

RACIALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: DESIGNING A PROCESS THAT INCLUDES ALL VOICES

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I have had the privilege of attending several thousand hours of workshops and presentations on racial awareness, cultural competence, and racial equity in education. Hearing from national experts on racial equity and listening to people of color share their personal experiences have given me a deeper understanding of my own racial identity as a white woman and how interactions are shaped by race. These experiences have also helped me understand how many elements and challenges must be considered in order to plan community conversations that effectively value racially diverse voices. In this article, I reflect on patterns of interaction between white people and people of color that I have observed in more than a decade of facilitating and participating in community conversations.

Becoming aware of and identifying some of the patterns that contribute to marginalizing the voices of people of color can help organizers and planners of community conversations design a more racially inclusive space for dialogue. Further, becoming more aware of our own social location within any group can help us identify inaccurate assumptions that inhibit the development of racially inclusive communities.

While multiple patterns of behavior and interaction contribute to marginalization and inequity, I will focus on three: inaccurate assumptions, expecting assimilation, and the ignorance of privilege. Understanding (and hence being able to foresee) these barriers will help everyone involved in community conversations address and change practices that perpetuate racial discrimination in government and local community decision-making.

During my years of working in the public arena, I have noticed the continued marginalization of the voices and ideas of people of color in government and community decision-making. Communities, including those in Minnesota,² have historically lacked representative diversity in leadership and decision-making positions. Promoting racial equity and inclusion requires white individuals in government and other public institutions to be culturally competent and racially aware in order to gain meaningful participation from the entire community.

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² Michael Fondungallah et al., REPORT OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE COMPLIANCE AUDIT OF CERTAIN PROVISIONS IN THE STATE OF MINNESOTA HUMAN RIGHTS ACT, STATEWIDE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROGRAM, AND PROCUREMENT ACT Equity/NAACP Working Group, State of MN, December 2016 <http://www.fondlaw.com/downloads/AuditReport.pdf>

“How can we help you?”

During the winter of 2016-17, the Dispute Resolution Institute at Mitchell Hamline School of Law, the Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution, and the Center for Integrative Leadership at the University of Minnesota helped organize a multi-session, community conversation in the city of Falcon Heights, Minnesota.³ This was the location of the shooting of Philando Castile, a black man who was killed by a police officer who pulled him over on a neighborhood road for what was considered a routine traffic stop. The small suburb of St. Paul was distraught over the event, and community conversations were initiated by the City Council to work in concert with the Council’s Taskforce on Inclusion and Policing. My experiences facilitating in Falcon Heights proved to be an excellent example of a well-designed community conversation. However, even using the most well-designed process, it is important for facilitators to be continually aware of barriers to participation in order to ensure that the process remains open.

The circle dialogue format in Falcon Heights was informed by restorative justice circles, a method of restorative practice with roots in Native American cultures.⁴ It was modified for these sessions to account for time and other limitations. Participants were randomly grouped into circles of about 10; each circle was led by two facilitators/circle keepers. Members of the circle were asked to respond to a series of questions, one at a time, using a talking piece that was passed from one person to the next around the circle. When they held the talking piece, participants could reflect on the question or they could pass. Participants were encouraged to speak their truth using “I” statements and to listen to each participant’s comments without judgement or immediate comment.

At one of the sessions I helped facilitate, two of the 10 circle members were people of color. As the talking piece was passed around the circle, each participant spoke to the question of what s/he valued about the community. One individual, a white woman I will call “M,” spoke at length during her turn and offered lots of comments about her positive experiences with the city and government. Once everyone had a turn, M asked to speak again. I gave her the talking piece out of order and she proceeded to direct a question to the only black woman (“S”) in the circle. “How can we help you?” she asked. I paused the circle to remind the participants of the format for circle dialogue. Rather than single out an individual and put them on the spot, I suggested that M state her question as a “wondering” and anyone in the circle who wished to respond could do so when the talking piece was passed around again. This was to maintain full participation of the circle as a community and to ensure a safe space for everyone to speak their truth. M responded, “Well, now I don’t feel safe.”

