

Guide for having difficult discussions about race & identity in AI/ML research & development



About

Why you should use this resource: This document outlines suggested prompts for discussing issues that may come up — or have come up — related to harmful bias within the product development process, with a particular focus on talking about race and racial bias. By learning more about how to communicate effectively about difficult topics with colleagues, you'll work toward improving your ability to create better products that enhance equity from the outset. You'll be better equipped to build community with your coworkers and work towards creating products that are better for everyone involved.

Who this is for: Anyone who is interested in engaging with their colleagues on topics relevant to more equitable product research and development outcomes that involve harmful bias, especially related to race. These topics can be challenging to talk about. This set of discussion prompts developed by researchers can be a helpful part of a toolkit of resources on topics such as product inclusion and responsible AI innovation. It can serve people who may be new to having these conversations or it can be a refresher for those with more experience. If you are taking the lead in an AI research project, developing a product, or serving as a product manager, this tool can be particularly useful for facilitating conversations with your colleagues. This tool can also be helpful for those involved in UX. If you read this document and still want to learn more about the importance of using language that advances equity and inclusion and why it is important for organizations, check out [Responsible Language Guide for AI & ML](#).

When you should use this: You can start using this tool at any point. Ideally, consult this tool to implement [general](#) and [preemptive](#) practices before starting any new project as part of your responsible innovation process. You can also use this to help guide discussions [after](#) an issue related to racial equity and AI system or product outcomes for downstream users has surfaced.

What you will have after using this guide: You'll build muscle in your practice of avoiding harmful bias related to race in the AI/ML research and product development process. This can help your team build products with a greater equity lens for better user outcomes for more people, while also mitigating risk the business can face.

For the guide on having difficult discussions related to race that are more interpersonal (non-product related), please see [Guide for having difficult discussions about race & identity](#). While many of the principles and practices outlined here can be useful for other difficult discussions beyond race, this document is specifically focused on race.

What can this guide do for you?

This tool is designed to help you and your colleagues navigate real scenarios that may come up related to race in the AI/ML research and product development process. Consider the following **hypothetical** scenarios:

Your team is conducting UX prototyping. Jada, a team member, raises a concern that users who are less familiar with the process of home financing (including racially minoritized groups) might have difficulties navigating the interface. Willie responds that this is outside the scope of the project, and starts to move onto the next topic in the meeting. You notice that Jada seems upset.

What skills this tool can provide for handling the situation:

- **Address the issue when it arises:** “Before we move on, Willie, I’d like to think a bit more about Jada’s point.”
- **Focus on resolving harmful impacts:** “I know you want to keep us on track, but I think this is an issue that could have a big impact on our users.”
- **Recognize your power to make change:** “This might not explicitly be within the scope of the project, but it seems like this is an area where we could leverage our tool to help make resources more accessible for more folks. What do you all think?”

Your team is working through the design of an updated user interface. The previous interface starts with a page in English; other languages can be accessed through a dropdown menu. In designing the new interface, your teammate Nico notes that they dislike how English is the default language. You think that adding a page for “select language” might be an unnecessary barrier for most users.

What skills this tool can provide for handling the situation:

- **Develop reflective practices:** Since you and your team have reflected on your own backgrounds, you’re not surprised to find out that others may face different barriers than you do. This allows you to address the issue rather than get defensive about your own experience.
- **Practice democratic discourse:** By establishing and following ground rules for democratic discourse, Nico was able to share their thoughts with the group, and you followed up by asking others to contribute their own experiences to the conversation.
- **Build discussions of equity into the product development process:** Nico voiced their opinion because you had set aside time to talk about equity issues. Because you’ve made it a regular practice within your group, your team members feel comfortable talking about these difficult topics and bringing them up early in the process.

Guiding Principles

Focus on resolving harmful¹ impacts. “I didn’t mean it that way! It was a compliment!” Throughout difficult conversations, it’s crucial to remember that people can have good intentions, but nevertheless cause negative impacts. Focusing on *impact* over *intent* helps to validate the experiences of people who are harmed, while also inviting the person who has done harm to change their behaviors and move forward with the rest of the team rather than withdrawing.

- Make known the importance of negative impacts: “I assume that it wasn’t your *intent*

to use zip codes as a proxy for race, but let's look at how this is inadvertently *impacting* Black people — and also exposing our company to risk.”

