# Examples of Hot Buttons, Triggering Comments & Behaviors During Discussions About Race and Racism

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(Organized using the model ***Path to Competence©*** developed by Drs. Jack Gant and Delyte Frost, Elsie Y. Cross Associates)

To watch Kathy’s webinar about the ***Path to Competence***: [**https://youtu.be/\_6Q61OP58y8**](https://youtu.be/_6Q61OP58y8)

**Diagram

Description automatically generated**

**Directions:**

1. Use a 0-10 scale to rate how much of a hot button or “trigger” each of the following is for you when you are engaging in dialogues about race, racism, white supremacy and/or white privilege.

0 = no emotional reaction

1 -2 = mild level of emotional reaction

3-4 = low-moderate degree of emotional reaction

5-6 = moderate degree of emotional reaction

7-8 = high degree of emotional reaction

* 1. = extremely high level of emotional reaction

1. As you review each item, reflect:

* How, if at all, is the intensity of your emotional and behavioral reaction related to **the source** of the comment or action? For instance, any difference if from:
  + A family member?
  + Friend?
  + Colleague or team member?
  + Supervisor?
  + Stranger?
  + Political or organizational leader?
  + Someone in a White Accountability Group, workshop or class you are leading?
  + A Person of Color? A white person?
  + You?

1. Do you have different reactions if the situation occurred in public or private?
2. In these types of situations, how have you responded in ways that furthered learning and development? Organizational Equity and Inclusion goals?
3. How have you reacted in ways that were counter-productive? Not aligned with your core values or organizational goals?

**When a white person (or you):**

**Box of Denial** (unaware/ineffective)

\_\_\_ 1. Makes a racist stereotypic, offensive comment.

\_\_\_ 2. Is set in their ways; refuses to consider new information or differing perspectives.

\_\_\_ 3. Challenges the validity of the information or statistics being presented.

\_\_\_ 4. Gets defensive when someone disagrees with them or gives them feedback.

\_\_\_ 5. Dismisses the conversation as “political correctness” or “cancel culture.”

\_\_\_ 6. Calls others “snowflakes” or a similar dismissive, pejorative term.

\_\_\_ 7. Shuts down and disengages.

\_\_\_ 8. Demands that People of Color teach them and help them learn; represent their group; lead racial equity efforts, etc.

\_\_\_ 9. Says, “We can’t learn without People of Color!”

\_\_\_ 10. Does “credentialing”: My best friend is Black! I married a Hispanic man! My kids are mixed! I adopted a child from South Korea! My family marched with Dr. King!

\_\_\_ 11. Says, “I’m a lesbian (woman, grew up working class, I’m part Native American….), I can’t be racist!”

\_\_\_ 12. Says, “I know a Person of Color and they don’t feel that way! They say this is a great organization!”

\_\_\_ 13. Says, “My Black friend has never had any problems from the police.”

\_\_\_ 14. Says, “I am a human being! We are all part of the Human Race!”

\_\_\_ 15. Says, “We are all human beings.”

\_\_\_ 16. Says, “I’m color-blind; I don’t see color!”

\_\_\_ 17. Says, “You can’t lump people together…we’re all individuals.”

\_\_\_ 18. Says, “I don't like being called white!”

\_\_\_ 19. Says, “I don’t hate anyone, I’m not racist.”

\_\_\_ 20. Says, “I don’t have any racial prejudice.”

\_\_\_ 21. Says, “There are bad apples in every group!”

\_\_\_ 22. Says, “I treat people how they treat me.”

\_\_\_ 23. Says, “I treat everyone the same.”

\_\_\_ 24. Says, “I never owned slaves!”

\_\_\_ 25. Says, “My parents worked hard for everything they got. These people are just lazy freeloaders!”

\_\_\_ 26. Says, “I grew up poor/working class, I don't have any privilege.”

\_\_\_ 27. Says, “There is no such thing as white privilege.”

\_\_\_ 28. Says, “Why can’t they just try to fit in more?”

\_\_\_ 29. Blames individual People of Color for the racist dynamics and structural racism they experience.

\_\_\_ 30. Supports the deficit narrative: “Most People of Color are under-privileged and haven’t yet had the opportunity to develop the critical skills and competencies needed to succeed.”

\_\_\_ 31. Says, “I do everything I can to help People of Color!”

\_\_\_ 32. Says, “They are just a bunch of Welfare Queens; trying to work the system and get something for nothing.”

\_\_\_ 33. Says, “People of Color are always looking for a free handout and special privileges they didn’t earn.

\_\_\_ 34. Says, “They just need to work hard and pull themselves up by their bootstraps!”

\_\_\_ 35. Says, ‘Those people…”

\_\_\_ 36. Plays “Oppression Olympics:” “Classism is the most important oppression.”

