



A conversation about unlearning racism, healing and the goal of becoming more human

Slightly edited transcription of an online conversation on April 5, 2022 on the occasion of the learning room against racism at the Bern University of Applied Sciences

Tzegha Kibrom
Stefanie Duttweiler
April 2022

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“Organizing a learning process means bringing experiences into the crisis” (Frigga Haug 1981, p. 73). In order to allow such processes at all, "relationships of recognition" (Stojanov 2013, p. 57) are needed, i.e. relationships that are characterized by empathy, respect and appreciation (cf. *ibid.*). Thank you, dear colleagues, that a space has opened up here that makes this possible.

The «Unlearning room against racism» is part of the project «Empowerment and unlearning of racism at the Bern University of Applied Sciences». The "Verlernraum" took place once a month between October 2021 and May 2022 with 12 lecturers from the Department of Social Work at BFH.

<https://www.bfh.ch/en/research/reference-projects/empowerment-and-learning-from-racism/>

We would like to thank swissuniversities and the BFH Equal Opportunities for the financial support within the framework of the funding line "P-7 Diversity, Inclusion and Equal Opportunities in University Development (2021-2024)".

What does unlearning actually mean?

SD: We are very pleased that you are accompanying our learning room¹ - i.e. the process of learning and unlearning racism and anti-racism for us teachers at the Bern University of Applied Sciences. You said that you like the term unlearning space so much. What were your associations when you heard the term for the first time?

TK: I found the term unlearning space inspiring, quite fresh, because it opens up the space more. This term makes it clear that we are not born racist or discriminatory, but that we learn it without wanting it; that racist ideas and behavior increase from an early age and become part of our conditioning. And the term unlearning space indicates that although we have learned something, there is still hope that we can unlearn it again. I liked that and I still like it.

SD: We noticed that this term also inspires us. And at the same time it triggers stress, since some colleagues have the impression: This is an educational program in which you can actually unlearn something within a number of sessions and in which you can't reach the learning goal either. It surprised me that this terminology triggers stress. Have you experienced this more often in your work?

TK: Well, what comes to mind is that racism and dealing with it *generally* triggers a lot of stress. Especially if you belong to the more privileged group when it comes to racism. And if there is also this requirement of having to give up something completely by a certain point in time, then it is understandable that quite a lot of pressure is built up. But what was important to me from the start was to make it clear that these are structures that have grown over centuries and that any claim to being able to unlearn or discard them in a short time is unrealistic and counterproductive. But that it is primarily about understanding *what* you have learned with regard to racism. So to understand at all what racism is and where its origins are and how much racism is in us.

What is the goal of the unlearning room?

SD: Is that also the goal that you set for our company?

TK: Yes – but also beyond that. That is one thing: to understand where does racism come from, what is racism, that it is not something external, but a part of us. In fact, a part of *every* person. It's difficult to say that in itself - that it's a part *of all of us*, it's inside us. And first of all, to understand, feel and endure it as well as possible. Because I believe that in order to be able to let go of something, you first have to understand what you are attached to, what you are holding on to. Because only what you are aware of can no longer dominate and control you. That is certainly one of the goals to become aware of. But not the only one.

¹The term "unlearning space" combines thoughts on "unlearning" and "intermediate spaces", which I was able to get to know through the work of <https://verlernen.trafo-k.at>. The idea of formulating "unlearning" as a goal of educational practice goes back to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1996, 4) "unlearning one's privilege as one's loss" (the unlearning of privileges that we should see as a loss), which they frame of their disputes about epistemic violence. "Unlearning requires", Castro Varela continues this thought, "active, critical thinking and acting, which is willing to take the risk of questioning one's own position" (Castro Varela 2017) and in doing so the self-evidence of one's own interpretation and to reflect on contexts of experience and one's own privileges. "It's about irritation, which can be pleasurable, but also challenging and painful." (Garnitschnig 2019, 268). The key here is to allow the insecurity that is not hastily covered up by new certainties.

