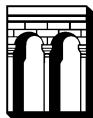


A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO
RACE MANNERS
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

NAVIGATING THE MINEFIELD
BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE
AMERICANS IN AN AGE OF FEAR

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Why a Guide?

“Do you have questions our book group can use in discussing *Race Manners*?” “Do you have anything I can use to help guide discussion of *Race Manners* among my students?”

In my travels since the release of *Race Manners* and now the second edition, *Race Manners for the 21st Century*, readers and teachers have asked these questions many times.

Often I simply typed up questions and guidelines for group discussions and emailed them to those who asked for them. Then one day at a reading, an audience member asked, “Wouldn’t it be a good idea if you wrote a discussion guide so that anyone who wants it can use it?”

He was right, so here it is.

The purpose of this guide is to spur people to think and talk more openly about the ideas raised in *Race Manners*. Most of us need help with this. We have learned to skirt racial topics in order to avoid the aggravation of yet another pointless argument, to dodge the potential shame of looking or sounding bigoted, and to do our best to push everyday racial stress out of our lives in a world already full of worries and anger.

We need a way to reclaim truth-telling.

The questions in this guide will help you do that in your book group, your classroom, or your own reading and thinking about the issues that *Race Manners* raises.

“The Rules of Engagement” on the next page will give you suggestions for getting the most out of these conversations. It’s not always going to be easy. Stay with it. After all, if we who are willing to sit down together don’t follow through on this vital interchange, who will?

Bruce A. Jacobs
January 2008

The Rules of Engagement:

How to Use This Guide

The structure of this guide follows the four sections of *Race Manners for the 21st Century*: “Out in the Open,” “Matters of Opinion,” “Identity,” and “Just Between Us.” For each section, the guide gives you a range of discussion questions. Here are some suggestions for how you can get the most out of this guide and out of the powerful conversations that may arise:

- Consider having a series of discussions. Some groups find, for instance, that it works well to discuss “Out in the Open” in the first meeting, “Matters of Opinion” in the second meeting, and so on. Divide it up any way you like. You will want to give each discussion the time it deserves and make sure everyone has a chance to express their thoughts and feelings. These aren’t conversations you can sprint through.
- Consider appointing or electing a moderator to keep the conversation moving and to provide a mediating presence if the discussion gets intense.
- Don’t feel locked into addressing all of the guide’s questions. You can choose the questions that seem best to discuss, and you can add your own. Agree as a group what questions you will

discuss so that people can experience an exchange of points of view on those topics.

- When someone voices a point of view that you want to challenge, ask questions: Why does she believe what she believes? On what experience does he base his statement? What is the source of her information? Show an interest in what brought him to his position, even if it seems misguided or misinformed. When a person is asked to account for an opinion — and also feels that his or her experience is being respected — the discussion can get interesting.
- If you come to the discussion with a need to be right, check that baggage at the door. Be open to being wrong, and realize that being wrong is not a sin. It's life. In fact, being wrong is natural for many of us, living as we do in a society of mass-produced untruths. You don't have to prove yourself right. But you should be open to understanding what is actually true, especially when it differs from what you believe.
- Don't expect agreement on every question. Do expect respect and a willingness to grow. When people fall short of this, push them to the extent you think is fair. Surprising windows can open up when we demand more of our relationships. Even if it gets rough, it's survivable. When we break through to one another, it's a victory for everyone.

Out in the Open

1. How have September 11, 2001, and the events that followed affected you? Be honest.

- Do you have a personal connection with anyone who was killed, injured, or has suffered severe trauma as a result of the attacks and their aftermath? How has this affected you and your outlook on other people?
- How do you feel about flying?
- How do you feel when you are in a crowd of strangers in an airport, a subway, a shopping mall? Is this the same way you felt before 9/11? How is it different?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how watchful of strangers were you prior to 9/11? Now? What do you conclude from this?

2. Have you noticed a stranger and wondered if he or she might pose a danger to you? (This might be a potential terrorist on a plane or a potential robber on the street.)

- What specifically did you notice about this person that made you feel nervous?
- Did you note the person's race or ethnicity? What was it?

- Did the person notice you noticing him or her?
If so, how did that make you feel?
- How did the encounter play out?
- Do you feel your fear was justified? Why or why not?
- If you could do it over again, would you do anything differently? What?
- If you now had the chance to say something to that person, what would you say?

3. Have you ever felt yourself to be the object of suspicions that you might pose a threat? (As a potential terrorist, thief, or attacker.)

- What led you to feel you were being viewed in this way?
- What do you think he or she noticed about you that he or she found scary? Do you think your race or ethnicity played a role? Why or why not?
- How did you feel as a result of this?
- How did the encounter play out? Was there official action — e.g., police questioning or arresting you, your being pulled out of line at an airport, your being detained, etc. — or was it a purely personal encounter?
- Do you think that the suspicion was justified? Why or why not?
- If you could do it over again, would you do anything differently? What?
- If you now had the chance to say something to that person or people, what would you say?

4. What good, if any, do you think has come about in America's racial climate as a result of 9/11? What harm, if any? Why?
5. How did you feel as the Hurricane Katrina disaster unfolded in New Orleans?
 - Were friends or loved ones involved? If so, how did that affect your reaction?
 - What were the most powerful images you saw and accounts you heard about what happened? How did they affect you?
 - Have you had conversations about the Katrina disaster with people of a different ethnicity? Did these differences affect the conversation? How? If not, do you think it's significant that you haven't?
 - Are you comfortable talking about what the Katrina disaster means to you? Do you feel uncomfortable talking about it? If so, why?
6. How do you feel now about the disaster and the nation's response? What conclusions, if any, have you drawn about race and class in the U.S.? Does our nation need to do anything differently? If so, what? What do you see as your role?
7. What racial problem bothers you the most? What can you and others do about it?

