More Than Just Talk: The Use of Racial Dialogues to Combat Racism

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More Than Just Talk:
The Use of Racial Dialogues
to Combat Racism

Joshua Miller
Susan Donner

ABSTRACT. This article describes the use of structured, public conversations about race and racism, known as racial dialogues, as a means of responding to racism. The importance of understanding racial identity development and the dynamics of intergroup conflict when conducting racial dialogues is considered. Different models of racial dialogues are reviewed. The authors sponsored a racial dialogue at a school of social work that was tape-recorded and transcribed. Participants completed questionnaires. An analysis of the dialogue is presented and recommendations about the future use of racial dialogues are offered. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>]*

KEYWORDS. Racism, racial dialogue, racial identity, intergroup conflict, public conversations

I say hi to everybody, touch everybody, but that is normal. I don't even see what color you are when I do that. But when a white student comes up to me in the cafeteria, where I am sitting,

minding my own business, and a white student wants to talk about her burning issues of race, that is another level for me and I can't do that if I'm not in a good space . . . it is hard when I get angry and voice it: I am getting angry with the people who I love and kiss. That is a horrible feeling for me.

–Latina Participant in Racial Dialogue

I need to check my own internalized oppression and voice it. I need the opportunity to talk about how I feel and how offended I am by constant references to [white] people's privilege and safety that I don't ever have the safety to experience. I need to allow myself to be angry.

–African-American Woman Participant in Racial Dialogue

It's the longest process you are going to go through probably in your life, if you are really committed to it. It is unlearning something so codified in the culture. It is both interrupting a racist joke and making a racist joke and being interrupted and hearing that; somebody having the courage to say to me, 'you're screwing up.'

–White Woman Participant in Racial Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the use of racial dialogues: structured, public conversations about race and racism. As background, the article will consider how people form social identities, particularly racial identities, identify with social groups and how group conflict is one manifestation of racism in the United States. After considering different models of racial dialogues, the article describes and analyzes a racial dialogue sponsored by the authors at a school of social work, from which the opening quotes came. We will conclude with recommendations about the use of racial dialogues by social workers as a means of challenging oppression and working for social justice.

Racism in the United States is ubiquitous, complex and pernicious, an undeniable part of our past and a contested reality of today. It strongly determines where we live, our friends and neighbors, access to education, jobs and resources, and overall life chances and opportu-

nities. There are different views of what constitutes racism. Although there is variation within groups, whites often conceive of racism as individual acts of prejudice or egregious and blatant attacks or denial of rights, while people of color often view racism as a pervasive part of our social fabric, woven into culture, institutions, social structures and relationships, and both the collective and individual psyches of our nation (Akamatsu, 1998; Blauner, 1994; Shipler, 1997). In this paper, racism is defined as: The systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups who have less political, social, and economic power in the United States (African Americans, Latinos/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans–collectively referred to as people of color) by members of a privileged racial group (whites/Caucasians/ European descended) who have relatively more social power. This subordination is supported by actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and institutional structures and practices of society (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, & Love, 1997) and is based on assumptions of natural, invariant, biologically or culturally determined racial categories (Winant, 1998).

Underlying this definition are two assumptions. The first is that the notion of race as a social construction, not a biologically determined category. As the American Anthropological Association (AAA) concluded:

> Historical research has shown that the idea of race has always carried more meanings than mere physical differences: indeed physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them. Today scholars in many fields argue that race as it is understood in the USA was a social mechanism invented during the 18th Century to refer to those populations brought together in Colonial America: the English and other European settlers, the conquered Indian peoples and those people of Africa brought to provide slave labor. (AAA statement on race, 1999: 712)

Race has always been a historical and legal creation, a category that is a repository of symbols, language and meanings that shift and mutate (Omi & Winant, 1994). The rights, privileges and burdens of being a member of this category of people have changed significantly over time. The second assumption is that although race is a social construction, racism is a concrete reality. Whether examining the dif-

ferential application of justice, unequal wealth and income, group differences in health and life expectancy, representation in the political system, access to high status jobs and industries, whites have a consistent advantage over other racial/ethnic groups (Council on Economic Advisors, 1998).

