
DISTANCING BEHAVIORS: GAMES WE PLAY TO IMPEDE PROGRESS IN UNDOING RACISM

This is an adaptation of an article by James Edler written in the 1980's entitled "Distancing Behaviors among white groups dealing with Racism" and is a work-in-progress. Special thanks to Lisa Martens and Christine Klassen for supplying the names and descriptions of several Games (indicated with initials, LM or CK). Feedback, suggestions and other Game descriptions are welcome.

When we as white people including activists and people of faith decide to work on undoing racism, our conscious motivation is usually sincere and often heartfelt. We say we want to be reliable allies; that we want to take our places at the multi-cultural table.

Why then do so many people, peace organizations and communities founder in the shallows, often at the discussion or workshop level, even before any structural changes are implemented? What often trips us up is a relatively unconscious agenda that tends to dull and limit our perception, acting like a filter so we can't quite get the multi-cultural table in focus.

What is this hidden agenda? Many times it is an unconscious (to us) belief that we own the table. People of color clearly see the belief acted out. We then proceed to act on that belief without ever rationally processing it. We expend a lot of energy trying to appear co-operative and friendly while going through all sorts of contortions to maintain control of the table.

And why do we do that? Are we evil people? No. We are tapping into a deep need we share with most human beings - the need for safety, security and a positive self image. Our problem is, as white people, we've equated security with control. This is equally as true of the white peace community or people of faith as any other subset in society. In fact, it can take a more pernicious twist because our chosen path is lined with teachings about servant theology and the power of nonviolent struggle while at the same time our obtuseness to the racial contradictions undercut these powerful teachings that could contribute to world peace and liberation.

As we begin to nibble at the edges of this deep and pervasive system of racism, we experience various levels of personal questioning, discomfort and bewilderment about our responsibility. When we look at what it means to be white in North America, James Edler says, it affects every receptor we have and sits hard in the lap of every family, community, organization, institution and system to which we belong.

Facing racism on a personal level and within our organizations is hard work and it can feel like we're out of control of the terms of engagement. So we often tie up a great deal of our cognitive and emotional energy in efforts to maintain a distance between the sickness of racism and our own lives. But racism cannot be undone at a distance - the only way out is - through sitting with whatever emotions come up, through listening to others, and listening with a more objective ear to what is coming out of our mouths, or noticing what thoughts are lurking unspoken but are actually being unconsciously acted out. Part of this requires developing a more objective eye and ear to what we are doing each day.

This can be difficult work. How and why do we keep at it? A powerful motivation is the understanding that undoing racism presents a tremendous opportunity for self

awareness and the letting go of a crippling dis-ease within us, a disease of fear, and a facade that limits our capabilities. A side effect of letting our various facades dissolve is the possibility of then being blessed with richer, more intimate and diverse relationships with everyone. Aha! And then we are in a better position to work shoulder to shoulder in a genuinely multi-cultural peacemaking organization. Without the participation of all reflections of the image of God, our hope and work for world peace is a mirage.

However, bringing our unconscious belief systems to the surface is an ongoing and lifetime project. We start here by identifying a few common games we play to keep a distance between us and the perpetuation of racism. Each of the games contain a kernel of truth and that's what makes them so seductive and easy to use, but remember a partial truth in one situation can be a stumbling block to open communication in another context. This list is not exhaustive, and the variations on the games are endless. What is important is to identify the games we personally use and how we use them organizationally. And then, even more importantly, we can decide to let them go so we can move ahead towards taking our appropriate and useful place at the multi-cultural table.

DESCRIPTION OF GAMES

“The U.S. has a Black President” Game - a handy new game that equates one gifted person getting to a top position with the equalizing of resources, opportunities and power throughout the society. Most social and economic institutions were put into place by white people for the benefit of white people during slavery or when Black people had no vote or influence. These systems did not suddenly change the day after the presidential election, but this game absolves White people from looking at and doing something about ongoing inequity.

“You’ve Come a Long Way Baby” Game: Like all effective games, this has an element of truth, but it becomes dangerous when it is used as an excuse to not investigate further to see how the system has nuanced itself to keep our benefits intact even though slavery and legal discrimination has been outlawed on the books.

The “They don’t like me” Game: When I begin to recognize my racist behaviour, I flee from the perceived consequences - the anger or bitterness I expect from racialized groups. I keep what I consider a “respectful” distance, but this is how I can avoid the self-work needed for reconciliation. (CK)

“Racism Isn’t the Only Problem” Game: This popular game starts with someone saying that there are many other inter-related problems besides racism - problems like sexism, poverty, or crime. That is true, but when used in an undoing racism workshop, it often serves to deflect our discomfort in dealing with racism and the possibility of being de-centered.

