CHAPTER TWO

Can we tolerate the relationships that race compels?

David Campbell

"The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, after careful consideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you"

(Roth, 1997, p. 35)

A personal statement

In the summer of 1962, I had just graduated from high school in Kansas City, and was preparing to go to university at a small men's liberal arts college in Ohio. One hot day in July, I received a letter from the college informing me that "amongst the 280 men in the incoming class were two Negroes . . ." (I will never forget the way this word, with its capital "N" stood out on the page.) The letter continued to ask if I would have any objections if one of these men were assigned to share a room with me. Partly I was shocked by this

and partly I was very curious, so I wrote back saying, "on the contrary I would be very interested to share a room with one of these men" . . . and so it happened.

In September, I arrived at the campus and went to the tiny room (about 10 ft × 10 ft) where Thad was unpacking his bags. He was from Detroit, and brought with him stacks of Motown records, which helped us to kick-start our relationship. As it turned out, we shared a room in the second year as well, progressing to a room that was approximately 10 ft × 15 ft!! We spent time together and also had separate circles of friends, but he became increasingly lonely in this all-white institution in the middle of Ohio. He spent more and more time at other universities where there was a larger contingent of black students . . . including women . . . and after this second year he left and transferred to a black college in Georgia.

Some of our best conversations took place when the lights were out before we fell asleep. In fact, we had a ritual of turning the lights out and listening to Sibelius's Finlandia as the last thing before we fell asleep, and it was during one of these bedtime sessions that I asked him, "What should I as a white person learn about what it is like to be a black person?" He thought for a few moments, and then he said, "Just don't forget that you can never know what it is like to be black."

Well, this message has stayed with me and I want to remind myself, and the reader, about its meaning as we embark on this chapter.

Introduction

For me, one of the influential ideas within the original Milan approach to family therapy was coined by Shands (1971), who advocated that we should strive to "stamp out nouns", and I think this could not be more appropriate than it is in this potentially volatile field of race and culture. If we see race and culture as "nouns", that is, fixed entities with attached meanings, we lose the potential to see them as pauses in ongoing conversations (Krause, 2002). It would be helpful to see terms such as black, white, or mixed race as pauses or stopping points in ongoing conversations about race. The conversations take place in particular contexts containing elements of the past and the future, but if they can be constructed in a dialogical format they acquire the ability to change and develop new meanings. I think we have an ethical

responsibility, if we choose to become engaged in this topic, to keep conversations going. So, the focus of this chapter is how to introduce the topic of race and culture into dialogical processes.

However, one thing that makes this such a challenging topic to discuss is that while we, and our ancestors, have all been trying to survive for millennia, survival is often achieved by one group establishing its power over another group, and history is filled with examples of wars, colonization, slavery, labour camps, and ghettoization to prove this point. While we are all trying to survive, there have been, throughout history, the powerful and the powerless, the "haves" and the "have-nots", those who survive at the expense of others.

So, when we sit down to talk to clients about cultural differences, we are also inviting these historical legacies into the room. Why is this important for therapists in the twenty-first century? Because we are not simply therapists and clients of the twenty-first century, and it will help us to do this work if we can see ourselves and our clients as participants in a long-standing exercise in power and the struggle to survive. We carry baggage with us. Having said that, I want to contradict myself by saying we are also living in one moment in the flow of history. Movements such as eighteenth century enlightenment, nineteenth century social reforms, and the abolition of the slave trade made society more aware of abuses of power, just as legislation for civil partnerships and the ordination of women do today. As a society, we become more enlightened and more aware of the experiences of others with increasing exposure to others and the passage of time. I think this is important, because it helps both therapists and clients accept their limitations. We are limited by the power struggles of the past and we are also enlightened by increasing awareness of "the other". The inequities of the past grip our relationships today in a way that will be different twenty years from now. So, we are also trying to create dialogue in the context of the future. (I write this chapter as the mixed-race senator, Barack Obama, is elected as the president of the United States, and his victory has prompted an enormous sense of a future, particularly for many African-Americans.)

Dialogue

How do we begin to construct a dialogical process that allows us to communicate meaningfully with clients from races and cultures other

than our own?[1] It is possible to see speech or action in a wider context that also includes all the possible things that were not said or acted upon. The work of Derrida (1982) and Bakhtin (1935) have been influential in highlighting that the thing said acquires its meaning from its relation to "the things not said". In a similar vein, positioning theory articulated by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) goes a step further by suggesting that when we take a position through our words or deeds, we actively position the words not spoken and the deeds not done as "the other". This creates a dynamic of mutual influence between ourselves and others. And when this dynamic model is applied in a social context in which people are vying for the power to compete for limited resources, we very quickly see the emergence of one group holding power at the expense of the "other", who does not.