Given the dualistic nature of racism, a two-track approach is also called for when challenging it. Combating racism requires both challenging the social hierarchies and systems of privilege that sustain it while also challenging the attitudes and beliefs that support this system and which are derived from it. Racial dialogues, the focus of this paper, directly respond to individual and group racism but hopefully also lead to challenges against institutional racism. Social workers, obligated to contest racism by their code of ethics, are well suited to confront all levels and manifestations of racism by virtue of the emphasis on the person in their environment.

When writing about racism it is important to place one's self racially. Both authors are white although the work described in this article has been with a multi-racial coalition.

RACIAL DIALOGUES

Dialogues about race and racism offer individuals an opportunity to explore who they are in relation to others while also affording them the opportunity to ponder the meanings of their own and others' social identity and group membership. Racial dialogues are essentially structured conversations that encourage expressing one's self and listening to others talk about race and racism. It is hoped that by having direct, open, and honest contact there will be improved understanding and cooperation between groups (Bargal & Bar, 1994; Fisher, 1990; Lawson, Koman, & Rose, 1998; McCoy & Sherman, 1994; Norman, 1994). The learning that can result from such conversations can involve a better appreciation of differing historical and social circumstances, actions and behaviors, fears and grievances, and differences of opinion and interpretations of events (Becker, Chasin, Chasin, Herzig & Roth, 1995; Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker & Stains, 1996; Fisher; Lawson et al.; Muldoon, 1997; Templegrove Action Research [TARL], 1996) Finally, improved understanding will hopefully lead to actions that will challenge racism in all of its forms (Study Circles, 1998b).

GROUP CONFLICT AS A MANIFESTATION OF RACISM

Racial dialogues engage people in a reflective process that responds to their social identities and group affiliations. These allegiances can anchor individuals but also be a source of group conflict (Group for The Advancement of Psychiatry [GAP], 1987). Therefore, it is helpful to briefly consider the dynamics of group conflict and the nature of social identity.

As a social construction, race reifies people into social categories, such as white/black or white/people of color. People identify with social groups but are also assigned to social groups based on assumptions about who they are. Whites often value a color-blind stance, in an earnest effort to transcend racism (Winant, 1998), yet colorblindness is a privilege, an illusion, which only whites can sustain.

Membership in racial groups is reinforced by the dynamics of group conflict and competition. Some theories of ethnic and racial group conflict stress the ''realistic'' nature of that conflict and examine areas where groups are in conflict with one another–housing, jobs, political power, control of schools (Bayor, 1988; Bodner, Weber, & Simon, 1988; Fisher, 1990). However, group conflict is not always or solely based on competition for resources and power. It can also be precipitated by attitudes and perceptions, even if groups have not had actual contact (Bayor, 1988). For example, Jews are targeted by neo-nazis in areas of the country, such as rural Idaho, that have few, if any, Jews. Whites form biased images about people of color from many sources other than direct contact, including history textbooks that gloss over white oppression and persistent negative media stereotypes (Shipler, 1997). Regardless of whether the prejudice stems from actual competition, negative attitudes, or a combination of both, it leads to poor intergroup relations (Miller, 1999; Taylor, 1998). Erikson (1968), among others, has postulated that group members gain from denigrating members of another group because they can project the negative aspects of their identity on to the others. The members of the other group become symbolic ''others,'' who are seen as being different, ''diabolical,'' morally deficient, less human (Fisher, 1990; GAP, 1987). Viewing members of another group as deficient can enhance the positive identities of members of the in-group (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Conflict with members of other groups can also enhance the bonds among members of the in-group (Coser, 1956).

Racial intergroup conflict leads to winners and losers. One group

can dominate and oppress another group, achieving economic, political, social and cultural dominance, as whites have done in this country. This not only has social ramifications but negative psychological consequences for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

RACIAL IDENTITY FORMATION

The evolution of a sense of self in a racialized society includes notions of who one is and who others are according to differential racial group membership. Though racial identity development occurs for everyone in the United States, the process, outcome, and associated beliefs are in general different for people who are white and for people of color (Helms, 1990). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to outline the many schemas of racial and ethnic identity, there are many well developed models that do so (see Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Salett & Kaslow, 1994; Smith, 1991). It is important to consider the following variables of racial identity development for members of a racial dialogue because they influence group dynamics in the following ways:

- The process of identity formation is different for whites and people of color.
- Individuals within the same racial identity groups are likely to be at different stages from each other.
- Individuals may be located at more than one stage simultaneously and move back and forth between stages.
- Racial identities include and interact with other social identities.

