

# **Bringing a Racial Justice Consciousness to the Restorative Justice Movement: A Call to White Practitioners**

Mika Dashman  
Katherine (Kat) Culberg  
David Dean  
Anna Lemler  
Mikhail Lyubansky  
Julie Shackford-Bradley

## **Introduction**

We are a multi-generational, geographically dispersed group of white-identified individuals in the restorative justice movement. We have all been involved in racial justice activism and have participated in various anti-racist white affinity groups. We acknowledge the long history of anti-racism organizing by people of color broadly and especially by practitioners of color within the restorative justice movement who have been calling for a more explicit focus on dynamics of race, power and privilege within restorative justice. Our intention is to add our voices to a conversation already in progress, because we believe that our silence perpetuates further harm. We come to this conversation with humility and the recognition that we have more questions than answers. We are speaking from our perspective as white-identified people, specifically to and with other white people. We believe that white people have a role to play in the struggle for racial justice, that it starts within ourselves, and that it must continue within the all-white and predominantly white spaces to which we have access. We hope it is in

the spirit of Stokley Carmichael's 1969 *Black Power* speech, in which he asks, "Can white people move inside their own community and start tearing down racism where in fact it does exist?"

Mika Dashman, the Founding Director of Restorative Justice Initiative, a New York City-based advocacy and organizing project, brought this group together. In 2015, she began developing an anti-racist circle model for white people called "Racism Stops With Me." She presented this model at two national restorative justice conferences, including the Restorative Justice in Motion Conference at EMU in July 2016 where she collaborated with Anna Lemler and Mikhail Lyubansky. When Mika learned about the "Transforming Whiteness for Racial Justice: A Restorative Approach" workshop that Kat Culberg, David Dean and Julie Shackford-Bradley offer in the San Francisco Bay Area, she invited them to contribute to this article. Over the following few weeks, the six of us engaged in fascinating and at times emotional discussions about the role of white people in the restorative justice movement in general and especially in the context of racial justice work. In this article we attempt to capture the most essential aspects of those discussions.

Originally, we considered writing a conventional 'academic' piece, but, in an effort to honor restorative principles and practices, we decided to hold a virtual circle process in which we agreed on several guiding questions and then took turns responding to each of them, one at a time. In this way, we hoped that we would not only build meaning collaboratively but that we would do so in a way that our different perspectives and voices would be distinguishable to those reading.

In addition, we recognize that academia has itself been shaped by the culture of white supremacy. By writing this *in circle*, we hope to counter the disproportionate value that the academy places on fact-based, rational, and emotionless analysis. Our goal was to speak from the heart as well as the intellect, to share our personal experiences as well as our knowledge, and to demonstrate vulnerability as well as aspiration. Our responses have been edited for brevity, and some of us chose to “pass” when we had nothing more to add to what had already been said.

**Question #1: How can white practitioners who engage in anti-racism work contribute to the restorative justice movement?**

**Mikhail:** I think racial justice activists and scholars can contribute by pushing the restorative justice movement to acknowledge the presence and impact of racism and structures that support racism, as well as by insisting that the restorative justice movement attends to power and oppression more broadly. One of my great worries about the future of the restorative justice movement in the United States is that its leaders and practitioners will not attend to these dynamics and therefore, unintentionally support and/or replicate existing structures that maintain racism and other forms of oppression. As just one example, I worry that well-intentioned gatekeepers will create easier access to restorative practices for some (racialized) groups of individuals than others in a way that

is not explicitly racial but will unintentionally wind up being more punitive for some and more restorative for others, based on race.

**Mika:** I think racial justice/anti-racism work is essential within the restorative justice movement for the reasons Mikhail mentioned, but also because there is a lot of visible white leadership/authorship in this community and it is important that we are willing to be self-reflective about why this is and what needs to happen to be more welcoming and to create space and opportunities for people of color (POC) to be more visible and empowered. And when racism surfaces in restorative justice spaces—and it often does—I think it is important for white practitioners to be prepared to acknowledge it without being defensive, and to make amends. But we need to be able to see it. So there is some “consciousness-raising” work that we need to do among ourselves. This responsibility often falls to POC in mixed groups, but it shouldn’t. I think we have a moral obligation to do this work as restorative justice practitioners.

