



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PAPER

TRUST

in Black & White

The Power of **Conversation**

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Terminology

Social Trust: The belief in the inherent goodness of people and that people are honest and fair.

Gender Solidarity: Women joining together in good faith, trust, and fortitude for advancing policies, practices, and goals to eradicate inequality. Women include all for whom “woman” is a meaningful identifier or experience, including but not limited to cisgender women, gay women, transgender women, and non-binary individuals.

Systemic Racism: A set of public policies, practices, procedures, norms, and strategies that collectively work to perpetuate inequalities based on race. Systemic racism is not attached to an individual, identifiable perpetrator but has historical underpinnings that are deeply embedded in current day practices.

Introduction

The following report delves into the rich and illuminating discussions that emerged from twenty-nine (29) Listening Circles that were facilitated by Dr. Deborah L. Plummer and Dr. Lori Stevic-Rust via zoom over a 9-month period (April 2021- December 2021). The listening circles brought together Black and White women, providing a space that fostered open dialogue, allowing participants to share their experiences, perspectives, and reflections on race-related topics.

Three hundred thirty-six (336) Black and white women, for an average of 11 participants per session, participated in the listening circle sessions. Participants represented all seven U.S. geographic regions (Southern, East Coast, Northeast, Midwest, Northwest, Southwest, and Central) and represented 20 states (Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maine, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Oregon, Wyoming, California, Texas, Kansas, Rhode Island).

Each session began with an overview of shared goals, what is meant by social trust, the reasons for a lack of social trust between White women and Black women, and a Social Trust poll¹. The sessions were not recorded to support a candid and open conversation. Participants consented to the following conversation agreements:

Caring: Speak about what has personal heart and meaning

Candor: Sharing with honesty and depth while being crisp and deep; sharing airtime by getting to the point of my story rather than sharing all the details, back fill in only if necessary.

Commitment: To MY learning by engaging, processing, and joining with other participants rather than attempting to educate them.

Confidentiality: After the Conversation, keep the excitement of YOUR learning without attaching names or assigning blame or shame to anyone

Courage: Question old assumptions, look for new insights while assuming positive intent

Curiosity: Seek to understand rather than persuade or influence

Participants were informed that Plummer and Stevic-Rust would be taking copious notes. After each session, as researchers, we debriefed for 1-2 hours for inter-rater reliability, focusing on the degree of agreement of what was heard and said during the session. The statements were then analyzed for themes.

Rather than seeking to prove or disprove existing theories about how social trust operates, this analysis used qualitative analysis with grounded theory research methodology to construct a thematic framework from the data. This required reading through notes numerous times, exploring topics that consistently surfaced in the sessions, clarifying statements that participants shared, and then synthesizing these statements into four interdependent and interconnected themes.

The themes are presented in polarities as the conversations and statements expressed illustrated the diverse and often nuanced and layered understanding of trust between Black and White women that the women experienced in their personal and professional lives. Polarities as a Gestalt psychology principle illustrates the opposing forces that may be in or out of our awareness. Each theme represents one end of a continuum with the opposite end of that continuum also residing within us as a potentiality. As we share a core identity as humans with racial identity being a visible and prominent dimension of our humanity, the polarities stated in the themes are part of one whole that is experienced in life. We provide illustrative quotes to support each of the four themes that emerged from our analysis of the conversations:

- Earned Trust vs. Presumed Trust
- Accountability vs. Responsibility
- Racial Identity Confusion vs. Racial Identity Congruence
- Taking Action vs. Complacency

These themes highlight the complexities of building trust, addressing systemic racism, navigating racial identity, and creating the conditions for meaningful change.

Listening to the participants also revealed areas where both Black and Women were in consensus about how social trust operates and what is necessary to build trust. We've listed these as Consensus Statements noted before the conclusion section.

¹ Note: refer to the same polls that we provided the data for in Trust in Black and White: Emotion and Choice.

