

The Inner Dialogue of a Black Collaborative-Dialogic Practitioner

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A few weeks ago, I had the honor of being invited to host a discussion about racism with a panel of psychotherapists. As I reflect on this invitation, I am now able to refer to it as an honor, but in the moment, I wasn't so sure. When Harlene Anderson asked me if I would be willing to participate on the panel, I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't quite sure why I felt the way I did, but as the interview began to take shape, I began to realize why I had felt so uneasy. I was so certain that the subject matter would hit so close to home that I would not be able to contain my anger, sadness, or shame. To my surprise, I was able to hold space for the four participants who so bravely bared their souls. All the while my mind was churning with so many thoughts of my own.

"Why don't you write about your experience?" Michael (my [Behind the Curtains](#) co-blogger) asked. I offered somewhat casually, "Sure, maybe I can write about my inner voice." As soon as I said it, I thought to myself, "Wow, as a black woman, my inner voice is quite sacred. We are often silenced, ignored, and disregarded, therefore our inner voice is often all we have." Sharing my inner voice would make me vulnerable in ways that I had been taught were not acceptable of the strong black woman I have been raised to be. "Do they really want to hear what I have to say?" I thought as I struggled with the idea of taking off my metaphorical mask and allowing my thoughts to be heard. There is so much that I don't say. In collaborative-dialogic practices, we talk about the conversation that we don't hear, what is not being said aloud. I wondered what my colleagues would think of me if they heard my inner voice which often reflected my hopes, my fears, and my resentment as a black clinician.

As a black therapist in a predominantly white field, speaking up about racism and difference isn't easy. When we speak about it, we are essentially separating ourselves from the flock, a flock where we are figuratively and literally the black sheep. When I hear a not-so-funny-it-was-just-a-racist-joke, I ask, "Should I call it out?" or should I cue what Dr. Maya Angelo referred to as the "survival laugh." That hollow, empty half-hearted chuckle black people sometimes use to mask their pain and disappointment in our non-black friends and colleagues after hearing the prelude to the phrase, "No offense but..."

As I prepared for the panel, my nerves began to get the best of me. After hearing some of the other panelists voicing their concerns and asking questions such as "What have I gotten myself into?" I began to realize that I was not alone. We were all in the same boat. We were all essentially being asked to take off our masks. The same masks that most of our white colleagues were unaware of because it was all we presented them with. The mask that I am referring to is the code-switching, always-adapting, token bearing mask that grants us acceptance and access. We were being asked to relinquish the power of those masks and offer ourselves as "victims." Victims of racial injustice. Admitting that I have endured racial discrimination is just as humbling for me as it is for other black people. It is a painful acknowledgment that there are times when we don't fit in, even in our own country.

I wasn't sure what the outcome of the panel discussion would be. All I knew was that this moment was either going down in the books as a teachable moment or one of the most self-reflective moments in my life. Prior to the panel discussion my mind swirled with waves of doubt and that old familiar feeling of not being "good enough." I even began to feel self-conscious about my ability to speak westernized, grammatically correct English, and how I would present to viewers if I mistakenly allowed myself to slip into my more relaxed "Ebonics" or what is now known as Vernacular English.

Even as I write this, I am becoming encased with anger and resentment, for it is society that has made my language feel improper and unacceptable. This inner voice of self-doubt and worry is something I often struggle with in large group discussions. This same inner voice silences me at times and causes me to overthink my ideas as well as my choice of words. When Dr. Russell Razzaque shared that even with all his accomplishments, there are still seeds of self-doubt that cause him to question himself. As a future doctor, I wondered if I would still share those same sentiments. Have I deceived myself into thinking that earning a Ph.D. would somehow make some of those seeds of doubt and experiences of discrimination disappear?

This time I tried to challenge these thoughts. "Relax, Tushanna," I told myself. If anyone can relate to the challenges of being a black therapist, it's you. I can recall being fearful of being assigned clients who sometimes responded with an unconstrained look of surprise when they realized their new therapist was a black woman. This was a reality that I often faced. This made my decision to go into private practice easy. This would allow my clients to choose me for themselves.

My heart sank as I listened to Charmaine, a multiracial therapist, share with the panel about being rejected by a client, simply because of the color of her skin. In that moment my mind floated back to a moment when I shared that a client had begun making racist remarks in the therapy room, then proceeded to isolate me from the conversation, only speaking to and acknowledging my white co-therapist. When I shared my discomfort with my white supervisor, the message I received was that it was the client's choice. I remember feeling angry, humiliated and truly separated from the flock in that moment. I felt disappointed in my supervisor for not supporting me.

Even as an intern therapist, I recognized that there had to be some part of her that did not recognize her own bias. Having that conversation also allowed me to see her in a more vulnerable form. It reminded me that we don't always have to know or must have the right answers to be a good leader. I realized that she wasn't trying to cause harm with her suggestion. I once heard Harlene say, "We don't know, what we don't know." In that moment I understood what Harlene had meant. My supervisor was not able to see past her own prejudices to realize what she was saying was not only insensitive to me, but in many ways gave permission to my white co-therapist and client to mistreat me. If I could return to that moment with the experiences and new knowledge I have today, I would have made my inner voice more public.

During this recent discussion with a panel of black therapists based in New York City, we were unofficially informed that whether we wanted to be or not, we are a part of the civil rights movement. I couldn't have agreed more. What is my obligation to not only my black and brown clients, but also my white colleagues and friends? I am obligated to be willing to have those much

needed, harrowing conversations about racism and social injustice. I am obligated to allow my inner voice to be heard and to acknowledge that my ability to speak the language of my clients and to be transparent with them is a strength. Lastly, my obligation to myself is to grant myself permission to heal from the memories of racial trauma that sometimes cripple and prevent me from having those difficult conversations. As we say in the collaborative-dialogic community, “We will continue the conversation.”

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