Restorative justice is based on indigenous practice and philosophy. Anytime we as white practitioners fail to acknowledge the roots of this knowledge, we are engaging in cultural appropriation and in so doing replicating the same power dynamics and oppression that has shaped the criminal justice system and the broader society. We can and must go into this work with deep humility and respect for the lived-experience of people targeted by racism. We must assume that as white people reared in a white supremacist culture, we don’t even know what we don’t know. But ending racism is

integral to reclaiming our full humanity and being in good relationship with all people, including those who look most like us.

The last point I want to make is about the institutions or systems in which restorative justice is being implemented most commonly, namely schools and criminal justice. These systems are major perpetrators of state violence against POC. We have to acknowledge that and make sure that we are holding space in our circles, conferences, and victim offender mediations not just for a conversation about interpersonal harm but also about systemic/structural harm.

**Julie:** I have always known the “RJ movement” to be aimed at racial justice outcomes. This may be because I was introduced to it here in the Bay Area, where from the start the goals were to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and reduce “disproportionate minority contact” in juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. And that is due to the amazing work of mainly women of color as well as some dedicated white folks who formed a task-force and were able to shape the future of restorative justice in this area according to their strong vision. But as Mika notes, the systems themselves are extremely problematic to work in (schools, criminal justice, probation for juveniles), and so it is very hard to maintain integrity while doing the work. But I also see that practitioners are working toward a kind of systemic change at the incremental level, day by day, teacher by teacher, kid by kid, and I think that work should be celebrated even as we acknowledge the immense challenges of major systemic change. A lot of people have high expectations that restorative justice will bring that systemic change and when they

do not see it right away, they question restorative justice, but it may be that their expectations are too great.

I also see more clearly how white people, including myself, who are facilitating and engaging in restorative justice processes, are not having the necessary and important discussions about race, about inequities, power imbalances and different communication styles, or what it is like to be the one person of color in a circle. Speaking for myself, I could be better about acknowledging those dynamics in ways that don't cause further harm, and that is a process of learning and practicing. I can develop and deepen relationships with other folks of all backgrounds across the campus where I work to show that my goals are aligned with theirs. What I can't do is undo my whiteness or privilege, and so these are the realities that I am challenged by everyday as a white person in the field.

**Anna:** I agree with Mikhail and Mika's assessments of current racial dynamics institutionally in the restorative justice field (even the concept of it being a 'field' is problematic), and want to highlight that even the most well-intentioned, liberal white practitioners can be doing harm in the name of restorative justice.

This is where the conversation about Transformative Justice feels very important to me. I think we want to believe that inherently the restorative justice process is restorative, but for me, it can't be restorative without it being transformative. While I have much to learn, my understanding is that transformative means that we are including a systemic oppression analysis to our work *all the time*. So for example, I met a young

person a couple months ago in juvenile detention who was being punished for breaking in and stealing a laptop. He seemed to be genuinely lost in life, but we (the system/adults) seemed more concerned about the computer and its owner rather than how adults and society have failed this young person time and time again! No one really focused on the fact that his mom was deported two months prior, or that he had to watch his younger siblings all the time, or that he has now missed so much school that he is literally ashamed and scared to go back. Has any adult ever apologized to this young man for all of that? Have we ever discussed the racist policies that don't allow his mom to live here or his family to get the money they deserve, or for him to be seen as a 'bright, driven, future-filled' child? Transformative justice, in my mind, asks us to imagine if we held those policy-makers accountable.

The problem is that *we are not taught about systemic oppression, and here specifically about racism, in our restorative justice trainings*. Already white people are intentionally not taught about racism (because why would 'we' want to dismantle something that provides so much benefit to us?), thus making race and racism taboo and uncomfortable to talk about. This means that people are being trained in restorative justice, and are missing this critical lens to their work, and thus perpetuating/recreating the exact systems we claim to want to dismantle.

