

TEACHING/ LEARNING ANTI-RACISM



A
DEVELOPMENTAL
APPROACH

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS
CAROL BRUNSON PHILLIPS
FOREWORD BY ASA G. HILLIARD, III

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Carol Brunson Phillips*

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A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

To Robert and Burnece Brunson and Ann and Albert Robbins,
who started us on the journey, and Douglass Sparks, Holly
Sparks, and Brandon Fitzgerald Phillips, who carry it on

Anti-racism education is not an end in itself but rather the beginning of a new approach to thinking, feeling and acting.
—From the Introduction

Foreword

Racism has a history, causes, a structure, and consequences (Schwartz & Disch, 1970; Wobogo, 1976; Woodward, 1966). Dialogue about racism can be conducted with minimal information about these things, in which case there is often more heat than light. On the other hand, a study of the history, causes, structure, and consequences offers some hope that effective interventions may be developed to reverse the course of racism. However, because there is an important affective component to this study, good information may not be received.

It is virtually impossible to approach the study of racism dispassionately. Victims of racism harbor anger, frustration, impatience, and so forth. Perpetrators and beneficiaries of racist systems exhibit various forms of denial and other defenses. This is why the recognition of racism is rarely connected to an appropriate response at an appropriate level. For example, even though racism is endemic and has been so for the past few hundred years at least, a helping/healing discipline such as psychology offers minimal help in analysis or treatment. The *DSM* lists denial, delusions, projection, phobias, and distortion—all of which are aspects of racism—as psychological disorders, yet racist behavior is not identified as a mental illness.

The primary form of racism is White supremacy. This is much more than the more trivial stereotyping and prejudice or human relations issues. White-supremacy activities go far beyond the interpersonal frictions based on race. White supremacy is a *structured system* of belief and behavior (Feagin & Vera, 1995). This system can be seen in real estate redlining, de jure or de facto segregation in schools, media slander, and the misuse of academic power (Guthrie, 1976; Lutz & Collins, 1993; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Because of the structural nature of White supremacy, an effective remedy for it must be structured at its base. The structure of White supremacy is a matter of both belief and behavior embedded within systems.

Racism and/or white supremacy depend on the construct “race,” which has been given *scientific* legitimacy only during the past three centuries (Barzun, 1965; Gossett, 1973; Montagu, 1942). That construct has taken on a life of its own, becoming a substitute in many cases for the more traditional basis of group identity, culture. The greed of the slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and ideology of White-supremacy structures, coupled with the fear of competition and retaliation from victims of the system, has fed the hardening of the structure. Therefore, we have two fundamental problems. On the one hand, we have the problem of causes

(fear and greed). On the other hand we have the problem of structures of domination. Any lasting response to racism, any anti-racism response, must respond to both of these.

A part of the response is conceptual and historical awareness. Another part is to develop an insight into affect and behaviors of individuals and groups within the larger structured system. Yet another response is to understand the politics and economics of the system and to respond to these.

Given the depth and complicated nature of the problem, it is a wonder that anyone would charge into the cauldron, motivated by hope, respect for humanity, and a profound valuing of justice. But that is exactly what we see here. Two colleagues and friends, who began their quest many years ago, chose to confront issues in an intensive way in an educational setting, with their students. From modest beginnings, they have developed greater sophistication. Their sophistication is a consequence of reading and dialogue, but most important of all, it is a consequence of human encounters over real behaviors. The anecdotal materials presented here bring a needed discipline to mere theorizing. By grounding theory in experience, Carol Brunson Phillips and Louise Derman-Sparks have given us a valuable longitudinal case study of intervention.

Having known both of these wonderful people for virtually the whole time they have been engaged in this project, I marvel at their courage, tenacity, perception, and openness, and their basic love of human beings. It is much easier to leave this problem alone. Who needs the tension, the disappointment, the frustration, the conflicts? Only those who have hope and who are committed to erasing the evil force of racism, without compromise, could persist.

The authors have offered us enlightenment, potential directions for action, and a level of hope. I do not know if the virus of racism/White supremacy can be eliminated. I believe that if it can, it will be in large measure because of the type of work presented here.

Asa G. Hilliard, III
Fuller E. Callaway Professor of Urban Education
Georgia State University

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Preface

The context in which we grow up and in which we carry out our professional lives influences how all of us teach, across all subjects. Doing anti-racism education particularly engages us at the deepest personal level, as it does our students. Therefore, knowing a little about the two of us will help you, the reader, understand where we began.

