Intergroup Dialogues: Building Community and Relational Justice

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Research suggests that civic engagement in American communities and connections among their residents seem to be in decline. With demographic changes indicating a greater population diversity, many are concerned about the social fabric that binds people together. One solution offered in the last two decades is engagement in intergroup dialogues - efforts to bring diverse populations into face-to-face facilitated conversations that attempt to craft better understanding, stronger relationships, and possible social action. This paper will look at the current research on "intergroup dialogues" to address three questions. First, why might such dialogues be important to building community, promoting reconciliation, and seeking social justice. Second, what does the research on these dialogues, in both community programs and on college campuses, tell us about their outcomes? And third, do intergroup dialogues provide a road to reconciliation that might be applied in the future to address broader issues of diversity?

The capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century.[1]

–British Scholar, Stuart Hall

Introduction

Building personal connections is an important, if perhaps somewhat understudied, aspect in seeking social justice. Davis-Lipman, et al, in a recent issue of Social Justice Research suggest that a personal relationship of some kind may matter in terms of how people relate to a group or institution. Just "perceiving that the potentiality for a personal connection exists with another person – even in an encounter that is relatively fleeting – is likely to change the tenor of that encounter and one's perception of the outcomes that ensue from it."[2] Unfortunately, previous research by political scientist Robert Putnam and his colleagues at Harvard suggests that the opportunities for making these kinds of connections seem to be declining in American communities. He presents evidence that participation in community groups has gone down considerably since its peak in the 1960s. Consequently, not only are individuals less connected to each other, but our communities are less connected as a whole, resulting in a decline in both reciprocity and trustworthiness.[3]

Equally important, many of these communities are becoming increasingly diverse. The divides within them might make it even more difficult to build a sense of community that would enhance both the perceptions of social justice and make possible the changes needed for it to be accomplished. Some research suggests that the more diverse a community, the less likely its residents are to trust other people, to connect with other people, to participate in politics, or to connect across class lines. With regard to connections, they are more likely to be personally isolated, claim fewer friends, and have less sense of community.[4]

Concern with the decline in civic engagement and the growing cynicism toward public life have encouraged many activists to offer an alternative vision of citizens engaging in community based intergroup dialogues "in a spirit of social justice and equality, doing with one another, not for one another,"[5] what some might call relational justice. As sociologist David Schoem has argued, intergroup dialogue - an effort to bring diverse populations into face-to-face facilitated conversations that attempt to craft better understanding, stronger relationships, and possible social action - represents a grassroots effort that is a "constructive response to the challenges facing our fragile democracy."[6]

Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung argue that when trust

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[1] Stuart Hall, quoted in John Solomos and Les Back, Introduction to *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 4.

[2] Angelina Davis-Lipman,Tom R. Tyler, and Susan M. Andersen, "Building Community One Relationship at a Time: Consequences for the Seeking and Acceptance of Help," Social Justice Research, Vol. 20, No. 2, June 2007 (2007)

[3] Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[4] "The Opportunity and Challenge of Diversity," in *The Social Capital Benchmark Survey*, The Saguro Seminar, john F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. (http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey/results3.html), accessed March 13, 2012.

[5] David Louis Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado, editors. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School*, College, Community and Workplace. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 3-4.

[6] Schoem and Hurtado, p. 4.

among citizens is low, they feel disenfranchised and fail to engage in public life. Efforts to strengthen the social fabric of communities through public dialogue build an important precondition for a healthy democracy.[7] Others see these conversations as an act of hope: "For conversationalists believe that people, despite their differences, can speak and listen to each other in a spirit of civility. And, conversationalists assert, these dialogues have value. They help our civic life."[8] Or, as another proponent asserted, "Dialogue invites discovery. It develops common values and allows participants to express their own interests. It expects that participants will grow in understanding and may decide to act together with common goals."[9]

As America moves through the twenty-first century, we continue to struggle with issues of diversity that have plagued previous generations. However, the landscape is constantly changing, and solutions offered in the past may no longer be applicable to the present or the future. The primary strategies for achieving racial equality, for example – civil rights, affirmative action, and anti-poverty programs – have achieved limited success, and have also resulted in substantial resistance.[10] Is there a way toward a more effective environment that allows for creating better policy changes as well as a positive shifting of people's hearts and minds?

In this paper, I will analyze current research on "intergroup dialogues" to address three questions. First, why might such dialogues be important to building community and seeking social justice. Second, what does the research on these dialogues, in both community programs and on college campuses, tell us about their outcomes? And third, do intergroup dialogues provide a road to reconciliation that might be applied in the future to address broader issues of diversity?

Intergroup Dialogues: Why are They Important?