The level of one's racial identity shapes self-perception, comfort with self and others, degree of willingness to work towards change, understanding of racial realities in society, and openness to listen and accept new information.

According to Helms (1990), the development of a positive white racial identity involves two fundamental and not frequently achieved tasks: eliminating one's own racism and evolving a positive non-racist white identity. In doing so, a white person must consistently confront the political, historical, cultural, economic, and interpersonal contexts in which whiteness maintains a privileged social status. Because the journey is a painful one and because society offers whites' numerous

escape routes, many retreat from full engagement with this process and progressive movement through the stages of white racial identity may become derailed.

While for whites, identity development requires a deconstruction of whiteness as a previously unexamined position of dominance and privilege, for people of color movement through the stages involves an immersion in the positive life affirming aspects of one's racial and cultural community and history (Cross, 1990; Helms, 1990; Salett & Kaslow, 1994). The more complex and advanced stages of racial identity for people of color encompass a secure, positive, and flexible sense of racial identity, which as Helms states " . . . frees the person to let other people be as long as by doing so one does not encourage oppression and victimization" (p. 31). This also applies to committed white allies.

Formal information on racial identity may be a useful tool in ongoing racial dialogue groups. Though in and of itself it will not solve conflicts, it may help participants bring some perspective to bear in what otherwise may seem to be inexplicable, unmovable conflict. Akamatsu (1998) provides an instructive insight:

> Theories of racial identity development for whites and people of color . . . are helpful, highlighting the relativity and context-dependent nature of our experience of our own race. Inevitable collisions can be analyzed and demystified, such as the mismatch between a student of color invested in networking with other people of color and a white student anxious to initiate cross-race connections. (p. 137)

DIMENSIONS OF RACIAL DIALOGUES

Two important variables, which affect the dynamics of interaction in any racial dialogue, are unequal power and differential racial identity development. As with all groups, racial dialogues occur in a larger institutional and societal context where there are unequal power relationships (Schwartz, 1971). Care must be taken not to replicate these inequities. The different stages of racial identity formation of participants will strongly influence the dynamics of the racial dialogue and at times can lead to misunderstandings, confusion and pain. A person at an earlier stage of racial identity formation may say things in a racial

conversation that are well intentioned but painful to others by virtue of their naivete. A common example of this is when white participants describe how they have always been color-blind. Conversely, people impatient with others who have done less work in this area can at times come on too strong and through vociferous advocacy or sophistication, intimidate less experienced participants, who may withdraw.

The actual models of racial dialogue can vary considerably. There are a number of variables that distinguish different forms of racial dialogue:

1. *Who participates?* President Clinton sponsored a racial dialogue on a national level for prominent invited participants (White House Government Initiatives, 1998), often referred to as 'elites.' Offering another model, Lani Guinier (1996) leads an organization called ''Commonplace'' that is searching for models of racial dialogue that permit ''real conversations'' between people who are not elites.

2. *Who sponsors the dialogue and where is it held?* National organizations such as Study Circles and Hope in the Cities have sponsored on-going racial conversations in local communities (Lawson et al., 1998; McCoy & Sherman, 1994). Some of these have been under religious auspices and others secular: both have created small mixed-race groups that meet regularly to discuss the dynamics of race and racism in their communities.

3. *Is the dialogue a single event or an ongoing group?* The dialogue that we will describe in this paper was a single event. Social workers in Northern Ireland have organized single event sessions between Catholics and Protestants (TARL, 1996). However other groups meet on an ongoing basis (Study Circles, 1998a) or for a series of meetings designed to reduce tensions and create trust between ethnic groups that have experienced conflict (Bargal & Bar, 1994; Norman, 1994).