This interaction played over in my mind as I drove home that night. And I have continued to reflect on, and discuss with others, the many layers of racial marginalization that are contained this interaction. I’ll use this experience to examine three common patterns of interaction in cross-racial community conversations.

³ Members of the design team for this project included Mariah Levison, Ken Morris, Sharon Press, Raj Sethuraju, Kathy Quick, and Elizabeth Dressel.

⁴ Umbreit, M. and Peterson Armour, M. 2011 RESTORATIVE JUSTICE DIALOGUE: AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE, Springer Publishing Company.

1. *Inaccurate Assumptions*

When we interact with others, making assumptions about them seems to be our default mode. In his book *THE NATURE OF PREJUDICE*, Gordon Allport explained that it is human nature to think in terms of categories.⁵ Additionally, Dr. David Premack developed “The Theory of Mind” to explain how our brains are designed to guess at and draw conclusions about what others are thinking, assumptions that subsequently guide our actions.⁶ But how we categorize and act on information is subject to the limitations of our awareness. One example of this limitation is called implicit bias.

Implicit bias comes from a collection of associations that are held deep in our unconsciousness.⁷ As Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald explain in *BLINDSPOT: THE HIDDEN BIASES OF GOOD PEOPLE*, we all carry implicit biases that may not be consistent with reality, or even with our conscious belief system.⁸ Thus, we are often “blind” to the associations that guide our words and actions. There exists a wealth of research on how our brains make judgements and sort information based on prejudice, stereotyping, implicit bias, assimilation/contrast, and in-group favoritism.⁹ Our judgement is limited and not always inclusive of other perspectives; particularly those of cultures or races that we have little experience with. The result is that inaccurate conclusions may be drawn without evidence and are frequently hidden from our consciousness. Since implicit bias and cultural influences operate unconsciously, good intentions are not enough to create the conditions necessary for effective dialogue. In order for diverse communities to gain participation and function more equitably, we must make a conscious effort to seek accurate information through intergroup contact.

In general, I have noticed that when a predominantly white group of individuals designs a community input session, organizers often make assumptions about what will affect the participation of minority or non-white populations. For example, during my years in school board service, a common excuse that I often heard from white people to describe non-attendance from parents of color at teacher conferences, is that “those parents don’t care.” Upon reflection, I have never actually met a parent who did not care about his/her child’s education. Even this brief examination of an assumption reveals the absurdity in concluding that people would care about their children differently based on the melanin in their skin. Data does not support the conclusion that not attending conferences proves a lack of concern; there could be many other reasons for non-attendance. Checking all assumptions with data is an effective way to eliminate the barrier of inaccurate assumptions.

⁵ Allport, G. 1954 *THE NATURE OF PREJUDICE*. Addison-Wesley.

⁶ Kaku, M. 2014 *The Future of the Mind*. Doubleday at 54.

⁷ Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, The Ohio State University <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>

⁸ Banjari, M. and Greenwald, A. 2016 *BLINDSPOT: HIDDEN BIASES OF GOOD PEOPLE*. Random House.

⁹ Plous, S. 2003 *The Psychology of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination: An Overview*. In Plous, S. (Ed.) *UNDERSTANDING PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION*. McGraw-Hill.

Another barrier rooted in inaccurate assumptions is the concept of “illusory truth.”¹⁰ For example, when a statement has been repeated many times in predominantly white spaces, it can take on the appearance of truth even when there is no evidence that supports the statement and the assumptions behind it. Even with knowledge to the contrary, illusory truth can dominate one’s beliefs.¹¹ Making such assumptions often perpetuates negative stereotypes. Sometimes, a simple logic check or further reflection can reveal a negative stereotype. Identifying assumptions and checking them with reflection or actual data is necessary to avoid the barrier of illusory truth.