In an age of diversity, we will have to govern differently, we'll have to build communities differently. . . It's not good enough to leave this to chance.[11]

–Henry Cisneros, former Secretary of Human Resources

There are many reasons as to why these intergroup dialogues should be important to those who seek social justice and to those who are concerned about the future of our communities. First, political scientist Catherine Walsh points out that recent new waves of immigration have layered additional intergroup tensions on top of long-standing racial conflicts - complicating coalition building, increasing the range of competing demands, and making the establishment of community priorities more difficult.[12] Future demographic changes will only exacerbate the situation. The Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050, the percentage of the American population that can trace their roots to somewhere other than White European ancestry will be almost fifty percent. Hispanics and Asians/Pacific Islanders will triple in numbers. African-Americans will increase about 70 percent, but Non-Hispanic Whites will decrease from 72 percent of

the population to about 52 percent.[13] At that point, "people of color" will collectively come close to a numerical majority of the population of the United States.[14]

Second, sociologist William Julius Wilson argues that even though it is important to acknowledge the racial divisions in America, often obscured is the fact that most Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds "share many concerns, are besieged by many similar problems, and have important norms, values and aspirations in common."[15] According to surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center since 1982, only marginal differences in core values of all racial groups pertaining to work, education, family, religion, law enforcement and civic duty were found.[16] Sociologist Amitai Etzioni, after reviewing several national surveys, also concluded that most Americans – Black, White and other – share similar attitudes toward the basic tenets of the American creed.[17]

A third reason that diversity dialogues are important is that it has become commonplace in many circles over the last few years to simply dismiss any discussion of racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or other differences as an effort at "political correctness." This negative label has been a very effective strategy for controlling, and at times, limiting any conversation about these issues. Hoover and Howard point out that this type of backlash has taken information produced by those who advance "inclusiveness of speech, advocacy of nonracist and nonsexist terminology, an insistence on affirmative action policies, an avoidance of Eurocentrism as reflected in much public and academic thought, an acceptance

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[7] Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung, "Sustaining Public Engagement: Embedded Deliberation in Local Communities," Everyday Democracy and the Kettering Foundation, 2009.

[8] "Commentaries on American Pluralism and Identity: Scholars' Essays," A National Conversation on Pluralism and Identity. Essays written under the auspices of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Not dated, Preface, p. 2.

[9] Judith A. Winston and Rose M. Ochi, One America Dialogue Guide. *The President's Initiative on Race*, March, 1998, p. 1.

[10] *Interracial Dialogue Groups Across America*. The Interracial Democracy Program of the Center for Living Democracy, 1997, Forward, p. 5.

[11] Henry Cisneros, quoted in Martha L. McCoy, et al, "Bridging the Divides of Race and Ethnicity," National Civic Review, Spring/Summer, Vol 83, Issue 2, p. 2 (EBSCO Host).

[12] Katherine Cramer Walsh, "Communities, Race, and Talk: An Analysis of the Occurrence of Civic Intergroup Dialogue Programs," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 1, February 2006, p 22.

[13] George Henderson, "Race in America," *The Phi Kappa Phi Journal*, Spring, 2000, pp. 12-15.

[14] Amitai Etzioni, "The Monochrome Society," *Policy Review*, Feb/Mar 2001, pp. 53-71, however, correctly points out that these projections ignore the reality of the rising number of racially mixed Americans.

[15] William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), p. 77.

[16] Ibid., pp. 77-78.

[17] Amitai Etzioni, "The Monochrome Society," *Policy Review*, Feb/Mar 2001, pp. 53-71.

of multiculturalism as a valued feature of American society, and the dismantling of the White power structure" and molding that information to suit its counter cause. At the very least, they point out, this process fosters a great deal of confusion and reduces discussion to often trivial terms.[18]

Donald Roy in The Reuniting of America makes a similar point, suggesting that the multicultural debate reflects a breakdown in the type of reasonable and calm discussion that is necessary for people who are trying to clarify their agreements and disagreements about our cultural terrain. In contrast, he suggests that what characterizes this debate is "emotional diatribes, vituperation, threats and intimidation, dire fears and predictions, and hostility."[19] According to Roy, most of this debate is between positions on the extreme end, with little consideration given to alternatives in the middle, which probably reflect the majority of Americans, and people most likely to engage in constructive dialogue. Although he wrote this in 1996, one might argue that it may be even more applicable to our current climate.