In relation to this, I want to emphasize two points. First, I want to emphasize the distinction between a dialogue between people of different races and a dialogue between people who have had different experiences based on race. Race and culture are "totalizing" terms and obscure the subtle meanings that these terms have in a particular context. The term race should be used only as a context marker, which alerts us to something potentially powerful and important behind the term. Because race and culture carry such emotionally laden baggage, we can easily fall into the trap of accepting a statement about race as though we know what it means to the speaker, and avoiding the more difficult, perhaps uncomfortable, process of finding out the range of meanings the speaker attaches to the statement. "Race", therefore, needs to be placed in dialogue and I find the concept of "dis-aggregating race" a helpful reminder of the many possible meanings lying behind each encounter.

In order to create dialogue between people who have had different experiences based on race and cultural differences, we need to explore some important aspects of the dialogical process. The prerequisite I have found most important is that each participant feels safe in a dialogue, and I think that people feel safe when they believe their conversational partner acknowledges and respects the reasons they are living their lives as they are (Mason, 1993). This is a tall order, but at least this proviso spares us from the pressure of having to understand, or be fully empathic with, another's experience. I think dialogues are dynamic, fluctuating processes, and, in this context, it means we become more and less respectful during a conversation

while seeking over time to reach a more respectful and empathic rela-
tionship toward "the other". I use the language of safety, but, over
time, I have also moved toward the idea that we need to think about
whether someone is "prepared for dialogue". I have found that it is
helpful in work with clients to distinguish dialogical conversation
from other types of conversation. I explain to clients that a dialogical
conversation is a different kind of conversation with its own ground
rules that aims to help people understand the positions they speak
from and the positions from which others speak to them. Some
ground rules which I find helpful are:

- this can be a time-limited conversation that is part of a longer
  therapeutic session;
- it requires each to listen carefully to the other in order to address
  the question: "Why is it important to the other to take the partic-
  ular position they have chosen?";
- the process is structured so that each is listening to the other in
  sequence, rather than in simultaneous, overlapping conversa-
  tions . . . (A listens to B, then B listens to A, and so on);
- each should help the other understand the value and meaning of
  their position, rather than persuade the other of the correctness of
  their position;
- it might be helpful to use diagrams to graphically represent
  polarities and positions.

In relation to the issue of safety and being prepared for dialogue,
I was interested to read an account of two professional women, one
white and one black, who were endeavouring to address their differ-
ences in an open and honest relationship (Ayvasian & Tatum, 2004).
When the black man, Rodney King, was severely beaten by a group of
white Los Angeles police officers in March 1991, the black woman felt
such anger against the white community that she could no longer
sustain her friendship with her white colleague, and reported that she
needed to spend more time with her black friends and their church.
This seemed like seeking out, for the time being, the people—her
black friends—who would know most what it felt like to be a black
person in that society. She felt it was not something a white person
could understand. After some months, she then felt able to contact her
white friend and re-start their relationship where they left off. For me,

this example illustrates the necessity of moving in and out of safe positions in the course of creating a dialogue based on racial experiences, because the dialogue was affected by the external events, or the "racial baggage", that we all carry into dialogue. The example also warns us against the notion that we can understand, or be empathic to, another person all the time. This, I think, goes some way toward lifting the burden on participants trying to create a dialogue across racial difference, and makes it acceptable, even necessary, for each person to step in and out of dialogue.

My second point refers to the way I think we need to employ dialogue. To move toward dialogue is to recognize that the position I hold in relation to race and culture is maintained by the existence of other positions. If I take the position of white privilege, this position gets its various meanings from the complementary position called black lack of privilege. Positions of power exist in relation to positions of powerlessness. When we take a position through our action or utterances, we position others as different, and if the issue at stake is one imbued with power relations, such as class, expertise, or skin colour, we are also positioning others in positions of less power and perpetuating a power dynamic that is favourable for some and not others.

An example

Here is an example, which illustrates the importance of disaggregating experiences of race, and trying to identify the polarity upon which each speaker has taken a position. A white supervisor was working with a group of four family therapy trainees, one of whom was from an ethnic minority, in a live supervision group. The supervisor had been influenced by the discourse about white privilege and the need to be proactive in raising issues of race so that they did not become marginalized in the working of her group. After several weeks of being with the group, she sensed that the ethnic minority trainee felt somewhat different from the others, and surmised that this was due to ethnicity. In order to promote openness and trust, she asked the young woman if there were any issues about race that she would like to raise in the group, to which the supervisee replied, "I don't have any issues about race in this group." The supervisor felt frustrated

that her good intention to make it possible to talk about race was not met with approval, and the group drifted on to another topic.