Earned Trust vs. Presumed Trust

A key theme in the conversations highlighted the nuanced nature of trust between Black and White women, specifically expressing divergent views on whether trust was earned or presumed in their interactions. Some Black women emphasized that trust had to be earned due to historical experiences of betrayal and mistreatment. They pointed to the need for White women to acknowledge and understand the social privileges they have enjoyed.

Respectively, White women recognized the responsibility to earn trust by actively demonstrating their commitment to dismantling systemic racism. Both racial groups acknowledged the impact of power dynamics and the importance of establishing genuine relationships grounded in shared understanding.

Trust was discussed as a reflection of power and the relationship of that power to the specific individual and their lived experiences. There is power, rooted in social privilege, that allows one an individual to trust freely, and there is a power of the protection that comes with requiring trust to be earned.

Black women expressed finding power or a sense of control over an interaction or relationship with someone more socially privileged by withholding trust until one is deemed trustworthy.

Illustrative Quotes

White Women

- “ *White women have higher levels of trust with Black women because Black women have been true to their word and say what they mean.*
- “ *White women don't always deserve trust from Black women. It's fair. Historically, we haven't been people who can be trusted.*
- “ *We trust each other but not sure it is emotional trust.*
- “ *Trust happens when you have good relationships.*
- “ *We may be kidding ourselves when we say we trust each other.*
- “ *Been told I shouldn't be talking for someone else. Don't speak out. It's performative. People don't trust my voice. You don't know. You don't understand. You need more education. Be open to learning and understanding.*
- “ *I don't have Black friends. I don't know if I trust Black women or if they trust me.*

Black Women

- “ *Mistrust comes from corporate America—everyone in the room gives White women all the credit.*

- “ *Trust factor comes down to power and the relationship of that power to me. How do I build trust if I have to assimilate to their environment?*

- “ *I carry a lot of things that happened in the past for how I was treated by White women. I got burned. It takes a while not to lean into those guards.*

- “ *I don't mistrust them [White women] but I am not going to tell them my story. I have to know them on the same level, and they would have to know me back.*

- “ *I don't really trust White women. Their understanding is through the lens of feminism and there's a lack of acknowledgment that White women have gotten all the benefits and women of color have not.*

- “ *There's an intimacy barrier. How far out do we need to keep each other in order to feel safe. Black women do this. In a new relationship with White women an armor is up where we code switch until we feel safe.*

- “ *In college I was told 'you know you can't trust White women' by another Black woman when I was reaching out to White women as friends. It broke my heart.*

- “ *Carrying battle scars wears on you and to shift to trusting mode is a process that will take time to sort out.*

- “ *“What you say behind closed doors...I don't want to give you an opportunity to show me who you are, so I keep deep issues off the table.” (Black woman)*

Accountability vs. Responsibility

Accountability and responsibility emerged as central aspects of the Listening Circles. This theme highlighted the root causes of a lack of trust between Black and White women, who should be held accountable for what, and who should be held responsible for changing the current reality.

Black women highlighted the role of white women in perpetuating systemic racism, emphasizing the need for them to take responsibility for their actions and actively challenge racist structures. They called for a reciprocal commitment to anti-racist work, expressing exhaustion at shouldering the burden alone.

White women recognized their obligation to confront their privilege and actively engage in self-education to better understand the experiences and perspectives of Black women. The need to hold each other accountable in dismantling racism was emphasized, promoting a shared commitment to change. In order to overcome these barriers, there needs to be an authentic acknowledgement of these historical and current harms by white women, who must hold themselves accountable without placing responsibility for their guilt on Black women.