SD: I recently read an essay by Annita Kalpaka again, in which she formulated her difficulties with a diffuse sensitization with regard to racism work.² That appealed to me because that's exactly what I'm experiencing. Through the unlearning room, the process that has been going on for a few months, I actually feel exactly as she describes it: that I have the feeling that I feel very strongly sensitized and somehow I don't really know in what respect. There is more of an opening, a sensitization towards the diffuse. I experience it positively - but I can't say exactly what and how, because a space for looking opens up that I didn't have before in this openness, in this width. This is an emotional deepening. But I can't really say what the new feeling is that we're getting.

TK: Hmm – well, first of all I want to say that theoretically you can find out a lot about racism, there are now many publications and, thank God, it is becoming more and more of an issue. In the course of my work, however, I came to the point that it was not enough to fill my head with even more knowledge. We tend to be programmed in our society to seek knowledge. Learning usually means acquiring knowledge and the more knowledge I have, the more I have learned. But that doesn't change much in my opinion.

As far as our unlearning space is concerned, this is where the space opens up. You just showed it with your hands: something is opening up. And actually it's like this: with racism and with unpleasant topics in general, something *happens*. We feel tight - something is getting tighter and we can feel it in the body as something closes. Because we usually don't want to look at *or feel uncomfortable things*. I would say that's a normal human impulse. But this closure prevents exactly what we actually want: to *really* look at this topic, *really*. First and foremost, *us*, our shadow, our racist shadow. Normally this is not possible either. There are almost no places where this is possible. Where a space is opened in such a way that we can really look at these racist mechanisms and parts.

Ultimately, it's about making yourself vulnerable. This should be made possible in the learning room. Especially in relation to the topic of discrimination and racism, where injuries are involved - in every respect.

About the feeling of being speechless, feeling and speaking in an anti-clichéd manner

SD: When you first said what you said, our feeling of cramping and speechlessness, the language difficulties, which was so predominant at the beginning, came to mind. Everyone struggled a lot with what to say. And not so much: Oh dear, then the language police are there, but: How can you actually express what you think and what you feel? I find it so admirable that you instruct us to speak anti-platitudes and we now try to choose our words well without falling into standardizations. But that also makes this great emptiness clear, because you're not at all used to talking about it: how are you involved yourself, what feelings and images do you have in your head?

TK: Back to the speechlessness or the empty phrases: I think that's such an important point. Because I'm also familiar with this in other contexts - especially when people want to behave particularly well or correctly and don't want to say the wrong thing. This also happens in everyday encounters: What may I ask? How can I say it? How can I best hide that I don't know how to say this? Actually, it's always more and more cramping and this intricacy that makes a human encounter almost impossible. I've experienced this so many times, even in my private space. Suddenly in the middle of a sentence: uh, dark-skinned?, uh, how do I say that now? how may I describe you? That's actually pretty bad! So I don't want to judge the insecurity, I understand where it comes from. I just want to describe what it creates - a distance, walls and a chasm. A chasm that

² I am referring to the essay by Annita Kalpaka (2003). Kalpaka takes a critical look at anti-racism workshops, which primarily contribute to raising awareness and changing attitudes, thus personalizing racism. On the other hand, she advocates first getting on the track of structural discrimination in concrete, self-experienced practical situations and analyzing one's own handling of it.

not only makes uncertainty clear, but also creates it, allows it to grow. And that's the first thing that comes up: yes, there is uncertainty here, there is speechlessness. That we allow ourselves to perceive that.

SD: I noticed with us and with myself: this speechlessness is also extremely productive, because then you have to find new words and really think: Who are you? Who am I? What are we doing here, what kind of situation is this?

TK: Exactly! The uncertainty itself is not actually the problem, but rather the attempt to avoid it. Ultimately, that's it. The feelings of insecurity, ignorance, speechlessness are not the difficulty. Nor are they what create the divide and make the encounter difficult. It's that we whitewash these feelings; that we keep trying to sweep these feelings under the rug; that we try to quickly paste a correct word about it and then think we're off the hook. But that doesn't build a bridge, it does exactly the opposite.