4. *How are the groups facilitated?* Racial dialogues can be facilitated by one person, two people or by teams of people. All racial dialogues benefit from some form of facilitation but some groups are appropriately facilitated by ''experts'' while others can be run by local residents, such as Study Circle community dialogues (Study Circles, 1998a).

5. *How structured or spontaneous are the conversations?* The Public Conversations Project of Cambridge has been experimenting with a model of structured, small-group discussion, with agreed upon norms of conduct, that permits people of opposing views to talk about controversial issues, such as abortion (Becker et al., 1995; Chasin et al., 1996). In Northern Ireland there have been structured debates and discussions about issues that have divided Catholics and Protestants, such as the different names that each group uses for the same community (TARL, 1996). Study Circle (1998b) community groups often allow for more free-flowing conversation. The composition and size of the group, the goals of the conversation and the ''ground-rules'' are all important variables that influence this dimension.

6. *What is the goal of the conversation?* Racial dialogues can be set up for a variety of reasons: to clarify competing historical narratives (White House Government Initiatives, 1998; TARL, 1996), to resolve conflict between two specific ethnic and/or racial groups (Bar & Bargal, 1994; Norman, 1994; TARL), to discuss controversial issues (Becker et al., 1995; Chasin et al., 1996), to reduce tensions and expand understandings between groups (Bar & Bargal, 1994; Norman, 1994; Study Circles, 1998a,b), to create coalitions that work together to take social action (Study Circles, 1998b).

Although the format and structure of racial dialogues vary, they seek to achieve similar goals. These include greater understanding, respect for others, less suspicion and negative stereotypes, less ethnocentrism, a process that fosters trust, genuine dialogue that is not formulaic or dogmatic (Becker et al., 1995; Chasin et al., 1995; Fisher, 1990; Guinier, 1996; Lawson et al., 1998; Study Circles, 1998a, b; TARL, 1996), and concrete actions to dismantle racism (Study Circles, 1998b). Also, racial dialogues are more effective when they take place in the context of a comprehensive community or institutional commitment to uproot racism.

A CASE EXAMPLE OF A RACIAL DIALOGUE

A racial dialogue was sponsored by the authors and held on the campus of a school of social work during an academic session. The

dialogue was part of an ongoing, comprehensive project by the school to become an anti-racism institution. Although there were numerous discussions about race and racism in classes, many students and faculty felt more could be done to improve the overall climate of the campus with regard to race and racism. The dialogue was open to anyone associated with the program–master's students, doctoral students, full-time faculty, adjunct faculty and staff. Master's students were asked to complete questionnaires immediately after the event, which was also tape-recorded and transcribed.

The Process

The authors and the facilitators mapped out the structure and form of the racial dialogue before the event. Once the overall form of the event was decided, the facilitators, on their own, developed the specific details. The co-facilitators, an African American woman and a white woman, had extensive experience and expertise in teaching and facilitation in this area.

Eighty people attended the dialogue: 58 master's students, the rest faculty, doctoral students and staff. It was held in a medium sized room with chairs arranged in a circle, with a fishbowl arrangement of six chairs at a table in the center.

There were a number of discrete phases to the dialogue:

1. An opening conversation between the facilitators.
2. A "fishbowl" discussion by participants that responded to two questions posed by the facilitators.
3. Large group reactions to the fishbowl discussion.
4. Reflections on the discussions by the facilitators in the form of a conversation.
5. A brainstorming session about manifestations of racism and ways to combat them.
6. A brief closing video.

OPENING CONVERSATION

The facilitators began with their own conversation about race and racism that lasted for 1/2 hour. The general theme was why it is

difficult for white people and people of color to discuss race and racism in a way that is both tolerable and meaningful. Both discussants described their own feelings and perceptions, as well as anecdotes from classes and workshops that they had taught, linking this to their racial identities. They expressed empathy for positions held by their co-discussant and people from racial backgrounds other than their own.