I (Carol Brunson Phillips) am a native of Chicago where I lived until I finished school and began my professional work in early childhood education.

Throughout my career, I have been involved in both teaching young children and training teachers, first as a teacher of 4-year-olds and instructor of child development at Prairie State College in Illinois, and then as a member of the Human Development Faculty at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, specializing in early childhood education and cultural influences on development. At present, I am the executive director of the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition, a Washington, D.C.-based national association that conducts projects to increase the status and recognition of early childhood education professionals.

Two underlying themes characterize both my work and my life—the commitment to young children and the commitment to the integrity of the developing human being. Both have roots in a long line of African American ancestry that deeply embeds me in family loyalty and standing up for what is right.

I (Louise Derman-Sparks) grew up in Brooklyn and Manhattan, in a working-class Jewish family where social activism was a way of life. My desire to become a teacher appeared early and remained persistent. My mother relates that my dramatic play as a young child revolved around teacher roles, rather than more domestic ones. As a high school student in the fifties, I became part of the folk music scene and, in college, made my debut as an activist by joining anti-nuclear bomb testing and civil rights activities of the early sixties. Involvement in various social justice causes remains an active theme in my life.

Becoming an early childhood teacher in 1963, I first worked for the Perry Preschool Project, and then the Piaget-based Ypsilanti Early Childhood Project. These experiences opened my eyes to the dangers of a “cultural deprivation” approach, as well as to the enormous potential early childhood education offered to young children and families living in poverty, if it proceeded from an anti-racist base.

Coming to Pacific Oaks College in 1974, where I am still on the faculty, I embarked on my career as an adult educator. In 1980, I also began the research

that led to initiating the Anti-Bias Education Task Force in 1985, and in 1989, publication of *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force, 1989). Since then I continue to focus on the complex challenge of preparing adults to meaningfully and effectively use an anti-bias approach in their work as early childhood educators.

When we began our journey together as anti-racism educators, we each had some previous experience in the civil rights movement of the sixties, and a deep commitment, but knew very little about what one-on-one anti-racism education would entail. The first few semesters, we often felt as if the process controlled us rather than the other way around. We learned as much, if not more, from our failures as we did from our successes. Gradually, through close attention to both students and our own responses, constant dialogue with ourselves and colleagues, and much reading, we gained in skill, understanding, and confidence. As we faced and resolved many of the personal tensions racism provokes in ourselves and saw that at least some of our students would change, we were able to relax and to accept the joys as well as the difficulties of anti-racism teaching.

Our work on the manuscript for this book has evolved over a period of 15 years. We wrote our first draft in 1981, with support from a Mina Shaughnessy Grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education. However, we did not complete the final manuscript until the nineties, although we never stopped working with anti-racism education in a variety of settings.

Several considerations led to our decision to return to and complete our initial draft. First, the need for anti-racism education among educators and other human service professionals remains critical. Second, the lessons we learned remain equally relevant today. Our work still uses the same conceptual framework, goals, and pedagogical principles, although, over the years, we have modified or added specific content and activities in response to new societal conditions and groups of learners. Updates and adaptations will always be a necessary component of effective anti-racism education. Third, since we completed our first draft, other educators and psychologists (e.g., William Cross, Janet Helms, and Beverly Daniel Tatum) published their thinking about racial identity development, placing our observations and analyses of the progression of student growth in a broader context. Fourth, reading what others had written about anti-racism training helped us decide that what we had to say about facilitating the process would be a useful contribution.

We began as fledglings. Many years later, we are still learning.

Acknowledgments

This book has had a long gestation time and many people helped it along the way to its birth. We thank them all. In addition, we particularly want to recognize:

The Mina Shaughnessy Scholars Program of the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, which provided the initial spark and support for us as practitioners to write about our work

The Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition for providing a constant backdrop of support

The faculty writing group at Pacific Oaks College and Stage 7 who urged us on
Betty Jones, who insisted the gestation period had gone on long enough
George Gonzales, Edward Greene, and Yolanda Torres, with whom we created the first version of our anti-racism course

Elizabeth Ashley, Antonia Darder, Lynda Doi Ficke, and Joyce Robinson, who contributed to the fine-tuning of the course while teaching with one of us in the later years