Another common assumption is that (all) people of color experience poverty and need organizers to provide meals, transportation, and daycare in order to attend a community event. These may be the needs of some families regardless of race, and providing access is important; however, targeting services based on race or ethnicity will often backfire. Community members of color can certainly identify actions, even those meant to be helpful, that are based on a negative stereotype. Organizers and planners must take the necessary steps to know their communities.

Returning to the Falcon Heights example, the design team included multiple perspectives and checked themselves for inaccurate assumptions. It was also important that as a facilitator I continued to scan for inaccurate assumptions in the circle process. When M singled out S, the only black woman in the circle, to answer the question “How can we help you?” I needed to pause the conversation immediately. The question triggered my awareness of the pressure commonly put on people of color in predominantly white spaces to speak for their entire race. There are a number of assumptions in this question:

- 1) that S can speak for all black people;
- 2) that M is asking for all white people;
- 3) that S needs or wants help; and
- 4) that M is in a position to help.

These assumptions are likely products of the brain’s categorization system and implicit bias. While M’s question may have had its source in good intentions, the unconscious interference of implicit bias makes intent irrelevant. The effect of M’s question, and the assumptions therein, must be stopped and examined to avoid supporting an illusory truth and the negative stereotypes that result in marginalization of black voices in Falcon Heights.

Using social science research and technical conclusions based on data is one way to eliminate bias. However, in my experience, the best way to determine how to provide a welcoming environment for all voices is to seek intergroup contact through relationships between an institution and diverse populations.¹² The contact needs to be proactive, authentic, equal, widely representative, and based on common humanity. Including a person of color on a committee and expecting them to answer for all people of their race will not meet this need. It is also

¹⁰ Fzaido, L., Brashier, N., Payne, B. K., Marsh, E., *Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth*, 114 JOURNAL OF EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY: GENERAL 5, 993-1002 (2015).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Plous, *supra* note 9 at 15.

helpful if the individuals designing community conversations are trained to recognize implicit bias.¹³ There are tools available that can increase our understanding of implicit bias and how it affects our judgement.¹⁴ Paying attention to verbal cues, using logic and data to follow through on assumptions, using tools to become aware of one's own implicit bias tendencies, and seeking intergroup contact are all ways to mitigate the barrier of inaccurate assumptions when predominantly white groups design racial and culturally diverse community input sessions.

2. Expecting Cultural Assimilation

Culture is a term that is widely used, yet its meaning remains vague. For this article, I define culture as a multi-dimensional framework that shapes our identity and how we interact. In addition, I describe the common experience of people who identify as white in the United States as a culture of experiences and expectations.¹⁵ Drawing on the expertise of social psychologist Geert Hofstede,¹⁶ culture is often unconscious, and we do not always know when we are affected by it.¹⁷ This is especially true for a dominant cultural group. My own culture becomes much more noticeable when I step outside of my predominantly white environment. Therefore, it becomes vitally important for leaders who design community dialogue to not only be aware of other cultures, but to know and recognize their own culture.

There are layers of norms and expectations that dictate the “how” and “why” of the democratic process in the United States. A white family moving into a predominantly white community will have a sense of ownership over decisions that are made at the local level. To be heard by local decision makers, and to have a say in how tax dollars are being spent is not experienced equally by all racial populations. The cultural expectation to have a voice in decisions is uniquely “white.” An individual from a non-white racial group is often expected to assimilate to the dominant culture; that is, the culture that influences systems and institutions. This assumes that the way things are done is already the best way for everyone.

Dominant cultures often portray an inflexible control and paternalism¹⁸ that stifles creativity, progress, and authentic inclusion for the greater community. Expecting assimilation is a

¹³ For example, verbal cues can alert one to situations where implicit bias may be engaged. The descriptive phrase “those people” when used by whites about people of color separates people of color into a general “other” category with assumed common generalizations that are perceived to be different than those of people who are white. The use of “we” when spoken by a white person can also implicitly mean only white people, especially when the statement contains an assertion with which people of color cannot identify.

