

Reciprocal and Transformative Relationships Conflict Scenarios KEY

SCENARIO 1

Two friends, one Latino/a and one white, are walking down the street in a college town on a Friday night. It is rather late in the evening and both are laughing and joking around as they talk about their evening's experiences. Suddenly, a patrol officer approaches the pair who asks them where they are going. The Latino/a friend replies that they are legally not required to answer that question. The white friend is silent. The patrol officer tells the Latino/a friend to face a wall, does a pat down, and proceeds to offer a warning about being careful about how to respond to authority. The white friend is silent. The officer leaves. The Latino/a friend complains loudly about the racism of the officer and how often this happens to people of color in the US. The white friend says, "You know, I'm not sure how much it had to do with race. I mean, if we'd just told the cop that we were going home that might have never happened." The two then continue with the Latino/a friend describing how racism and racial profiling are usually ignored and the white friend talking about how our individual attitudes make a big difference in how we are treated.

Issues that could be pulled out in discussion:

- **White friend dismissing the Latina/o friend's experience of the situation**
 - **Unhelpful to act as the Devil's advocate, acts as a complete invalidation of something that very well might be true**
- **Silence of the white friend in the face of a police officer's abuse of power**
 - **What might underlie the choices to speak up or stay silent?**
 - **What might the effects be on the relationship if one person feels unsupported and left to fight for his/her rights alone?**
- **Compliance in the face of power for the sake of getting through without challenging authority figures overstepping their bounds**
 - **How were we taught to deal with authority? Why?**
 - **How has our group's historical experience trained us to see this situation?**
 - **How does our personal relationship with institutional racism affect our willingness to just "go along"?**

SCENARIO 2

Two close work colleagues, one African-American and one white, spend time together after work one evening. They enter a bookstore to look around and wander off in different directions in the store. A few minutes later, as the African-American colleague is standing near a table of books, a white woman approaches from behind and starts to touch the colleague's dreadlocks, saying "Wow, how did you get your hair to do this? It looks so interesting." The colleague offers a hasty reply about it being a lot of work and moves away quickly. As the colleagues meet up with each other and leave the store, the African-American friend tells the white colleague what happened and turns to her with a shake of her head, releasing a sigh, saying, "I just don't understand the nerve of white people? What makes you do something like that? The lack of respect is completely ridiculous." The white colleague responds by talking about how not all white people are like that and that it's wrong to generalize that one experience to all white people.

Issues that could be pulled out in discussion:

- **Well-intentioned approaches to people of different backgrounds can actually be infuriating to people. Can we understand why?**
 - **Imagine this happening over and over and over, small slights that add up to a lifetime of being treated as unusual and an oddity. Can we imagine what that would feel like?**
- **Immediate move to distance oneself from a generalization**
 - **Although true that not ALL white people act in this way, the immediate focus on that element of the complain invalidates the essential message being conveyed by the African American colleague.**
 - **How can we work to hear one another better when emotion is sparked and, if necessary, discuss the trouble with generalizing at a later time**

SCENARIO 3

An interracial group of friends who belong to the same organization are in a meeting together where they are listening to a presentation by a guest speaker. The speaker is unusually brash and tells jokes that some might interpret as sexist and racially prejudicial. Several people in the audience laugh at the jokes, but some are also uncomfortable. After the event, the interracial set of friends leave to grab a bite to eat. As they sit to talk about the evening, one person begins to talk about the racism of the speaker and how someone really should have done something to stop the barrage of insults being thrown out. One of the white friends suggests how helpful it can be to just see the speaker as being rather ignorant instead of emotionally reacting to that kind of nonsense. The discussion continues with several people of color arguing that white people really need to stop other whites from acting so ignorantly. The white friends in general suggest that doing something to interrupt the speaker would just make things worse and that refusing to engage it is smarter.

Issues that could be pulled out in discussion:

- **Why would the white friends suggest interpreting the situation as someone being “ignorant” instead of being “racist”?**
 - **Many white people are uncomfortable speaking up publicly because they are not sufficiently skilled at knowing how to approach a situation or what to say**
 - **Many white people have learned to be conflict avoidant – culturally seeing even polite confrontation as rude and frightening**
 - **Where does that leave us, if white people are generally afraid of speaking up and people of color are tired of carrying the burden of naming when racism occurs? How would that affect our relationships with one another?**
- **What room is there for white people to approach the speaker privately? Does the confrontation have to be done publicly in order to be satisfying?**
 - **Given the white cultural framework of confrontation being rude, a middle ground can be white people learning to take the risk of naming the issue at the end of a presentation. But, where does this leave the people of color who are not able to see this intervention? How can white people become vocal enough to allow the message to be conveyed that the situation is recognized and being attended to in some way?**