

Can we talk? Challenges and Triumphs of a Qualitative Study on Race

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Introduction

Reluctance to discuss racism is clearly a problem that pervades American society. This presentation describes an investigation that examines those who intentionally engage in interracial dialogue on race. This examination is considered within the social context of the United States, where race is a cultural preoccupation and yet is commonly avoided as a topic of frank, open discussion, especially among interracial groups. The central inquiry focuses on the distinctiveness of participants who elected to engage in interracial dialogue on race. This is an epistemological inquiry that views the propensity for interracial dialogue on race as a unique tendency and therefore probes factors that contribute to this behavior. This study seeks to formulate an understanding of what prompts individuals to seek out interracial dialogue on race and racism through gathering input from participants in such dialogue.

Background of the problem

Racism has arguably been the most divisive force in the American consciousness. The United States has a long history of viewing race as its most salient social category, a notion that has caused race-related events and movements to significantly define the country's history and identity (Dalton, 1995; Correspondents of The New York Times, 2001; Cargan & Ballantine, 1994; Hodgkinson, 1997; Terkel, 1992; Wilkinson, 1997). Rubin (1994) called race "the great divide in our society, dividing people of color from each other, separating whites from them all" (p.164). Hacker (1995) suggested that, "race has been an American obsession since the first Europeans sighted 'savages' on these shores" (p. 3). (Hacker's use of the term "savages" in this context is clearly meant ironically.) He described race in the United States as a "social and human division, ...[that] surpasses all others—even gender—in intensity and subordination" (p. 4). Ropers and Pence (1995) confirmed that, "because it is one of the most visible, powerful, and violent ways of dividing peoples, social scientists have long considered race one of the greatest concerns confronting the United States (p. 30). There seems to be considerable agreement among social scientists, like Dalton (1995) that race "remains America's central social problem" (p. 4).

Conflict involving race relations has contributed to political, economic, physical, and social division among Americans (Dalton, 1995; Feagin, 2000; Feagin & Vera, 1995; Goodman, 2001; Hacker, 1995; Ropers & Pence, 1995; Tatum, 1997; Tuch, Sigelman, and MacDonald, 1999). The violence and degradation that established and has enforced domination of one race over another has promulgated continued violence of hate, bigotry and protest (Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Correspondents of The New York Times, 2001; Feagin & Vera, 1995; Hacker, 1995; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Tatum, 1997). Thompson and Neville (1999) spoke of “an array of injustices that people of various races experience on the basis of race” [and cite] data [that] support the persistence of racism in terms of public opinion, incidents of racially motivated violence and structural discrimination” (p. 155).

Racism has wounded the spirits and diminished the humanity of scores of individuals and has sought to prevent oppressed and oppressor alike from realizing the benefit of collective effort and power (Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Dalton, 1995; Feagin, 2000; Goodman, 2001; Hacker, 1995; Tatum, 1997; Thompson & Neville, 1999). Tuch, Sigelman, and MacDonald (1999) concluded that, “few issues are as critical to America’s future, or as potentially divisive as race relations” (p. 109).

American cultural preoccupation with race has been the result of a long history of racially-motivated events. Throughout the course of United States history, a great deal of energy has been generated and invested in both propelling racially-influenced (or racially-motivated) movements and then struggling to make amends for, recover from, or “undo” such movements. Examples such as the near-genocide of the Native American peoples, reservation acts and treaty legislation, slavery, Civil War, Reconstruction, the Civil rights movement, WWII internment camps, affirmative action, school segregation and desegregation, and so forth, stand as testimony to the ubiquitous nature of race in American culture.