Listen to learn. Start from a place of curiosity where you are open to hearing others' perspectives, even when they are different from your own, and foster the same principles among your team members. Seek out a diversity of perspectives and remember that we may each have different experiences as individuals and members of different communities. Consider a multitude of data, including not only quantifiable data, but also qualitative perspectives such as lived experiences and emotions. While listening to others, practice active listening skills ([outlined by the Greater Good Science Center](#)):

- Paraphrase what others have said to make sure you understand their message: “What I hear is...” / “It sounds like...” / “If I’m understanding you correctly, you’re saying...”
- Ask clarifying questions: “When you said...did you mean...?” / “Can you explain a bit more about what you meant by...?”
- Empathize with others' reactions, even if you don't feel the same way: “I get the sense that you're upset...” / “I can understand why this has caused you to feel frustrated...”

Stick with race. Because talking about race can be uncomfortable, people may try to shift the conversation to issues they may be more comfortable with, such as gender or socio-economic status. While issues related to equity in these areas are also important, so are issues of race. Be precise and stick with race — or intersections between race and other categories — during conversations about race. For example, imagine that a White woman speaks up during a conversation about anti-blackness to note that women also face barriers. While marginalization of women is an important issue to address, in this situation it might be serving to shift the conversation from anti-blackness (which is outside of some people's conversational comfort zone) to gender (which is a more comfortable topic for some). In this case, we want to make sure that the conversation about race isn't avoided. You might redirect the conversation by saying:

- “I agree that gender is another important factor. Can you help me understand why gender is standing out to you in a different way from race? Are there ways in which the effects of gender and race intersect or are distinct in this situation?”
- “All of these issues of inequity are important, so let's make sure we address them all. Right now, I'd like us to continue this discussion of race.”

Practice self-care. Addressing racial inequities is difficult work that can require heavy emotional labor. Acknowledging when you need to step away and take time for yourself is an important part of the process. This does not mean that issues should be left unresolved, but not all issues need to be addressed immediately. Be strategic about how and when you have conversations about tough topics. Think about what medium is best for a particular dialogue. Do you want a written record to refer back to later? Is this a conversation that's best had privately and face-to-face so that participants feel less threatened? Discuss with participants what they feel comfortable with ahead of time if possible. Remember, difficult issues are unlikely to be fully solved with a short conversation, but will require consistent thought over time. Do what you can to make sure that you can remain engaged with the topic over the long haul.

Good practices

As a team leader, it is important to foster a safe and communicative environment in which team members proactively think about issues related to racial equity and are amenable to addressing issues of inequity whenever they arise throughout the process of product development. Below,

we present (1) general practices for creating this type of environment, (2) preemptive practices to mitigate issues related to race arising in product development, and (3) practices to acknowledge and respond to issues related to race that arise in product development and use.

1. General practices

Develop reflective practices.

As a leader, reflect on your own racial background, privileges, and barriers you have faced. Understanding and coming to terms with your own background will help you to stay grounded while facilitating difficult discussions. Promote similar reflective practices for other team members, as they too will benefit from self-awareness during difficult discussions.

Ask yourself and your teammates to reflect and journal about these questions:

- What is my racial background? What privileges have I faced given this background? What barriers have I faced given this background? ²
- How might my various identities (racial, gendered, social, etc.) intersect and impact the privileges/barriers I encounter?
- How can our product actively work to break down the barriers we've identified related to race?
- What advantages and barriers do I have to promoting equity within my team? Within my discipline? How does my role affect the agency that I have?
- When have I been resistant to changing my behavior (especially when that behavior has negatively impacted others)? Why have I been resistant to making that change?

Highlight a diversity of perspectives and voices.

As a leader, think about which voices and perspectives you lift up. Strive to represent perspectives — and particularly racial perspectives — equitably. This includes voices of individuals with multiple, intersecting identities, such as Black women. Remember that no social group

is a monolith, but rather is composed of individuals with unique experiences. To help promote a greater diversity of perspectives, you could:

- Reflect on who is speaking up in team meetings and invite people who don't speak up regularly to share their opinions.
- If some people are not speaking up regularly, have a conversation with them about why and if there are things you could do as a facilitator to make team meetings a more comfortable space for them to share their thoughts. Recognize that it's also possible that some people will not be able to speak up safely and comfortably until there has been a broader shift towards a more inclusive climate.
- Build & support a culture of representation, equity, and inclusion. One person cannot speak for an entire group, as individuals have unique experiences. Seek multiple perspectives, including perspectives from people with intersectional identities.
- Leverage existing resources that have been compiled by diverse groups to address issues that come up. Check out resources like:
 - The [racial equity resource guide](#) compiled by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation which provides lists of organizations, guides & workshops, and resources to advance racial equity
 - [This list](#) of videos and podcasts on race, diversity, equity, and inclusion from UC Berkeley or [this Race Inclusion Initiative Library](#) from the Berkeley Haas School of Business
 - Lists of recommending reading that highlight a diversity of experiences, such as Seattle Public Library's [Celebrate Diversity reading list](#).