SD: I think that's a good connection to what you mentioned earlier about vulnerability. I see a similar mechanism at work there: actually not being able or not wanting to look at it. That's an incredibly embarrassing and scary feeling when you hurt someone - and when one gets hurt even more. But to face the fact that in our racist society this is in interactions, in being together - I see that as a very big challenge.

TK: Yes - and also addressing the elephant in the room. Just say it out loud and make it possible to experience what is in the room. I remember our first session: A black woman who is the speaker at the front and everyone else is white. How much does that alone do! And then there is the issue of racism. Just what is already there! Most of the time we ignore it instead of stopping for a moment and noticing and feeling it.

SD: I remember now. We also talked about whether we see your blackness at all or whether we overlook it. That maybe also an over-feeling is there out of the desire to bridge it. But as you say - there is an elephant in the room that is just *there*. Looking away doesn't help.

TK: Yes! I would say that is a main approach of my work. First of all: slow down. Because it is only when it is slow enough that we begin to perceive. And then start with myself. I walk into the room and it feels weird to me too. There is this elephant in the room - for me too! And I notice that when I address that, it starts to relax. When the obvious is addressed.

Of wounds and the longing for healing

And so we have come closer - or are still there - and it is then possible to perceive and address things that are actually cruel. Because it's about dehumanization. Yes - and that is where - to some extent - healing can begin to take place. I know - I'm taking it a long way when I bring in the word healing so quickly. But that's one of my main goals, if not *the* main goal: that it's about healing.³

SD: So for me the term is actually a bit difficult, coming from the political, feminist movement. And at the same time, the more you insist on this term, I notice: that's what it's really about, that's what I have to deal with. The term falls on ambivalent ground for me. There is a great longing for healing - or to put it even more dramatically: for salvation. That what divides is healed, dissolved. For me, too, this is linked to the hope that this is actually somehow possible. And at the same time I have the feeling: this is a utopia that is so far away - it almost makes me dizzy when I hear that. So I think it would be interesting if you would say a few more words about how you envision this process.

TK: Of course I thought a lot about healing. What do I mean? First of all, I'll say it flatly: people who study psychology are often concerned with understanding themselves. I asked *myself* what is this so-called anti-racism work about for me? Be it in the support of organizations or organizational development. What am I really about? Ultimately, my drive is the longing for healing. I want to become whole *myself*. And when I talk about healing - I know that can quickly be dismissed as esotericism - I'm talking about very specific things on different levels. By that I also mean society. When healing is needed, there is also an injury, a wound. The wound is so obvious! I see them in me, I see them in society, I see them in universities. There really isn't an area where I don't see them. And a wound cries out to be healed. Naturally! That's actually logical.

To start with: wounds are always about healing. The body does this automatically: it heals itself, it seeks healing. And the other thing: we often try to dismiss it quickly and initially think we want to fight! It's about struggles, about human rights, about activism. It's totally understandable! But what I see here is that when we focus so much on the fights, we don't really want to look at the wound. Put a sticking plaster or a good bandage on it. But the wound has to heal anyway! And by that I also mean very specific approaches: such as at the university, that there are not only white lecturers or a different curriculum. That's what it's all about - of course!

But we long for nothing more than real human encounters. In other words, what our everyday life consists of - including our professional everyday life, even at a university. It's about us wanting to connect. The question then is: what is preventing us from connecting? What is that? And here we come again to the point of asking: What actually separates us? So we look at that. That's the first point to look at: Here's a wound that wants to heal. And that alone is a big step. And contrary to the current activism. That seems like a taboo.

SD: That makes perfect sense to me! Feeling the wound, seeing it, maybe even measuring it. And - to stay with the metaphor - a wound can heal badly, it can fester, it can ulcerate, and then it can have dramatic consequences. You can see that over the last few centuries the possibility of healing has been denied.

TK: Yes! And to continue what pulls me: that it is also in the collective, so being able to see the changes in groups or organizations bit by bit.