This conversation was characterized by the ability of each facilitator to address both the experiences of their own racial identity group and that of their partner. For example, the white facilitator normalized the fears of whites entering racial dialogues, their socialized need never to appear ignorant while also noting the frustrations for people of color in watching whites become aware of racism that they have had to grapple with continually. The white facilitator also empathized with the struggle whites have in owning racism but was unequivocal about their responsibility for doing so. The facilitator of color spoke of the pain of people of color in the face of white silence but also addressed how hard it may be for whites, embracing an anti-racism stance, to deal with white family, friends and community who do not. Both reflected an understanding of what different racial groups experience while embracing their racial identity. Both recognized the pernicious, though differential impact that racism has on all. Their conversation emphasized common cause, different experience, and the need to work together and, at times, apart.

THE FISHBOWL AND LARGE GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The facilitators then invited participants to respond to a question: "What do you need to respond to a cross-racial dialogue at this school of social work?" Participants were invited to occupy five out of the six fishbowl seats, always leaving one open. The non-fishbowl participants were asked not to engage in the discussion, although anyone could move to the fishbowl by occupying the empty seat. As one seat would always need to be empty, if someone from the audience joined the fishbowl, then one of the fishbowl participants was expected to voluntarily leave.

After 15 minutes of discussion, the facilitators, who had not participated in this discussion interrupted and posed a second question: "How do I use what I have learned here beyond the gates of the

university or in a clinical setting with a client?'' Although this question had been planned in advance, it had been adumbrated by the direction of the discussion. After 10 minutes the facilitators ended this part of the discussion.

All of the discussants were female masters students. There were always at least two people of color out of the five fishbowl participants and the conversation generally alternated between whites and people of color, although the facilitators had not asked for this. Although there were disagreements between participants and some very different perspectives and experiences shared, there was no severe conflict. The facilitators briefly then opened up the discussion to the entire group. Themes that had been developed in the fishbowl were further amplified, questioned, and clarified.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DISCUSSIONS BY THE FACILITATORS, BRAINSTORMING AND THE FINAL VIDEO

The facilitators then returned to the fishbowl area and had a reflective conversation about the previous discussion in front of the participants. They linked what was said by participants with their introductory comments and made other general points about discussing racism. The next phase was a brainstorming session, led by the facilitators that explored examples of active and passive racism and ways to actively resist racism which lasted 25 minutes. The final phase of the event was the screening of a 10-minute video that showed different hued faces melting into one another.

The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed to gauge participants' responses to the event. This was an attempt to gather information about the impact and meaning of the racial dialogue. Statistical correlations were not sought, as the goal was to describe and understand rather than to confirm cause and effect relationships.

The questionnaire was offered to all of the 58 MSW students who attended the event. (Other participants, such as faculty, did not complete questionnaires in order to limit the numbers of variables contributing to responses.) The questionnaire included two sections:

1. Fifteen statements each respondent was asked to rate on a Likert scale.
2. Open-ended questions designed to elicit more thorough and personalized responses.

Fifty-six of the fifty-eight students who attended the event completed the questionnaire with 95% declaring their racial identity. Sixty-one percent were white and 34% people of color. The majority of people of color were African American (64%) while the remainder were Asian American and Latina/Latino American.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

As can be seen from Table 1, on some questions there was accordance between racial groups while in several instances responses differed significantly by race, with white students reporting gaining more than students of color. With the following questions, people of color and white participants were more congruent in their responses:

- Close to 100% of participants strongly agreed or agreed that the racial dialogue was helpful.
- 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that racial dialogues are one important way to deal with racism.
- All participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the facilitators were skilled at assisting the expression of diverse points of view.
- 72.8% of students of color and 97.6% of white students stated that they came away with increased hope that people from different racial backgrounds would *listen* to each other. However, it is interesting to note that only 54.6% of people of color compared to 100% of whites thought that people from different racial backgrounds could *learn* from each other. The most salient areas of difference were as follows:

  - A majority of white participants (92.7%) agreed with the statement that the dialogue would better enable them to talk about racial issues on campus while only 36.4% of participants of color agreed.
  - 45.5% of respondents of color agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the dialogue increased their understanding

of how people from a different racial background might think
or feel about issues of race in their school of social work. For
white respondents, the percentage was 85.7.

