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Heeding the Signs: Using Contemplative Practice for Sustainability as Black Racial Equity Facilitators

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As women of color working in partnership and individually as Black Racial Equity Facilitators (BREFs) of critical dialogues, we recognize the tremendous difficulty and demand in holding people's uncertainty, anguish, revelations, and awakenings. We expect that white people will bring their tears, anger, denial of racism and collective whiteness. When the pain emanates from Black indigenous people of color (BIPOC), this can take an additional toll on the livelihood of BREFs. The collective emotions in these conversations are heavy and require preparation, centering and co-leadership that will provide space for healing and sustainability for BREFs. Building awareness of the particular emotional needs of BREFs and creating a self-care practice cultivate intentionality and presence, thereby mitigating any harm to either participants or facilitators.

This article will discuss our healing and how we have curated a way to move forward in the work. By intentionally centering our own well-being we are releasing oppressive internalized narratives, while prioritizing our own souls as Black women. We will explore the ways we sustain our work as BREFs facilitating courageous racial justice conversations, while also regulating our own responses through a specific self-care practice we developed.

"How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contribu-

tion of others? At the point of encounter there are neither yet ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know."

– Paulo Freire

In recent years, conversations about the mechanisms of eradicating and dismantling racist ideologies have become highly prioritized and necessary. In tandem with activism to dismantle racism, part of the discussion involves creating brave spaces to talk about racism within groups of people with diverse identities, leading to a high demand for racial equity training. Interventions for ending racism and social injustice now include a proliferation of transformative cross racial and cross-cultural dialogues. Called by several names, including anti-bias training, racial equity workshops, critical dialogues, and cross racial conversations, these trainings include creating opportunities to have difficult and challenging conversations around race and our intersecting identities (Hardy, 2016; Ngounou & Gutiérrez, 2019). The ways we build community and dismantle systems of oppression have recently included expert-led discussions focusing on our positionalities, biases, stereotypes, and the ways in which we perpetuate white supremacist, dominant, and colonial thinking.

Racial equity facilitators are being asked to hold spaces for dialogues and conduct workshops coaching organizations at greater frequency and numbers. The work is varied depending on the training request, identity and positionality of the facilitators and participants, as well as the organization's specific culture. For presenters and experts in racial equity consultation, the work is exhausting, demanding and complicated with facilitators carrying the weight of emotional discussions. Due to the great demands and challenges surrounding this work, it is incumbent on those of us who are racial equity facilitators to find ways of sustaining ourselves.

As Black women racial equity facilitators, we recognize the tremendous difficulty and demand in holding people's uncertainty, anguish, revelations and awakenings. Often white participants are bringing their confusion, anger, supremacist thinking and tears to these conversations. Simultaneously, Black participants are in pain and frustrated. The

collective emotions in these conversations require preparation, centering, co-leadership, and a self-care practice that will provide space for healing for the facilitators. As women of color, we share our stories and provide a self-care practice grounded in Black self-love, Black joy, and Black resistance. We reflect on how this model is contemplative and brought us to a place of healing and transformation in our personal lives and our anti-racist work. Our “SELFCare” model, shared below, helped us maintain our practice and continue in the work we value.

Black Racial Equity Facilitators

The literature has a dearth of material that pays attention to the distinct experiences of Black racial equity facilitators. We hope by sharing our stories we can open the door for more BREFs to speak of their experiences in this work. There exists an inherent paradox in that it is our very Blackness that specifically positions us to be experts, analysts, and transformers of the pain we bear witness to as we facilitate spaces. We often lean into our lived experiences balancing the intensity and vulnerability required using what is presented in the space organically and authentically. When the costs of using ourselves outweigh the purpose of the training, we must heed the signs of burnout, take pause, and purposefully find ways to self-heal.

An important part of our healing and ability to move forward in the work has been to behold our vulnerability and prioritize resilience and even resistance. Our intimacy, grace, and unconditional regard for one another have provided courage to step away, and find reprieve when needed. These intentional self-care practices for recovery and restoration have provided paths of care, which have contributed to our sustainability throughout the work.

Beginning with our stories entering into racial equity conversations, we then move to the beauty of working together as co-facilitators, the incorporation of contemplative practices in workshops with multiracial groups, and conclude with our development of a self-care contemplative practice.

