



Dad Denies Systemic Racism

Estefania was always close to her dad, but lately their relationship has been strained. Thanks to the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, they've been talking more about race and racism. It's become clear they don't see the issues the same way. Also, social justice doula who helps people put into practice their anti-racism gives Estefania and the rest of us the vocabulary that can lead to more honest conversations with loved ones.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything. ¡Hola! to new listeners! I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. This week, we're tackling one of the hardest things we talk to our parents about. Racism. But let's start by honoring our dead. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Andrés Guardado, Aura Rosser, Antonio Zambrano-Montes, Botham Jean, Janisha Fonville, Carlos Adrian Ingram-Lopez, Akai Gurley, Erik Salgado, Sean Monterrosa, Gabriella Nevarez. 26 million people so far have protested around the clock for months. In this episode, we're bringing the conversation home with Estefania, who tries talking with her Puerto Rican dad about race and racism in the context of their own lives. Let's get into it.

Estefania: Hi, I'm Estefania, and I'm from Los Angeles, California, and in my house, we called my parents mamá and papá. Growing up, my dad and I had a really... I was like a daddy's girl, you know? Really close bond. I think over the recent years, as we've gotten older, it's been a little bit more strained, specifically with politics, but there's still a lot of love. I'm Latina. My whole family's Latina. I'm mixed with half Colombian, half Puerto Rican, and my dad identifies as Puerto Rican. Like if I had to pick a box, I know technically we're white, but I don't like to say that, so... My father would identify as white if he had to check a box.

There was a school project that we had to do, like a family tree. I probably was in second grade. And we had a conversation about where we came from, and considering that we're light skinned... My mom's a little darker than my dad and myself, and so I remember one time my mom was like, "Oh no, I'm Black." And then my dad was like, "No, you're not." And just we had this frank conversation about okay, what does it mean to be white? What does it mean to be Black? And I became more aware of it.

Because my mom, I think she was just kind of comparing colors. I mean, I wouldn't say she's dark skinned, but she's definitely like morena, like trigueña. I mean, she was like, "Well, I'm not white, so..." My dad, I think he was being more like Black or white, you're either one or the other. Having my dad be Puerto Rican and having discussions about race and politics, it's been really interesting, because when I point out my dad's privilege in being Puerto Rican, and that he didn't have to go through a naturalization process like my mom did, for example, his stance was more, "Well, I'm not privileged. I've worked hard to get where I'm at." And so, I think his mentality is very much the whole American dream, pull yourself up by the bootstraps. It's really disheartening when I hear my dad say like, "Well, they have to do it the right way." And then when I bring up where there might be barriers for that, he's just like, "Well, that's really unfortunate, but we can't save everybody."

My dad has definitely experienced being otherized and we've had conversation about have you felt discriminated. When I bring it up to him, he'll say like, "Well, yeah. I definitely feel like I've been stopped by a cop because of being Latino or something like that, but when I get pulled over, I do what I'm told. I try not to instigate." And I'm like, "Well, yeah, but there's still differences there, you know? You're light skinned. There's just a difference." My dad does have a sense that other people have different experiences, for sure. However, I think it's hard for him to understand that systems can have problems. Like his background is being in the military, so he comes very organized, he understands systems, but I think for him to question systems is hard.

I love my dad and I know he loves me, and he still thinks we can agree to disagree, but I also think that to an extent, especially with everything that's going on, there's a difference between politics and humanity, and I feel that he has raised me to be the person that I am today, and because of him I am... I'm a social worker because he has taught me to care for others, and empathy, and so for him to have trouble then engaging in that at this point in our lives, I find it really hard. And so, I'm disappointed, and it makes it hard to talk about what's going on, so in a sense, I feel like our relationship becomes a little superficial.

If my dad was on the line right now and I could tell him something for him to hear me, I would tell my dad I would hope that we can one day engage in fruitful conversations where we can not just share opinions of what we've seen on the media and on the news, but really allow each other to share the research and the information that we both have gathered, and to be open, not just being on defense the whole time, so that our relationship can grow and be more deeper than how it's been to this day.

Lantigua-Williams:

I've been there. Estefania seems to have an uphill climb when it comes to helping her dad see things differently. I really get that. But how can we have more fruitful conversations about race and racism with our loved ones? Is it even possible to

have these conversations in a way that doesn't damage our relationships? There's so many questions in between those two, so of course I called an expert.