- Only 18.2% of participants of color agreed or strongly agreed
  with the statement that perspectives were put forward in the
  event that they had not considered before in contrast to 66.7%
  of white participants.
- While a majority of the total participants agreed or strongly
  agreed that the dialogue helped clarify some of their own
  thoughts and feelings about race, 95.1% of white students con-
  curred while a smaller percentage of people of color (45.5%)
  did so.
- Of white participants, 63.4% reported that the dialogue chal-
  lenged some of their own feelings and opinions about race. For
  participants of color, the percentage was 27.3.
- Of people of color, 45.5% agreed or strongly agreed that par-
  ticipation in the dialogue motivated them to want to become
  more involved with antiracism efforts. Of whites, 92.7% agreed
  or strongly agreed.
- In response to a question about who has responsibility for rac-
  ism, a majority of respondents, both white and people of color,
  agreed that whites and people of color have shared responsi-
  bility. However, a larger percentage of white participants
  (39%) than participants of color (26%) stated they thought
  mostly whites were responsible. In addition, 12% of white re-
  spondents indicated that only whites are responsible while no
  respondents of color agreed with this.

DISCUSSION

The racial dialogue was a single-event group that combined a focus
on task (combating racism) and self reflection and awareness. It had a
number of characteristics of mutual aid and support groups (Gitter-
man, 1989; Shulman, 1986): an emphasis on strengths, reciprocity and
the expectation that group members would support, challenge and help
one another. The group was grappling with a subject that if not "ta-
boo" (Shulman) is certainly charged. Everyone had come together to
talk about race and racism and there was a focus on self-disclosure and

TABLE 1. Results of Questionnaire

Percent of respondents who strongly agree (1) or agree (2).

	Total	People of Color[1] (n = 11)	White People (n = 42)
I found this event to be helpful	98.1	90.9	100
My experience in this dialogue increased my desire to participate in further racial dialogues	98.2	90.9	100
A person's race is a central element in one's experience in this society	98.1	90.9	100
Racial dialogues are one important way to deal with racism in this country	100	100	100
This dialogue increased my understanding of how people from a racial background different from my own think and feel about racial issues at SSW	77.4	45.5	85.7
Perspectives were put forward that I had not considered before	56.6	18.2	66.7
The dialogue inereased my hope that people from different racial backgrounds can listen to each other	92.4	72.8	97.6
The dialogue gave me hope that people from different racial backgrounds can learn from each other	90.5	54.6	100
My experience with this event will better enable me to talk about racial issues on campus and in the classroom	80.8	36.4	92.7
The dialogue was just an exchange of monologues	0	0	0
The dialogue complements other anti-racism activities on campus	86.3	72.8	90
The dialogue helped me clarify some of my own thoughts and feeling about race and racism	84.6	45.5	95.1
The dialogue challenged some of my feelings and opinions about race	55.8	27.3	63.4
Participating in this event motivated me to want to become more involved in anti-racism efforts	82.7	45.5	92.7
The facilitators were skilled at assisting the expression of diverse points of view	100	100	100

[1]African American, Asian, and Latina.

insight, but in the service of taking action, individually and collective-ly, to combat racism.

The co-facilitators structured the group so that it had a number of phases common to most group processes (Toseland & Rivas, 1998). There was preparation before the group, with attention paid to content, process and physical location (such as sitting in a circle). There was a beginning phase, modeled by the co-facilitators and then a middle phase, involving the fishbowl and subsequent reflections about the fishbowl discussion. The use of the fishbowl permitted the facilitators to create a small group experience within the context of a large group. The ending phase was initiated when the facilitators asked the group to brainstorm about active and passive racism and ways to respond to it. This refocused discussion from the subjective experience of partici-pants to ways that they could individually and collectively engage in social action. This acted as a transition, preparing people for activities after the group ended. The final video served as a brief ritual that emphasized healing and similarity between people, ending the group on a positive note.

Student comments and responses to the questionnaire indicated that the opening dialogue between the facilitators was extremely meaning-ful. Many commented that the dialogue provided hope that construc-tive and substantive conversations could take place across racial lines and connected it to their willingness to take risks in dialogue them-selves. Because most in American society have neither experienced it nor seen it, watching others who are experienced, committed, and skilled at having racial dialogue may be an important component to build into any racial dialogue format.