2. Preemptive practices to mitigate issues related to race in product development

Practice democratic discourse.

During discussions of race and racial inequity, allow everyone to voice their opinions, and affirm that you have heard and appreciate what they have shared. Guide the conversation so that it stays centered on race, but allow all participants to speak and be open to a wide variety of reactions. It can be helpful to:

- Work together to set ground rules at the start of the session. Have team members agree to listen to one another and to share the floor. Decide who will manage the conversation (in many cases, this will be the project manager). This person will help make sure everyone has a chance to talk, and can refer people to the ground rules if not everyone is being given a chance to speak. These guidelines can be tailored to your group and should honor the communicative practices of all group members.
- State your appreciation of what each team member has the courage to say. Even if the contribution is controversial or off-topic, engaging in these conversations is difficult, and thanking people for taking the risk of speaking up can encourage participation and engagement.
- Keep in mind that language constantly changes and evolves. Stay open to changing the words or phrases you use to talk about things as new information comes up in the conversation. If you learn that a term has a problematic history, for example, adopt a new one.
- Use probing questions and “I” statements to keep the conversation on topic. For example, if someone shares a comment that is hurtful, you could ask, “I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying by that. Can you say more about what you meant? Can you clarify that for me?” You can also try grounding your reaction in your personal experiences by using “I” statements: “I have a different perspective... / For me, this feels... / I don’t think you meant it this way, but I feel hurt by that statement because...”

Build discussions of equity into the product and practice development process.

To address equity issues proactively, set aside time throughout the process to address equity issues head-on as a team. Schedule time for these discussions regularly and in advance so that team members are aware of when the conversations will take place and can prepare.

- Have a conversation with your team at the beginning of a new project to talk about equity issues. Use this as an opportunity to establish team ground rules for democratic discourse that you can rely on throughout the project, and to brainstorm issues that should regularly be kept in mind. Examine and update existing guidelines (such as conventions for code) to include specific guidelines about using language that promotes racial equity and inclusion. You can consult our guide ([Responsible Language Guide for AI & ML](#)) and [terminology guide](#) for specific suggestions about language to use.
- Schedule time (20-30 minutes) into regular check-in meetings to discuss equity issues. At each meeting, ask teammates to reflect individually for 2-3 minutes on questions like, “How might changes and developments we’ve made in the past week affect users differently depending on their race? If I don’t know what effects might arise, how could I find out?” After reflecting, ask team members to share their thoughts with the group and get feedback on how to move forward.
- Build longer meetings into your quarterly workflow to address equity issues. These meetings can go more in-depth, building on issues raised during weekly check-in meetings and provide time and space to develop strategies to ameliorate inequities.
- Take advantage of resources available to you and your team. Identify resources — including teams at your organization whose job it may be to assist in advancing equity — that can help you achieve greater equity with your product. Remember that you don’t have to do this work alone!

Promote and model direct discussion of race.

Encourage team members to speak precisely when racial issues arise rather than sidetracking to other issues that might feel less difficult to discuss. Use precise language — if an issue is related to anti-Black racism, for example, use Black and White to discuss the issue rather than using coded language (such as “urban” and “suburban”) that could shift the focus away from race. Acknowledge that it is difficult and brave for people to speak up on these difficult topics, but keep the conversation focused on the core issue at hand:

- Acknowledge all participants’ comments, but keep the conversation focused. For example, you might say: “I’m glad you noticed negative feedback from our customers based on their zip code. Let’s look at the demographic data in detail here. I wonder if the underlying issue is truly related to geography, or if race could be a factor. Could we look in more detail at their feedback?”
- Point out imprecise language and suggest alternatives. For example, if a colleague describes how “underrepresented minorities” have provided different feedback from “everyone else”, invite them to talk about the data in a more precise way that could help reveal interesting patterns: “Thanks for pointing out this data. Can we be more specific about which groups we are talking about? Which minoritized groups do you think have similar feedback? Is this in contrast with White respondents?”

3. Practices to acknowledge and respond to issues related to race in product development or use

Address the issue when it arises.

Although it can be difficult, it is important to address each issue that arises, whether it be differences in users’ experiences by race or biases that crop up in a product. Those involved might need time to think about it before pursuing a productive conversation. However, it is important to return to the topic and talk about it directly rather than leave it unaddressed.

Depending on the situation, you might want to:

- Speak with each team member involved to understand their perspective. Then, convene a meeting where everyone can talk about how they were affected and what they need to move forward together.
- Convene a team meeting to discuss what happened. Present the problem or issue and analyze how processes, design, and behavior might be changed in the future. Focus on identifying the root of the issue: where was bias introduced into the product? What can be done to remedy this issue? For example, if zip codes were learned as a proxy for race in a product: how did this happen, how were customers/users impacted, and what can be changed to fix it?