¹⁴ Bringing unconscious bias into consciousness can begin by having individuals take the Implicit Association Test (IAT). <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>. Project Implicit is a non-profit organization that collects data via the internet on hidden biases with the goal to educate the public about social cognition. The organization also has helpful tools to assist individuals in understanding their own implicit bias. <https://www.projectimplicit.net/index.html>

¹⁵ It is important to note that while race informs culture, race and culture are not the same. For example, two individuals who have similar social experiences based on the tone of their skin can be culturally very different based on their lived experience with language, religion, and ethnicity. Therefore, describing white as a culturally similar experience does not ignore the other cultural differences that shape a person's identity.

¹⁶ <http://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/>

¹⁷ Lee, J. *Culture and its Importance in Mediation*, 16 PEPPERDINE DISPUTE RESOLUTION JOURNAL 317 (2016).

¹⁸ Paternalism is the root of much of the dominant culture related to inclusion in this country. Originating from the Latin word *pater*, meaning father, paternalism assumes a male figurehead displays an assumed responsibility for the welfare of subordinates by exerting control and authority. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/paternalism> In 1971, Professor Gerald Dworkin illustrated the concept of paternalism in the law, and attempted to describe the circumstances where it was ap-

cultural expression of paternalism. Even if input is welcomed, a paternalistic entity may reinterpret the input to make it fit the cultural norms of the dominant culture. This is another way the barrier of expecting cultural assimilation preserved the status quo of inequity, even when it appeared that input was welcomed and given.

When paternalism becomes deeply ingrained in our country's lawmaking, and the lawmakers lack racial and cultural diversity, assumptions based on implicit bias and homogenous white experiences become part of the laws of our nation. The assumption that "we" (as white people) know what is best, or that people of color need our help, continues to exist as a strong cultural influence, informing structures and systems that perpetuate racial inequity.

Organizers of racially diverse community input sessions need to be keenly aware of the effects of cultural influence and develop a process that effectively receives input from people of color. When M asked "How can we help you?" her question was loaded with paternalistic perspective. "We" assumes that there is some group that is in charge of helping. When the statement is made by a white community member, and the "you" refers to a person of color, the "we" is seen as referring to white people. By asking how to help, M reflects the cultural influence of paternalism that whites are in a position to help, and that S is subordinate. This is why I stopped the discussion when this question was asked during the Falcon Heights community conversation.¹⁹ I tried to take the focus off of the single person of color and placed the responsibility of answering the question on the entire group, allowing all group members an equal opportunity to respond to the question when they had the talking piece. This is consistent with restorative justice circle process in keeping a balanced community during discussion.²⁰ The circle process is a great tool to "redress the abuse of power and the resulting imbalance"²¹ as long as the circle facilitator has "a critical consciousness about her own social location."²²

Assimilation is a strong cultural expectation that is rooted in our country's paternalistic history and legal system. Including other cultures and perspectives into the design process is an effective way to resist paternalism. If the diversity of the greater community is given power and control over designing a process for community conversation, the likelihood of it being inclusive increases dramatically. As the Falcon Heights conversations illustrate, circle process is a helpful tool for leveling the playing field for participants and for avoiding the assimilation barrier.

propriate for government to interfere with individual freedom and autonomy. Dworkin, G. 1971 *Paternity, MORALITY AND THE LAW*. Wasserstrom, R. (Ed.) Wadsworth Publishing Co. Even so, Dworkin acknowledged "[p]aternalism then will always involve limitations on the liberty of some individuals in their own interest but it may also extend to interferences with the liberty of parties whose interests are not in question." at 183.

¹⁹ My judgment in this moment exemplifies the difficulty to act with racial awareness in any given moment. While I make some generalizations based on race in this article, we must also suspend the tendency to assume that people will react similarly based on the color of their skin. In some respects, race does create similar social life experiences; but how one internalizes those experiences results in different reactions that are exclusively original to them. This article speaks to common patterns that act as barriers. The patterns are common, not constant; and the barriers may have more or less effect on a person of color. Awareness of the possibility for inequity must be combined with the ability to discern emotions, read body language and hold open a safe space for expression of multiple perspectives.

