusion that continue to privilege some over others.

We have separately participated in interracial trainings in the past where difficult racial conversations happened. From our own observations of these past experiences, we concluded that racial injustice conversations are often characterized by strong and powerful emotions and are approached ambivalently by many. Facilitating difficult social justice-oriented conversations in our perspective would therefore require more than adopting politically correct "woke" terminology; it calls for honest, authentic, and open dialogue. This foundation provided the background of our conceptualization on how to structure and facilitate conversational circles, with the awareness that we wanted to cultivate spaces where we could all authentically engage. In framing these conversations, we agreed to embrace and adopt the African concepts and techniques we had grown up witnessing our elders and community use to engage in conversations on difficult topics. Concepts of African restorative dialogue techniques have been utilized to promote restorative healing on the African continent for thousands of years. These tools have especially been used in situations that require engaging in difficult conversations with a goal of healing and bringing reconciliation to the mind, heart, and soul of the individual and therefore the community. In facilitating these conversations, our goal is to cultivate an environment where we model the power of tolerance and listening with kindness and compassion. We demonstrate how embracing others without judgment can be of mutual benefit and lead to change and healing within the individual and the community.

Applying the African Restorative Dialogue Approach

In formulating conversational circles and facilitating these dialogues, we have employed the principles, values, and restorative strategies that we observed in our communities growing up in rural Kenya. Our first social justice conversational circle comprised a group of fifteen women. This group constituted Caucasian and African immigrant women who committed to meet once a month to engage each other on matters of racial violence and the social injustice we found so troubling. African restorative approaches are grounded in the African philosophy of “Ubuntu” (Houshmand, 2019). The Ubuntu philosophy centers on our universal human bond, respect for the humanness and worth of every person, and the dignity and worth of every person. The Ubuntu philosophy also places emphasis on our interconnectedness, interdependence, mutuality, and the importance of the wellbeing for the individual and community. As such, we wanted to emphasize and show that as interconnected and interdependent beings who share the human bond, country, and community, what happens to one affects us all. Further, our conversations actualize storytelling as a strategy and emphasizes the importance of dialogue in facilitating healing and restoration (Ukwuoma, 2016). In embracing the Ubuntu philosophy, human interactions become a genuine and powerful dialogue where power differentials get broken down and mutual respect for each other’s humanness gets centered. The masks of being judged or being judgmental are removed and individuals engage in respectful and open conversations that foster healing, compassion, and a desire to be part of the change. As explained by Houshmand (2019), Ubuntu does not ask individuals to erase their differences and become the same but rather asks them to interpret and appraise each other positively, build understanding and consensus through dialogue, make meaning of their communal experiences, and therefore forge a way forward that would be best for the whole. These are the philosophical foundational values that we have adapted and applied to these group conversations that have been going on for over a year. These social justice conversations have provided a space to process the emotional burden we have experienced individually and to express our feelings and thoughts in a mutually supportive environment.

We’ve allowed the conversation to flow organically and have guided our interactions in an inquisitive manner geared towards hearing each other and developing compassion for ourselves and each other through our shared humanity or Ubuntu. As the facilitators, we stayed away from providing much of a structured environment but focused more on modeling interactions in ways we saw our elders do. Each conversation has been built on practices rooted in techniques that provide a space to “lean in” and engage in these difficult conversations, with the goal of creating social injustice awareness, fostering compassion for self and others, and in turn bringing forth healing to the heart, mind, and soul, which in turn has driven many of the group members into action.

This group of women journaled and shared personal reflections and experiences with racism, as well as shared readings to enhance our understanding and help us locate ourselves in the tapestry of America. We have also relied on materials from Black racial scientists and authors as a starting point, then allowed the dialogues to unfold organically.

The journaling was guided by prompts to reflect on racism provided by Kendi (2020). These

prompts included:

Have you ever described yourself as “not racist”? Why do you think so many people are invested in believing they are not “racist”?

List and describe five major experiences that have most influenced how you relate to racial issues.

Describe the first time you challenged (or thought about challenging) racism. (para. 3-6)

Other conversations have started with Brené Brown’s (2020) podcast interview with Dr. Kendi (2019) on his book *How to Be an Anti-Racist* and how structural racism and COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black communities. The organic parts of the conversations have included questions posed by us (African immigrant women to our White counterparts) where we’ve asked questions such as “How often did your family have conversations about race during your childhood?” “As a parent and a mother, how and when do you have these conversations with your own children (if at all)?” “Are you aware of your own family’s history?” “Did your family own Black slaves?” and “Do you discuss this in your own homes and at your dinner tables?” among many other questions.