Set in this historical context, the title of Studs Terkel’s best-selling 1992 book, RACE: How Blacks and Whites Think & Feel about the American Obsession, the term obsession seems to be an appropriate, and widely accepted, descriptor. Similarly, Scott (1997), in a concept he attributed to Hacker (1992), identified race as “our [the U.S.’s] perpetual preoccupation” (p. viii). Taylor (1992) noted that “[American] society is officially—and officiously—race-conscious” (p. 12). Rutstein (1997) suggested that America is gripped by a coast-to-coast, border-to-border obsessive neurosis

about race” (p. 80). D’Souza (1999) referred to Americans as possessing a “neurotic obsession with race that maims our souls” (p. 431). Taylor (1992) suggested that,

in our multiracial society, race lurks just below the surface of much that is not explicitly racial. Newspaper stories about other things—housing patterns, local elections, crime, antipoverty programs, law-school admissions, mortgage lending, employment rates—are also, sometimes only by implication, about race. When race is not in the foreground of American life, it does not usually take much searching to find it in the background. Race is a looming presence because it is a category that matters in nearly every way that we know how to measure” (p. 10).

Taylor captured the essence of how American society, through its obsession, has become definable by measures of racial discontent.

Taylor (1992) also alluded to the other defining characteristic of the American race dilemma. His description of race as lurking “just below the surface” and his assertion that often stories about other issues are “only by implication, about race,” illustrate the avoidance of racial issues that is simultaneously part of the American paradigm. I suggest that, juxtaposed with Americans’ preoccupation with race, is the directly contrary tendency to avoid direct engagement on the topic of race and racism. I term this phenomenon the *race obsession-avoidance paradox*.

In the professional counseling and social issues literature, as well as in popular literature, Americans’ emotion and conflict about race, their lack of preparedness, and their reluctance to discuss race-related issues is addressed. Experts in counseling supervision, Bernard and Goodyear (1998), referred to American society as “phobic about race” (p. 45). Tatum (1997) remarked that “as our nation becomes more diverse, we need to be able to communicate across racial and ethnic lines, but we seem increasingly less able to do so” (p. xvi). In their discussion of racism as a problem largely and strategically denied by American culture, Thompson and Carter (1997) indicated that, “one byproduct of these dismissive strategies is a climate where race has become a sensitive topic. Hence, and ironically, race is a subject worthy of meaningful discussion, yet people who talk about racial matters are often silenced” (p. 9). Kivel (1996) went so far as to say that, “in this country it has always been dangerous even to talk about racism” (p. 11)

Dalton (1995) likened our avoidance of racial discussion to a “deep and abiding wound” [he credits Wendall Berry for the use of this term], which “left untreated, ... will continue to ooze and fester” (p.

3). Dalton (1995) also said “we are loath to confront one another around race.... We have run away from [it] far too long. We are so afraid of inflaming the wound that we fail to deal with what remains America’s central social problem” (p. 3-4). The politically correct (PC) movement of the 1990s, as it has come to be called, and the backlash reaction to it, also exemplify Americans’ awkwardness and uncertainty with regard to race-related conversation, as the nation continues to struggle with terminology and how to go about talking with one another without offending.

The mention of race relations at a social event or even in a classroom typically engenders self-consciousness, awkward silence, and eagerness to change the subject (Gallagher, 1997). Mechanisms of avoidance, like the often-referenced racial joke, may be viewed as an attempt to neutralize social discomforts and may serve to discourage frank and meaningful dialogue on the subject. Tatum (1997) told of being approached often by parents and teachers who ask questions about how to talk to children and other adults about racial issues” (p. xvi). Sternberg (1997) reported “analyses [that] suggested that even for individuals with high levels of experience, competence, and satisfaction in interracial living, talking about race is challenging and fraught with ambivalence” (p. 226).

Referring to the tendency toward racial dialogue avoidance, Dalton (1995) hypothesized that “we are afraid of tapping into pent-up anger, frustration, resentment, and pain” (p. 3). Thompson and Carter (1997) observed that, “people of all races, but particularly Whites, are often eager to dismiss race as irrelevant to any issue, to profess their color blindness, and to contend that race and racism are the preoccupations of Blacks and other visible racial-ethnic group members....A key feature of the construct of race in contemporary North American society is denial.” (p. 9). Denial that a race problem exists, combined with the tendency to avoid inter-group situations, is a common de facto response to racism in the United States.