Hoover and Howard argue that the backlash also suggests the need for an alternative model to the type of traditional arguments that have dominated "talk" about diversity related issues. Building on a postmodernist orientation, they reject the Western, and perhaps more so American, tradition of winning arguments and proving "truth" as an effective process. They suggest that public discussion, rather than argumentation, serves as a better response. More specifically, they offer "critical dialogue" as an alternative:

> Free discussion does not avoid conflict or "ideology." Instead, free discussion encourages "critical dialogue" that equalizes opportunities for self-creation, that maximizes opportunities for social and individual choice, that motivates people to work for change, and that affirms new categories of thought... Critical dialogue, then, consists of commitment to discussion, to understanding, to acceptance not necessarily of the position of the other, but of the right of the other to a position, all without fear of retribution or of loss. Critical dialogue therefore provides the key to community formation... in that dialogue establishes understanding and civility.[20]

A final reason these intergroup dialogues are important is that in addition to the limited success our efforts in the past to address issues of social justice and inequality (by the courts, by elected legislative bodies, or programs by the government), Americans in the 21st century seem to be polarized about a whole host of issues that divide our communities and our nation. Is part of the problem that we do not understand these issues in any constructive way and perhaps even more the impact that they have on significant parts of our population? Can intergroup dialogues provide that understanding and bring diverse populations closer to agreement and ultimately social action for social justice? To begin answering that question, let's turn to some of the research.

Community Dialogues: The Early Programs

The power of the intergroup dialogue lies in its ability to evoke in participants the expression of deeply felt but rarely publicly spoken attitudes and viewpoints, to enable them to confront long-standing group conflicts, and to move them to address the structural barriers to social inequalities in society. The intergroup dialogue experience can transform communities of people to change group behaviors and effect institutional change, and it can enable individuals to emerge from the intergroup dialogue with new perspectives, insights, attitudes and behaviors.[21]

–David Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado

The weaknesses have always been there. Getting people to get past, maybe their prejudices, the old stories, the way they were raised, and get them to open up. It is hard to be strangers with people that you break food with, talk with, and laugh with. The more we are together and the more we talk face to face, we start realizing that we have more in common than we do different.

–Dialogue Participant

Although many communities across the nation have historically struggled with issues of diversity, inequality and discrimination, it was not until the early 1990s that a concerted nationwide effort was made to bring diverse groups together for dialogue and deliberation. Three initiatives were especially important to laying the foundation for the intergroup dialogue movement. The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) developed much of the thinking and produced many of the resources that continue to be used by many groups today. The SCRC is a project of the Topsfield Foundation, a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation "dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States."[22] The SCRC carried out its mission by promoting the use of small group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as study circles. In the early 1990s, it shifted its focus to primarily addressing the racial divide.

In November of 1993, Sheldon Hackney, in his first major speech as Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), announced a new initiative called "The National

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[18] Judith D. Hoover and Leigh Anne Howard, "The Political Correctness Controversy Revisited." *American Behavioral Scientist*, June-July, 1995. pp. 963-964.

[19] Donald H. Roy. *The Reuniting of America: Eleven Multicultural Dialogues*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 5.

[20] Ibid. p. 970.

[21] David Louis Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 225.

[22] *Toward a More Perfect Union in an Age of Diversity* (Topsfield Foundation, 1997).

Conversation on Pluralism and Identity." Hackney and the NEH were responding to what they saw as the fraying of social bonds dividing Americans into mutually suspicious and antagonistic subgroups, as well as a perceived lack of confidence in our public institutions, a growth of cynicism and a sense of alienation. The goals of this conversation were quite ambitious. First, Hackney wanted to encourage discussion among and between different ethnic, racial and cultural groups about American pluralism and identity. Second, they wanted to use the insights of the humanities to deepen these ongoing conversations and expand the numbers of Americans who were participating in them. Third, they wanted to establish public spaces, which would provide opportunities for Americans to increase their understanding of themselves, others, and their role in their community.[23]

Then, in 1997, President William J. Clinton embarked upon his own initiative on race relations, which was guided by a Race Initiative Advisory Board headed by the late eminent historian John Hope Franklin. The board was established to counsel the President on ways to improve the quality of American race relations. Like the effort from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the President wanted to promote a constructive national dialogue to confront and work through challenging issues that surround race; however, the thrust was somewhat more practical in scope. These conversations would hopefully encourage leaders in communities throughout the nation to develop and implement innovative approaches to calming racial tensions. In the long run it was believed that they would help to identify, develop and implement solutions to problems in areas in which race had a substantial impact, such as education, economic opportunity, housing, health care, and the administration of justice.[24]

Hundreds of community programs emerged across the United States in the 1990s. Du Bois and Hutson, after an extensive search of the literature in 1997, estimated that at least hundreds of thousands of Americans were engaged in "sustained, serious, community-based interracial dialogues."[25] Their own research of 60 intergroup dialogues in 30 states found that five institutions were most prevalent in fostering intergroup dialogues: religious organizations, community based not-for-profits, schools and universities, local governments, and local businesses.[26] And the strongest, most successful dialogues incorporated the leadership and involvement of several of these institutions. Most of them had national organizations as initiators or supporters. They also found that Blacks and Whites predominated in forming interracial dialogues. Most were a response to some Black/White crisis and when they did create dialogues, they often failed to invite other racial or ethnic groups to the table for conversation.[27]

Participation in and expectations from these intergroup dialogues differed among participants. Research on study circles found that organizers and participants, regardless of race or ethnicity, generally viewed study circles as an effective tool for fostering personal changes in individual attitudes and behaviors,[28] but there was less agreement, especially among young Blacks, on whether the study circles were effective as a tool for addressing institutional racism.