Ovita's Story

As a Black, queer, cisgender woman, experiences of racism and heterosexism were my lived experience, but talking about these narratives in mixed company was more foreign, uncomfortable, and angering for me. About fifteen years ago, my colleague, a white woman, was involved in facilitating challenging conversation around race, gender, and sexual orientation for social workers and students. She invited me to co-facilitate these conversations with her. I was nervous, untrained, cautious, worried about saying the wrong thing. As I witnessed my white colleague over several years maneuver the room, hold white folk accountable and manage the nuanced levels of feelings, emotions, and experience in the room, I felt more and more uncertain. I was astonished when she asked a white Jewish participant to hold both their white identity and Jewish identities simultaneously in an exploration of privileged and subjugated perspectives (Hardy, 2016). Cross racial facilitation expertise took confrontation, gentleness, directness, openness, vulnerability, and patience. It also meant I had to face and understand my own biases and my traumas and transgressions.

Teaching an annual seminar in field instruction for social workers, I created space to be open and honest, and allow people to lean in and take chances. My facilitation of these spaces helped me recognize the power of my own vulnerability as a model for people to attempt talking about themselves in a supportive, trusting space, and to take risks. Each seminar, participants shared transformative dialogues and expansive discussions on racism and other isms. Whether it was a Black cisgender person who realized their own genderist comments, or white women who tuned into their own fragility, or a person of Asian American background recognizing a need to speak out against anti-Black racism rather than remain silent. Although each group is different and I am never sure how I will be tasked to respond, I am always drained and spend days decompressing.

Ericka's Story

Although I have been having critical conversations around power and privilege in many ways over the last 15 years as an advocate and an

educator, it was my own work in racial equity processing group which began around Spring 2015 that transformed my desire to have these conversations differently. I decided to engage in a racial processing group to process my own racial and vicarious trauma, which began to slowly unravel after the birth of my son. As I struggled to manage the grief and anxiety I felt over the loss of Black boys' lives (Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice), I began excavating years of untapped rage and powerlessness experienced as an advocate serving Black and Brown communities in the child welfare, education, mental health, and criminal legal systems. The group helped me further explore, unpack, and voice my emotions in a mixed race processing group while continuing to engage in critical conversations in my direct practice. As a participant in the groups, I experienced much of what I do now as a facilitator: white folx' fear showing up as silence or tears of white fragility, BIPOC folx caring for the white folx, the BIPOC folx' rage and mistrust, interracial tensions between Black and Non Black people of color (NBPOC), anger transferred onto the facilitators of same race or ethnicity, moments of connection through vulnerability, respect for other's narratives, and awakenings and shifts in the room. As I engaged in my own healing, I felt more equipped to focus on wider facilitation of these conversations and I wanted to support future social workers in developing capacity for these kinds of dialogues. When I began teaching social work students about power, racism, oppression, and privilege, I continued to see similar patterns in my classroom. The more conversations I facilitated, the more I learned about my own power, privilege, and positionality and how it impacted both my BIPOC students and white students. Through my work in the racial processing group, I created space within myself to hold many of the complexities of these conversations and offer support to students. When I began using contemplative practices, for building awareness and grounding, I found greater ability for this process. Later, I was able to use these tools and techniques while teaching about supervision through an anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens to social work field instructors with equal success.

Coming Together

Facilitating critical dialogues takes capacity to regulate one's own discomfort, while holding a barrage of participants' confusing emotions and feelings. Having a co-facilitator who is able to balance the process and be in unison can be hard to find. In our partnership story, we were not searching for one another, but found one another, by chance and by faith. Our combined tolerance and openness to sit with the discomfort and unwieldy ways critical conversations happen, led to a mutual connection.

As an Afro-Caribbean and an Afro-Dominican, we took risks sharing our fears and thoughts of the other, and fostered intimacy with one another. We were able to talk about the way we saw one another as Black women, unpacking harmful initial assumptions about one another. After a few years of consulting around teaching and facilitation, we were able to see our shared values and approaches in educating students and field instructors around racial equity. We began to share our own struggles, both personally and professionally, and were excited to explore co-facilitating a challenging conversations seminar which focused on supervision with social work students. The initial four-session workshop unearthed our synergy, awareness, and capability of navigating the discussions. We consulted with one another through every step of the seminar, including planning, impressions, challenges, and teachable moments. After each session, we spent time debriefing with similar assessments of the room and evolving dialogue.

Our shared identities as Black Afro-Caribbean women, similar career experiences, and joint passion for leading critical cross racial conversations helped us build a foundation for our relationship and trust in one another's assessment, approach, and insights. Sharing our partnership story in racial equity and contemplative practices is critical as we realized there is little written about how to sustain the work of facilitating critical dialogues and taking care of one another and ourselves.