Shelagh Mullings, Vivienne Oxford, Kathy Spencer, and Rhonda Williams, who, respectively, typed and managed us through the first, subsequent, and final drafts of the manuscript

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Rheta Negrete Karwin, who looked through the final version with the eyes of the audience we want to reach and kept the office fires going while Louise wrote

Cecelia Alvarado and Phyllis Brady, with whom the journey continues
Vicki Frelow, Luba Lynch, Marilyn Segal, and Valora Washington, whose belief in the importance of anti-bias work has made it possible to keep going

Bill Sparks, who, as many times before, took on more than his share of home and family duties when deadlines pressed and always provided love and nurturing

J. D. Andrews, who removed obstacles and cleared away barriers as only he could have done

Finally, we especially thank our students, who took up the challenge of facing racism with courage and persistence and from whom we learned what it means to teach carefully.

Contents

<i>Foreword by Asa G. Hilliard, III</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
 Introduction	 1
<i>Racism and Anti-Racism</i>	2
<i>Origins and Evolution of Our Anti-Racism Course</i>	3
<i>Organization of the Book</i>	5
<i>A Final Word</i>	6
 <i>PART I</i>	
<i>A Conceptual Framework for Racism and Anti-Racism</i>	7
 1 The Dynamics of Racism	9
<i>Institutional, Cultural, and Individual Forms of Racism</i>	10
<i>The Structural Dynamics of Racism</i>	11
<i>Ideological Components: Assumptions of Racism</i>	14
<i>New Faces of Racism</i>	18
 2 The Individual, Racism, and Anti-Racism	22
<i>Anti-Racism and the Individual</i>	22
<i>White Racism/White Anti-Racism</i>	24
<i>People of Color: Pro-Racism/Anti-Racism</i>	25
<i>The Journey to Anti-Racist Identity</i>	28
<i>Conclusions</i>	31
 <i>PART II</i>	
<i>Racism and Human Development: The Class</i>	33
 3 The First Phase: Beginning Explorations of Racism	39
<i>Teaching Challenges</i>	39
<i>Activities</i>	40

	<i>Student Responses</i>	44
	<i>Conclusions</i>	64
4	The Second Phase: Exposing the Contradictions	66
	<i>Teaching Challenges</i>	66
	<i>Activities</i>	67
	<i>Student Responses</i>	81
	<i>Conclusions</i>	93
5	The Third Phase: Transformation to an Understanding of Self and Society	95
	<i>Teaching Challenges</i>	95
	<i>Activities</i>	97
	<i>Student Responses</i>	107
	<i>Conclusions</i>	124
6	The Fourth Phase: Anti-Racism as a New Beginning	126
	<i>Teaching Challenges</i>	126
	<i>Activities</i>	128
	<i>Student Responses</i>	131
	<i>Conclusion</i>	138
PART III		
	<i>How to Adapt the Course</i>	141
7	Making the Course Your Own	143
	<i>Reflections on Teaching</i>	143
	<i>Continuing Self-Education</i>	148
	<i>Participating in Anti-Racist Activity</i>	151
	<i>Adapting the Course to Different Settings</i>	152
	<i>The Choice to Act as the Mission of Living</i>	158
	<i>References</i>	159
	<i>Index</i>	163
	<i>About the Authors</i>	169

Introduction

Why does this class affect people so much? I think it's because in untying the knot of racism, we're unraveling the brainwashing each of us experienced growing up. This has had a dehumanizing toll, and in unraveling even a bit of the whole, we feel tremendously excited. We have only to unravel further to reclaim ourselves more completely.

—Cathy Berger, Letter to authors

This book is about a course we co-taught for 10 years to undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Pacific Oaks College in California. Our aim is to describe the process that evolves as teachers and students grapple with the complexities and challenges of learning about racism and becoming anti-racist. We have combined methodology and course content descriptions with student writings and our analyses of student growth. In addition, we discuss the personal challenges and feelings that we faced, seek to convey the dynamics of an extraordinary teaching/learning process, and suggest specific pedagogical tools.