**Kat:** I am on a mission to get comfortable with being uncomfortable around this conversation...to not run from it. Yesterday I spent eight hours giving a "Transforming Whiteness" workshop with an restorative justice approach with Julie and David. The

attendees were all white-identified. I'm pretty uncomfortable with our designation of this workshop being "for white people" and yet intuitively, and from experience in multiracial circles talking about race, I know that this space is essential. White people, I have noticed, show up differently in spaces with POC. It doesn't feel like genuine authenticity, vulnerability and honesty happens, because many of us are too invested in defending, denying, intellectualizing, overcompensating or holding on to power and control. I myself had been "running from my own whiteness" for too long, which prevented me from showing up authentically until very recently.

The circle was draining. I left the training to meet up with a friend who is an African American Elder in the Oakland community. He asked me why I seemed so tired. I told him that I had been doing "white work in racial justice/restorative justice with an all white group all day." "Damn", he said. "I'm sorry for you Kat, I wouldn't want that job. But that's YOUR job, baby, and YOU all need to do it." That's my job, not his. Examining honestly and deeply how we are complicit, consciously or unconsciously, in perpetuating personal, structural and institutional racism in ALL spaces—including restorative justice spaces—is our job. In fact, I believe restorative justice spaces are particularly at risk of inadvertently perpetuating systemic oppression because we are so well *intended*, indeed, we are 'restorative.'

Last week I was in the maximum security unit at a juvenile hall doing restorative justice work (chew on that oxymoron). About ten young people, all African American, all going on to hard time, were responding to a question around institutional/structural racism and violence. I was feeling great about the circle. The guys were going deep. I had



named my white privilege, and internalized racial superiority as well as how white supremacy continues to benefit me, as I always do, and how my two white sons had done some of the same behaviors as many youth in juvenile hall but were treated differently by society, and on and on. (Note: it's all about ME and my whiteness). At one point the vibe shifted and one of the young men put down the talking piece and said, "None of this matters Kat. We already know all this." And they do. Most of these young men have a better "critical analysis" of the problems we are talking about than many academics since it comes from a LIVED experience within the school-to-prison pipeline. Another young man asked for the talking piece. "How does what we know or what we talk about in the circle make a difference to us out there? Nothing changes. We're still going back to the same streets and we are still ending up back here." This scenario highlights two issues. The "white saviour," that is, I myself, a white woman who has something for you (note the internalized racial superiority), and secondly, the risk of overlooking the fact that the wisdom lies in those communities most impacted by the problem, and not within me. Additional harm will be done if we do not pay close attention to how we show up with or without being conscious of these tendencies and norms.

**David:** If white restorative justice practitioners engage with these topics, we can far more effectively reach our goal of creating opportunities for healing and repair on individual, interpersonal, and structural levels. Personally, I have found I cannot truly embody the philosophy of restorative justice in my own life as a white person without being accountable to this massive historical conflict that I exist in. These days I am learning

more all the time about my ancestors' part in horrific racial violence. My ancestors and I have run from the memory of this violence. We have segregated ourselves from it. We have split our consciences, fought these memories through historical revision, fled from them through historical erasure, and frozen in the face of their enduring effects. Coming To The Table (CTTT), an organization that brings together descendants of slaves and slave masters to participate in a process of dialogue and reconciliation, has demonstrated that making restorative justice deeply race-conscious is not only healing for people of color but also the only way that we, as white people, can regain our wholeness. But CTTT does not stop there. Their final step is collective action to create cultural and institutional change in the broader society.

In a similar way, white people in restorative justice need to adopt a racial justice lens not only to create repair on personal and community levels, but also to have the analysis necessary to successfully address structural harm in our world. The actions of the current white house administration make clear how white supremacy has continually been used, since its inception centuries ago, to direct harm toward people of color as a strategy to advance extreme, unregulated capitalism. By leading white Americans to see black and brown folks as the cause of our problems, it crushes the potential for powerful multiracial coalitions for justice and makes people of all colors more vulnerable to corporate, economic and environmental exploitation. The enduring strength of white supremacy has left this exploitation largely unchecked, and through time it has grown to become mass inequality, pollution, and climate change that could ultimately devour everyone. This is therefore not a social problem that operates in isolation of others.

Rather, it is one of the greatest barriers our country faces in building a better society for all.

This movement could take on a large-scale process of group education and processing in racial affinity contexts followed by relationship building and healing across this line of difference in order to revive shattered multiracial coalitions and prepare them to take action for racial justice and freedom from all forms of oppression. Even in settings where restorative justice is not traditionally done in connection to organizing, I believe that we must strive to connect the “repair agreements” that come out of our circles to social action.