Focus on addressing harmful impacts.

It is common for people who have made choices resulting in a negative impact to try to focus the conversation instead on their positive intent. Acknowledge the positive intent while keeping the conversation centered on impact. Systemic racism persists in part because of this tendency to allow intent to outweigh impact. No matter the intention behind a choice, negative impacts on marginalized individuals and groups are no less real and no less important to resolve.

- Acknowledge harmful impact: “I’m sorry. I see how my statement/product/process had that impact. Thank you for sharing that with me.”
- Respect what has been shared with you: “Thank you for telling me that. I see that my statement/product/process has had that impact.”
- If participants push back against making changes, invite them to think about how equity will be good for your company and product overall. Encourage them to read our guide ([Responsible Language Guide for AI & ML](#)) and as a facilitator, help to steer the conversation towards greater equity. For example, if a participant makes a comment like:

- "I understand how you are feeling, but it's important for us to maintain positivity rather than focus on problems." You could respond, "Actually, I think it's really important for us to focus on this issue. I think resolving it can help us feel positive in a sustainable way."
- "You often bring problems instead of solutions." You could respond, "I think it's really important for us to identify all of the problems that might be out there so that we can address them and leverage our power to make a strong, equitable product."
- "Making this product more accessible is important, but I don't want to give up a feature that brings us revenue." You could respond, "I wonder if over time, making this more equitable will have a positive impact on revenue. There's some [research](#) suggesting that equity is a financially smart investment in the long run."
- "Yaremi is the only one on the team who has an issue with this. It's too disruptive to make the change just for one person." You could respond, "Actually, I think we should take everyone's concerns into account. One of the reasons that we brought Yaremi onto the team was to get her insights, so let's think more deeply about her suggestions."

Recognize your power to make change.

While it may be uncomfortable to admit that a product or process has had a negative impact, it is crucial to recognize that you likely have the power to right the wrong. Don't assume that the issue will go unnoticed or the impact will be insignificant. Instead, be courageous in raising the issue and addressing it directly.

- When issues are discovered, take it as an opportunity to be a leader in achieving equity. Reward team members who identify issues and work to resolve them.
- Follow up on changes that you make to address equity issues. Has the problem been resolved? What is the impact of making the product more equitable?

Additional Notes

This guide is focused on having tough conversations about race during product development. However, it is important to emphasize that product teams should center equity from the beginning through equity centered research and design, even before beginning project development.

Here are some basic tips to get started:

- Be sure to gather input from a diverse group of stakeholders and ensure that discussions of the equity impacts of your product or process include opinions from a diversity of perspectives.
- While building a diverse team is certainly important, also make sure that any pilot testing involves a diverse set of participants representative of the various target or potential end users or customers. Don't automatically rely on the majority opinion, as it may hide important issues affecting minoritized groups.
- In addition to searching for overall trends among pilot testing participants, push to disaggregate by social categories, including race, when possible. If disparities emerge, figure out a strategy to address the issue.
- When presenting qualitative data, examine whose voices are represented, and seek to have an equitable sample.
- Build and support a diverse team. If you already have a team and notice that there are gaps in which demographics are represented, seek out additional collaborators who can join on the project and make sure their voices are listened to during product development. In order to prevent overburdening of individuals from minoritized groups, always seek out information that is already available through [resources](#) like publications and podcasts rather than asking for that work to be replicated.
- See EGAL's [Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Checklist](#) for more specific organizational actions and tips.

Interested in learning more?

This document was informed by our guide, [Responsible Language Guide for AI & ML](#), and the following guides for having difficult conversations:

- Singleton, Glenn E. (2015). *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.
- Sue, Derald Wing. (2015). *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This guide was developed by Julia Nee, Genevieve Smith, Ishita Rustagi, and Alicia Sheares with the Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership (EGAL) at the UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business. It benefited from invaluable feedback and contributions from practitioners at leading tech companies and in academia, including Clementine Collett, Antoni Lewa, Dr. Kellie McElhaney, and Dominique Wimmer. We respectfully acknowledge that this work has been developed at UC Berkeley, which sits on unceded Ohlone land.

Endnotes

- 1 In this document, we consider harm as a broad term, which includes actions that cause individuals to feel overtly harmed as well as actions (such as microaggressions) that cause feelings of discomfort or uneasiness because of an individual's membership in a minoritized group.
- 2 Note that it is important to focus not only on barriers we have faced, but privileges we have. It can be easy to avoid acknowledging privilege in favor of focusing on barriers, but confronting privilege is a key aspect of self-reflection.