³The metaphor of the "healing" of the racist "wound" was made productive by bell hooks (2001, 2003), among others. In addition to love, spirituality and political, collective action, education, according to hooks, can also have something to do with healing, with "empowerment, liberation, transcendence, renewal of life" (2003, 43).

But there is also a very big desire in me for my personal healing of the dehumanization that I and my ancestors have experienced. Across generations and generations. This is what I long for; I have the feeling that something in me is crying out to finally be able to heal. This is what I perceive when I allow myself to perceive. Yes - (pause)

The *white* group as a place of healing?

SD: That touches me very much. And there comes a question mark: what kind of work are you doing with us as a *white* group? Is this the place of healing?

TK: Yes – it's good that you're asking the question at this point. Yes - that 's it! Because it's about *all of us* healing. It's not just about healing us black people, people of color, but the wound is everywhere. It shows up differently, the depth is different, the texture of the wound is different. But it is there - everywhere. And ultimately we all cry out for healing. So I assume so. And I think it's possible in all spaces: whether it's an all-white space, or a space with white people and people of color, or just people of color. The way the healing - if we want to stick with this term - takes place is of course different. But it's really nice to experience and feel when this desire can come to the surface, that we actually all want to connect - because we humans are social beings. We *all* long for human contact. And that's in every group. Of course - it's challenging because - as I said - the nature of the wounds is different. But that's why I see it as an experiment. And as a speaker, I give an advance if I show my vulnerability and give this into the room. Not in an accusatory way, but in a way that makes me feel that I also want this encounter. This can open something up. Just like it was in our group.

SD: It's an incredible gift to us that you put your own vulnerability in this space. The vulnerability drives the elephant away, it is then no longer effective, because we can look at things differently. What I find so interesting is that over time we have been confronted with our own hurts and with our own experiences of discrimination. I actually didn't expect that at all - even if in retrospect it's not that surprising. Because we all have experiences of discrimination that are remembered. These are not spaces that are free from discrimination. It goes on here, too, that one feels discriminated against as a woman, as a non-white person, as a foreigner. These are things that are actualized in concrete spaces. And yet I notice how much that touches me, how much we are confronted with our own hurts. Because actually we have never exchanged it with others. And it strikes me as strange that the unlearning space is now a space where we remember our experiences of sexist discrimination, because that's not really what it's about. This irritates me.

TK: I understand very well what you're saying. But I think it's important to make a clear distinction between what's happening in this space and what isn't. I know that as soon as it comes to racism, people quickly get distracted: But I also have...! And I felt like this and like that... ! And it's not easy for me... ! But that's not how I experience it at all in this group and if it were to happen I would intervene. It's *not* about the distraction, but the speed was taken out from the beginning and so a basis was really created where it's about feeling bit by bit what leaves you speechless. To stay there. That works pretty well in our group - I think. And that your own experiences of discrimination then come to the surface more and more, that makes total sense! Anything else would make no sense! What is important to see - as you say - there are actually few spaces where an encounter with one's own vulnerability is made possible. We are constantly protecting ourselves, putting on masks. I wish there was much more, much much more! Also because I believe that only if I can really perceive my *own* vulnerability I can start to perceive that of others.

Vulner-ability

SD: The English term vulner-ability⁴ – the ability to be vulnerable.⁵ I have the impression that you awakened that in us, I found that very exciting. Because I actually believe what you say: that there is such a step forward in becoming human – through vulnerability.

What makes me uncomfortable, or what I would like to deal with, is that there are of course completely different types of experiences of discrimination. This means that just because I have experienced sexist discrimination, I don't have to imagine that I understand what it means to be discriminated against because of the color of my skin. And yet I feel like there's a resemblance in the intense sense of hurt. But the reason is quite different. That's when I realize that I find it challenging - emotionally and cognitively.

TK: Yes, yes, I can hear that. However, I do not have the impression that a leveling is happening. It's that we start to feel: ah – that's dehumanization, ah, that's what happens with dehumanization, that's what it feels like! That sounds familiar to me, I've experienced it too! Dehumanization in- and as the situation. So I think we all actually experienced that. And we need to be able to build on our own experiences in order to relate to the experiences of others. And I believe that the 'white straight man' has also had experiences where he has been dehumanized. That might be hard to endure, to say and feel exactly that. And he too must build on these experiences in the same way. And you have to allow yourself to think about that too.