The importance of this finding cannot be underestimated. For most Whites, as pointed out by Emerson and Smith,[29] it appears that race relations and racism are best understood at an individual or small group level, not on the institutional plane. Attitudinal or behavioral change at the personal level, therefore, is what is needed to address racism in America. While these intergroup dialogues may help whites to build meaningful relationships with African Americans, research by Flavin-McDonald found that African American participants tended to withhold judgment "until they saw implementation of ideas and action in the community."[30]

Roberts and Kay[31] also found significant differences in their research on intergroup dialogues by race, age, gender, and city of origin. Generally, whites, adults, females, and those from small or mid-sized communities believed that personal and interpersonal changes served as a good starting point for addressing racism and that the experience of dialogue about race and racism itself constituted change. Alternatively, younger adults, people of color, males and residents of large cities viewed changes in relationships as primarily making Whites feel better, without adding any power to bring about institutional change. Although dialogue might be a platform for action in some cases, this latter group believed that it hardly constituted a worthwhile action itself. They also found that African American males in particular viewed these initiatives as unlikely to bring about the kinds of institutional changes they sought.[32]

These are important findings for scholars who want to better understand the dynamics of intergroup dialogues and for activists who wish to use them to build stronger communities. For example, women are more likely than men to participate in these intergroup dialogues, and generally see conversation as a solution to many problems, not just those

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[23] *A National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity, A Special Competition*. National Endowment for the Humanities, 1994, p. 7.

[24] Reported in Chester Hartman, "Notes on the President's Initiative on Race," *Poverty and Race*, November/December, Volume 6:Number 6, 1997, p. 3.

[25] Paul Martin Du Bois and Jonathan J. Hutson, *Bridging the Racial Divide: A Report on Interracial Dialogue in America* (Brattleboro, VT: The Center for Living Democracy, 1997), pp. 12

[26] Ibid. pp. 5-6.

[27] Ibid. pp. 13-14.

[28] Rona Roberts and Steve Kay, *Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community Wide Study Circles*. Produced for the Topsfield Foundation, Inc./Study Circles Resource Center by Roberts and Kay, Inc., Lexington, Kentucky, 2000.

[29] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

[30] Catherine Flavin-McDonald, *Study Circles on Race and Racism: A Report on the Focus Groups*. Study Circles Resource Center and the YWCA of New Castle County, DL, 1998, p. 3.

[31] Rona Roberts and Steve Kay, *Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community Wide Study Circles*. Produced for the Topsfield Foundation, Inc./Study Circles Resource Center by Roberts and Kay, Inc., Lexington, Kentucky, 2000.

[32] Ibid. p. 30.

of race. Men are often more instrumental and consequently more action oriented, if they are inclined to take action. The size of the community also makes a difference. As Roberts and Kay point out, people who lived in communities where race had never been a topic of public discussion tended to view the purpose of these racial dialogues differently than those in large communities, where there was often a lot of talk but little action. In the former, participants understood the purpose as promoting racial awareness and developing relationships. In the latter, participants often wanted to work on more systemic issues, but did not see the dialogues as necessarily leading to this outcome.[33]

Part of the problem was identified by Shapiro in an extensive review of ten national programs on racial equity and inclusion. She concluded that most of these and other programs drew from psychological and cultural theories and use well developed methods to address prejudice, internalized oppression, diversity and intergroup relations. However, few efforts were "grounded in sociological, political and economic theories that directly address the structural dimensions of racism – and too few programs transcend individual and intergroup relations to address systemic racism."[34]

Although almost all of these early dialogue projects at the national level had clearly stated goals for their initiatives, few had "operationalized" what their intended outcomes would be. All made the assumption that bringing diverse groups together for dialogue was a positive move, but few, if any, had a clear sense of whether they were trying to bring about changes in individual attitudes or behaviors, much less structural changes in the community, or especially how these changes might be measured. Hurtado points out that most studies at the community level had generally focused on the outcomes for individuals rather than examining the impact on the climate of the community as a whole.[35] The changes that did occur were often complex and subtle, and it was difficult to sort out whether the outcome resulted from the community dialogues or other factors. McCoy and McCormick observed that a growing number of early study circle programs did begin to successfully link dialogue to action. However, there were several challenges that make this progression difficult. The volume of energy and effort to simply bring large numbers of people together for dialogue often left little time to plan the next stage of moving to action, and action steps might actually compromise the neutral convening role of the dialogue program.[36]

So, while these early community-based intergroup programs had some success in perhaps changing individual attitudes or behaviors, few programs achieved social action on a collective scale. It was on college campuses where a more expanded concept of intergroup dialogues began to emerge and more sophisticated research was conducted.

