

Sample Dialogue: Under Critical Race Theory

Participants:

Michelle, a 26 year old black woman, graduate student in economics

Kathy, a 33 year old white woman who works in a flower shop in downtown Minneapolis

Mediator : A 46 year old white woman who has been involved in Anti-Racism workshops for 10 years

Each is asked to talk about how they feel about the events of the last week.

Michelle: I've been very upset. I have not slept well. I keep seeing that video of George Floyd's death over and over in my mind, and I'm outraged. It's traumatizing because I personally know a family who lost a family member in a police killing. My brothers have been harassed by the police and I have been stalked by police in a few instances. So many of my relatives and friends are behind bars. I see the whole police system as at war on the black community, and that this continues in spite of all the work we've done, just exhausts me. I am literally afraid when I go out the house that some police officer is going to take it in their mind that they don't like how I'm looking at them, and start harassing me, and next thing you know it's gonna be me on the evening news, dead on the ground under somebody's knee or foot. I am sorry I can't... (cries).

Mediator: Kathy, do you want to speak now?

Kathy: Well, I am really sad about how Michelle feels.

Mediator: Do you want to say how you feel?

Kathy: Well...I felt horrified when I saw the video of George Floyd's death. Over the last week...it's been hard. The riots were bad in our area, and so my employer shut down the business and boarded up the store. I had to stay home. In spite of the store being boarded up, rioters broke the plywood down and went in and destroyed the place. It was looted and then set on fire. I was feeling really scared. The police were completely unable to protect the area... I am upset too because now that the business is gone I'm out of a job and...

Michelle: You're upset about a **job** when someone was **murdered**?!!!

Kathy: I didn't mean to say that...

Michelle: White people get upset when their **property** is threatened, meanwhile, black people are being **killed, murdered**!!! (shaking)

Kathy: I didn't mean to suggest that I don't care about...

Michelle: Yeah I heard you loud and clear! You're concerned with your **paycheck**, when someone's **life** was snuffed out!

Kathy: (silent)

Mediator: Kathy, did you have anything you wanted to say?

Kathy: I don't know...

Michelle: I have something I want to say. You know Kathy, what I feel, when I walk by that **police station**, the one you say they didn't do enough **to protect** you and your employer???? I am **traumatized**. Thoughts come to me of **genocide**. I'm seeing my ancestors when their **bodies hung on trees**. That's what I'm goin' to bed with these last few days. So don't talk to me about your **flower business** honey, the plywood that come down! You see? You get it? I don't care none about that!! You know????!! That is what is different, between me and you, and it gets **tiring**, to not have that difference known. I am **exhausted**.

Kathy: (silence)

Mediator: Kathy, did you want to respond?

Kathy: Well...(long pause)....Michelle I am sorry you are feeling that but I don't see what that has to do with me. I don't want you to feel so upset, but I don't see what that has to do with wanting to keep my employer's business safe from rioters and looters, and I don't see how rioting and looting can help make the world better. I mean, how can crime and violence....

Michelle: **What** did you just say? You mean you don't see how your **privilege** protects you and allows you to focus on smaller issues like property, and not have to be **dragged** into one tragedy after another, one **death** after another, all because laws exist to protect **white people property**? ?? You need to own your white privilege, woman, you are ignorant of how it protects you!! I'm living here continually traumatized in an atmosphere of **death and imprisonment**, and you're talking about protecting flowers! Listen to yourself, woman!! Do you know how many black men are in prison??? Those that don't get straight out killed by the cops!! They all in prison.

Kathy: (silence, cringing expression)

Kathy: I...I understand why people are angry...but I don't understand why they think looting will solve anything.

Michelle: **Damn**, woman. Do you **not** understand that white people been looting from us for **hundreds of years**? That they looted us from Africa and brought us here and looted our rightful wages and lives, stealing our **work** from us, stealing our **children** from us, stealing all our **property**? We never been given no reparations!! So after **two hundred years** of that, you are gonna complain about a **plywood wall** on a flower shop????! 'Scuse me if I don't really give a fu#k!

Mediator: Kathy, did you want to respond? Are you aware of your white privilege in this situation and how it gives you a different experience from Michelle's?

Kathy: Well I don't know....

Michelle: See, there's your privilege talking. You don't have to know, you can just stay **ignorant** about everything and go your merry way, while the rest of us are dragged down into this mess and living traumatized day to day.

Kathy: I don't necessarily agree that I'm so privileged, I mean I grew up....

Michelle: Ha!! You're too fragile to admit your own complicity in this system from which you benefit! I mean come on, do you think a white woman gonna be held down and choked to death by police on the street? That **ain't** gonna happen! You're immune, because you're special, you're privileged.

Kathy: My Dad was a janitor, I never went to college, but you are in graduate school...

Michelle: Oh, she gonna play poor little ignorant hillbilly me! **NO** it's not about your education or what your father did, it's about your skin color, see? When the police seein' you they don't know if your father was a professor or a janitor. They just know you **white**. And me, my father might be a congressman, they don't see that, all they know, all they see, I'm **black!!** And **that's** how they done George Floyd, and he now in a casket!!

Kathy: (silence)

Mediator: Kathy, did you want to respond?

Kathy: I don't know, I just don't think everything can be reduced to skin color....

Michelle: **Damn** that lady thick! (rolls eyes)

Mediator: Kathy, can you see that Michelle's really frustrated with you because you are not understanding what she is saying? Could you try harder to understand her point? Do you see how white people might be advantaged in terms of being less susceptible to police brutality, and have a different experience?

Kathy: I think I have to go to the bathroom, can you excuse me a minute? (goes out of room and doesn't come back)

UNPACKING afterwards:

Kathy left the dialogue to go to the bathroom and did not return. She left the building and went home,

feeling hurt, humiliated and angry, and convinced her effort in good faith to dialogue with someone on race issues and work for social justice, was a waste of time. She felt hurt and confused about why Michelle was so angry at her. She understood Michelle was upset about Floyd's death, but felt like she was being blamed for that. She did not understand why Michelle would belittle her for being upset about the destruction of her employer's business: that seemed cruel.

When the mediator asked her if she was aware of her white privilege, Kathy felt punched in the gut and hurt, betrayed. She had expected that a mediator would take a neutral role in a dialogue, and that was not happening. She did not understand what was being asked of her, when both Michelle and the Mediator wanted her to accept or acknowledge her "white privilege"...she honestly did not see that she had any privilege, but now she wondered if she was wrong and really was stupid about something really important...or were the two of those women just ganging up on her for no good reason but their own need to be right and feel that they had won?

Kathy didn't know, but one thing was sure: the incident had upset her and she would not be going back. When she talked to a friend the next day, her friend said, "Why would you go to a group that would just spend the whole time bullying you and not listening to you?" and she realized that she agreed: yes, it was stupid.

Michelle went home and noticed she still felt angry. She didn't feel the dialogue with Kathy had done any good. She felt some remaining annoyance and despair. Reflecting on all that she had been through, both in her life as a whole and over the last week, she wondered whether it was worth it to even talk about it: talking about it all just made her feel worse. White women couldn't understand, weren't willing to take responsibility for their part in this problem, and so the problem was not going to be resolved. Michelle felt a huge heaviness and despondency about anything ever being different in America, other than more black men ending up being murdered by police. Michelle remembered what she'd said to some of her friends, that sometimes she felt it was better not to talk to white women. They were only focused on their own small concerns, they didn't know what her life was like and didn't want to know.

The next day, Michelle called one of her close friends, another black woman around her age, and they commiserated about the ignorance of white women and then Michelle felt better.