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The new borders of transmission

Eugene Ellis
The Race Conversation: An essential Guide to Creating Life-Changing Dialogue
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Reviewed by Naomi Segal*

For many, the idea of a conversation about race can conjure up uncomfortable and unwanted feelings of shame, guilt, rage, confusion, denial, ambivalence and more, leaving one with a sense of not knowing how to safely or constructively navigate the topic. Eugene Ellis offers *The Race Conversation: An essential guide to creating life changing dialogue* to address this difficulty.

Ellis is a psychotherapist specialising in body-oriented therapies, and founder of the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network, the UK's largest organisation specialising in therapy for black, African, Caribbean and south Asians. *The Race Conversation* is his guide for both people of colour and white people on how to acknowledge and sit with the emotional and bodily discomfort of race-focussed conversations.

His style is knowledgeable and informative, yet personal and casual, which makes for an easy, although at times, disturbing read. Ellis doesn't shy away from addressing unsettling topics. Throughout the book he sets up the problem, as he sees it, and offers guidance for

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its resolution. Sometimes the suggestions feel like a tough assignment for anyone who hasn't already undergone a good amount of reflective work, however he acknowledges the difficulty of being able to achieve this without external support and suggests that therapy or groups may offer the required assistance.

Ellis discusses at length his choice and meaning of appropriate language used to identify racial groups - black, white, people of colour and mixed-race. This, in itself, highlights some of the difficulties in having a race conversion. How does one practically go about it? Labels he refers to frequently are 'victim', referencing people of colour who are subjected to racism, 'perpetrator', the white people who enact racism either consciously or unconsciously, and 'witness', being the white people who observe it. Terms that, I imagine, may make some readers bristle. However, it is this discomfort that Ellis encourages the reader to confront.

Chapter one makes clear his wish for readers to engage with the text predominantly through the body. As a reader who would fit into his victim category, there were certainly times when I needed to pause and breathe in acknowledgement of my emotional and bodily responses to the text, as Ellis suggests is required at noted intervals.

Ellis emphasises throughout how safety is a requirement for engaging sincerely in dialogues about race, and in chapter two, he highlights how a desire for safety may leave us avoiding the distress such conversations often evoke. He uses his work in UK adoption services to understand the relational trauma of those engaging in race conversations, both from a victim and witness perspective, to describe how adoptees and caregivers can begin to develop a similar response of turning away from emotional support, which can lead to an environment of blame, shame and reduced empathy.

The theme of intergenerational trauma is a concept Ellis returns to on several occasions. He posits intergenerational relational trauma holds a clear link to the difficulties that can be encountered when engaging in a conversation about race. He suggests a trauma-informed approach is required to safely engage on the topic, drawing on the concepts of implicit memory (p. 40) and neuroception (p. 43).

Chapter three skilfully describes how experiences of black, white and mixed-race identities are inextricably linked. This challenges the notion of race being about black or brownness and includes whiteness within it. He offers an historical overview of the racial construct of mixed-races, based on African slavery and Indian colonisation, which can leave mixed-race individuals searching to understand where they fit in.

Ellis offers the term "race construct" (p. 76) as a way of acknowledging identities that have been formed on the basis of skin colour, and extends this to describe how "race construct shame" (p. 79) plays a prominent role in conversations about race.

In chapter four Ellis explores the origins of racial constructs and how they are transmitted through intergenerational trauma amongst people of colour and the unconscious bias of white people. He highlights how the brutal treatment of enslaved Africans became enshrined in law, establishing a mindset of how whites were to treat blacks and, with it, the preferential concept of whiteness (p. 105).

He expands Bowlby's attachment theory to include the importance of, not only an infant's

relationship with its primary caregiver, which he argues is a western, middle-class frame, but also the necessity of "positive experiences within a social group" and "a respectful gaze from the wider world" (p. 121) which helps create a sense of safety and trust with others. This seems like an important reappraisal of the theory to expand its focus from being based on a secure attachment to a primary caregiver.

Ellis suggests an epigenetic transmission of fear is passed on intergenerationally through both people of colour and white people, whereby people of colour fear for their safety, and white people fear violent retribution (p. 127). This could be considered though the psychoanalytic notion of early attachment trauma, however this would miss the aspect of the transmission which is bound to the body, which is what Ellis duly emphasises.

In chapter five, he goes on to address how the trauma within the perpetrators, witnesses and victims of slavery contributes to a hyperaroused nervous system. He points out the risk that a non-relational approach to healing nervous system dysregulation might leave one post-rationalising the enslavement of Africans.

Chapter six brings the reader back into the major thrust of the book: one's own body awareness, which seems useful in exploring how primitive mental states may be affected. Its discomfort, Ellis suggests, may compel some to take up a journey of healing. Here he coins the term "race construct arousal" (p. 150) to describe how both people of colour and white people can feel triggered by historical, intergenerational and present-day events, such as micro-aggressions towards people of colour and, for white people, moving out of the safe construct of whiteness.

Chapter seven leads the reader into a mind, body, heart approach to becoming race construct aware. He describes how the practice of mindfulness encourages awareness of in-the-moment sensations of one's body, as a calming alternative to the preoccupation of cognition.

In an exploration of "bodyfulness" (p. 175), Ellis examines the non-verbal cues our bodies offer and how abandoning the body's wisdom can set people of colour on a path towards self-criticism, chronic health issues and attempts to force the body to fit a narrative of whiteness. Ellis talks through stages of mentalising, empathy and compassion as a means of reducing and eventually dissolving race construct suffering.

In the final chapter, Ellis guides the reader through the five stages of his Race Construct Awareness Model and how it can be used. He suggests reading, listening and understanding isn't enough to navigate this journey, and instead one must deploy intention, attention and time to the cause.

Towards the end of the book Ellis makes an important and profound statement that acknowledges the possibilities and limitations of race conversations between people of colour and white people. He closes, not with his own words, but with a quote of optimism from Angela Davies that neatly summarises his own hopes for positive advancement offered by this engaging and challenging book: "People accuse me of being an inveterate optimist, but I always think we have to find something that holds a promise and that we look towards the future." (p. 269).


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