Our Use of Contemplative Practices

“What do we need? A curated, adapted set of awareness (mindfulness) and compassion practices—experienced at the level of the personal, the interpersonal, and the systemic, as central components of teaching and learning about race.”

– Rhonda Magee

The literature focuses on participants and less on the BREF’s emotional care facilitating racial discussions. Crowder (2017) discusses the tools to ground and assist participants to find and stay within their “window of tolerance” for discomfort. Berila (2017) and Magee (2019) address shifting participants’ conditioned responses of reactivity to more regulated and kinder responsiveness. The authors share the integration of contemplative practices, such as mindfulness and embodied practices, to cultivate self-awareness and build capacity for the expected discomfort. Racial equity facilitators offer practical elements to consider before entering these dialogues such as having a team with different racial identities, and working with participants who are willing to experience discomfort and tell their stories (Ngourou & Gutierrez, 2019). BREFs can use these same practices to maintain themselves in the racial equity work.

As racial equity facilitators we intentionally use contemplative practices that help our participants dive deeper, slow down, increase their ability to pay attention, be open, curious, nonjudgmental, and tolerate discomfort while bearing witness to one another’s stories. In a true parallel process, these elements are also useful for our own self-preservation and endurance. We open the space with transparency regarding the probability of lack of closure to issues which will arise, offer permission to speak one’s truth, and encourage engagement despite the discomfort (Singleton, 2014). Our dual-purpose practices include activities ranging from guided meditations and embodied practices, reflective journaling, music, and storytelling as ways of cultivating self and collective compassion in mindful ways.

Additionally, we use our lived experiences as Black women, to raise consciousness and curate alternative forms of knowledge (Ngourou &

Gutierrez, 2019) and lean into our unique positionalities to carry these dialogues forward. As social workers, we embody using ourselves to better discern patterns of responses that impede authenticity and vulnerability (Dewane, 2006).

Ovita's Practices

Music is a tool to set the stage for accessing our interconnectedness. I incorporate Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, Sam Cooke, Billie Holiday, India Arie, and Andra Day to open up the space. The vibe claims a space of centering the Black experience of healing, joy, and pain. By introducing music, I am calling on my ancestors, to strengthen our Black women voices as facilitators, to help us carry our history and stories into the room. We lean on the masses of Black and Brown people who have made sacrifices before us. In the same vein, I use land acknowledgements to call in Indigenous contributions to the history of this country and the importance of First Nations stories in conversations about racism. I use a guided meditation to name and acknowledge all that we bring into the space regarding racial dialogues, including our concerns and expectations about the sessions as an introduction to mindfulness practice to begin cultivating equanimity. I use a familiar construct (the story of your name) to warm up the room, build trust, practice bearing witness, identify interconnectedness, and lay the foundation to a deeper exploration of identity (Laker, 2015).

Ericka's Practices

Using frameworks provided by mindfulness and somatic practitioners such as Magee (2019) and Menakem (2018), I use guided meditation, trauma informed mindfulness, and somatic activities (using the breath, grounding feet, exploring what is in our heads, hearts, and bellies) to cultivate self-awareness around our conditioned responses to racism and how they show up in these critical dialogues. By connecting participants back to their bodies, I invite folx to pay attention to where they hold tension as a way of taking notice to all they are carrying and bringing into these conversations, and how it is not only what is in their heads (thoughts) and hearts (feelings) that impacts their ability to whole-

heartedly engage in racial conversations, but also what is in their bodies (bellies). I use reflective journaling to process specific inquiries around thoughts, feelings, and sensations to encourage further self-introspection and process participants' reflections.

SELF Care as a Liberatory and Healing Practice for Black Racial Equity Facilitators

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

– Audre Lorde

It is our contention that BREFs require another level of self-care to carry us through the work. Our identity as Black people creating space for mixed racial groups to talk about racism and racial identity means we are also holding and managing our own pain, trauma, and recovery. As Black women, there is the additional labor of masculinity and genderism present in these discussions. In order to be present and sustain ourselves in the work, we must heed the signs of pain that we experience in our bodies from reaching capacity, the mental and emotional strain which comes with holding our own racial trauma in facilitation spaces, the everyday wear and tear of being Black and women, and the impact this has on the different roles and responsibilities in all dimensions of our lives.