There seems to be a tendency to avoid this sensitive topic, even in forums where it could be expected that the issue of race would be a central issue. Critiques of multicultural or diversity education suggest that the topics of racism, power structures, and oppression, concepts that are key to addressing racism in the United States, are frequently not directly addressed by such courses (Briggs, 2001; Goodman, 2001; Morelli & Spencer, 2000; Thompson & Carter, 1997). Instead, diversity education mainly focuses on the less contentious approaches of tolerance and acceptance of all differences (Briggs, 2001; Goodman, 2001; Morelli & Spencer, 2000).

In her experience teaching a psychology of racism course, Tatum (1997) described her experience with the phenomenon of avoidance. She indicated that, “my students have learned that there is a taboo against talking about race, especially in racially mixed settings, and creating enough safety in the class to overcome that taboo is the first challenge for me as an instructor. But the evidence of the internalized taboo is apparent long before children reach college” (p. 36). Tatum used the word *taboo* in order to underscore the strength of the cultural norm not to discuss race. While discussion of race is certainly not forbidden by law or by moral dictates, Tatum’s use of the word emphasizes and calls attention to the powerful social pressure to avoid the discomfort often experienced in racial discussions. In considering the socialization process of such a taboo she wrote, “when asked to reflect on their earliest race-related memories and the feelings associated with them, both White students and students of color often report feelings of confusion, anxiety, and/or fear (Tatum, 1992, p. 5). The complex and often controversial subjects of race, privilege and oppression, and institutional power tend to be avoided in the culture at large, and even in settings where one would expect to converse about race, (such as a class on the psychology of race!), because of a generalized feeling of discomfort with the subjects.

Even counselors, psychologists, and social workers, presumably experts in interpersonal communication, are seen as somewhat uncomfortable with issues of race and race relations (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; Thompson & Carter, 1997). Thompson and Neville (1999) suggested that therapists are often reluctant to initiate discussion of race or ethnicity due to feelings of awkwardness and fears about being misunderstood. At the same time, Thompson and Neville suggested that clients may interpret silence on these issues as negation of part of their person, or as avoidance or minimization of the meaning of race and racism in their lives. “Consequently,” said Thompson and Neville, “both the therapist and the client can be manacled in addressing manifestations of racism in therapy because of a societal climate that generally suppresses open, meaningful talk about race” (p. 202).

This avoidance of engagement on an interpersonal level by therapists is also manifested in the professional literature. Thompson and Neville (1999) indicated that counseling literature that focuses directly on the relationship of racism, mental health, and mental health practice is scarce. The premise of their work suggested that American socialization practices that encourage silence on race not only contribute to the problem of racism but, thereby, also contribute to mental health problems sustained by this societal denial (Thompson & Neville, 1999).

In more formal settings, such as public education, discussion of race issues is described as uncomfortable and often takes the form of outright fear (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Tatum, 1997). Tatum (1997) related that White teachers in her professional development workshops often report feeling uncomfortable, pained, and embarrassed when discussing race relations in their classrooms (p. 41). Morelli and Spencer (2000) researched the use and support of multicultural (MCE) and antiracist (ARE) education in schools and indicated that “teachers and administrators were unwilling to use ARE because they had insufficient knowledge of its objectives and methods and feared negative community reaction” (p. 173).

The educators surveyed by Morelli and Spencer (2000) seemed to agree that there is a need for multicultural education and were distressed about the effects of racism and bigotry in the schools; however, fear of controversy from the public, as well as an expressed need for more training for instructors, prevented the vast majority from using any curricular intervention with regard to race relations. “The lack of clear, consistent policies in these state educational systems incapacitates antiracism and antibigotry efforts; perpetuates a know-nothing, see-nothing, hear-nothing, non-confrontational attitude toward racism and bigotry and contributes to fear in communities” (Morelli & Spencer, 2000, p. 173). This is a telling example because it illustrates how people avoid addressing the issue not because they do not acknowledge the problems of racism, but because they are not prepared emotionally or cognitively for dialogue on race.