Matters of Opinion

1. Do you listen to or watch partisan talk show hosts — Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Michael Savage? Why?
 - Do you think the popularity of such talk shows has any impact on the political and cultural conversations you are able to have with friends, acquaintances, and coworkers? If so, what impact does it have?
2. In a lobby or waiting room, have you ever wanted to ask that the radio or TV be switched from such shows to something else? Have you ever done so? What happened? If not, what do you think would happen if you asked?
3. What do you think is the best possible way for people and pundits to express opinions via the media? What do you think is the worst?
 - What can you do to help advance the best ways? To combat the worst?
4. If all of the angry talk show hosts disappeared tomorrow, do you think their audiences would redirect their resentments? If so, where?

5. If you sat next to Rush Limbaugh or Ann Coulter on an airplane, what would you say?
6. Under what circumstances do you think it's okay to ask a person of another race his opinion on a racial issue in order to gain a broader perspective? At what point does it become an insulting query about what "their people" think? What makes the difference?
- Have you ever asked or been asked such a racial question, whether fair or unfair? What was it like for you?
 - Have you ever had an honest conversation with someone of a different ethnicity about your experience with and attitude toward the police, and compared it with his?
 - What, if anything, did you find difficult about this exchange? What do you think it takes to engage in such a conversation productively?
7. Do you think O. J. Simpson was innocent or guilty of the murder of his ex-wife and her friend?
- Do you feel uncomfortable answering this question in a racially mixed group? Why?
 - Why do you think his murder trial was such a big racial issue?

8. How do you feel about modern affirmative action programs?

- Is this hard for you to talk about across racial lines? Why?
- What would make you feel more comfortable talking about it?

9. If a historian demonstrated to you that government largesse was deliberately designed for and limited to whites from the American Revolution to the 1950s, would it change your opinion about today's affirmative action? Why or why not?

10. Is there a better way to right the racial scales than affirmative action? If so, what?

- Is it hard for you to talk about this across racial lines? Why?

Identity

1. Since race doesn't exist as a physiological entity, why talk about race at all? Should we? Why?
2. How do you feel about black people using the term *nigger* either as a joke or insult among themselves, and young black (and sometimes non-black) people using the term *nigga* as a term of endearment? What do you think this means? Is it black self-hatred, or is the meaning shifting?
3. Should blacks be able to use the word if it is off-limits to everyone else?
4. Is *nigger* equivalent to a word like *honky*, or is it worse? Why?
5. Define the term *ethnic* and explain your definition.
6. How do you feel when music historians point out that Elvis, the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, Led Zeppelin, Madonna, Eminem, and other white stars built their careers on black musical styles?
 - If you're black, do you resent this trend? Why?
 - If you're not black, how do you feel about this issue? Why?

- What do you think is the solution to this conflict over cultural ownership? How should audiences, artists, and the music industry handle this?

7. Have you ever laughed at an ethnic joke? Be honest.

- If so, what kind of ethnic joke? Who were you with?
- Is it ever okay to tell or laugh at an ethnic joke? Why? If so, when? Who gets to tell it, and to whom? Why?

Just Between Us

1. Do you use the term *tolerance*? What do you mean when you say it?

- Do you think *tolerance* is a good word because it captures the inner messiness of our mandate to treat others respectfully even when we're not sure why?
- Do you think tolerance falls short of our obligation to work at embracing true respect instead of simply acting out an idea?
- Does it matter what word we use? Why or why not?

2. Deciding when and how to speak up to family, friends, and coworkers about racism is often not easy. How do you make that judgment, taking into consideration both the desire to take care of yourself and the need to right wrongs?

- Think about a time when you had difficulty making that choice. What choice did you make? Why? Do you think it was the right choice? What would you now do differently?

3. Think of a time when you raised an issue of racism or someone raised one to you.

- If you are a person of color, do you ever feel burdened by raising these issues? Given the chance to tell your white peers how you feel about this, what would you say?
 - If you are a white person, do you ever feel frustrated by others' anger at your failure to understand experiences outside your own? Given the chance to tell your peers of color how you feel about this, what would you say?
4. How do you decide when to speak up about a racial issue and when not to?
5. Have you ever acted out or witnessed the “overly nice black man” syndrome, whereby a black man exaggerates good manners and niceness to try to counteract white fears or assumptions about him?
- If you have observed it, what would you say to that black man if you were given the opportunity to speak from the heart?
 - If you are black (or, more specifically, a black man), what are your experiences and points of view about this? If you have been in the “nice black man” position, what would you say to the world about this stance if given the opportunity to speak from the heart?
6. Which of the “Ten Most Bigoted Ideas Held by White Americans” did you find most telling? Which of the “Ten Most Bigoted Ideas Held by Black Americans?” Why?

7. Have you ever had, or are you now in, an interracial relationship?

- If so, what are or were the biggest cultural challenges for you, both personally and as a couple?
- Do you think that racism or stereotyping — on your part or your partner's — has ever been an issue in your relationship?
- Do you feel burdened by the way that outsiders view or comment on your relationship? If you could stand on a mountaintop and shout one truthful sentence to the world about your relationship, what would you say?

8. Whether you have ever been in such a relationship, have you had any issues with any such relationships? Be honest. What racial issues or patterns, if any, have bothered you about interracial relationships you have seen?

9. Do you think society should just overcome its hang-ups and let people love? Or do you see broadly unhealthy tendencies within interracial relationships that deserve persistent scrutiny?

10. In one sentence, if you could sum up your honest point of view about dating interracially, what would you say?



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