How can we understand what happened? From my conceptual framework, I would argue that each of these persons took positions within different polarities. The supervisor was operating within a polarity that could be labelled "range of interventions to promote discussion of race", and consisted of a myriad number of interventions, some more direct and some more indirect, which she could choose at that moment. Within the myriad possibilities, she chose to take a position I would call "ask the ethic minority trainee directly if she would like to talk about issues".

When polarity lines are drawn out, several things, which were not so clear before, become apparent. Implied is that the supervisor supports and respects all the positions, because they all depend on each other for their very existence. Also implied is that the timing of a discussion about race or respect depends on two people, in this case the supervisor and the supervisee, negotiating the right time to talk. For example, if one person says, "I would like to ask about race here", that is only one position, and rather than necessarily discussing race at this time, both can become interested in how that statement influences the other to take a corresponding position within the same polarity.

Is this a moment to discuss race?

I_____x_____x_____I
     Probably   Not yet

If the supervisor/therapist and supervisee/client are united in their adherence to the polarity line, it is more likely each will be interested in trying to connect themselves to the position the other wants to take.

As it happens, I was supervising the supervisor, and, after further discussion with her, we thought the trainee was operating within another polarity altogether, and hers might be labelled "range of things I can do to feel I belong to this group". Within her range of possibilities might be "acknowledge my differences" at one end of the polarity, and "acknowledge my similarities" at the other end of the polarity line. When the trainee was asked about "her issues about race", it might have been difficult for her to take the position "acknowledge my differences" if she was, in fact, more preoccupied with belonging to the group. Within that polarity, it would make more sense to take a position of "acknowledging my similarities" in trying

to belong and, therefore, she would need to say, "I have no issues". At the other end of the conversation, for the supervisor, operating within the polarity of "promoting discussion of race", the trainee's reply did not fit, and she felt confused because her efforts seemed to have been in vain. This is an example of positioning others when we try to construct meaning by taking a position on our own semantic polarity. When the supervisor takes the position of "white privilege", she automatically places others in the position of "non-white, less-privileged", but this might not be the position that the other wants to choose for herself, and, as a result, there is a discrepancy that will inevitably lead to misunderstanding. So, as therapists and supervisors, we must be vigilant about our own positions and the way they position others. I think problems of understanding arise when we do not make race and culture acceptable topics for conversation and exploration, but I also suggest that problems arise when we assume race should be discussed at the time and in the manner of our choosing.

Using the positioning model means starting a conversation with the assumption that each of us takes a different position within different semantic polarities. Therefore, we should begin a conversation assuming we want different things from each other and not rush too quickly into a conversation aiming for connectedness. Better to get interested in the other's position, and employ the mantra, "Why is it so important for this person to take this position at this time?", rather than looking for the connections to our own position. Paradoxically, it is the attention to the separateness or the uniqueness of each person's position that encourages each individual to seek out the other and look for the connectedness between different positions. I use this approach in many of my supervisions, because often therapists try too hard to make connections, and, while they are doing so, they fail to see some important aspects of the client's or family members' need for difference, distance, and separateness. I think this is particularly pertinent to the issue of race, for which separateness is so intrinsically bound with a history of abuse of power and the subsequent guilt of those holding power.

Power

Power is a vexed issue. We choose positions (and inadvertently position others) to help us influence conversations and relationships. We

would like others to see the world as we see it, or at least not to challenge our view so much that we become uncertain and vulnerable. Therefore, within every conversation there is the subtle negotiation of power to influence relationships (Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978), and as this occurs over time and within institutions, positions of power are held on to and fought over with consequences for both winners and losers.

When society allocates power, wealth, and status to certain positions, while they do indeed derive their meanings from the existence of the "other", they are difficult to relinquish. Who will willingly surrender power, wealth, or status? This is what we are up against when we encourage people to take responsibility for the "other" position that supports their own. I do not think we can progress with this model until we are able to talk about positions of power and what it might mean to give them up.

However, I also think that changing attitudes about race and culture must not rely exclusively on good works or morality-based charity and love. Rather, here I want to suggest that it is within our own "selfish" interest to review and alter our attitudes toward the other. Our own selfish individual development depends on it. At the heart of my argument is the assertion that we learn and develop as human beings by participating in dialogical communication with the other. If I can define myself in relation to what is "not me", or what lies in the territory belonging to the other, then any expansion of myself and my beliefs will take place, to some degree, within the territory previously allocated to the other. While it is beyond our ability to influence the "system" that creates and maintains racism, we can scale things down and make the issue relevant for therapeutic work by exploring what it means to the therapist–client relationship evolving in front of us. This has been acknowledged by various writers, such as Levinas and Benjamin, who have discussed the idea of having "responsibility" for the other:

> Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which commitment to another would have been made. [Levinas, 1998[1974], p. 114]

