Instructor’s Guide

Policing America: Racism, Reform, and Redefining Justice

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If you have grown up in America or have spent any time in America, you are well versed in the subject of race relations and policing. News reports, reality television shows focused on law enforcement, and typical college textbooks reveal what the Kerner Commission predicted for America in the aftermath of the “race riots” of the 1960s: two Americas, “one White, one Black,” and the consolidation of police power and law enforcement in white America.

If you are apprehensive about discussing race in the classroom, I found Ijeoma Oluo’s *So You Want To Talk About Race* (2018) an accessible and helpful book. From my own classroom experience teaching criminal justice for the past 17 years, here are my suggestions:

1. Reflect on how you personally feel about issues of race and criminal justice that may invite contentious disagreements in the classroom, such as:
   - police enforce the law, they do not see color
   - black-on-black crime (“look at Chicago!” is what many say)
   - affirmative action in higher education and policing
   - the wars on drugs and crime
   - mass incarceration
   - police not living in the racial-ethnic minority communities they serve

   Be prepared to respond when certain issues arise so you can help navigate the discussion in an educational direction. A word of caution, though: Do not announce your views about the topic to the class prior to the discussion. Studies show those who agree with you will be emboldened to speak, but those who disagree with your view will likely remain silent.
2. Plan time during your lecture, or in responding to discussion posts online, to talk about race. Be emotionally prepared to not reach closure or a tidy resolution to an issue that has vexed the country for 400 years.

3. In preparing to engage your students in a discussion about race, prepare “off ramps” in advance. When a situation escalates and you find yourself ill-prepared to cool emotional flare ups or to corral the discussion based on race, plan an exit ramp that keeps the discussion about race moving, but once removed. For example, one preplanned “off ramp” could be, “In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. If he were alive today, what speech would he give?”

The goal is to pull back from the emotion but still keep the discussion going. If the discussion becomes irretrievably broken down and it would be counter-productive to continue, please do not end the class period with a mass of swirling emotions. Check in with students to see how they are feeling and commit to continuing to address the race issue so that everyone can understand and honor their classmates’ different perspectives.

4. In conducting the class discussion on race, have the class establish ground rules to make sure everyone is heard. The rules should be specific. If a ground rule is “be respectful to everyone,” ask the class to define what “respectful” means so everyone understands. During the discussion, check in and make sure everyone is still comfortable with the rules as community norms of engagement.

5. When you begin the discussion either face to face or online, allow everyone to speak once before anybody speaks twice. I cut up my class list and pull names randomly out of a cup until everyone expresses their thoughts on the topic. Giving everyone a chance to talk will prevent students who believe they have certain expertise on the issue from drowning out other opinions.

6. Employ active listening techniques to prevent misunderstandings and ask open-ended questions (who, what, where, why, when) to encourage students to participate. Work hard at not being judgmental or condemnatory if a student expresses unpopular viewpoints.

7. If a class member expresses statements that may be perceived as insensitive—for example, “The Confederate flag is about history, not hate, and removing statues of southern heroes is trying to erase history”—you will have to engage in Socratic method deductive reasoning. The goal is not to get the student to change their mind, but to help the student see why what they are saying may be hurtful to others. A hypothetical exchange between instructor and student may look like this:

- Why did the South fight the Civil War? (states’ rights)
- States’ rights about what? (economic freedom/determinism)
- What was the source of the southern economy? (agrarian/labor from enslaved people)
• The federal government won the war, settling the issue about state slavery, correct?
• The Confederate flag, then, represents the fight to keep Black people in bondage?
• Can you see how the Confederate flag may be perceived as wanting to subjugate Black people?
• Are you okay with honoring a symbol that causes people psychic pain?

8. Leave time for a debrief. Plan to end your discussion with 10 minutes to wrap up, check in with students to gauge whether the discussion helped them understand the issues, ask if you can do anything to improve the quality of the discussion (if you made mistakes, apologize and ask for suggestions to do better), and then rinse and repeat.

9. The more we all talk about race in our classroom, the less people will equate discussions about race with “racism,” allowing us to continue to learn from one another. Our students are depending on us to lead the way and show them how to engage with difficult topics. In this day and age, silence in no longer an option.

For more information, watch my webinar on Having Conversations about Race in the Classroom.

Feel free to reach out if you would like to discuss more, sajira@ship.edu.

Q&A ON HOW TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE IN THE CLASSROOM

Here are some responses to questions other instructors have had when considering how to have a courageous conversations about race in the class.

How would you recommend responding to students who view ground rules as oppressive?

Ground rules are not oppressive. Students are not going to graduate and walk into a meeting with a management team their first day on the job and start talking about their personal problems, romantic interests, and their investment strategies. Guidelines for social discourse exist in the professional world, and the college experience is preparing students to be professional.