Lutze Segu: My name is Lutze Segu. I am a social justice doula, which means I accompany organizations and individuals on their journey to operationalizing their anti-racism. I am also a social worker and I am a third-year doctoral student at the University of British Columbia, at the Social Justice Institute, where I study gender, race, sexuality, and social justice.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, you heard Estefania's testimony about her dad. What do you hear when you listen to it?

Segu: One of the major things I heard with Estefania and her father is this is a conflation that Latinx and race are not the same thing. Latinx is an ethnicity. It is not a race. And so, that's always gonna be a problem, and so this is why a term like intersectionality matters, right? Because intersectionality teaches us that race is always attached to class, always attached to gender, always attached to citizenship, and ability, and those kinds of things. So, what would it look like for Estefania to honor the fact that her father is a victim of xenophobia, and he also profits from the fact that he is not read as Black, and he is not Black in the United States of America. Like both of those things can be true.

Lantigua-Williams:

Right, right. So, I was actually really interested, because in her own household, her mom spoke up and said, "No, wait. I'm Black. I see myself as Black." And then there was an immediate denial, and I thought, "Okay, that's a place where we need to do some digging."

Segu: Right. And this is something, especially for Puerto Ricans, is a tricky one. Because again, we know that, and Puerto Ricans are definitely made up of colonizers, Indigenous people, and Black people. However, right now, in this present moment, race is made up in relation and context. Racially, how do you identify? Racially, how do you see yourself? And racially, how did you raise your children? So, it's very clear that these people are partnered, but they never really had a conversation about race, because one person is really clear that they are not white, and the partner is really clear that that's not the case for them.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, broadly speaking, a lot of people have historically minimized racial identity to phenotype. What do you look like on the outside? And I think thankfully, we're getting away from that and understanding that phenotype is part of it sometimes, and sometimes it's simply not. So, how does someone like Estefania, who is younger, who has grown up in a place where there's a lot more nuance about this

and a lot more knowledge about this, how can she explain that small part of it that says, “Dad, it’s not just what you look like.”

Segu: Yeah. It’s not just what you look like, it’s how the world responds to you. So, remake race in conversation and relation to each other, and so this is very similar, too, to Black immigrants. Anti-Blackness in this country tends to be more directed to anti-Black American sentiment, so that’s something that all immigrants have to learn and undo, even Black immigrants. So, there’s this way that Black immigrants, because of how racism works in this country, we want to move away and be like, “I’m Black, but I’m not Black like those people.”

So, with that said, how can Latinx people understand that yes, no one is asking you to deny your nationality or your ethnicity, but what I want my Latinx folks who are white to understand, there’s nothing inherently bad or evil about being white. Because remember in the beginning, Estefania said, “Technically I’m white, but I don’t like to say that.” That is gonna permeate her conversation with her father until she gets clear on who she is. There is nothing inherently wrong about being white. There is nothing inherently righteous about being Black. We are people, and our value and our worth is not predicated and should not be predicated on our skin. That’s the whole point of Black Lives Matter. That’s the whole point of it.

If you miss that, you miss everything. The problem in this country is white supremacy and how whiteness gets interpreted in white supremacy. The problem is not the skin. So, it’s okay for Latinx people to hold their whiteness and celebrate, backstroke, and flourish and thrive in the fact that they have a nationality, an ethnicity. Never let that go.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, one of the things, one of the examples that Estefania gave us, because I asked her, has your father ever felt that who he is, what he looks like, was a reason for him being treated differently? And the example that she gave me is a classic. Being driving while Brown. And that, to me, is such a good example of how it’s when we’re dealing for example with something like widespread police brutality and racial profiling, it’s not about the individual.

Segu: Right. And so, what Estefania would need to do is really tease out like racism, it operates on four different levels. Internalized racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic racism. And so, if we keep making it seem like racism is about a question of good or bad people, then we’re never gonna see the racism within institutions. We’re not gonna see it in policing. You’re not gonna see it in prisons.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, bringing it back to this conversation between Estefania and her dad, how can she utilize this data, this information that we now have as evidence to make the case to get him to at least understand that it does matter?