²⁰ Umbreit and Armour, *supra* note, at 179.

²¹ *Id.* at 265.

²² *Id.* at 272.

3. *The Ignorance of Privilege*

Awareness of explicit and implicit bias, as well as one's own culture, are important skills for community leaders, especially for white leaders in diverse communities. But perhaps the most humbling and challenging awareness for a white person in this country is that of one's own privilege. Peggy McIntosh introduced the phrase "white privilege" to describe the invisible unearned benefits that society confers upon white people as an institutional phenomenon.²³ She lists those benefits metaphorically; it is as if white people have an invisible knapsack of unearned privilege.²⁴ "Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is, in fact, permission to escape or dominate."²⁵ The power that comes from privilege is the power to be comfortable. The comfort comes from living in a society that is set up for your success.

White people in the United States live in an environment that is set up for their success based on cultural assumptions.²⁶ People of color do not share that same privilege. Inaccurate and negative assumptions about people of color and the culture of paternalism create and perpetuate systems of inequality. As a white person, awareness of privilege, along with awareness of one's own race and culture, is a necessary skill for influencing actions to equalize the power base of communities. In order to combat racial inequality, it becomes necessary to actively work against the systems that privilege whites.

When Beverly Daniel Tatum coined the phrase "the moving walkway of racism,"²⁷ she was describing the effect of systems of oppression for people of color and the power that comes from a history of repeated norms that perpetuate that oppression because they become entrenched in society. So even if a white person's behavior is not racist or prejudicial, she contributes to preserving systemic racism by just living her daily white existence (on the moving walkway of racism).

The foundation upon which I base much of my understanding of the world and the values that I hold changed as I began to learn about the experiences of people of color. Twenty years ago, I was not aware of my unconscious bias, the biases embedded in the culture that I lived in, or how I supported racial inequity. Cruising along the moving walkway of racism, it was easy for me to be blind to policies and practices that oppressed people of color. As a person with privilege living in a predominantly white environment, I did not see the effects of racism. If I witnessed racial inequity, it was easy for me to explain it as an isolated occurrence, and not part of a system. By not objecting to things I noticed, my silence endorsed racial inequity. My ignorance of privilege helped preserve the status quo of social racial hierarchy.

Only through many years of interactions and relationships with people of color have I come to better appreciate my own privilege and, alternatively, what it means to live without those

²³ McIntosh, P. 1989 *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum. Wellesley Centers for Women. https://nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/Knapsack_plus_Notes-Peggy_McIntosh.pdf for a summary of white privilege and tips for facilitators.

²⁴ *Id.* at 3-5.

²⁵ *Id.* at 7.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Tatum, B. D. 1977 *WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE CAFETERIA? AND OTHER CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE*. Basic Books.

same benefits. I now understand that regardless of my intent, the effect of my actions can either be consistent with the walkway, or in resistance to it. This has changed my perspective, behavior, and world view. I am more aware of power dynamics within society and how they play out. Witnessing racism and then being able to deconstruct my perspective with a racially conscious person of color was critical to my learning. I have become more culturally cognizant and better understand my own racial identity. And I still make mistakes and seek multiple perspectives so I can continue to learn.

White privilege showed up in Falcon Heights, when M said she did not feel safe. M presented as a very knowledgeable, confident white woman. Her participation content, length of speaking, and perspective sounded like she was a leader in the community and a caring person. My own experiences as part of white culture made it easy for me to relate to her. Whether or not it was conscious, M understood that certain achievements and titles gave her the authority to speak without being challenged in many environments.