The White women in the group have voiced that they have benefitted from these conversations and that the facilitation strategies we’ve utilized have allowed them to reflect and engage with the topic in a manner that they previously did not. One of the sentiments expressed often within the group is that the environment we’ve cultivated has allowed vulnerability in manners they haven’t experienced before. One participant described her experiences and observations of interracial conversations: “People tend to be over conscious on how to say things in order to avoid being offensive as opposed to being authentic.” Other participants agreed, with another voicing that “people are so afraid of saying the wrong thing—even when they care.” We’ve also processed and talked at length about the price of saying the wrong thing, which is going to happen if we all continue to actively engage in these and similar conversations and where this fear originates—including the fear of being labeled racist and what this would mean. We’ve also discussed the need for us as members of this society to talk openly about the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of social inequality and discrimination. Most participants agree that learning how to communicate on topics such as social injustice, racial violence, White privilege, police violence, economic inequality, and mass incarceration requires practice, and that engaging in these difficult conversations demands courage and skill—regardless of who we are or what our intentions may be. One of the facilitators utilized this conversation to point out the White privilege demonstrated in the act of choosing to be silent in the name of being afraid of saying the wrong thing or being judged as racist and the damage this silence causes. In reflection, one participant shared that “there is a collective indifference among White people. For White people, reflection is optional. They don’t have to reflect because they want to believe this country is good, that it’s an ideal and perfect democracy.” Participants were challenged to dig deep into their true feelings, beliefs, values, and even their possible own contributions to social injustice. We also utilized Brené Brown’s (2012) description of vulnerability as

“uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (p. 34). We encouraged the group to embrace vulnerability as “a source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity” (Brown, 2012, p. 34). As a group, we came to an acceptance that being wrong and saying the wrong thing is probably going to happen, but that we can’t afford to collectively stay afraid. We mutually agreed that there are times that participants will do harm and act in racist ways, but that it’s important that they not be stuck at feeling ashamed but rather use this as a growth point they needed to work on. We have also discussed how members of the group can approach conversations with family members who sometimes act or demonstrate racist behavior. Further, this conversation circle has become a space to practice how to model how to effectively engage in difficult conversations regarding race and racism with our children/grandchildren. We have valued authenticity and the importance of genuinely starting where we each are in our own social justice journeys. A participant expressed that “if people are not vulnerable then our society will continue down the same path of systemic racism and racial inequalities.” Another participant pointed out the danger of continuing to not do anything about social injustice and shared that “until you become aware of your own assumptions, you continue to justify that you are not racist.” We spoke about the fact that we live in a racist society where racist thoughts have been passed down for generations, and that often we are not aware of them. A participant encouraged all to be willing to engage with their thoughts which may be racist and that “when we do become aware of them, we acknowledge that we were wrong in our beliefs and thinking. It’s this truth that will lead us to becoming more anti-racist individuals.” This part of our conversation ended with the conclusion that it’s possible for White people in this country to acknowledge the history of oppression and that they have benefited from White privilege—without necessarily feeling shame and guilt.

This conversational space has provided us opportunities to process the racism we encounter on an everyday basis as two African Black immigrant women, but it has also given us another perspective of how others who may not look like us view issues of racism. As Black women, one of the discussions we found most troubling was Caucasian group members sharing that they never discussed slavery or race issues in a meaningful way with their own parents and/or with their own children. We struggled to understand how an issue that is ever-present and so entrenched in the fabric and all facets of American society can be completely muted from the dinner tables of the majority of its citizens. This specific conversation was very eye-opening to us as immigrant Black women. It was a good moment to dig into our own wrong assumptions about racism, White people, and White privilege. When we first began our conversations, our Caucasian participants were attentive and listened, and were sympathetic to our anger, pain, and disgust about the status of Black individuals in this country. One participant reacted to our pain, frustration, and vulnerability by stating that “I am feeling ashamed that people of color are living in fear in 2020.” In our earlier conversations, they allowed us to talk without interruptions, validated our feelings, and acknowledged how grave the situation is for us as Black people in this land. As the conversations have progressed, they started sharing more about their own experiences, their ignorance, and their denial of the reality of this country’s legacy of oppression and discrimination—but also regarding their own journeys of wanting to be and do better. As these conversations have progressed, all the group members have had opportunities to discuss our personal levels of awareness of racist incidents that we now encounter every day in the many spaces that we occupy.

