Civic deliberative dialogue groups and the topic of race: Exploring the lived experience of everyday citizens and their encounters with tension and conflict

Dissertation Defense
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We must talk to each other to survive as a society.

(Schoem, Hurtado, Sevig, Chesler, & Sumida, 2001)
Presentation Overview

- Dissertation Question
- Background and conceptual framework
- Review of the literature
- Research approach
- Dialogue context and data gathering
- Findings and analysis: Grounded theory and dimensional analysis
- Theoretical propositions
- Contributions to scholarly literature
- Implications for leadership and change
- Questions and comments
Research Question

What is the lived experience of participants and facilitators of civic dialogue and how do the members collectively move beyond tensions and disagreements that surface during deliberative dialogue processes?

Rodriquez, E., n.d. [Illustration of two faces - women].
Wilkerson, I., No, you’re not imagining it. Essence Magazine, September 2013, p. 133.
Characteristics of civic deliberative dialogue

- Assumes that many people have pieces of the answer
- Collaborative, inclusive and participatory
- Process oriented
- Personal stories and diverse perspectives shared
- Participants work together toward common understanding
- Active listening to understand, find meaning and agreement
- Admits that others’ thinking can improve one’s own
- Search for strength and value in others’ positions
- Keeps the topic open even after the dialogue formally ends
- A way to discover new options
- Face-to-face orientation
Civic deliberative dialogue and public engagement: The literature

Civic dialogue (as distinguished from other engagement)

Public sphere and public places

Public vs. private dialogue

Citizen centered participation

Literature Review

Civic deliberative dialogue and the topic of race: The literature

Civic deliberative dialogue and the topic of race: The literature

- Structural inequality
- Privilege
- Race and Racism
- Dignity and dialogue

Defining Race and Racism

- **Race** is “a worldview and as an ideology of human differences predicated on the assumption of a natural inequality among human groups” (Smedley, 2003).

- **Race** is a false classification of people that is not based on any real or accurate biological or scientific truth. In other words, the distinction we make between races has nothing to do with scientific truth. Race is a political construction (Race: The power of an illusion, 2003).

- **Racism = power + prejudice** (Operario & Fiske, 1998)
  
  A set of discourses and practices that imposes inferiority, subordinate positioning, and exclusionary group boundaries and hierarchies (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992).


  “An organized system, rooted in an ideology of inferiority that categorizes, ranks, and differentially allocates societal resources to human population groups” (Williams & Rucker, 2000, p. 76).

  “A system of structural inequalities and a historical process both created and recreated through routine practices” (Essed, 1991, p. 39).
Civic deliberative dialogue to address difficult issues and topics

Civic dialogue and engagement is purposefully intentional, possessing qualities that allow participants to partake in a democratic discussion of thoughts, concerns, and perspectives, in spite of tensions.

Research approach and perspective

- Relational epistemology and axiology

- A relational perspective is appropriately aligned with civic and deliberative dialogue processes and a focus on the work and relationships of the group and recognition of the whole as a collection of individuals, rather than individuals in isolation.
Civic dialogues on race

- Convened by a local non-profit organization
- Small, semi-rural mid-western city (2010 population 25,000), within 30 minutes of a major metropolitan area
- History of racial discrimination
- Seven sessions, held in fall 2012 and spring 2013

# Deliberative dialogues on race – Two sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogue Location/Venue</th>
<th>Dialogue Session One (Three Meetings)</th>
<th>Dialogue Session Two (Four Meetings)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Various venues around the City for three dialogues sessions</td>
<td>One location for four dialogues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Starter Video (Race: The power of an illusion)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Experiential Exercise</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Understanding the lived experience data gathering and Informal observations

- Witnessed the dynamics of personal interactions.

- Field notes were developed to document the physical qualities of the civic dialogue spaces.

- Status as an informal observer provided potential interview volunteers an opportunity to develop a comfort level with me as researcher.
## Dialogues on race – Summary of participant volunteers

### Initial interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>First Interviews</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity of First Interviewees</th>
<th>Tri-Racial/Melungeon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Follow up interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Follow-Up Interviews</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity of Follow-Up Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grounded Theory Methodology – data coding and analysis

- Data from interviews was sorted using open and axial coding
- Coding produced 880+ nodes
- Memoing throughout the coding process
- Constant comparison
- 44 node categories
- Dimensional analysis – three perspectives identified
  - Participant (12)
  - Facilitator (6)
  - Deliberative dialogue group (participants + facilitators)

Participant perspective – dimensions

- Participant
  - Promoting Health & Wellness
  - Convening for Healing
  - Sharing Local History

- Meeting Face-to-Face
  - Co-constructing Safety
  - Validating Our Stories

- Illustrating Disparity
  - Experiencing Tension, Disagreement, Discomfort
  - Forming a Dialogue Circle

- Listening Leads to Learning
  - Shifting Perspective

- Engaging Facilitator

Perspective -> Context -> Conditions -> Process

Consequences/Impact
Participant voices – co-constructing safety

“Well it started first with sharing, and the fact that we needed to be respectful, we needed to understand that my experience is not your experience. It went from there into an overview of some things that we might be experiencing after looking at the video. We saw the video and disseminated into small groups for two-way conversation. After that, we went back into the framework of the large group to share feelings, stories and perspectives.” (P03FTRM)