**Question #2: Why is there a need for all-white, anti-racist, restorative dialogue and healing spaces?**

**Mika:** I feel very fortunate to have done and continue to be doing anti-oppression organizing and healing work in a multiracial community where an emphasis is placed on building honest, authentic and caring relationships across identities while working toward collective liberation. Within the organization where I have done much of my anti-racist organizing and healing work, there has been an understanding from the beginning that there is value in doing healing work within affinity groups with shared identity and experience.

I grew up in a time, a family and a culture where I was taught definitively that racism and “racists” are bad. Largely because of my fear of being blamed and humiliated,

stemming from my lived experience, I am very careful not to “be racist” in mixed spaces (although I am certain I am anyways). So what is the impact of that? I am sure people of color pick up on my unease, my fear, my caution and my reticence. How can we build trust and respect across difference when we are not showing up fully? Where are the spaces where we have permission to share our confusion, our fear and our anxiety around race, however that manifests for us? We should never assume or expect that people of color will reassure us or even hold space for us. But if we are ever going to become more comfortable naming and calling out racism and listening to other people’s experiences of racism without denial, defensiveness or silencing, we need to process our own heartbreak, confusion and pain stemming from growing up in white families where we were conditioned to participate in this deeply inhuman system.

**Anna:** I wholeheartedly believe we need caucus/affinity/identity-groups and group education. I also think it is important that no space should ever deny people of color; if a person of color wanted to come to a space aimed at educating white folks they should, obviously, be allowed and welcomed! Being part of accountable spaces like this have fundamentally transformed every part of my life. Through this work I have begun to identify and understand how pervasive racism is in every aspect of my life, and to change my behavior to the best of my ability.

**Kat:** I believe that by sitting in affinity spaces built on the principles of restorative justice, we can remove an obstacle that is stopping white people in their tracks in racial

justice and healing work. We have to first learn to say the *unsayable*, (“I did this racist thing; I had this racist thought,”) and then learn to sit through that crippling discomfort without running from it. For many of us, we don’t even have that awareness yet, since we are so deeply entrenched in implicit bias and internalized racial superiority. We do this in white spaces first so that we can get experience, skill and resilience in saying the *unsayable*, hearing the *unhearable*, to show up with truth and authenticity in mixed-race spaces to do “the work.”

**Julie:** I am thinking about a training I have coming up which will be a mixed space. In the past, we asked the questions: When was the first time you learned about race? When was the first time you learned about gender?...class?... and then ask people to tell stories to each other in concentric circles, and thereafter share out to the group. In the past some of the people of color shared very traumatic experiences of learning about race through acts of racism aimed at them or their parents or grandparents. Some of the white participants, including myself, talked about when our parents or grandparents were the ones engaging in those horrendous acts of racism toward someone else. Still other participants would bypass race and talk instead about other kinds of harm they experienced based on gender identity or class status. The effect was very asymmetrical. One group is clearly the one that has been harmed while the other group has caused harm, but yet we had not prepared ourselves or the group for a harm circle.

When we lead these discussions, we often have not prepared ourselves for how people will feel pulled and divided, at a loss for words, unheard or misunderstood,

growing further apart, rather than closer through the circle process. These kinds of experiences have made me think that a good first step in these multiracial or interracial dialogues involves inviting people to recognize our different experiences of race in our lives and histories in *separate spaces* first, and to begin thinking about what is needed to make cross-racial interactions more humanizing, more about listening and understanding, more about connecting in ways to develop shared visions about going forward from here.

**David:** I think there is a body of healing work that we as white people need to do ourselves—work that is needed for us to embody something different than whiteness, an identity we have been given. Though the idea of white superiority was not a conscious belief I ever had and one directly countered by the words of family, friends, and teachers, I have realized that my sense of self was shaped by it. The messages I received throughout my life and the images I saw everywhere glorified people who looked like me and normalized my people’s dominance. My identity became partially dependent on these things. When they were challenged by voices expressing the truth of racism in our society, I experienced a form of existential crisis. As I began to accept this truth, I dealt with this crisis by deeming conservative, southern, or older white folks as the “bad ones.” While some cling to a denial of racism, I clung to the myth that I was “the good white person,” an exception from the rest. But underneath I still felt rootless and afraid.