Illustrative Quotes

Black Women

- “ *Women are keepers of the culture. If racism is in the culture, we are responsible for eradicating it.*

- “ *The desire to be friends with White women is a one-sided relationship. If they were really committed to the work, they would be taking more responsibility. I don't have the energy to carry them along.*

- “ *I feel an obligation to engage with White women, but Black women need to determine how to engage and protect themselves.*

- “ *White people/women can say or do something and get sent to HR if they did it. We have to present ourselves in a professional tone all the time.*

- “ *I have no desire to be associated with White women because of negative experiences with their spirit and their sense of entitlement. We have a history beyond 1619 and they don't know that.*

- “ *I don't want to be the one to have to educate someone and explain a life experience. It is my lived experience. Believe it.*

- “ *I don't hear the voices of support for Black women when the opportunity happens. White women remain silent.*
- “ *I turn the table on White women and ask, 'what is your story?' You don't have to solve my problems.*

White Women

- “ *A culture of racism is maintained by White women.*
- “ *I went to buy something at Talbot and forgot my wallet. I told the clerk that I had my credit card memorized and could give her the number and she let purchase it that way. I used it as a lesson and taught my kids about White privilege.*
- “ *Guilt is a call to action. Something you should walk toward.*
- “ *It's up to you to do the work. You can trust me and call but don't depend on people of color. We are always wondering if there is that little crack—do you really see me? When you walk into a room, do you feel your Whiteness? Black women are always Black women.*
- “ *White women don't speak up because of their husbands.*
- “ *I don't say anything because I don't know what to say. I haven't been asked to do this work over the years. I have to do the work to know what to say.*
- “ *Whenever we talk about racism, it is always about who experiences it—Black and Brown people. It removes the accountability that needs to take place in the White community.*
- “ *We [women] carry the culture. We either stop or modify. If there is no correction going on for racism, we can influence that.*

Racial and Gender Identity Confusion vs. Racial and Gender Identity Congruence

Understanding oneself within our multiple and intersecting identities as a racial being and a woman surfaced in the conversation with variance for Black and White women. Racial identity refers to the psychological connection one has with one's race rather than the mere demographic identification. Gender identity is the personal sense of one's own gender. Participants explored the intersectionality of racial and gender identities in the context of trusting each other as women in their respective racial identity groups.

Black women voiced statements demonstrating less confusion about racial identity with less exploration on their gender identity as they often experience the two identities as inextricably linked with racial identity as the forefront and gender as background. White women stated more racial identity confusion especially when coupled with their gender identity as they perceive the two identities as inextricably linked with gender identity as the forefront and gender as the background and perhaps even invisible.

Illustrative Quotes

Black Women

- “ *I don't know what it is like to be treated like a woman because I am always treated as a Black person first.* ”
- “ *Equity has been a trendy movement to support and Black women haven't been talked about until it was trendy. We are a trend.* ”
- “ *I have been called White because I like classic rock.* ”
- “ *I was told, 'Oh, you are White inside' and they thought it was a compliment. I realized that people don't see you. All the positive things she saw about me was attributed to whiteness.* ”
- “ *Whites have to have lived experience with Blacks in order to capture and see my humanity. I have to influence them.* ”
- “ *I get tired of hearing that I am strong for reasons that I didn't ask for.* ”
- “ *As someone Black in Wyoming, I am more comfortable here with Whites. I am not comfortable with other Blacks. I get more challenged by other Blacks because of colorism. I wasn't raised around Black people.* ”

RACIAL AND GENDER IDENTITY CONFUSION VS. RACIAL AND GENDER IDENTITY CONGRUENCE

- “ *What is happening that Black women don't trust White women? I don't get that.*
- “ *Black women don't have the sisterhood that we actually believe we do. Some of the kindest women I have met are White women.*
- “ *It is less about race and more about economics. When we are saying Black and White, it's really more economic status Whites are more comfortable with you based on your economic status.*
- “ *We, as a people, have denied our humanness. We don't understand how racialized we are.*

White Women

- “ *Women create problems among themselves, even gay women who are harsh as well.*
- “ *White women are fighting to be White males which is why they can't fight for women of color.*
- “ *I am experiencing the need to hold my White voice. I'm hyperconscious of needing to listen more.*
- “ *There are few minorities in Wyoming, therefore I'm curious. My level of trust is high because I don't know Blacks.*
- “ *Lack of understanding. I have never been put in a racially diverse situation. I have to watch my words more carefully.*
- “ *Karens of the world are devastating to my racial group. It affects me more as a White woman.*
- “ *With Black women race trumps gender. Whites never mention race. Everyone Black in the group introduced themselves as a Black woman.*
- “ *We know what a 'Karen' is but what do they call a man? What does it mean to have a stereotype built around your name as a middle-aged woman?*

Taking Action vs. Complacency

This theme centered on the urgency of taking action to bridge the racial divide between Black and White women. The common thread in this conversation questioned what needed to be done to build social trust and what happens if the status quo is normalized and we continue along the current path of racial divide between Black and White women.