We offer an example of a harmful experience as BREFs that brought to light the necessity of centering self-care and allowed for development and implementation of our model. While facilitating a racial equity training, we learned that taking a break, having moments of stillness, reflecting on our thoughts and feelings, examining bodily sensations, and remembering what brings us joy, are practices which promote our well-being. Through these practices, we identified a series of complex somatic symptoms that were impacting our bodies, minds, and spirits. After several group sessions of enduring discomfort, being forcefully questioned, and attacked, we felt and expressed to each other our thoughts and feelings about moving forward with this planned training. During one of our debriefing sessions, Ericka said, “I don’t want to do this anymore, I am done.” She explained that her body and soul were

speaking to her and she knew she had to listen. At this moment Ovita also realized that an unusual tightening in her gut over the past several weeks had developed and the gnawing, nagging level of underlying dread felt every day, was her own hesitancy at continuing with the workshop series. As two BREFs, the complexity and scrutiny were more intense from people of color who criticized our methods, than from the strong resistance of white participants. We were aware the responses were not personal, but more about the intense way in which Black folk felt demoralized, silenced, and dejected by their white counterparts. Our take away was that we needed to pay attention to ourselves and assess our capacity for continuing.

With this insight, we developed a model of self-care practices to center our experiences and move forward with intention and radical authenticity. Our framework embodies the core elements of how we define self-care, and the ways we operationalized this concept into a contemplative practice.

Framework for “SELFCare” for BREFs

S – Stillness Pausing, being still and noticing what arises without judgment from others or ourselves. Notice what sensations arise, and where they are in your body. Do you have a knot in your stomach, are you having headaches? Where are you experiencing tightness? Staying in the quietness of a flood of sensations allows for self-reflection in the moment. As in the example we shared above, we both paused and took time to be still and notice what was arising in those moments. *Prompt: What is arising in the stillness? What am I feeling in my body and where?*

E – Exploration Now that you notice your body’s sensations, explore the thoughts and feelings associated with the sensations. What’s the feeling, what is the emotion? Are you angry, sad, overwhelmed, anxious, heavy? *Prompt: Name the feelings/thoughts associated with the bodily sensation. When have I felt these feelings/thoughts/sensations before?*

L – Letting go Letting go of our insecurities, allowing them to move through our minds, from the top of our heads to the bottom of our soles. Releasing our narratives of internalized oppression manifesting as

feeling inadequate, or not good enough or unprepared or intelligible. Allowing and forgiving ourselves and one another for having self-doubt and guilt for needing to step away. Eliminate any tightness, heaviness, anger, or sadness by spending time in our bodies through activities such as walking, yoga, dancing, etc. Confide and consult with a co-facilitator, friends, and community. Speak to yourself with positive affirmation, love, kindness, encouragement, and validation: “I am enough, I am capable, I have power, and I have choice.” *Prompt: What are some things that I can do to help me let go of the negative feelings, thoughts, and sensations?*

F – Free Embodying freedom through centering our joy and spirit is a radical act of liberation. By choosing ourselves in this way, we are able to take a liberatory stance towards our collective self-care. When we center our well-being, we are in fact claiming that our lives matter. Acknowledging and practicing self-care is also modeling and giving permission for others to do the same and thrive. *Prompt: What makes me thrive? What brings me joy? What actions must I engage in to be true to myself?*

Engaging in the “SELFcare” practice through our own experience, we connected our bodily sensations to the array of negative feelings BREFs experience during racial equity training. Despite our expertise, feelings of inadequacy, failure, self-doubt, incompetence, and cowardice can arise, but can be quelled through this “SELFcare” contemplative practice. Holding space with one another and bearing witness to one another’s pain helped us release some of these intense emotions and heal. It was liberating to pause, step back, and recognize that all of our years of experience as facilitators of critical dialogues were not lost, but still accessible, and enriched by the experience of this practice. We shared about the things that would bring us joy and help us thrive as BREFs and in our personal lives. We connected on a shared sense of responsibility and care for BIPOC participants and felt it necessary to mitigate any further harm towards them by moving away from the facilitation. Consequently, we were able to access our resilience and resistance, and our choice to care for ourselves and the collective.

This “SELfcare” practice allowed us to heal and empowered us to acknowledge a need to pause the training and reclaim our dignity and self-respect.

Conclusion

This overview of our “SELfcare” model for BREFs has brought us to a place of healing and transformation in our personal lives and with anti-racist work. This contemplative practice supports BREFs in acknowledging and healing their racial trauma by raising awareness, providing self-regulating tools, and building capacity for sustainability in racial equity conversations. Centering our own healing, we choose ourselves in a way that is authentic and meaningful for us and participants. As a result, we are able to make choices grounded in Black self-love, Black joy, and Black resilience. We recognize our racial justice work includes choosing our well-being and sustainability which consequently promotes our collective liberation.

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