When our internalized racial superiority is called out and the sanitized history of white American patriotism is discredited, what can we hold on to? How do we make meaning out of our lives? This process of identity development and renewal is one that I

think is uniquely ours to do. If we don't, I believe we will hold onto the harmful, false, and fractured ways of understanding ourselves as white people that are currently on the menu.

We must find different soil to root ourselves in. This could mean connecting to the lineage of white anti-racist organizing over time—or what Anne Braden called, “The Other America.” I think it also means reconnecting to the indigenous heritages that created meaning for us prior to their loss, prior to our displacement from our ancestral homelands, prior to becoming “white,” and prior to our journey forward as foot soldiers (or at least complicit beneficiaries) of white supremacist empire. It is important to also understand the specific ways that this transition happened for our particular ancestors. Classist depictions of European history lead us to forget that the vast majority of them lived in communities that opposed oppressive empire and sought to maintain alternative, more just and sustainable ways of life. All of this is why Jeff Duncan-Andrade, a past professor of mine who teaches in the Education and Ethnic Studies departments at San Francisco State University, said that “white folks need them some ethnic studies forreal!”

**Mikhail:** When I was first introduced to the concept of white privilege in the 1990s (at the now embarrassing late age of 20-something), I immediately formed two beliefs: 1) the concept had undeniable truth and potential benefit, and 2) it did not apply to me. As an immigrant who struggled socially to fit in throughout his childhood and whose entire friendship network consisted of non-whites until high-school, it was hard to locate myself in whiteness, particularly as part of a privileged class, which, as far as I could tell, wanted

nothing to do with me, except maybe as a convenient teasing target. White privilege didn't apply to me, I thought, and I resented anyone's suggestion that it might. These days, I see it a bit differently. Although I did not realize it back then, it is very likely that my whiteness predisposed teachers to believe I was smart, gave me the benefit of the doubt when I got into trouble in school and on the streets, and kept storekeepers and other community adults from making assumptions about my intentions.

The honest conversations about privilege that allowed me to shift my perspective have always been uncomfortable, but I think they are even harder to have in today's political climate than they used to be. Whether it is due to the growing visibility of Black Lives Matter or the relatively new narrative of "white fragility," I seem to hear a lot more white people these days talking about "lack of safety" in reference to interacting with people of color, not only in the context of so-called "anti-racism" and "diversity" work but sometimes in terms of being afraid to disagree or express an opinion, or even just experiencing emotional fatigue at the prospect of yet another conversation about diversity. While a white-only space would not eliminate such fatigue, it could be a place where it could be brought up and discussed, not as a way to justify taking a break or not engaging in the work for other reasons, but as the *appropriate* place to name and receive empathy for the struggle and create strategies for self-care that allow us to keep doing the work that needs doing. Similarly, such spaces could also allow would-be white allies to share and examine their own racist ideas and actions, not to celebrate or even accept such ideas but to make visible what is typically too shameful to bring up, especially in multiracial spaces. White-designated spaces certainly need to have accountability



structures (which I know is our next question), but if they allow white people to work through their racism and privilege away from people of color, I believe they can create more safety, not just for white people but for everyone designated or perceived as non-white.

**Question #3: What does it look like for restorative justice practitioners gathering in all-white spaces to be accountable to our colleagues of color?**

**Anna:** Internalized Racial Superiority (IRS) is a term I have learned from The People's Institute of Survival and Beyond. Despite being raised in very liberal and diverse community and educational settings, before attending the Undoing Racism training with them I never considered, how have *I* internalized oppression? How does it impact *my* behavior?

The first step in undoing our internalized racism is being able to recognize it. Some manifestations of IRS are: taking up space (verbally, physically, or emotionally), valuing intellect over emotion (and thus suppressing emotions), focusing on individualism, avoiding conflict, prioritizing intentions over impact, perfectionism, defensiveness, either/or thinking, objectivity, assuming a right to comfort, and power hoarding. IRS shows up in all of us (white folks) in some way or another. And it is so internalized in us that if (*when*) we are not taught about it, we are likely recreating racially oppressive dynamics. This question for me is two-fold: (1) what infrastructure

can we as a white group put in place to challenge racism, and (2) how can I as the circle keeper hold this space in an ‘accountable’ way?