The content of the opening discussion may have been one of the reasons that it was so positively embraced by participants. The themes in the opening conversation touched upon many issues central to rac-ism and interracial dialogue, as well as perspectives, fears and resent-ments experienced differently along racial lines. The conversation also included strategies for dealing with stuck conversations and for doing anti-racism work.

The facilitators spoke in an informal, yet respectful way, which can be an important stance to take with ethnically-diverse groups (Davis & Proctor, 1989). They also modeled self-disclosure, which has a more powerful impact on group participants than telling them to self-dis-close (Congress & Lynn, 1995). Their comfort with one another and

with the topic may have also set a tone, as lack of anxiety by group leaders can help calm and stabilize a group (MacKensie, 1990). They also laid out clear ground rules, which helps establish a structure and process conducive to delving into difficult material (Gitterman, 1988). They achieved a balance between being attentive and flexible with directing a highly structured group session, which is useful with single session groups (Northen, 1988). It is also important that in a racially and ethnically diverse group discussing racism there is a multi-racial facilitation team (Davis & Proctor, 1989).

When the two questions were posed to the fishbowl participants, similar themes as in the opening dialogue emerged: fear on the part of white students of making a mistake; hesitancy on the part of students of color about the degree of commitment of white students to go beyond talk; the difficulty of dealing with racial insensitivity on the part of friends; the tendency by whites to claim aspects of oppressed identities rather than deal with privileged parts of one's self awareness of defending against one's own racism by projecting it onto others.

Participants did not try to look good. The quality of discourse was one of openness, which contrasts with what frequently occurs in other contexts. This may be attributable to several factors: the modeling that occurred in the opening dialogue between the biracial team of facilitators; the commitment of those who attended the event; the confidence participants felt in the skill of the facilitators; the hunger participants expressed for a forum in which to meaningfully discuss race and racism; prior events and courses on campus highlighting race; and perhaps the relationships many students had with each other prior to the event.

A significant finding from the questionnaire was that close to 100% of the participants strongly agreed that the racial dialogue was helpful to them. However, the results also make clear that although for most participants the event was worthwhile, there were significant differences in how white students and students of color viewed it; the results indicate more learning opportunities for white participants than participants of color. It is not surprising that in dialogues that have racism as a central theme, whites, who in general tend to know less about it and who are not its primary target, will have more to learn about it. An event that removes the veil of white privilege is also more likely to move white participants than participants of color, for whom this is no news at all.

It is also possible that members of certain ethnic groups have differential responses to large and small group processes (Davis & Proctor, 1989). Group composition can also affect satisfaction levels. For example, some research has indicated that African Americans may feel more comfortable in groups that are composed of an even racial split while whites prefer groups more reflective of the demographics of society at large (Davis & Proctor).

Differential satisfaction levels are consistent with findings from evaluations of other dialogue groups (Study Circles Resource Center, 1998b) and from literature on classroom discussion in which race and diversity are a focus (Smith, 1997). In the latter, though most students gain from exposure to the topic, benefits are likely to be greatest for those who are white (Smith). This may make sense in light of the fact that whites tend to have less experience with discussing race and racism and in their daily lives. Whites usually have more to learn. Whites are also more likely to view racial dialogue as a useful end in and of itself while people of color are more apt to judge it according to whether or not it leads to action (Study Circles Resource Center, 1998b).

Racial dialogues are not risk-free. Whites can fear shame and humiliation for saying the wrong thing. Conversely, listening to whites' naïve and uniformed perspective on what constitutes racism and the devastation it wreaks is often a source of frustration and anger for people of color (Wan, 1994). In racial dialogues this phenomenon is probably unavoidable but comes at a cost. Some people may opt out of them all together (Haynes, 1998). Consequently, assuring that the needs of people of color are addressed as well as those of whites is an area in need of further study and attention. Suggestions for dealing with this issue will follow in the section on future recommendations.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This dialogue was a single event and as such its utility and impact are limited. Participants commented that it was both too brief and constituted only a beginning. Though there can be gains from single events, they are modest in comparison to the potential of ongoing dialogue. A few hours of skillfully facilitated dialogue, however open and meaningful, is hardly a match for several hundred years of racism.

