

So You Want to Talk About *So You Want to Talk About Race*

A Discussion Guide

Over the past year, I've received many emails from readers telling me how much they've enjoyed this book—how much it has helped them have more productive conversations on race with their friends, family, coworkers, and community members. So it was always with a little amusement that I would read the request that often comes with these emails: do you have a discussion guide?

The need for a discussion guide for this book really hit home when I was speaking at an event in my hometown of Seattle. During the Q&A session, a visibly nervous woman

A Discussion Guide

of color stood to ask me a question. Her team at work had chosen my book for their book club, she explained, and they were going to be discussing this book the next week. She was the only person of color on her team. With dread in her voice and eyes watery with unshed tears, she asked me if I had any advice on how to get through what would likely be a very difficult and perhaps harmful discussion for her?

I knew exactly the scenario she was talking about, having lived through it myself many times. Yes, this book will help you talk about race. But what if you want to talk about this book? A well-meaning group of mostly white people who get together to discuss race might very well end up insulting, exploiting, and plain-old exhausting the few people of color in the room in the process. When this happens, the white people in the discussion often leave feeling enlightened and unburdened, while the people of color are left feeling abused.

I do believe that if you are white, this book will help you to avoid harming people of color in discussions of race. I also believe that if you are a person of color, this book will help you feel more confident in your feelings, experiences, and boundaries. Regardless of your color, as you read and discuss the chapters, you will likely experience challenging feelings about race, racism, and the points and opinions I put forth. And if you are discussing this book in a group, and processing it with others, you'll experience the anger, fear, hurt, and defensiveness together.

So, in order to help increase the productivity of your group discussions and reduce possible harm, here are some suggested guidelines for your gatherings.

A Discussion Guide

Basic Guidelines

1. If you are in a majority white space, talk with people of color in advance—in a private, safe setting—to hear their concerns about the upcoming discussion. Ask what subjects they are eager to discuss, and if there are subjects they do not want to discuss. Ask what would make them feel safe and comfortable. Then, incorporate these needs and boundaries into the agreed-upon parameters of the discussion. Be prepared to enforce them instead of waiting on the few people of color in the group to risk ostracization by speaking out.
2. Be aware of who in the group is given the most space to talk and try to center the conversation around voices of color—and, in particular, nonmale voices of color.
3. Ask all attendees what they hope to get out of the book, and out of the group discussion. Encourage group members to verbalize their intentions so that everyone has a better chance of reaching aligned goals.
4. Make space for the fear, anger, and hurt of people of color. Abuse is never okay, but what is often called “abuse” in heated discussions on race is often simply people of color expressing very justified emotions about living in a white supremacist society. It’s fine to maintain firm boundaries about what sort of language and behavior is and is not tolerated, but consider re-reading the chapter on tone policing (chapter 15: “But What If I Hate Al Sharpton?”) before you decide what language is acceptable.

A Discussion Guide

5. *Do not allow racist statements or slurs against people of color.* When people of color finally feel safe enough to honestly talk about their experiences, nothing hurts more than to be answered with a racist reply. It is an act of violence against people of color and a betrayal of the group. Be very clear about this from the start, and be prepared to remove offenders if they are making people of color feel unsafe.
6. Try to tie the discussion to issues that are happening in your group's community.
7. Don't be afraid to pause conversations that are becoming overly heated, or if you feel that people of color in the group are not feeling safe.
8. Do not allow white group members to treat their discomfort as harm done to them. Remember, the primary focus of this book—and therefore, hopefully, your discussion group—is how we can talk about the systemic harm done to people of color by a white supremacist society. It is the instinct of our culture to center white emotions and experiences; don't let that happen in these discussions. The comfort of white attendees should be very, very far down on the priority list. If white attendees feel strongly that they need to center their feelings and experiences in the discussion, set up a space away from the group where they can talk with other white people. Do not let it take over the group discussion or become a burden that people of color in the group have to bear.
9. Don't allow people of color to be turned into priests, therapists, or dictionaries for white group members.

A Discussion Guide

If you are white, you shouldn't be looking to the people of color in the group to absolve you of your past sins, process your feelings of guilt, or help you understand every phrase in the book that gives you pause.

10. Acknowledge that your discussion is a very, very small step in your efforts to tackle issues on race. Even if you are reading this book to help you process a specific issue affecting your community, workplace, school, or organization, chances are that it will not be solved in a few gatherings. This book is meant to help you have better conversations in the hope that you will have many of them. Centuries-old constructs of race and generations of systems of oppression are not torn down in a few hours. Appreciate the small moments of progress as you make them—because every bit of progress matters—and also know that you will still have more to do. Do not allow yourself to become overly discouraged by the task ahead of you.
11. For people of color in the group: please know that you have every right to your boundaries, your feelings, your thoughts, and your humanity in this discussion. You have the right to be heard, and your experiences are real and they matter. Please remember that. And thank you—thank you for your generosity in joining yet another conversation on race. If you do not hear this from other members, please hear it from me. You are appreciated.

A Discussion Guide

Questions to Discuss

1. In chapter 1, “Is It Really About Race?,” the author states: “It is about race if a person of color thinks it is about race. It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of color. It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affect people of color.” After reading the author’s explanation of these points, can you think of social or political issues that many people currently believe are not about race, but actually may be? Which of the above guidelines for understanding when it is about race fit those issues?
2. The chapter about privilege is placed right before the chapter on intersectionality. The author has stated in interviews that she placed those chapters in that order because it is impossible to fully understand intersectionality without first comprehending privilege. How do the concepts discussed in the chapter “Why Am I Always Being Told to ‘Check My Privilege?’” help deepen your understanding of intersectionality and help implement intersectionality into your life?
3. The author states that she grew up in a majority white, liberal area and was raised by a white mother. How might that upbringing have influenced the way that she wrote this book? How might it have influenced the personal events she describes in the book? How might this book have been different if written by a black person with a different upbringing, or if written by a person of color of a different race?

A Discussion Guide

4. Throughout the book, the author makes it clear that this book is written for both white people and people of color. But does the author expect white people and people of color to read and experience this book in the same way? What are some of the ways in which the author indicates how she expects white people and people of color to react to and interact with portions of the book? What are some of the ways in which the author discusses the different roles that white people and people of color will play in fighting systemic racism in our society?
5. In chapter 12, “What Are Microaggressions?,” the author lists some of the racial microaggressions that her friends of color said that they often hear. What are some of the racial microaggressions that you have encountered or witnessed? What are some that you may have perpetrated on others?
6. Chapter 15, “But What If I Hate Al Sharpton?,” discusses the issue of respectability politics and tone policing. What burdens of “respectability” and “tone” do you see placed on different populations of color in our society?
7. The final chapter, “Talking Is Great, but What Else Can I Do?,” discusses some actions you can take to battle systemic racism using the knowledge you’ve gained from this book and from your conversations on race. What are some actions you can take in your community, your schools, your workplace, and your local government? What are some local anti-racism efforts in your community that you can join or support?