Campus Dialogues

As far back as the early 1990s many people recognized the potential for college campuses to serve as a laboratory that could offer what most residential community neighborhoods in the United States could not - it brought people from all kinds of backgrounds into potential relationship with one another and created the opportunity for new capacities of learning across differences. Building on the momentum and public attention that resulted from the President Clinton's initiative on race, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) initiated its own project titled *Racial Legacies and Learning: An American Dialogue*. The *Racial Legacies* initiative was a part of a larger AACU program called *American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy and Liberal Learning*, which sought to address fundamental questions about higher education in a diverse democracy and to provide resources for colleges and universities that are willing to engage these questions as a part of their mission and curriculum. The program published papers and reports, supported faculty study and institutional planning, and provided materials for curriculum development and classroom teaching. It also created many model programs in universities and college campuses across the nation for dialogue, both within the campus and in the communities that surrounded them.[37]

By 1999, some 500 colleges and universities had received backing for some type of diversity initiative from AACU or other national foundations for these efforts.[38] Much of the seminal programmatic and research work in this area started at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where an interdisciplinary group of scholars tackled the issues of diversity at almost every level.[39] In a review of the literature in 2001, however, Sylvia Hurtado concluded that although the intergroup dialogues were firmly grounded in theory and research based principles, actual research on the outcomes of intergroup dialogues was still in its infancy.[40] She did note

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[33] Ibid. p. 258.

[34] Ilana Shapiro. *Training for Racial Equity and Inclusion: A Guide to Selected Programs*. (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2002), p. 109. Today, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond and their "Undo Racism" workshops are one notable exception.

[35] Hurtado, p. 29.

[36] Martha McCoy and Michael A. McCormick, "Engaging the Whole Community in Dialogue: Study Circles Resource Center," David Louis Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado, editors. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 145.

[37] See the AACU website for further information: http://www.aacu.org/resources/diversity/index.cfm

[38] Caryn McTighe Musil, et al, *To Form a More Perfect Union: Campus Diversity Initiatives* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1999).

[39] For an excellent overview of the history of this seminal work at the University of Michigan, see "Intergroup Dialogue in Higher Education: Definition, Origins,and Practices," by Ximena Zdñiga, Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, Mark Chesler and Adena Cytron-Walker, ASHE Higher Education Report 32, no. 4, 2007.

[40] Sylvia Hurtado, "Research and Evaluation on Intergroup Dialogue," in David Louis Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado, editors. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 27.

that where longitudinal studies had followed students over at least four years, the research confirmed "identify development, more comfort with conflict as a normal part of social life, more positive intergroup interactions, and long-term effects on participation in activities with members of other racial racial/ethnic groups among dialogue participants."[41]

A few years later Ximena Zúñiga, after reviewing several qualitative and quantitative studies of intergroup dialogues on college campuses, found that dialogue participation was linked with positive effects on cognitive outcomes such as "knowledge about other groups and discrimination in society, stereotype and prejudice reduction, development of complex thinking, social awareness of self and others in systems of inequality, and increased understanding about the causes of conflict between social groups."[42] Dialogue participation was also found to "reduce anxiety about intergroup contact and to enhance skills related to communication across differences, conflict exploration, perspective taking, and comfort dealing with diversity."[43] Other researchers have documented "increased personal and social awareness regarding the importance of identity, affiliation, and difference, as well as increased knowledge about other groups and discrimination in society."[44]

In 2006, in an updated review of the research, Nagda reached similar conclusions regarding "students' greater intergroup understanding, increased motivation and skills for engaging across differences, and strengthened confidence in intergroup collaborations," but she also found that participants were more likely to take action toward greater social justice.[45] This later finding was also supported more recently by Lopez and Zúñiga (2010), who analyzed research from the Multiversity Intergroup Dialogue Research Project, a multi-institutional collaboration, funded by the Ford Foundation and W. T. Grant Foundation. This multidisciplinary team designed and implemented a common intergroup dialogue curriculum. The research demonstrated not only a significant change in awareness of group inequalities, empathy, and motivation to bridge difference, but, most importantly, an increase in the frequency and confidence in taking action individually or with others.[46] Additional research by Lopez and others[47] suggests that that these effects also persist over time.[48]

These findings about campus programs contribute greatly to our understanding of the relationship between intergroup dialogues, community building and social justice. Intergroup dialogue not only increases a systemic understanding of social problems but may also motivate people to seek structural social change. What is perhaps even more powerful about the work on several of the college campuses is that some are increasingly linked to broader institutional and community efforts, creating sustained intergroup dialogues focused on race and ethnicity, gender, religion, and rank and class. Lopez and Zúñiga point out that these college/community efforts help develop a more democratic culture not only in higher education but also in the wider communities.[49]

Where Do We Go From Here?