Whereas many of our conversations were focused on reflecting on what was happening around us, and processing readings and podcasts we came across, some sessions have naturally moved towards talking about what to do now that we know what we know. Members have shared their experiences and perspectives on the importance of continuing to engage in social justice conversations by stating, “Groups like this are so important as I’m getting an awakening in my 60s,” and “It’s going to take all of us to shift and make changes related to race and social justice.” Some members also recognize that it’s going to take collective action to make a change. One participant started us on this journey by stating, “The history may not be your fault, but it is your responsibility to learn about racism and do something about social injustices.” Another participant added, “We need to stay engaged in difficult conversations of inequalities, racism, and injustices by remaining vigilant and having these difficult conversations with coworkers, family, and friends.”

With time, the conversations have naturally evolved to discussions of the need to advocate, identify inequalities, and push for change. Some participants have utilized the group as a platform to process some of the actions they have personally taken in personal and public spaces to challenge racism. As facilitators, in helping the group formulate possible actions they can personally take to deal with racism, we have again relied on Dr. Kendi’s (2019) *How to Be an Anti-Racist* work. We acknowledged that it’s not unusual to feel uncomfortable as we tackle structural racism and the inequalities in this country and its history but asked participants to reflect on this question: “After reflecting on your own comfort level, how will you stay engaged in difficult conversations of inequalities, racism, and injustices?” Below are some of the excerpts from that conversation on strategies that participants shared they will utilize as they engage in difficult conversations about race and racism in their own families, circles of friends, and acquaintances:

One participant described her thoughts and approach by pointing out that “The heart of racism is denial. To be anti-racist, we must acknowledge our beliefs and actions, be vulnerable, and have honest confessions.”

Another participant added that “We must admit when we are being racist, instead of being defensive. Anti-racist work is never-ending and requires constant self-reflection. We must be constantly growing, and growth requires self-awareness.”

One other participant stated that “Like Dr. Kendi and Dr. Brown stated, it is important to hold people accountable for their words and actions that are racist. I think this is something I can continue to do in my personal life.”

As Black women, our personal feelings, thoughts, and interactions as we engaged in these difficult conversations with this group of White American women deepened our interest in Black racism science and social justice, and our own anti-racist endeavors were amplified. These conversations and materials challenged some of our own preconceived notions that once we speak up against racism, we will be labeled as “angry Black women.” We came to acknowledge that the situation we are confronted with is dire and we must act without fear of

what labels others may apply to us. We also came to the realization that we can facilitate difficult conversations by approaching it utilizing the Ubuntu philosophy that centers our universal human bond and respect for the humanness and worth of every person. As such, we have gotten to a point where we recognize that we have something to contribute to this fight and that we do not have to alter ourselves to be able to pursue and participate in social justice. Getting to this place did not come without our own struggles; we spent lots of time debriefing after every conversation. Sometimes we were dumbfounded by confessions of being White, having White privilege, and navigating life without the burden of having to think about one's skin color in a racist society. In other instances, we were shocked by the realization that race and slavery was not a dinner table discussion among the group members during their own childhoods and subsequently with their own children—despite the significance of this phenomenon in the history of this country.

Personal Impressions and Conclusions

African restorative dialogue techniques have been used in the African continent for thousands of years for conflict resolution, facilitating healing, and reconciliation. These techniques are effective strategies of resolving conflict; restoring a sense of peace, wellbeing, and reconciliation; and building interpersonal relationships. Adapting these techniques to the difficult dialogues we facilitated provided appropriate and relatively comfortable tools for us to use. It also provided an avenue to process the emotional burden we experienced individually and collectively after the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent killings that have followed. By centering Ubuntu (our humanness), members become comfortable with expressing feelings and thoughts in a mutually supportive environment, which in turn organically builds community and compassion for one another. Some of the strategies we utilized to create a comfortable space included building rapport and trust with the participants and establishing interpersonal relationships. This involved starting the conversation without any set agenda and allowing the dialogue to flow organically which then allowed participants to start the conversation by talking about what was important to them at that given time. The only reminder at the beginning of our conversations was for all to listen with openness without judgment, to be authentic in expressing their thoughts, and be willing to challenge their own misconceptions. Immediately after completing each conversation, the authors spent time debriefing and processing their reflections of the content of the group dialogue. This acted as an outlet for emotions that were triggered by these difficult conversations.

As social work educators of color, our experiences with these conversations reaffirmed that this is a promising approach for us to utilize to join the social injustice conversation in a manner that fits with who we are as individuals. The strategies could be utilized in advancing antiracism in social work education and practice. We have also learned as social work professionals that the Ubuntu philosophy and the accompanying restorative approaches can be adapted to facilitate genuine and powerful dialogue where power differentials are broken down and mutual respect for each other's humanness is centered. This would also be utilized by social work professionals who are engaged in advancing antiracism in social work education and practice. As we continue to fine-tune this approach, we hope to continue to finesse our strategies and techniques and feel encouraged that there is space for us to join this social justice fight.

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