How best to address racism and anti-racism in a course is one of the first issues confronting educators. A parable that we often use to begin our first class highlights the dilemma:

Once upon a time a woman, strolling along a riverbank, hears a cry for help and seeing a drowning person rescues him. She no sooner finishes administering artificial respiration when another cry requires another rescue. Again, she has only just helped the second person when a third call for help is heard. After a number of rescues, she begins to realize that she is pulling some people out of the river more than once. By this time the rescuer is exhausted and resentful, feeling that if people are stupid or careless enough to keep landing in the river, they can rescue themselves. She is too annoyed, tired, and frustrated to look around her.

Shortly after, another woman walking along the river hears the cries for help and begins rescuing people. She, however,

wonders why so many people are drowning in this river. Looking around her, she sees a hill where something seems to be pushing people off. Realizing this as the source of the drowning problem, she is faced with a difficult dilemma: If she rushes uphill, people presently in the river will drown; if she stays at the river pulling them out, more people will be pushed in. What can she do?

Some think a solution is impossible. Yet if we define racism as the force pushing people into the water, then this tale metaphorically suggests three alternative perspectives for educators and human service practitioners: (1) Rescue people in trouble and return them to the conditions that caused the problem; (2) after rescuing people teach them how to manage their problems so that if they “get pushed into the river again” they at least won’t drown; and (3) organize with people to destroy the source of the problem.

We opt for the third position, for professional training should do more than teach people to respond to the symptoms or consequences of oppressive conditions. Rather, it must help people develop strategies for responding to the source of racism, and encourage people to reevaluate their own role in its continuation. In other words, anti-racism education is about learning to understand and to eliminate the problem on the hill. Our parable illustrates the dilemma of failing to have a comprehensive view of the source and consequences of racism, as well as of the role of individuals in either continuing racism or transforming it by their choice of action strategy.

RACISM AND ANTI-RACISM

We define racism as an institutionalized system of economic, political, social, and cultural relations that ensures that one racial group has and maintains power and privilege over all others in all aspects of life. Individual participation in racism occurs when the objective outcome of behavior reinforces these relations, regardless of the subjective intent. Consequently, an individual may act in a racist manner unintentionally.

In the United States, Whites are automatically considered members of the dominant group, and people of color, including Asian-Pacific Americans, Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, are automatically considered members of the subordinate or dominated group. The individual’s relationship to racism is defined by group membership; so too are his or her responsibilities for anti-racism.

In a racist society an ideology of racism—a system of beliefs, attitudes, and symbols constructed and legitimized by those with political and cultural power—socializes each succeeding generation. Consideration of the psychological impact of racist ideology on the development of Whites and people of color also

suggests specific issues that anti-racism education must address. In particular, the dynamics of internalized superiority, on the one hand, and internalized oppression, on the other, must be uncovered, examined, and transformed. Anti-racist consciousness and behavior can be learned and lived, as the Americans of all backgrounds who have actively challenged racism throughout our history demonstrate.

Anti-racism education is not an end in itself but rather the beginning of a new approach to thinking, feeling, and acting. Anti-racist consciousness and behavior means having the self-awareness, knowledge, and skills—as well as the confidence, patience, and persistence—to challenge, interrupt, modify, erode, and eliminate any and all manifestations of racism within one's own spheres of influence. It requires vision and will, an analysis of racism's complexities and changing forms, and an understanding of how it affects people socially and psychologically.

Racism affects everyone, and so, too, anti-racism education benefits everyone. However, because the structural relationship to racism differs for Whites and for people of color, the specific issues and steps in becoming anti-racist also differ. People of color learn how not to collude in their own oppression; Whites learn how not to be oppressors. The characteristics of an anti-racist identity for people of color include—

- Greater understanding of and sense of security in their own racial/ethnic identity
- The ability to view both their group and other racial/ethnic groups more objectively
- Being actively anti-racist within their own spheres of influence, which involves establishing meaningful relationships with Whites who acknowledge and are respectful of their self-definition, and building coalitions with members of other oppressed groups

For Whites, anti-racist identity includes

- New understanding and internalization of a realistic White racial identity and a new sense of their cultural identity
- Remaining open to and searching for new information as they engage in on-going self-examination of their participation in racism
- The ability to work effectively in multiracial settings and be actively anti-racist within their own sphere of influence (Tatum, 1995)

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF OUR ANTI-RACISM COURSE

The origins of our course in anti-racism education were in the 1970s at Pacific Oaks College. Despite the institution's commitment to "honoring the uniqueness in each person," we were dissatisfied with our students' preparation for effectively