Too many Americans allow the tensions of diversity to tear them and their communities apart. They retreat from the public realm to the foxholes of private life, from which they lob rhetorical grenades at "the enemy," producing more psychodrama than social change. Democracy, meanwhile, continues to wither in the face of "money, faction, and fear."[50]

–Parker J. Palmer, founder and senior partner, the Center for Courage and Renewal

Current research on intergroup dialogues suggests that they are a promising way to address the racial divide in our nation. And they seem to be spreading. Catherine Walsh recently estimated that people in over 400 cities, in 46 states and the District of Columbia, have used this form of civic deliberation to try to improve race relations.[51] The evidence indicates that they have changed individual attitudes and behaviors, have opened the door to more constructive ways of thinking about discrimination and inequality, and have built beginning relationships among groups that often have little constructive contact with each other. Evidence suggests that these conversations help to build a stronger sense of

[41] Sylvia Hurtado, "Research and Evaluation on Intergroup Dialogue," in David Louis Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado, editors. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 27.

[42] Ximena Zúñiga, "Building Differences through Dialogue," *About Campus*, January–February 2003, pp. 8-16.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Hurtado, p. 24.

[45] Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, "Research on Outcomes and Processes of Intergroup Dialogue." *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 2006, Vol. 32 Issue 4, p59-73.

[46] Gretchen E. Lopez and Ximena Zúñiga, "Intergroup Dialogue and Democratic Practice in Higher Education," *New Directions For Higher Education*, no. 152, p. 38, Winter 2010, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

[47] Lopez, G. E., and Galbato, L. "Intergroup Dialogue and Students' Beliefs about Group Inequalities." Paper presented at the annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, Denver, May 2010; Lopez, G. E., Gurin, P., and Nagda, B. A. "Education and Understanding Structural Causes for Group Inequalities." *Political Psychology*, 1998, 19, 305–329; and Lopez, G. E., and Sorensen, N. "Learning through Intergroup Dialogue: A Multi-University Study of Educational Outcomes and Processes." Symposium presented at the annual Teacher's College Winter Roundtable on Cultural Psychology and Education, Columbia University, New York, Feb 2008.

[48] Lopez and Zúñiga, p. 38.

[49] Ibid, p. 40.

[50] Parker J. Palmer, "Humility, Chutzpah, and the Future of Democracy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 29, 2010.

[51] Katherine Cramer Walsh, "Communities, Race, and Talk: An Analysis of the Occurrence of Civic Intergroup Dialogue Programs," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 1, February 2006, pp. 22–33.

community and sense of belonging in areas where they take place. And, as William Julius Wilson points out, this intercultural contact can also foster the "bridging social capital" that can increase the capacity to collectively address future public problems or even prevent conflict from occurring.[52] Although research has not consistently documented that social action for social justice has always been an outcome, research on college campuses does suggests that these intergroup dialogues may provide a necessary foundation, and the future leadership, for it to emerge.

However, the divisions in our communities today go well beyond race and ethnicity. Most of the intergroup dialogue work to date has focused primarily on repairing relationships across racial and ethnic divides, often necessitated by a negative event that provided the catalyst for some community based action. Hurtado points out that the concept of "diversity" has been used almost exclusively to refer to race and/or ethnicity and argues that "today's social discourse requires an expansion of how we study diversity . . . to include differences in gender, age, socioeconomic status, physical ability, sexual orientation, religion, and geographic or cultural origins."[53]

Both survey research and even a cursory observation of news media suggests that the culture war around these issues has polarized Americans into opposing camps, where we see each other as not only opponents or adversaries, but often as enemies.[54] Is it possible to create intergroup dialogues that could lead to not only a better understanding among these groups, but also reconciliation about past injustices, and ultimately to social action that builds a stronger sense of community and an avenue toward more just and equitable social structures? The answer is a qualified yes, but several findings from the research suggest that the ability to move forward must address the following challenges.