Segu: The beautiful thing that it would be great if Estefania can herself struggle with and be in principle struggle with her father is if we can all do a better job at understanding in one body, I can both experience power, unearned power, which is that's what privilege is. I didn't do anything, and I just so happen to be white, I just so happen to be able-bodied, I just so happen to be heterosexual. And in that same body, I can also have parts of my identity where I do experience oppression, where I do experience discrimination. Because the more I understand who am I, and my complications, I am better able to understand and read other people and their complications.

Lantigua-Williams:

When I talked to Estefania, there was definitely some frustration on her part that they've had to rehash this conversation over and over. So, at what point do you just give up and keep living your life and understand that you're not going to change someone's mind?

Segu: Well, when we're talking about our family members and people that we love, we have to think about it on a spectrum. On the far right spectrum is, "Okay, my parent is a neo-Nazi and is supporting the annihilation of people," right? And then there's like, "My parent just can't understand how race and class and all those things interact." So, in those kind of situations, I would recommend people take a real hard look. What's at stake here? What is the level of the problem? And then I would actually ask ourselves, have we done the work in this relationship that makes it possible for us to have these kind of hard conversations? Because there's this assumption because we are related to people that we sometimes overinflate the level of intimacy we have with each other, and it overinflates what we can actually talk about.

Because we understand for a lot of us within our family, there's a lot of regular, mundane conversations we can't even have. We have to be in deep relationship with each other and we have to create the conditions inside of our relationship that allows for radical truth telling, for deep listening, and for us to lovingly push back on one another.

If the overall job of Estefania is like, "Black Lives Matter and I want to be in solidarity with Black liberation struggle in this, the United States of America," she has to be more strategic about what does that look like. What's my strategy with my family? What's my strategy on the internet? What's my strategy with people at work? And what's my strategy at the supermarket? Because it can't be a one-size-fits-all strategy. And it's totally okay as adult children for us to practice having boundaries, and if we know there are certain topics where our parents cannot be moved, we have every right to say, "Look, in my house, these people's humanity is not up for debate. I love you, I want to continue to be in a relationship with you, so at this moment, it looks like we're at an impasse. Let's revisit it when we both have different tools and strategies and can be in this conversation in a way that is in service to our love and our relationship."

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, last question is are there any online or elsewhere resources that we can point people to, where they can become familiar with some of the terminology that you've used, some of the definitions that you've provided today, and just do deeper learning about how to have these conversations?

Segu:

Yes, for sure. Kimberlé Crenshaw, which is the Black woman legal scholar who coined the phrase intersectionality has a wonderful [podcast called Intersectionality Matters](#). She [has a TED Talk](#) that is both on Ted.com and on YouTube where she talks about intersectionality. Mijente, [Rosa Clemente](#), those are Afro-Latinx people who are having conversations about how Latinx folks need to have a reckoning and a better understanding of Blackness and those kind of things. So, look out for [Mijente](#), Rosa Clemente, read her work, but I would really recommend starting with those three places.

Lantigua-Williams:

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Lutze. I have learned so much in the last 20 minutes.

All right, let's recap what we learned from Lutze. Mind the distinctions. Race and ethnicity are different things, but the terms are often conflated. When having conversations about race and ethnicity, make sure everyone is clear on what each means. Look in the mirror. Reflect on your own experience and get clear on your identity. The better you understand yourself and your complications, the better you'll be at understanding and engaging with other people. Use intersectionality as a tool. Race plays out differently in different contexts and is impacted by ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, and other identities.

Assess your relationship. Be honest. Is there enough intimacy, trust, and mutual respect in your relationship with your parents or your relative? Can it really handle an open and honest conversation about race and racism? If the answer is no, first work on deepening the relationship so you both can be vulnerable and courageous when talking about race. Focus on the real problem. Remember, the problem is not being white, the problem is white supremacy. There is nothing inherently good or bad about people based on what they look like. And remember, have different strategies. There are no templates on how to have a conversation about race, so be flexible and be prepared to change strategies as you are moving through the conversation.

Lantigua-Williams:

¡Muchas gracias! Thank you so much for listening. How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything is an original production of Lantigua Williams & Co. Virginia Lora produced this episode. Kojin Tashiro mixed it. Micaela Rodriguez is our audio producer. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @TalktoMamiPapi, and please remember to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify,

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