Like most groups, dialogues are more likely to be successful if attention is paid to preparation, facilitation, and follow up.

Preparation

A context must be built which increases the likelihood that a racial dialogue will be effective and constructive. Talking about race in an interracial context is not an activity many are used to and the playing field is rarely level. As is often the case in public discourse, policy debates, and classrooms, people of different races talk past each other. Participants should be informed at the outset that racial dialogue is difficult and people of different racial backgrounds will enter with different levels of racial awareness and understanding. Though no exact map of the terrain is possible, it may help to know ahead of time that the journey is likely to be arduous. Also, in preparation for ongoing racial dialogue, or during the process itself, historical and sociological information about race and racism may be helpful. In general, with mutual aid groups, sharing such data is helpful (Shulman, 1986). Because of the lack of balance in participants' knowledge and experience of racism, there is always the danger that dialogue often means people of color spending much of their time and energy helping whites "get it." Then it is less of a dialogue and more a class with whites as the students and people of color as the exasperated teachers. Consequently, readings or formal presentations may relieve people of color of some of this burden.

Preparation might also include information about racial identity development and its complexities. At any given moment in time the understandings of participants will vary from each other, in part because of differing and fluctuating racial identity stages. It helps participants to know that this is an inherent dynamic in such a group. It may help anticipate some conflicts, help participants understand some of their own reactions as well as those of others, and serve as a marker for forward movement. It normalizes a difficult process.

Facilitation

Skilled facilitation is an absolute necessity. At least two facilitators, each from different racial backgrounds, are ideal. Participants' safety lies not in lack of conflict or anxiety but in confidence that there are

guides who are familiar with the territory, have varied life experiences and world views, and know how to use conflict constructively. Participants will also look to a multi-racial team to model what is possible in racial dialogue.

As suggested earlier, facilitators might want to demonstrate racial dialogue by having a conversation themselves in front of the larger group. Modeling comfort, self-disclosure and respect are critical (Congress & Lynn, 1995; Davis & Proctor, 1989). This is particularly useful in the beginning, as it creates possibilities. Dialogue between skilled facilitators can also move the group when inevitable impasses arise. The skill and strength of relationship in a multi-racial team may help them wend their way through sticking points that the group cannot. Skilled facilitation also includes engaging the group in establishing mutually agreed-upon ground rules. If rules are broken participants need to know that facilitators will refer back to them and enforce them.

Though racial dialogues are conversations between people from different racial backgrounds, there may be times that groups need to temporarily separate into more racially homogenous caucuses. As described earlier, wounding statements can be made however well intentioned. Conversations can become destructively heated and feelings can boil over. Breaking up into groups, each led by a different facilitator, may allow a cooling-off period and provide needed safety and support about how to go forward. Homogenous groups can lead to greater candor and deeper exploration of self and promote greater group cohesion (Davis & Proctor, 1989). Care must be taken to let people self-select caucus groups, as many people have multiple ethnic and racial identities. Ultimately, caucus groups are a temporary phase. They can be productive as long as the goal of eventually bringing the groups back together is paramount.

Follow-Up

Lastly, there should be more than just talk. A decrease in racist attitudes and beliefs, better cross-racial understanding, and an amelioration of racial tension are certainly substantial goals for racial dialogue groups. For many white participants, such achievements are a goal in and of themselves (Study Circles, 1998b) and are a major purpose of racial dialogues. They challenge individual racism and intergroup conflict. However, because racism is embedded in our cul-

tural, economic, and institutional life, much more is needed. Because people of color are the recipients of institutional racism, they are, understandably, more likely than some white participants to judge the effectiveness of racial dialogue groups on the basis of whether they lead to concrete action. The context in which the racial dialogue occurs will influence the nature of action steps taken, but for a racial dialogue group to maximize its potential, it should eventually lead to some form of concrete change.

Racism ultimately hurts everyone, those who are targeted and those who are privileged. Effective interracial conversation, given the paucity of it, is not really ''just talk.'' If the talk is genuine talk, informed talk, and persistent talk, it will identify the waste, cost, evil, and tragedy of institutional racism. Action will follow because there will be no other viable choice.

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