However, the circle process levels the playing field for all who are participating. It does not matter what racial, professional, or societal role you hold, everyone is equal. There is no place for privilege or the expectations that come with it. M did not actually have the privilege of stepping outside the circle format. As a facilitator, I should have not given her the talking piece out of order. Doing so allowed her to exert a social position that circle practice does not recognize, and I should have sent the talking piece around the circle again with a specific prompt. To correct the imbalance, I brought the question to the group as a whole. I believe this alerted M to her privilege and made her uncomfortable. When she stated, "Now I don't feel safe," she equated not being comfortable with not being safe.

Shortly after this circle exchange, I became aware of the work of Robyn DeAngelo and the term "white fragility".²⁸ Dr. DeAngelo explains that one of the ways white fragility presents itself is when white people equate discomfort with a lack of safety.²⁹ Talking about race can be uncomfortable for anyone. The fear of being called racist is often cited as a reason white people avoid the topic of race. It is especially difficult for white people to get to a place where their reaction to being called a racist is one of curiosity about what they may have to learn about themselves or others. In fact, it is a common avoidance technique for white people to claim that the mere word "race" stifles conversation. However, it is the reaction to the word that stifles conversation, and that reaction is caused by white fragility. I've found that when I react to an assertion of racism with open curiosity and actually listen, the conversation is quite enlightening. Being cognizant of dynamics related to white privilege is crucial to providing a place where people of color can show up, speak their truth, be believed, heard, and honored. "[F]eeling safe" as a person of color in a predominantly white environment has a different meaning than when used to describe a white person's experience in that same environment.³⁰ It is important to understand these dif-

²⁸ DiAngelo, R. 2018 *WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WHITE? DEVELOPING WHITE RACIAL LITERACY - REVISED*. Counterpoint Books. See also, DiAngelo, R. 2018 *WHITE FRAGILITY: WHY IT'S SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM*. Beacon Press.

²⁹ Robyn DiAngelo, *Critical Racial and Social Justice Education*, Resources, (2014). https://robindiangelo.com/2014site/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/White_Fragility_And_Feedback.pdf

³⁰ *Id.*

ferent perspectives. A person's life experience with feeling safe is often different based on skin tone and the culture of the environment they live in.

Being aware of one's privilege and being able to maintain an open curiosity about race can lessen the effects of white privilege. This awareness, along with an understanding of implicit bias and ways that a dominant culture can perpetuate structural inequities are skills that will improve access to community decisions for people of color.

More importantly, building and maintaining authentic relationships with people of color reduces barriers to creating the understanding necessary for racial equity. Deep and intentional listening is a skill that helps build relationships and opens up new perspectives. The more we open space for other possibilities and points of view and listen to what is said, the better our communities will be. The circle process used in the Falcon Heights community conversations was an excellent tool to promote equality in participation. When assumptions, assimilation and privilege crept into the discussion, circle practice allowed me as the facilitator the ability to quickly correct the imbalance and bring the discussion back to the community conversation.

A Note About Perfection

The desire to design a perfect process can itself be a barrier to effectiveness. Similarly, fear of doing or saying something wrong in a relationship can paralyze us. Humility and curiosity are helpful when designing processes to counteract systems that have repeatedly marginalized or silenced the voices of people of color. When seeking multiple perspectives, it is helpful to suspend judgement about what is right or wrong and allow space and time for different perspectives to surface and be heard. Mistakes can bring critical new understanding. When we speak out, we may make a positive difference or learn ways to do better.

Conclusion

Understanding how specific patterns of interaction can marginalize the voices of people of color is helpful in creating a safe space for authentic dialogue. What is perhaps more helpful is increasing our awareness of implicit bias, white privilege, and cultural influences through self-reflection. My relationships with people of color are the source of most of my awareness of my own white privilege. I reflect more deeply on my beliefs when they are challenged by experience. It is critical to make a conscious effort to seek accurate information through intergroup contact in diverse communities. When personal relationships are authentic, meaningful, and honest, they help remove barriers across race and culture. In Falcon Heights, when M asked S, the only person of color in the circle, "How can we help you?" S responded, "Get to know me."