The participants called for the normalization of conversations about race and the dismantling of systemic barriers through collective efforts, also emphasizing the need for education, both at an individual level and within the wider society. In acknowledging historical disparities, they recognized the importance of creating spaces for open dialogue and developing trust. Participants emphasized the value of learning from other social justice movements, such as the LGBTQIA+ community, in fostering unity and making progress.

Illustrative Quotes

White Women

- “ *Older generations keep making excuses. There is absolutely no excuse for this desire not to learn. ‘It was a different time’ is no excuse. We are in this time now.*

- “ *Embarrassing. This is not a topic that before this meeting I was exploring at all.*

- “ *Knocked off at first. I wasn’t aware of the statistics or research about the racial divide.*

- “ *We need to learn from the LGBTQ+ community with Pride. Make coming together fun. They [LGBTQ+] have had enough suffering and it doesn’t always have to be about the struggle. Black and White women coming together can learn from the Pride movement.*

- “ *There’s an absence of stories about Black women and men. Critical race theory is shut down. Hadn’t read Baldwin. No one ever told us as White women how to build trust with Black women.*

- “ *Friendships between Black and White women demand grace.*

- “ *When the rubber hits the road, we have already demonstrated what we won’t do. As White women, every day we have to ask ourselves what we will do and not do.*

Black Women

- “ *Black and White women are like a couple who wants to avoid talking about their relationship. They talk about the kids, work, in-laws...*

- “ *Baby steps. Acknowledge and listen. Racial equity education. Acknowledging Black history is American history. Shape up the media.*

- “ *There was a time when these forums wouldn't have been possible. I consider this evidence of progress.*

- “ *I don't see that divide. Like selling Mary Kay cosmetics. Race doesn't matter. It's about everyone working toward a goal.*

- “ *Black people aren't allowed to express their dislike with White people the same way White people can of Blacks.*

Consensus Statements

Listening to the participants and reviewing our notes also clearly revealed areas where both Black and Women were in consensus about how social trust operates and what is necessary to build trust.

We've listed these as "Consensus Statements."

1. Women are the keepers, teachers, and influencers of our culture. Subsequently, Black and White women trusting each other is foundational to eradicating racism.
2. Building trust is a process. We need to work to build trust and stay in the struggle despite the discomfort.
3. We need to believe each other's lived experiences in order to trust each other.
4. Our work life is not a place to build trust. Competition works against trust.
5. Black women are exhausted and White women need to step up and do their part.

Conclusion

The Listening Circles provided a powerful platform for Black and White women to engage in candid discussions about race, trust, accountability, and action. They revealed the complexities of building trust and understanding, as well as the shared responsibility to dismantle systemic racism.

The narratives shared during the conversations underscored the need for active engagement, self-reflection, and continuous learning. By embracing vulnerability, empathy, and mutual respect, these women opened the door to transformation and demonstrated the potential for bridging the racial divide. Their stories and knowledge serve as a reminder of the importance of fostering dialogue and working collectively towards racial understanding and social justice.

About Getting To We

Getting to We (GTW) is a non-profit organization that uses the transformative nature of the arts (theater, film, dance, comedy, literary, visual) to help people understand their shared, core identity as humans and relate to each other without fear. Ultimately, we want a world where minds are open and human interaction is about making ourselves and each other better friends, families, neighbors, co-workers, and citizens – better humans.

Our Thought Leadership Papers serve to incubate new ideas for building social trust as the bedrock of a healthy society and a foundational aspect for achieving equity.



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