First, even those who are willing to engage in such dialogues will have different expectations about what they want out of them and what they are to accomplish. In addition, people bring different, and often contradictory, levels of understanding of the issues involved. As Schoem points out, it is probably more accurate to assume that people who come together in community dialogues "likely will have different sociohistorical legacies steeped in inter-group antagonisms due to unequal social relations, hold stereotypical views of each others' behaviors and values, and question whether they are members of the same community."[55] This important truth poses no small problem for advocates of diversity dialogues, especially given a broader conception of diversity. How to handle this heterogeneity has also divided those who support these efforts. There are many who believe that, because of these differences, it is important to focus primarily, if not solely, on what binds us together in our communities and in our nation. Others, however, believe a better starting point is acknowledging group differences, develop a better understanding of why these differences may exist, and then, from the discussion that ensues, discover the commonality of goals and values.[56]

Second, while ultimately intergroup dialogues should lead to social justice on a systemic level, not everyone is ready to engage the conversation at this level. And there will mostly likely be resistance. Peter Schmidt points out there are signs of an emerging backlash against intergroup dialogues from conservatives. The National Association of Scholars issued a report in 2008 alleging that intergroup dialogues on campus are part of a broader movement to indoctrinate students in leftist ideology.[57] But resistance may come for a number of other reasons as well: uncomfortableness in dealing with the perceived anger of another group, lack of communication skills, not knowing where the conversation will lead, or simply a calculation that the time spent might not be worth it.

In my own work with a five-year project in North Carolina, multiple opportunities for dialogue were created to address this challenge - celebrations of diversity, intergroup conversations in a variety of institutional settings, an oral history project, study groups, and a community symposium. Participants would move from one component to the next as they became more comfortable.[58] What I have come to conclude is that participants must be recruited at different levels of engagement and each level helps to build towards the next. The least threatening is the "celebration of diversity." These type of events involve exhibits from different cultures, along with food, music, dance and art. Most people know very little about those that are different from themselves, either by race, ethnicity, social class, nationality of origin, age, sexual orientation, or religion, among many other things. Being exposed to cultural diversity is a beginning, relatively non-threatening, step to open oneself up to difference. Before you can effectively participate in the more serious dialogues about institutional discrimination or privilege, and certainly a history of domination of one group over another, these types of events begin to build relationships, increase interactions, and develop an appreciation for the positive role that difference might play in a community. Sumida and Gurin also point out that celebration plays an important role in the balance of power in society. They argue that acts of celebration can themselves be empowering and powerful. While power structures the life experiences of minority groups in America,

[52] Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[53] Sylvia Hurtado, et al, "Assessing the Value of Climate Assessments: Progress and Future Directions," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 2008, Vol. 1, No. 4, 204–221.

[54] Leonard Pitts, "Republican Party: Great Enemy of Reason," *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, April 15, 2012, p. F3.

[55] David Louis Schoem. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p 5.

[56] The former approach was reflected in the National Conversations of the National Endowment for the Humanities; the latter by the Undoing Racism workshops of The People's Institute.

[57] Peter Schmidt, "'Intergroup Dialogue' Promoted as Using Racial Tension to Teach," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wednesday, July 16, 2008. http://chronicle.com/daily/2008/07/3829n.htm.

[58] For a detailed analysis and evaluation of a five year intergroup dialogue project in North Carolina, please email the author.

"the celebration of traditions and the creation of new ones gives agency to members of racial and ethnic groups.[59]

A third, and related issue, is the belief that intergroup dialogues are simply "preaching to the choir" and that this is a relatively small part of the population. Recent surveys over the last few decades indicate that discriminatory attitudes have certainly changed, although some researchers have suggested that these surveys are really measuring what people think they should say, rather than what they truly believe. Sniderman and Carmines' creative experimental research on this dilemma, however, suggests that what people say on these surveys truly reflects what they believe.[60] If true, then the potential population who may be interested in such initiatives – the choir, so to speak – is actually quite large and that those who represent a racist philosophy, at least in the pure sense of this phrase – may truly be in decline. It is not that racism, especially systemic, does not exist, or that individual racists do not exist. The problem is that there is a large population of people, majority and minority, of good will, who are struggling for answers to this dilemma but have no recognizable opportunities for constructive intergroup dialogue about possible solutions.

A fourth challenge is that few intergroup dialogues ever get to the point of actual systemic change. Most of the projects have been relatively short term, either because of limited resources or perhaps exhaustion. A dialogue among groups that does not address these more systemic complexities may do little to enlighten the participant's understanding of the root causes of their attitudes. As Schoem and Hurtado point out, "absent a thorough analysis and engagement of the issues of structure and power associated with diversity, dialogue is a shell of what it is intended to be."[61] I agree that this systemic analysis is a necessary condition for an outcome that seeks social justice, but it is not sufficient. Equal attention must be paid to the relationship building across the group divides that creates the foundation for further action. As DeKurk points out in her research in southwest Texas, dialogue engenders intercultural understanding of the experiences of others and the structures that shape those experiences. This learning, and the process in general, facilitates intergroup alliances which support personal agency, or what she calls "response-ability." Of course, a successful outcome also requires access to resources such as cultural capital, and incentives to recognize a need for change.[62]