\_\_\_ 37. Says, “This is how we have always done things and they work well for everyone.”

\_\_\_ 38. Says, “That is just how the policy is and we can’t change it.”

\_\_\_ 39. Says, “We have to work within the organizational structures and culture.”

\_\_\_ 40. Tries to ignore, justify the impact of their behaviors: “That wasn’t my intent!!”

\_\_\_ 41. Says, “I don’t do that! I’m a good person!”

\_\_\_ 42. Says, “I can’t control how they feel!”

\_\_\_ 43. Says, “I’m not responsible for how they misinterpreted my comment!

\_\_\_ 44. Takes it personally when someone is sharing a pattern of racist dynamics.

\_\_\_ 45. Is stuck at the Individual/Interpersonal Level: Unable, unwilling to acknowledge Group Level differential experiences and impact.

\_\_\_ 46. Says, “That was an isolated incident!”

\_\_\_ 47. Says, “It was just a joke! We can’t say anything anymore!”

\_\_\_ 48. Says, “I’m not racist!”

\_\_\_ 49. Says, “That had nothing to do with race! That happens to me, too!”

\_\_\_ 50. Uses PLEs ~ Perfectly Logical Explanations to try to excuse or rationalize away racist dynamics.

\_\_\_ 51. Says, “We are damned if we do and damned if we don’t! We can do anything right! What do they want from us?”

\_\_\_ 52. Says, “What do they want? Nothing will please them!”

\_\_\_ 53. Says, “It is never enough for them!”

\_\_\_ 54. Says, “There’s reverse racism! They do it, too! We’re the victim here!”

\_\_\_ 55. Says, “Things have swung too far; now whites are discriminated against!”

\_\_\_ 56 Says, “People of Color are racist, too!”

\_\_\_ 57. Tone polices People of Color: Focuses on and critiques HOW they engaged, not the original problematic behaviors and practices they were addressing: If they would only…. they are too aggressive…“coaches” members of marginalized groups on how to act, think and feel, etc.

\_\_\_ 58. Says, “People of Color are often loud, argumentative, and unprofessional.”

\_\_\_ 59. Accuses People of Color who call them in: “You attacked me!”

\_\_\_ 60. Says, “They are too sensitive; always over-reacting!”

\_\_\_ 61. Says, “They are always playing the Race Card over nothing!”

\_\_\_ 62. Says, “There is no systemic racism in this organization.”

\_\_\_ 63. Says, “People of Color need to ‘get over it’ and stop using the past as an excuse for their lack of success.

\_\_\_ 64. Says, “There are microaggressions against whites, too!”

\_\_\_ 65. Says, “We are post-racial now!”

\_\_\_ 66. Says, “Things are so much better now; look how far we have come!”

\_\_\_ 67. Says, “I know all I need to know!”

\_\_\_ 68. Says, “It’s not as bad here as most other places.”

\_\_\_ 69. Says, “Change takes time. You have to be patient.”

\_\_\_ 70. Says, “You are pushing too hard, lighten up!”

\_\_\_ 71. Says, “If you keep pushing, you will lose people and set us back years!”

\_\_\_ 72. Says, “You are creating divisions and hostility by talking about race!”

\_\_\_ 73. Says, “You make it worse by segregating us, talking about race.”

\_\_\_ 74. Says, “Why are we always talking about race!”

\_\_\_ 75. Says, “We need to talk about other issues of diversity!”

\_\_\_ 76. Deflects the conversation to focus on one of their marginalized identities.

\_\_\_ 77. Debates, argues, and resists.

\_\_\_ 78. Says, “We just have different opinions, different facts.”

\_\_\_ 79. Claims a false equivalency.

\_\_\_ 80. Is stuck in their heads, intellectualizing. Refuses to own and talk about their emotions.

\_\_\_ 81. Minimizes and discounts the experiences and comments of People of Color.

\_\_\_ 82. Has distracting nonverbal behaviors as people share: eye rolling, deep sighs, head shaking, side conversations, look at phone, etc.

\_\_\_ 83. Interrupts and talks over People of Color or other white people.

\_\_\_ 84. Refuses to believe the lived experiences of colleagues of color.

\_\_\_ 85. Says, “This ‘data’ is just anecdotal. Probably from under-performing staff!”

\_\_\_ 86. Rescues other white participants who are given feedback.

\_\_\_ 87. Ignores or minimizes the racial trauma colleagues of color are experiencing from national events and the organizational climate.

\_\_\_ 88. Escalates the degree of conflict; the conversation feels “out of control”

\_\_\_ 89. Says, “I’m not open to your feedback!”

\_\_\_ 90. Says: I asked my friends of color and they say I am not a racist; No one has ever complained about me being a racist.

**Box of Fear** (more aware; still ineffective)

\_\_\_ 91. Is quiet; refuses to participate in discussions or activities.