> The notion of intersubjectivity postulates that the barbarism of incorporating the Other into the same, the cycle of destructiveness, can only be modified when the Other intervenes. Therefore *any subject's primary*

responsibility to the other subject is to be her intervening or surviving other.
This perspective allows us to move beyond the critique of the think-
ing subject into the problem of identity as it presents itself in the
psychopolitical world. [Benjamin, 1998, p. 99, original italics]

The responsibility to get into dialogue is a moral imperative that
lies at the heart of both personal and social change. But what can
entice or compel anyone to enter into dialogue with someone, unless
there is some self-interest at stake? Are we going to wait for altruism
to motivate people to talk and listen to those who are different? I think
not. Why should we be interested in another person's position on any
particular issue? One reason is that we can enhance our position by
readying ourselves to borrow from those who have similar interests,
whether they be for alliance or rivalry. We can develop our own
wealth, knowledge, and emotional well-being by getting into dialogue
with people of similar interests. It is possible to position speakers on
the polarity of power. Who has a greater amount of power to define
the context? That is, this conversation is about you accepting my point
of view or this conversation is about my trying to agree or disagree
with your point of view. Are you an employee of the state speaking to
someone who feels on the margins of the state? It is then useful to
position people on the polarity of how much each is open to being
influenced by the other. This is the difference between a *conversation,*
in which each has a goal of influencing the other towards their own
point of view, and a *dialogue,* in which each is interested in exploring
and understanding, and perhaps moving toward the other's position.

I want to clarify here that this positioning model can be used for
the therapist to demonstrate the different positions taken by family
members, or it can be used for the therapist to demonstrate her own
position *vis-à-vis* a client for a particular issue that emerges in therapy.
When people are able to listen empathically, their position changes
because some of the "others"' position is incorporated into their own,
and this signals the emergence of a new position . . . a third position.
Another way of representing this might be to say that my position is
Context A, and yours is Context B, and the dialogical process allows
for the emergence of Context C (Campbell & Grøenbaek, 2006). My
experience in managing these dialogues (and they do require active
management) is that it is the quality of listening rather than the qual-
ity of speaking that facilitates the creation of Context C. Therefore, I
emphasize the state of mind for listening by making comments such

as these: to the person in the speaking position, "Just try to explain to the other why it is so important for you to take and hold on to your position on this particular issue"; to the person in the listening position, "Try to listen in such a way that helps you come a bit closer to understanding why the other's position is so important to them and why it is so helpful to hold on to their position".

Survival and connectedness

Because we all, chapter-writers and chapter-readers alike, have myriad experiences of race and culture, some of which are highly charged, this discussion will be read through the lens of our own personal and societal meanings. Other writers (see chapters by Daniel, Flaskas, Malik/Mandin, Mason and Pocock, this volume) discuss the necessity of revisiting our own experiences, in order to be grounded and authentic when we raise the topic with clients. I agree that this is a crucial part of the preparation necessary for therapeutic work, but there is one issue I have seldom heard addressed, although I have found this very helpful to me in this effort to "make my own safe environment". This is the issue of *survival*. I think that persons intrinsically want to be connected with, or one might say that persons want to be embedded in, some context that gives meaning to their lives. Another way of saying this might be that persons intrinsically want to be placed in a relationship with the "other" in such a way that allows them to enhance their own position, whether this be a moral, material, relational, or emotional position. This is survival. The problem for us, as therapists, is that we are unrealistic about what people really want to be connected to and we are unrealistic about which "other" our clients want to get to know. This idea of survival might be best understood as an aspect of Maslow's needs' hierarchy (Maslow, 1943), because all thoughts and activities about race and culture differences imply that these are ideas which help us survive.

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, I have aimed to produce some guidelines for practitioners who try to have conversations across racial and cultural

divides. My guidelines have taken the form of processes rather than nouns: being/becoming prepared, being/becoming connected, having dialogues, disaggregating race, positioning oneself and taking responsibility for the "other". These might help to offer different perspectives, but they might also obscure as well as illuminate. Apart from the fact that an iceberg is white, I think the metaphor of the "tip of the iceberg" is helpful in thinking about race and cultural differences. As with skin colour and facial features, that part of the iceberg above the water announces its presence and its identity as an iceberg based on immediate visual features. However, what lies beneath the waterline is much more influential in defining the size and shape of the iceberg and, as we all know from the story of the Titanic, potentially is much more deadly. Similarly, we might make initial judgements about people based on visual cues, unaware of what lies beyond the initial impression. What is this person's history? Why have they come for a consultation? What might they possibly think of finding themselves sitting in front of me? We can only start by taking stock of our own beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices (Cecchin, Lane, & Ray, 1994) and we can only deal with what we "know" about others.

Note

1. Readers who want a more thorough discussion of my use of dialogue and positioning theory can refer to other writings: Campbell and Grøenbaek (2006), and Campbell (2008).

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