Is it really ok to say we are willing to hear all voices if some voices are harmful to students of color?

All voices are welcome—there is no way we can move forward in society if people do not feel free to share how they think and feel. Understand higher education may not change people’s beliefs about race that they have cherished for a lifetime, but education can open eyes
Instructors leading discussions about race must work to remain non-judgmental and non-condemnatory in the face of inflammatory statements; try to guide the conversation into an analysis of why what someone said is problematic or hurtful.

Is there a place for intersectionality when discussing race, or is it important to save this topic for another time? Why?

People often desire to dilute race-specific conversations because of the possibility of generating feelings of discomfort. Talking about intersectionality is great, but try not to conflate race with general issues of diversity. Here’s a resource:

Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality

As a professor I sometimes have difficulty with students who have had little exposure to racial and ethnic minorities, yet want to pursue social work, a field in which they will frequently interface with people of color. How do I get students to stretch out of their comfort zone?

Field trips! You want to avoid taking students to a racial-ethnic minority neighborhood or other type of diverse space because students may resent the “gawking” and “trivializing” of a one-off experience of diversity.

You can watch movies, or you can visit cultural sites and museums—even online! In person (with social distancing), you can organize an event at a museum; curators are more than happy to help here. Or you can assign virtual tours of notable museums. Then you can reconvene in class and discuss the representations of life in diverse spaces and connect the art to experiences students will have in the field. Here is a list of notable museums:

DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago, IL
Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, Jackson, MS

QUESTIONS RELATED TO PRIVILEGE AND FRAGILITY

Can you give ideas for how to set up courses and discussions that meet the needs of students who are unaware that racism exists and students who have experienced racism or are knowledgeable about structural racism?
How do I gently correct a white student who says a hurtful thing unwittingly without pandering to and prioritizing white fragility?

I’d love more advice about how to navigate discussions regarding, for example, white privilege, when I have mostly white students and a few students of color.

How would you recommend correcting a student who makes a statement that is racist in a group discussion? I want to point out that the statement is problematic without stifling conversation.

Suggestions for Dealing with Issues of Privilege and Fragility in the Classroom

Here’s an example from my own work space. A wonderful white colleague, Dex, is on the telephone describing a courier who will be dropping off some papers as “a big Black guy with a moustache.” Dex’s Black colleague says, “You can’t talk like that,” and walks away. Dex has no idea why his description is hurtful. I explain that if the courier were “a big white guy with a moustache,” Dex would probably never had used the word “white” as a descriptor of the courier; Dex sees my point and agrees. America has made color and race shorthand only for people of color, reducing three-dimensional human beings to their color. Your job as an instructor is to provide the why, but to get there, you have to plan ahead for your class discussions or content delivery.

My advice is to navigate race talk by immediately trying to separate the student from their ideas or statements that may be harmful. Because talking about race is personal for everyone, discussion often shuts down because people (students, colleagues, staff) are afraid of how they will be perceived and any potential backlash if they are inarticulate in what they say.

**Step #1** is to understand there is a difference in how people talk/dialogue culturally. A good example is the snippet of a Democratic presidential debate when Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) challenged Vice President Joseph Biden on the issue of school busing. Harris made the story personal (I was that girl), while Biden’s response was filled with facts (your local city council). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1OvDB.wavI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1OvDB.wavI)

**Step #2** is to give a “privilege” quiz so students understand the issue. Privilege is often associated with excess. Many white students work two or three jobs and their families struggle with tuition bills, so they do not identify the freedom to move about America without thinking about race as a privilege. The quiz can help all students see the invisible hand of how some members of society benefit from our racially segregated society.

Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley College, created the “White Privilege Checklist.” Giving credit to McIntosh (1987), I have adapted the checklist for college students. [http://also-chicago.org/also_site/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/white-privilege.pdf](http://also-chicago.org/also_site/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/white-privilege.pdf)

Have students answer true or false to the following questions and discuss. **Everyone speaks once before anybody speaks twice.**
1. I can be late for class without everyone thinking bad thoughts about my race. 
   ________

2. I can talk about racism without people thinking I am pushing a radical agenda. 
   ________

3. I can get a job and feel confident people will not think I got the job because of affirmative action and I must, therefore, be unqualified for the position. ________

4. I can rent an apartment in town and not think twice that I might get turned away because of race. ________

5. I can turn on the news and remain confident that I can see my race reflected in a positive light. ________

6. When I walk into a supermarket, I am sure I can find hair care products I use regularly. ________

7. When I am called on in class, I am aware that I always represent the views of my race. ________

8. If I am stopped by campus police, I never think the stop is because of my race. ________

9. When I shop and use big bills, it never crosses my mind the clerk might question my legitimacy. ________

10. When class discussion turns to our national heritage, I know the discussion includes me. ________

   **Step #3** involves making sure you do not impose a “diversity tax” during class conversations; your students of color should not have to answer for or educate white students about what it means to be a person of color in America.

