Interracial Dialogues on Race Relations

Talking about Race
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What are race dialogues?

Intergroup dialogue programs on race relations are volunteer programs that organize interracial conversations about race over repeated sessions. In one common format, volunteers are recruited through local media and then placed in racially diverse groups of about a dozen people. Sometimes, public officials participate in the conversations, and they do so as equal participants in the dialogues. The groups typically meet for two hours once a week over about five weeks. Discussions are led by one or two facilitators, often with the use of guidebooks that encourage people to talk openly about their personal experiences with race, their perceptions of race relations in their community, and their ideas about how they might individually and collectively improve race relations. At the end of the program, participants are encouraged to pursue some of these actions, but they are not obligated to do so. Programs are often sponsored by local governments, existing nonprofit organizations or organizations created specifically to carry out the program. While there are national organizations that promote and provide support for such programs, the programs are usually initiated organically by people who feel that there is a need for dialogue on race in their communities.

Why organize interracial dialogues on race relations?

Many are skeptical about whether interracial dialogues on race relations can truly fulfill the various goals associated with them. In her study, Walsh found that dialogue programs vary greatly and are far from perfect, but do provide community members an opportunity to have difficult conversations about race. The following are common questions raised by skeptics along with findings that respond to these questions:

*If the dialogues are truly honest and challenge people’s beliefs, they will devolve into chaos and conflict. If they are not, they will be too superficial to have an impact.*

Most dialogue programs are structured to promote dialogue and storytelling rather than debate. However, this does not mean that the dialogue Walsh observed was not honest or challenging. Participants often responded to
statements with which they disagreed with stories of personal experiences that offered a different perspective. Rooted in real experiences, these stories seemed to encourage others to listen, and challenged preconceived notions. Moments of debate and contention did arise during some of the dialogues observed, and rather than leading to chaos, these moments were some of the most productive as they offered opportunities to better understand discrimination that occurs in the community.

**These dialogues are about talking and listening rather than decision making and taking action. It sounds like they are more for self development rather than political action that leads to real change.**

Self development is indeed a major outcome of dialogues on race. Not only White participants, but also participants of color learn a lot by listening to each other. They are often surprised to discover how much they do not know about each others’ experiences and understandings of race relations in the community. Often, participants start from a stance that emphasizes community unity at the expense of acknowledging and valuing differences in culture and experience. Many participants shift over the course of the program and adopt a more nuanced stance that continues to strive for unity while at the same time acknowledging that race matters and differences in culture and identity deserve recognition. While these impacts on individuals are impressive, both statistical analysis of community characteristics and interviews with participants reflect that the motivation for initiating these dialogues is rooted in a desire for larger social change. The social impact of these programs is often indirect and difficult to measure. However, in some cases dialogue programs have directly led to collective action and community change ranging from the diversification of police and fire departments to the passage of anti-discrimination laws for public schools and the organization of a multiracial community choir.

**Public officials only participate in dialogue programs as opportunities to avoid blame or to make empty gestures toward improving race relations.**

Public officials who participated in the dialogues Walsh observed showed signs that they were hearing for the first time the diverse opinions of community members, and learning more in the dialogue format about community race relations than they had in other venues. Other participants used the programs to ask tough questions of the public officials and held them accountable. Participation of public officials was also valuable because they at times contributed their expertise which helped other participants to engage in more informed conversation. However, officials and residents may fall into habitual patterns of communication when public officials take part in dialogues. Facilitators can take steps to ensure equal, two-way participation, such as avoiding seating arrangements that single out officials from other participants and being mindful of the speaking time of officials to ensure that they do not dominate conversations.

**AL [public official]: Well actually, I learned something earlier today [during the dialogue], that just blows my mind. These guys were telling us that African Americans are afraid to come up into this area especially in the countryside because they are afraid for their physical safety among us.**

**Issues to Consider when Organizing Dialogues on Race**

**Negotiating Between Unity and Difference**

Programs for dialogue on race relations have dual purposes: to create a space for people of different racial backgrounds to both listen to their differences and find common ground. The former is necessary for gaining an understanding of how racism exists and impacts different people in the community. The latter is a foundation for building a shared commitment to improving race relations. Observations of dialogue programs reveal that it is possible to achieve a balance between these seemingly conflicting goals. Many participants left feeling that it is important to pay attention to race and how race operates in society, while at the same time striving for a community in which race is no longer a source of discrimination.

Many participants, both whites and people of color, came to the programs with a strong desire to quickly reconcile conflict and develop unity. They felt that moving beyond race and creating a colorblind society is the way to improve race relations; some even perceived recognizing racial differences as an obstacle to this goal. It is important that organizers and facilitators of dialogue programs gradually support the group to negotiate a focus on difference throughout the program. If the group is racially diverse, some calls for recognizing diversity often naturally arise. In
several groups, this happened when white participants claimed that racial labels no longer matter and were then challenged by people of color in the group. However, many groups did not pay sustained attention to these issues when they were brought up. Facilitators can listen for and take advantage of these moments through prompts and follow-up questions that encourage the group to grapple with rather than avoid the difficult questions surrounding unity and difference. This allows the focus on difference to develop organically from the experiences of group members so that it is not imposed by the facilitator.