Some ideas for accountable infrastructure include: at every gathering, ask for (additional) funds to donate to a local organizing group led by people of color as a form of reparations; explicitly name ways we have been racist or how IRS has manifested in us to the group; at the beginning of every gathering, acknowledge the indigenous people whose land you occupy and the history of slavery in that region; set up a culture where both challenging each other and anti-oppression education *will* happen and is encouraged.

The aim of these groups must be to do work on ourselves *in order to* dismantle white supremacy in *all* spaces that we occupy. And we must acknowledge that learning does not stop there. We must educate ourselves for the rest of our lives by listening, listening, and listening some more. I think it is important that groups have action (but of a certain informed type), like, “talk with three of your white friends about racism this week; keep a daily journal identifying your IRS, and read more literature by authors of color than white authors.

The answers to the second part of the question are less clear to me because I think it depends on your relationship with people of color, where you are regionally, and how much work you have done on yourself.

**Julie:** The Transforming Whiteness workshop is aimed at helping people, including myself to be accountable for the racism that we ourselves are feeling or enacting. So, after establishing a really safe space, where it is clear that there will be no judging,

shaming and blaming, and where people can be vulnerable and can open up, we ask people to talk about negative assumptions they have made on the basis of race, and to think collectively about the broader question of where those assumptions come from. That is how I see the circle process, as starting with a discussion of our personal experiences and then building on those to develop solidarity and collective action.

In the workshop, we also ask people to talk about another level of individual accountability, namely by talking about the ways in which our family histories intersect with national histories and current structures of racial harm. In the circle space, we work to surface stories and histories with the belief that this is the *first step* in a series of actions that will unfold in the future where we then come together to collectively address those historical harms. The first step in all of this, though, is to create that container where people can open up to different layers of accountability and to acknowledge the kinds of violence and harm that have been enacted throughout history and that we continue to inflict everyday in our personal interactions.

Where I get concerned about accountability is when an individual white person, say, is asked to “be accountable” for this sweeping history and all of the political and economic dynamics past and present, or even to “be accountable” for all the ways in which they have experienced privilege in their lives. In my view, this creates an impossible situation where the person expected to “be accountable” experiences a sense of being overwhelmed, of existential panic, or perhaps a sense that “this is not who I am; I am a good person,” while the person demanding accountability will also be disappointed or even harmed by the encounter because they may face defensiveness,

minimization of their harms, or an array of other responses. I don't think that this antagonistic approach will bring about the kinds of transformation we are all seeking. There has to be a better way, and I think we are trying to figure it out collectively by trying out different strategies and tactics in different kinds of gatherings. We start with questions such as, How do we create spaces where people are moved out of their comfort zone but not placed in the panic zone? How can accountability be discussed collectively in ways that lead to an outcome that moves us forward? How do we agree to start from where we are now to move forward, acknowledging the inequities and the asymmetries and the crimes of the past, but not letting those be a barrier for thinking about moving forward?

**Kat:** A mentor and a dear friend—a black woman with whom I do restorative justice work—said to me the other day, “Internalized white superiority to white folks is like water is to fish. It’s all you all know. It’s as normal to you as water is to fish; you’re swimming in it.... You can’t even see all the ways internalized white superiority plays out in your thoughts and behaviors because you were born in that water.” She didn’t say this in a way that was shaming. She said it simply as a truth. The sky didn’t fall and the ground didn’t give way underneath me. It resonated so completely.

I believe that unless we can see this water we are swimming in, we, as white people, will not know how to get out of and take those actionable steps of accountability towards truth, reconciliation and racial healing. And I believe that this understanding and

insight will come more effectively and meaningfully with restorative justice principles and practices than it can in a punitive environment.

### **Some Recommendations for White Practitioners**

In closing, we offer some practical recommendations—micro and macro—for white restorative justice practitioners to ensure that we are centering racial justice in our work.