“Instant Solution” Game: This is played by insisting that the answer is education or housing or jobs (or whatever) and wants to jump into campaign mode to solve the problem. Yes, these are all important aspects of the web of racism, and yes, they will

require our action, but jumping on one issue prematurely serves to short circuit and important process. It deflects the conversation prematurely to an exclusively external focus so we can avoid deepening our understanding of our relationship to the web and seeing that internal shifts are also required.

The “Geography” Game: This game involves pointing to another region as the one with the problem. “It’s the southern states,” if you are in the U.S.; “It’s a U.S. problem,” if you’re Canadian; “It’s a problem in the cities,” if you’re in a rural area, etc. First of all this problem ignores the fact that racism is systemic and affects everyone and that it was set up by White people to benefit White people and operates whether people of color are in the region or not. Secondly, it neatly absolves us of focusing on our own lives and participation in systemic racism.

“I Don’t See Color” Game: On the surface this can sound like a noble sentiment, but by sweeping ethnic differences under the rug we keep ourselves comfortable with no need to engage with other people’s experience of the world.

“It Happened in the Past” Game: This game is an attempt to excuse White people of the “even worse” racial violence of the past. For example, in talking about White people’s relationship with Indigenous peoples, it can be used to say, “It’s terrible that so many of them were killed and had their land taken over, but it can’t be undone and they have to accept that the past is the past.” This game avoids the problem that White people continue to enjoy living on ill-gotten land without acknowledging it. It ignores the fact that Indigenous peoples have sacred relationships with land that continues to be taken over at a fast rate through mining, logging and hydroelectric industries. Saying, “It happened in the past,” does not consider that the 85-90% genocide of Indigenous peoples across North and South America since Columbus is carried on today through White government policies and related suicidal despair in Indigenous communities. In addition, this game is based on Western/White understandings of chronological time and land ownership and necessarily ignores other understandings of time and land. (LM)

“I’m Learning About Their Culture” Game: This game is closely related to other games including...

- **“We’re All One in Spirit” Game**
- **“I Have an Indian Name” Game**
- **“I’ve Been in a Sweat Lodge (and am therefore enlightened and no longer racist” Game**

The identification of this game does not suggest it’s bad for White and Indigenous people to be friends with each other, nor that White people should ignore the stories of Indigenous peoples. It does not even suggest the impossibility of White people having transformative experiences in sweat lodges or other typically non-White ceremonies. But it is a dangerous game when used to say that because a White person has gained some knowledge of Indigenous or other non-White cultures, she/he no longer participates in racist systems. It is a dangerous game when White people use it to identify so closely with non-White cultures, on an emotional level, that they no longer see the necessity of doing the hard work of decolonizing and undoing their own racism and the racist acts and policies of their governments. (LM)

“Other Whites are Bad; I’m the Exception” Game: This game is tempting especially for those White people who have put energy into undoing their own racism and who may even have put themselves at risk to do so. In overcoming the temptation of this game, it is important for White people to...

- recognize the typically-invisible White privileges that they have come to rely on every day of their lives and remember that people of color have not been able to rely on them.
- remember that in a racist system with Whites living out and within a strong superiority illusion and structure, White people (including those who work against their own racism) always have the choice of putting themselves in a safe-feeling environment to “rest” from undoing racism work for days/weeks/months on end, while people of color have no choice but to experience the effects of racism every day. (LM)

“Where are the Blacks” Game: This game demands that members of minority groups be present in order for us to understand ourselves. Underlying the demand is a prevailing myth in the White community, namely to deal with racism must be a 50-50 deal. After 350+ years of being told there is a racial problem in this country, we begin our awakening, but still seem to need confirmation that there is a problem. In contrast, we seem to be able to talk about politics without a politician around, or crime without a criminal. There is a deeper undercurrent here about our expectation that people of color need to come running when the time to go to work is determined by the oppressor. The analogy is a White person with her/his foot on the neck of a person of color, saying to the person on the floor, “What can I do?”

Other Games:

- **Distinguished Lecturer Game**
- **Black Expert Game**
- **Find the Racist Game**
- **After I Become a Millionaire Game**
- **Definition Game**
- **Maintain Niceness Game**
- **Why Can’t We All Just Get Along Game**

Each of us has our specialty games. **One way of dropping the games and becoming real is to name and describe them out loud, get them outside of ourselves so we can see them for what they are.** You are invited to send in your personal games to become part of this list. This paper, and each of us, is a work-in-progress.

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