SARA [white]: I remember my cousins growing up in Pensacola, drank from a “white” fountain. But now institutional racism has to be more financial because there is not segregation anymore, they actually bus kids to the non-white schools, take Chinese kids and dump them in the north side schools because too many white kids there. I can hardly think of institutional racism being blatant nowadays.

STEVE [African American police officer]: Oh, I would—some things in the police department, probably seven or eight years ago where officers were eating lunch or dinner at these private clubs around town, well minority officers weren’t allowed to eat there…

Later in the session, Sara reconsidered her views after considering these stories:

SARA: Now that I said that I feel stupid, that I said there wasn’t blatant racism out there. Because now there are lots of things that are coming to mind, that could be probably racism.

RACHEL [white]: There still are. Every day and we just aren’t aware of it.

Telling and Listening to Stories as Tools for Dialogue

Storytelling was a pervasive and powerful form of communication in the dialogue groups. Storytelling means sharing experiences from one’s own life. In race dialogues, these stories do more than simply relay a series of events. Rather, they often make arguments about what behaviors and identities should be accepted in the community. They help the group to make sense of the past, relate it to the present and envision the future (Walsh, 2004). Stories can help strengthen unity as participants build upon the stories of others to reinforce shared identities and goals as fellow community members. They can also draw attention to difference when members of racially diverse groups bring a broad range of experiences to light through their stories. Some research has shown that people who perceive their views are in the minority are more likely to participate by telling stories (Polletta, 2002). Therefore, storytelling is a valuable tool for achieving the dual goal of dialogues on race.

In the observed dialogue programs, storytelling played several functions. Participants used personal experiences to support their claims, for example, when challenging racial stereotypes. In these situations, stories helped participants to scrutinize arguments and reason together about race relations in the community. Storytelling created a space for participants to share their experiences of discrimination and to listen to difference. Stories told by people of color seemed to carry a different weight. Their stories about discrimination often impacted the direction of the conversation. White participants appeared to listen actively as they often expressed alarm, brought up these stories in later sessions or asked follow-up questions. Facilitators can better leverage the power of storytelling by creating a safe environment for sharing personal experiences, eliciting stories at key points of the dialogue, inviting complementary stories to support marginalized voices (especially when there are few people of color in a group), and asking questions that encourage participants to delve into the meaning and implications of powerful stories.

The Role of Debate in Dialogue

Dialogue programs are often structured to promote peaceful dialogue, yet despite reminders from facilitators to engage in “dialogue not debate”, moments of debate and contention do surface in many dialogue groups. Debates sometimes cause facilitators to feel anxious or uncomfortable, but in fact often make valuable contributions to the discussion. During the observed dialogues, debate allowed participants to convey sincerity in a way that they could not simply by listening to each other. Because participants asked difficult questions when it might have been easier to avoid conflict, they conveyed that they were taking each other seriously. In these moments, it is as if
COLLEEN [white]: I think it is kind of unfortunate that you said that we are losing our heritage and our history. I think everybody needs to have a sense of who they are and where they came from and their parents and grandparents and trials and struggle that they’ve gone through no matter what your heritage is and also bring your heritage out and educate other people who aren’t German or Irish or black of Hmong as to what your culture is… You kind of have to still retain where you came from and then pass that along to people that you meet from other cultures.

[...]

SAMUEL [African American]: I like what she said about the history—I am going to say something here that may be a little harsh, but I’m going to say it softly.

MARIA [Latina facilitator]: Dialogue not debate.

SAMUEL: Not going to debate. We as black people really don’t have a history because we were pulled here against our will. Can’t race back to Africa—we were raised here—forced to work for mothering… our wives raped, and when we didn’t comply with what they wanted, they sold us, so we are still trying to find out who we are.

MARIA: I am sad to say this also happened to the Native American population.

SAMUEL: Not trying to put anything on anybody, but we don’t know.

Maria: Thanks—Don?

DON [white]: Devil’s advocate—

MARIA: This is not a debate now.

participants said, “I have listened to you and taken your view seriously enough to be threatened by it, confused by it, or find some aspect of it to disagree with.” By challenging each other, they created connections amongst themselves and reasoned through complex issues together. These debates did not erupt into debilitating chaos or conflict because participants were committed to constructive communication. Rather, they provided unique openings for raising awareness and disconfirming stereotypes.

Facilitators can support constructive debate by setting ground rules and providing tools for debating respectfully and by refraining from quelling conflict or confrontation that may contribute to the group’s learning. Sometimes, participants themselves are quick to gloss over confrontations that arise as they desire to return to more comfortable dialogue. However, confrontations are often a signal that a particular issue is significant and that participants can benefit from understanding each other’s different perspectives. When this happens, facilitators can consider returning to the issue later during the dialogue or in a later session.

Further Resources for Interracial Dialogues on Race Relations

- The following are some of the many organizations that promote interracial dialogues on race:
  - The Deliberative Democracy Consortium http://deliberative-democracy.net/
  - Hope in the Cities www.hopeinthecities.org
  - Everyday Democracy www.everyday-democracy.org
  - The National Conference for Communities and Justice www.nccj.org
- These websites provide practical resources and guides for initiating community dialogues:
  - Everyday Democracy how-to guides in English and Spanish http://www.everyday-democracy.org//en/HowTo.aspx
Works Cited