“I think it was reiterated that we all needed to be able to feel comfortable with our own stories, our own ideologies, regardless of the topic so that we can come to a better understanding of each other.” (P10MTRM)
Participant voices – experiencing tension and disagreement

“He made me really uncomfortable with some of his comments. And I mean I really understood that it was because there was a difference in generation and with age. He grew up in a different time with different socialization than I had.” (P12FW)

“And then, of course, when that man said “Don’t come at white people with such a… whatever his comment was; now I can’t even think of it. But I just remember his face, and I just was so mad about it.” (P14FAA)

“I was uncomfortable when the guy kept talking about hybrids (chuckles). He kept talking about that it would be good when finally everyone was interbred because nature smiles on the hybrid. And he was talking about children of interracial marriage always have great teeth and they look better than their parents, and I kept thinking, where are you going with this? I couldn’t tell if it was positive or negative.” (P04FW)
Facilitator perspective – dimensions

- Perspective
  - Promoting Health & Wellness
  - Co-Constructing Safety
  - Listening Deeply
  - Honoring Experiences of Others
- Process
  - Convening For Healing
  - Assuming a Dual Role
  - Processing Tension, Disagreement, Discomfort
  - Letting the Dialogue go Its Own Way
- Context
  - Sharing Local History

Conditions:
- perspective
- context
Facilitator voices – co-constructing safety

- “The great thing about the dialogue was that everyone really paid attention to what we set up as a group in terms of caring for each other.” (F02FW)
- “Before we begin the dialogue and before we begin interacting, we discussed how we wanted to interact. We talked about the importance of having a constructive environment for conversation and interaction.” (F01MAA)
- “I think that the dialogues and the film series allowed people to dig in and feel uncomfortable. But that was a positive, because we can’t dismantle structures of oppression if we don’t know how they were structured.” (F05FAA)
- “We attended to folks, in terms of body language and conversation to see if they were, showing [signs of] discomfort and [we were careful to] give voice, or give attention to folks who were expressing signs of discomfort.” (F01MAA)
Deliberative dialogue group perspective – dimensions
Group voices – promoting candid conversation and inclusion

- “It was the only time where I have had transparent conversations with any other people of color in this City. Because in the workplace there is a guardedness and carefulness about how people interact and what they say.” (P04MW)
- “Participants had an opportunity to talk across differences, in a very diverse group and in a very safe way.” (F01MAA)
- “You have to be willing to listen and understand in order to have other people listen and gain an understanding from you.” (P14FAA)
- This was a time to hear people share about their sore spots and the things that have caused them pain. (P04FW)

Core dimension - Safety

- “I think that everyone was able to express themselves in their way without fear of reproach.” (P03FTRM)

- “The facilitators explained that this wasn’t a debate, it was a dialogue and we were all to speak and share our experiences in an equal manner and that we were to create a safe place so people could share.” (P04FW)

- “Creating safety allowed everyone to express themselves in their way without fear.” (P03FTRM)

- “Safety gave me an opportunity to say what I really feel and have it received and not looked upon in a negative way or as criticism.” (P14FAA)

- “The aspect of safety gave people the chance to take their time and really articulate what they were trying to say without being worried about how it sounded coming out.” (P15FW)
Theoretical Propositions

- Creating space to move from tension to healing
- Heart stories, hurt stories
- Sustaining the conversation, bridging the divide

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Wilkerson, I., No, you’re not imagining it. Essence Magazine, September 2013, p. 133.
Contributions to theoretical literature

- Empirical insight and understanding about how participant’s processed their thoughts and feelings about the deliberative dialogues on race.

- An understanding that safety (a safe environment) is necessary to productively confronting tension and disagreement.

- The time between the dialogues produced a space for reflection which assisted with shifts in participant perspective and new understanding.

- The inevitably of tension and disagreement in civic deliberative dialogues about race is mitigated through a sustained practice.

- Sustained civic deliberative dialogues on race creates opportunities for healing and relationship building emanating from group interaction.
Implications for leadership and change

- Civic dialogue as sustained practice in local communities:
  - Promotes leaderfulness and leaderful practice -- individual and collective (Raelin, 2004, 2011)
  - Accepts tension and disagreement as a healthy and natural “given” to healing, problem-solving and transformation.
  - Preserves participant dignity through safety and respect for multiple points of view and perspectives.

Study limitations and areas for further study

Questions for Further Research

- What shifts in understanding and perspectives are recognized from civic dialogues on race sustained for 90 days or more?
- What is the lived experience of Generation X and Millennials with tension and disagreement in civic dialogue groups?
- Despite the tension and disagreement that is inevitable in civic dialogues on race, what is it that motivates people to remain engaged in the practice and the work?
- How to implement sustained civic dialogue as an alternative to the traditional public hearing?
Personal reflections and call to action

**Dialogue is Action**

*Begin a conversation about race in your community using civic deliberative dialogue!*

Questions and Comments
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