

Book Review

The Race Conversation. An essential guide to creating life-changing dialogue

by Eugene Ellis, London, Confer Books, 2021, xii+291 pp., £45.55 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-913494-48-3, (ebook) ISBN-978-1-913494-79-7

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The Race Conversation coherently articulates what the mind and body of the people of colour experiences in spaces; it exposes several defences that people of colour build up to protect themselves from as follows: being treated as less than and the feeling of shame that comes with it. Secondly, voices that are silenced and prevented from truly expressing opinions and authenticity, and thirdly, the painful burden on the body. In the authors initial exposition 'Who I am' (p. 22), Ellis described himself as a young person 'who felt fear much of the time and a kind of unease' (p. 23). It is wondered if at this point, the author had already introjected the difficulties, pain and unresolved wounds of racial discrimination seen and observed by older generations and those closest to him. The book calls for a rethinking of the race construct, an understanding of the discomfort, shame, guilt, along with other unnamed feelings of dread and annihilation that prevents an honest conversation. This process can facilitate a deep dive into the unconscious, for the racially discriminated and the racist. Ellis writes in psychodynamic speak as an experienced and talented psychotherapist but also accessible, as that young person of colour who was once stuck, watching others live their lives whilst hidden in plain sight.

The book is divided into eight chapters; Chapter 1 discusses everyday racism with spotlights on the global event of the killing of George Floyd among other such profound incidents around the world. Ellis's aim in this book works to provide opportunities for people of colour to discover their voice in having a race conversation, no matter how difficult, through an internal recognition and understanding of painful experiences. The second chapter describes the cumulative impact of these difficult experiences on the individual which impacts the self in all spaces, especially in the ability to articulate the painful trauma suffered. In Chapter 3, most striking is the 'PAUSE ... and breathe' guide to take notice of the body, the breathing, and the thoughts. An appreciation and the balancing of the physiological functioning of the body with the cognitive experiences (conscious, subconscious, and unconscious) of racial discrimination and injustice. With a hope for deconstruction, conversation, and healing, Ellis's discussion of Blackness and Whiteness (p. 59) is poignant and alludes to the norming of the single story of 'Blackness as a physiological sign that predetermined psychological inferiority', whilst the single story of 'Whiteness was conceived of as a 'physiological sign that predetermined psychological superiority' (p. 62). The chapter discusses the difficult concept of race construct shame; a phenomenon which presents itself in race conversations, traceable to ancestral origins and not explicitly available at conscious level and proves hard to articulate in race conversations. Chapter 4 focuses on the reality of distorted fields; moments when thoughts, feelings and emotions become incoherent. The chapter discussed contact with ancestral hurt and processing the diabolical effort at erasing the sensitivity of these hurts from the minds of the new generation. The historical chronology of slave trade and the stories of slave turned abolitionist (Olaudah Equiano) provides heartbreaking insight into intergenerational trauma and the intersectionality experienced by people of colour (race, class, gender, and the law). Ellis highlights the problem of internal discomfort in Chapter 5.

Internal discomfort stemming from unresolved trauma and hurts following the formal end of slavery and all obvious manifestations of racial discrimination and oppression. The chapter also discusses the relational and non-relational resolving of internal discomfort. This attempt to resolve internal discomfort is in connection with the other. In Chapter 6, Ellis invites the reader to make a body-mind decision to ensure racism is no longer given life in any form. The chapter shares extracts of two race conversation '... between Ellis, and two other male psychotherapists, one white and one of Sikh heritage' (pp. 144–149). In Chapter 7, Ellis locates the awareness of race constructs in places – the mind, body, and heart. The use of mindfulness and 'bodyfulness' in the healing journey of racial traumas; in addition, the development of compassion towards oneself first before outwards to others in relation to race construct arousal. Chapter 8 is valuable in understanding black rage and the profound reaction to black rage (real fear) which then manifests in 'brutal and unforgiving white rage' (p. 208). This circle brings about more black rage; Ellis poses the question in race conversation on how black rage can be managed when it shows up and what is the resolution to the white rage that immediately follow a black rage presentation.

Much of what is covered in this book was done through the psychodynamic and systematic perspective. For students, academics, and practitioners of colour in psychotherapy and the area of mental health care; the race conversation book provides a tool for deep reflexivity for the individual self and greater understanding of the counter-transferential materials experienced and presented before, during and after a race conversation experience. However, there are areas of the book that are easily accessible for anyone outside of the main areas (lenses) through which this book was crafted; anyone with a wholesome interest in the race conversation as a live construct.

I would certainly recommend the Race Conversation to practitioners including managers and senior management in health and social care and other disciplines, educators at all levels of education, group leaders in multi-racial platforms, student groups and service users. The various concepts diligently discussed invites all stakeholders to hold the space for a race conversation, to acknowledge the feelings of discomfort, shame, guilt and rage and to process these myriads of feelings towards compassion and healing. I am inspired by the psychodynamic, systematic, and scientific lenses through which Ellis has crafted the Race Conversation.