   If someone says something hurtful that needs to be corrected, you have to prepare to explain *why* the statement is hurtful. You can prepare in advance for the most basic statements students typically make. My method, “Seeing it through my diverse eyes,”© uses the current news of the day and historical references in a “paint-by-numbers” exercise to help keep the dialogue flowing without it spiraling into emotional volatility.

   I give a few examples here, but feel free to create your own matrix so that your responses are natural and organic for you and your students, who all have different needs. Again, you want to take the discussion away from individual students to keep students engaged and inoculate yourself from charges of coddling students based on feelings. I make no endorsement or criticism of the current political figures by using them in my examples here.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom Comment</th>
<th>News of the Day</th>
<th>Historical Reference</th>
<th>Shaping Professor Response: WHY</th>
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<td>I don’t see color. Racism is a myth. We had a Black president, which proves we live in a post-racial society. (The person is not prejudiced, but may be unaware they live in a society where social mobility is defined by color.)</td>
<td>President Donald Trump remarks, July 16, 2020, White House “ . . . I will be discussing the AFFH rule—a disaster—and our plans to protect the suburbs . . . People have worked all their lives to get into a community, and now they’re going to watch it go to hell . . . Your home will go down in value and crime rates will rapidly rise.”</td>
<td>1. Practice of redlining (R. Rothstein, The Color of Law, 2017). 2. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 3. AFFH = Affirmatively Further Fair Housing, which was implemented by President Barack Obama to foster inclusive communities</td>
<td>How many students live in racially diverse suburbs? Cities are racially diverse. If people do not see color, why are laws such as The Fair Housing Act or AFFH necessary? What is the implication about color: “crime rates will rise”?</td>
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<td>Legal immigration is okay, but illegals take our jobs. (The person absorbs media references without recognizing that certain terms are derogatory.)</td>
<td>President Donald Trump remarks, July 19, 2018, Twitter “They don’t care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13. They can’t win on their terrible policies, so they view them as potential voters!”</td>
<td>In World War II, many crimes against humanity were committed by everyday people who thought they were acting morally as a result of relentless government propaganda dehumanizing the “other” as rats “infesting” traditional communities. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, (1963).</td>
<td>Referring to people as inanimate objects, animals, or by general characteristics makes it easier for society to distance themselves from certain groups. Dehumanizing people makes it easier to hurt identifiable groups or, at the least, not care deeply about the groups’ welfare.</td>
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### Classroom Resources to Help Talk About Race

- **Phil Vischer, “Let’s Talk About Race: A History Lesson”**
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGUwcs9qJXY

- **Dr. Eddie Moore, “21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge”**
  https://www.eddiemoorejr.com/21daychallenge

- **Justice in June** [This website was created by two friends, Bryanna Wallace and Autumn Gupta, when they were 22 and 23 years old. It is very relatable for college students.]
  https://justiceinjune.org/

- **Priya Vulchi and Winona Guo, “What it takes to be racially literate”** [This TED Talk is given by two college students.]
  https://www.ted.com/talks/priya_vulchi_and_winona_guo_what_it_takes_to_be_racially_literate/transcript?referrer=playlist-talks_to_help_you_understand_r#t-128053

  https://medium.com/@jxjirard/how-to-turn-all-lives-matter-into-black-lives-matter-a-6-step-guide-for-productive-dialogue-2ce82682b47
| Gina Crosley-Corcoran, “Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person” |
| Teaching Tolerance (part of the Southern Poverty Law Center), “What Is White Privilege, Really?” |
|https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2018/what-is-white-privilege-really|
| Ibram X. Kendi, “Who Gets to Be Afraid in America?” (May 12, 2020) |
|https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/ahmaud-arbery/611539/|
| Sheryll Cashin, “How Larry Hogan Kept Blacks in Baltimore Segregated and Poor” |
| Ibram X. Kendi, “The Anti-Racist Reading List” |
| 11-minute audio on NPR titled “‘Interrupt The Systems’: Robin DiAngelo On ‘White Fragility’ and Anti-Racism” (June 18, 2020) |
| Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley, “Resources to Support Anti-Racist Learning” |
|https://ggie.berkeley.edu/school-challenges/anti-racist-resources-for-educators/#tab__2|
| P&G Corporation, “Engage” |
|https://us.pg.com/take-on-race/engage/|