\_\_\_ 92. “Walks on eggshells” and acts more distant and more formal with People of Color.

\_\_\_ 93. Seems to use tears to distract, re-center themselves, weaponize them, etc.

\_\_\_ 94. Is all talk, no meaningful action.

\_\_\_ 95. Is performative: Uses all the current terms and lingo as well as academic theory and concepts, but still behaves in racist ways.

\_\_\_ 96. Stays at the conceptual level, uses inaccessible language and terms.

\_\_\_ 97. Doesn’t speak up to interrupt racist dynamics.

\_\_\_ 98. Tries to excuse their silence and inaction: I’m afraid to make a mistake, say something racist; Afraid to make things worse or cause harm…

\_\_\_ 99. Demonstrates a lack of integrity: Says one thing, does another.

\_\_\_ 100. Seeks approval, validation, and recognition from People of Color.

\_\_\_ 101. In an effort to interrupt the difficult conversation and avoid discomfort, says, “Let’s table this for now and form a task force to research this and suggest next steps.”

\_\_\_ 102. Says, “We need to do an organizational survey to see how bad this really is” - as a resistance strategy to slow or stall change efforts knowing that leaders will eventually move on to the next crisis and lose interest and energy for addressing issues of race and racism.

\_\_\_ 103. Rushes to a solution without fully embracing the emotions and cumulative impact.

\_\_\_ 104. Tries to smooth over disagreement and conflict; create harmony.

\_\_\_ 105. Is overly aggressive in their reactions to other white participants.

\_\_\_ 106. Appears timid, hesitant.

\_\_\_ 107. Gives up: “This is too hard! I feel so powerless, helpless! I am so tired! I need to take a break from this work.”

\_\_\_ 108. Says, “I’ve tried to get some leaders to care about racism, but I don’t have any influence with them.”

\_\_\_ 109. Says, “I tried to speak up more but a colleague of color called me out for doing it wrong, so I need to step back for now and keep listening.”

\_\_\_ 110. Says, “This is so overwhelming! I don’t think I’m making any progress.”

\_\_\_ 111. Says, “Am I just fooling myself I am making a difference? When I am really still colluding and maintaining the status quo?”

\_\_\_ 112. Says, “I get all this white privilege! I feel so guilty! How do I give it up?”

**Box of Judgment** (Stuck in guilt and/or shame; judging and blaming self and/or others)

\_\_\_ 113. Says, “I am so ashamed!”

\_\_\_ 114. Says, “I am so guilty!”

\_\_\_ 115. Says, “I’m a horrible person!”

\_\_\_ 116. Is deeply triggered, expressing intense emotions.

\_\_\_ 117. Refuses to look at their own racist attitudes and behaviors.

\_\_\_ 118. Tries to avoid self-work by redirecting the conversation to family racist dynamics or external societal racism.

\_\_\_ 119. Distances from other white people.

\_\_\_ 120. Judges other white people: “White people are so racist!” “They’re a leader, they should know better!”  “How did they get to be a leader and be so incompetent about racism!” “You say racist things, how dare you confront me?” “You’re a hypocrite!” “You say you are committed to equity and inclusion, but you are still such a racist!”

\_\_\_ 121. Criticizes, gossip abouts, and finds fault with white people.

\_\_\_ 122. Critiques how co-conveners are running the White Accountability Group or training as a way to show superiority.

\_\_\_ 123. Says, “I’m better than these whites!” Engaging in Woke Olympics; Social Justice Arrogance, etc.

\_\_\_ 124. Says, “I’m woke!”

\_\_\_ 125. Competes to be the most “woke” white person in the room.

\_\_\_ 126. Calls out other white participants, rather than calling in.

\_\_\_ 127. Has a condescending, arrogant, self-righteous or patronizing tone.

\_\_\_ 128. Competes with other whites to be “the good white:” the best ally, the one People of Color let into their circle, etc.

\_\_\_ 129. Aggressively confronts any white person who says or does something racist; piles on the feedback to distance from them and prove who is a better ally.

\_\_\_ 130. Gives unsolicited advice to others.

\_\_\_ 131. Says, “Whites are boring; I’d rather hang out with my friends of color!”

\_\_\_ 132. Takes no responsibility for developing white colleagues.

\_\_\_ 133. Aggressively calls someone racist to shut them down and prove they are better than them.

\_\_\_ 134. I’ve worked with them for years and never knew they were so racist!

\_\_\_ 135. Says, “These white people are so racist!” as they separate themselves from them.

**Additional common triggers for you:**

I am deeply grateful for the input and feedback from participants in trainings and White Accountability Groups over the years; and especially for the ideas from my colleagues Beth Yohe, Beth Douthirt Cohen, Rachael Forester, Shannon Joliff Detorre, and Victoria Farris.

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