The first way is to **create and maintain a community value** that restorative justice practitioners (and scholars) should be actively engaged in doing their own work around understanding intersectional systems of oppression and racial bias. This is essential because without a certain level of competence in these areas, restorative justice has the potential to cause substantial harm by reinforcing rather than challenging racial hierarchies and inequities. While it is tempting to conclude that this would be best done by including these topics (e.g., privilege, bias, oppression) in restorative justice trainings, there is a risk that restorative justice trainers are not necessarily sufficiently experienced and versed in this realm, especially in the United States, where the restorative justice movement has so far largely eschewed any kind of licensure and credentialing. This leads to the question of how restorative justice can support inclusion and access over professionalism, while still promoting certain competencies throughout restorative justice that are aimed at reducing harm and meeting the needs of all who participate.

The second way is to **create restorative spaces** in which those who see themselves as white can critically examine whiteness and unlearn racism. Although such

spaces exist outside the restorative justice movement, for a variety of different reasons, these non-restorative spaces are too unfamiliar, too threatening, and too vulnerable for many white people to be able to engage. In these spaces, the analyses, the discourses and the language of today's anti-racism movement can be addressed and embraced in ways that emphasize "head and heart" approaches and personal accountability. As we discovered through the process of writing this article, restorative spaces are conducive to unpacking terms like "privilege," "white supremacy," "white fragility," "accountability," "cultural appropriation," as such terms have been developed and applied through anti-racism discourse and through our own personal responses to them. Strategies such as "shaming and blaming" can also be discussed and debated in terms of their effectiveness in different contexts. Through these conversations, the analyses that these terms, concepts and strategies bring can be fully engaged and interpolated in ways that reduce the likelihood of negative reactions, such as defensiveness and denial, that obstruct true growth and transformation.

The third way is by committing to **work through our own racial conflicts**, both interpersonally and organizationally. Social justice organizations (like other organizations) are often distracted or untracked by internal conflict because the work they are doing is often stressful and, for many, is tied up into their sense of self. Though the long-term goals are often shared, there may be passionate disagreement about strategies, as well as anger and hurt feelings about how power and privilege are expressed within the organization. We have seen this happen first-hand in different social justice organizations and we continue to mourn the harm that was never repaired. Restorative practices can

support those doing anti-racism work in working through these kinds of interpersonal and organizational conflicts and repairing the harm and misunderstandings that are inevitable when human beings work closely together.

The final way restorative justice can center anti-racism work is to **prioritize institutional diversity and racial disproportionality**. Research data show that interacting with people who are racially different is more strongly associated with cognitive growth than either coursework or workshops.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Pettigrew and Tropp found that reducing anxiety and increasing empathy toward the outgroup were both more effective in reducing prejudice than increasing knowledge about the outgroup.<sup>2</sup> Both of these findings point toward the need for racial diversity in both the restorative movement and in the many contexts in which restorative justice systems are being developed. It is important that those who are in leadership positions in restorative justice make it a priority to recruit and support (financially and otherwise) people from all backgrounds. It is imperative that people in the restorative justice movement track and address racial disproportionality both within our own restorative organizations and (again) in the different contexts in which we do our work. Thus, for example, those working in the school systems must not only focus on reducing suspensions and other forms of punitive discipline, but also invite people from the groups most targeted to learn about and engage in restorative processes in ways that are beneficial for their communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bowman, N. A. (2010). College diversity experiences and cognitive development: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 80*(1), 4-33.

<sup>2</sup> Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2000). Does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Recent meta-analytic findings. *Reducing prejudice and discrimination, 93*, 114.

As restorative justice practitioners, we cannot effectively facilitate the healing of harm if we do not understand one of the greatest sources of harm in our society, white supremacy. We must also recognize and address the psychosomatic effect that white supremacy has had on us as white people. As human beings we are hardwired for connection. Our role as the dominant group in this violent system has created a painful and traumatic violation of our humanity that is passed from one generation to another. It is precisely because hurt people hurt people that white restorative justice practitioners must engage in ongoing learning, healing and accountability practices around race, power and privilege. As Fania Davis of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth has written, “To move toward a reconciled America, we have to do the work ourselves. Reconciliation is an ongoing and collective process. We must roll up our sleeves and do the messy, challenging, but hopeful work of creating transformed relationships and structures leading us into new futures.” We hope that this article will serve as an invitation to our fellow white practitioners to do exactly that: “our work.”