SD: Yes, the situation is complicated. You have to allow yourself to feel the hurt, and it's not so easy to allow others to feel it either. Especially when you bring the 'straight white man' into play. I realize that saying goodbye to your own images is a challenge. That's what I find so exciting about our process: this struggle with the perception of one's own vulnerability - and can I - and do I want to also see this in the others.

TK: That's a challenge! But I believe that we cannot get around this debate, to see this ambivalence. On the one hand, to become aware of how strong your own privileges are. And at the same time to perceive this vulnerability. Seeing and feeling this having been hurt, this having been dehumanized and building on it – and at the same time seeing these privileges. I don't think we can get past that. And I don't think that we'll really get any further with certain, clear labels.

Although I've noticed in my work that some people - and these are actually mostly white, straight men - still have difficulties opening up emotionally about racism and the hurts that happen to black people or people of color. Over time, however, I also realized that it is precisely *about* making this possible again. That empathy is only possible through one's *own* vulnerability. By perceiving yourself and allowing yourself. And also be allowed to feel how great this price is, which is connected with the privileges. How much it ultimately cuts one off from their own humanity. That alone is a great pain to feel - and in return makes a lot possible.

SD: We are a department of social work, and empathy is one of Carl Rogers' three counseling principles. That's what the students are taught and we try to live by it. But when I listen to you, it becomes clear to me again: empathy is so infinitely much more than a technique or an attitude, it is extremely demanding, painful work -

⁴ I saw this way of writing in Boris Nikitin: “But through this act of sharing, vulnerability also undergoes a revaluation. It suddenly turns from a supposed deficiency into an ability: Vulner ability! The ability to be vulnerable, attackable, and mortal. https://www.borisnikitin.ch/de/projects/Macht_und_Verwundbar

⁵ Emilia Roig (2021) is also currently talking about the connection between vulnerability and the hope of healing, through an opening to more humanity.

TK: Yes!

SD: .. to allow yourself to have that feeling too. And not just simply to understand the feeling of the other. But - when it comes to these big issues - it actually means becoming a completely different person yourself - (long pause) And that's incredibly scary! Letting go of the privileges - even if you don't know exactly what they are like... what exactly the price is. I'm getting sweaty hands just talking! (Pause)

How would I be if I could see, be allowed to see and feel all of this?

Again to unlearn: That alone creates a great deal of uncertainty: what would I be like if I saw, was allowed to see, and felt all of this?

TK: Yeah – who would I be? So my assumption is: more human. Actually happier.

SD: That would be a great final word!

TK: (laughs)

SD: But I still have to say something – I must have the last word (laughs). That's a wonderful goal: to become more human. You have to spend your whole life thinking about what that means. And at the same time one only becomes more human with the other and together with the other. And that's why I thank you from the bottom of my heart for accompanying us. In this space of unlearning, with this humanity, which you also - I'm saying it quite emotionally - exemplify to a certain extent for us. (long pause) I hope it rubs off.

TC: Thank you! I am also very grateful. I'm grateful and I would actually put it like that, to be a bit healed. To be able to become a healer - and to experience it. As you say: Becoming human is only possible in relation to human beings.

SD: Maybe we'll just leave it at that. (Pause) I had written down the last question: What would you like to say in parting?

TK: (long pause) Well, now specifically I would say: continue and carry out exactly what we do in the room in everyday life: perceive yourself, slow down and observe yourself. By that I don't just mean to think about it, but by that I really mean: to feel. What happens when I read the news and see where dehumanization is happening? Or when I see a film or an advertisement – actually in all of these areas. Or in private – what happens in these human encounters? What is happening in me, in my body? And what do I actually long for, if I'm honest with myself? Yes - that's what I practice.

SD: Thank you again for allowing us to practice this with you, and thank you very much for the conversation!

TK: Thank you for the conversation too!

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