Support for this ultimate goal of systemic change is found in a sophisticated comparative statistical analysis by Katherine Walsh of 68 cities that undertook intergroup dialogues. She concludes that these dialogues are not merely symbolic - all talk and no action - reflecting the desire of the affluent as politically expedient ways to appear to do something about race relations. On the contrary, she states, "it would be erroneous to assume that publicly funded intergroup dialogue is an empty gesture toward social justice."[63] She did find, however, that pursuing a social justice agenda (focused on redistributive policy) was more likely in cities with lower affluence, high levels of inequality and large stores of racial resources. This suggests that members of marginalized communities do see the potential in this form of deliberative democracy.

Conclusion

Intergroup dialogues seem to be an effective means to educate participants about both the individual and systemic factors of discrimination, inequality, and oppression. But perhaps more importantly, they provide a vehicle for doing justice in a society where relationships have been undermined and undervalued. This may be especially important for those whose voice has been traditionally left out of a community's decision-making processes. Perhaps they are also building the relationships, and the social capital, for a more robust democracy and a closer step to social justice.

So, what might one do to engage in and perhaps build intergroup dialogues in their community? On the individual level, a good first initiative is to put yourself in situations where you simply have the opportunity to interact with people different from yourself. This is not easy. Most of our lives are organized around being with people that are pretty much like ourselves. So you have to be intentional about this. Visit churches, synagogues or mosques of a different race or a different religion. Go to small businesses that are owned by new immigrants. Attend community or neighborhood gatherings where people of a different social class are discussing issues that affect their lives. If you are fortunate to have in your community a nonprofit group that is concerned about diversity, or trying to address the needs of newer immigrants, attend their meetings. Many communities have "culturefests" or celebrations of diversity where you will have the chance to meet people from many cultures and walks of life. But you must go beyond observation. You need to engage people in conversations and begin building the kind of relationships, and trust, that eventually might lead to more serious dialogues.

If you get to the point that you want to address this at the community level, I recommend that you work first with a group to create an educational diversity event. I have worked with libraries, museums, and schools to invite people from different cultures to set up booths to display and teach about their culture, share food and music. My experience has been that most people who reflect the diversity of American life

[59] Stephen H. Sumida and Patricia Gurin, "A Celebration of Power," in David Louis Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 281.

[60] Paul M. Sniderman and Edward G. Carmines. *Reaching Beyond Race.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). p.149.

[61] Schoem and Hurtado, p. 226.

[62] Sara DeTurk, "The Power of Dialogue: Consequences of Intergroup Dialogue and their Implications for Agency and Alliance Building," *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1, February 2006, p. 33.

[63] Katherine Cramer Walsh, "Communities, Race, and Talk: An Analysis of the Occurrence of Civic Intergroup Dialogue Programs," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 1, February 2006, p 30.

welcome the opportunity to do this. And many members of the "established" community will attend. The reason that this is a good "first" event is that it is both relatively nonthreatening and provides a vehicle for recruiting folks to more sophisticated dialogue opportunities.

A second step might be to work with various institutional sectors to create conversational groups. This might include religious institutions that come together across the religious or racial divide. It might be bringing health care professionals together with members of the Latino community to discuss access to health care. It might be bringing members of a neighborhood together that has become more diverse, but have not had the opportunity to sit and talk with one another. The goal here, in addition to simply learning about each other, is to build social capital and perhaps lay the foundation to solve specific problems. It also creates dialogues where we live and work.

It is important that we not only talk about cultural diversity; we must examine it as well. A third step might create study groups which would bring people together to read and discuss diverse literature, history, or works of social commentary about cultural diversity in America. It is in these groups that we might tackle the often difficult subjects of institutional discrimination, economic inequalities, or political power, but also the successful stories of communities that have brought about structural changes for a more just society.

A fourth step might be to complete oral histories reflecting the diversity. By knowing our respective stories, we come to know ourselves and each other, and this shared knowledge gives us confidence and trust in our neighbors and reasons to care for and help each other. It is the process of sharing these stories that allows for a commitment to working together for a common community.

Finally, at some point, or perhaps several points over the years, you will want to bring the participants from all of these activities together to discuss collectively what they have learned in the process and how that shared knowledge might influence public policies. This is the hardest part. Although most of us have some sense of what the Swedish sociologist Gunner Myrdal called "The American Creed" - the ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all people, and of certain unalienable rights to freedom, justice and fair opportunity - we are not necessarily in agreement as to how it should be implemented. But with the help of these intergroup dialogues, we may move a step closer to its realization.

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