Cultural reluctance to engage on the topic of racism is clearly a problem that pervades American society. It is a problem not just for “the person on the street” as captured by Terkel (1992), but it also stymies professionals whose business it is to facilitate discussion on issues that affect the very heart of personal experience. Interpersonal discomfort is then carried like a virus into entire institutions, such as public education or mental health agencies, that become paralyzed by the fear, and thus, avoid addressing race related issues that are often at the forefront of the lives of their constituents.

In the preface to How Race is Lived in America, Lelyveld (2001) spoke of the essence of the phenomenon of obsession with race juxtaposed with avoidance when he described some conversational comments about race conducted by reporters from around the nation. He described them as, “so carefully hidden away in the daily lives of those who speak them and yet so near the surface, so ready to be excavated” (Correspondents of the New York Times, p. xvi). The state of affairs that results

from this illogicality and irony—this entangled combination of preoccupation and evasion-- is the race obsession-avoidance paradox.

Statement of the problem

There is consistent support for the idea that racial dialogue is worthwhile, even vital, in order to make progress in race relations. Socha and Diggs (1999) state the following:

Ultimately, if discussions by U.S. residents about ‘race’ are to broaden racial awareness, broaden racial understanding, and improve the quality of communication between African-Americans and European Americans, or, more generally, improve the status quo, then *all facets of society must participate in constructive discussions about race*, be open to learning, and keep the focus on the goal of developing values and skills that move us toward living successfully and peacefully in a culturally diverse society [my italics] (p. 3).

The idea that dialogue on race is a major key to racial healing is shared by many social science scholars (Dalton, 1995; Goodman, 2000; Kivel, 1996; Sternberg, 1997; Tatum, 1997; Thompson & Carter, 1997; Thompson & Neville, 1999). Dalton (1995) went so far as to say that, “engagement is critical to healing” (p. 27).

Kivel (1996) described the anger that racism has evoked in the United States throughout its history. “The only way to break this cycle of rage,” he suggested, “is for us to seriously address the sources of the anger, the causes of the problems. And in order to do that, we need to talk about racism directly with each other” (Kivel, p. 94). In her study on racial discourse, Sternberg (1997), suggested a need for, “identifying conditions under which racial dialogue will be possible and meaningful for all participants” (p. 226). It seems reasonable, given Sternberg’s suggestion, to investigate what conditions or factors make interracial dialogue happen. The most obvious ingredient, human participation in such dialogue, seems like a logical place to begin investigation. Review of literature that mentions participants in interracial dialogue reveals only vague reference to participants’ characteristics.

In their book, *Improving Intergroup Relations*, Stephan and Stephan (2001) presented a volume representing years of working in the field of intergroup relations. Their extensive examination of the current programs and research on intergroup relations (primarily addressing race and cultural groups) does not include any references to studies on what factors prompt or encourage individuals to engage

in interracial discussion of race. Despite the fact that they acknowledge an explosion of programs designed to improve intergroup relations since 1996, even some describing interracial dialogue, none that they discuss provide data on participants' reasons for engaging in interracial dialogue. In an exhaustive review of literature on race relations and dialogues, there is virtually no attention given to what characteristics, skills, or lived experiences propel individuals to engage in cross-racial dialogue.

Purpose of the study

This study proposes to describe factors that may have contributed to individuals' decision to participate in an interracial dialogue on race and factors that allowed those individuals to curb, overcome or otherwise cope with the forces that may have discouraged such engagement. Insights developed through this study are intended to describe factors that may (a) increase the tendency to engage in interracial dialogue and (b) promote competence in interracial dialogue.

No previously published studies on the traits of voluntary participants in interracial discussion groups have been located; therefore, this research is aimed at the discovery of new knowledge related to the propensity for individuals to engage in interracial dialogue. There is evidence to suggest that factors like interpersonal skills and empathy skills, racial identity development, moral development, and life experiences may have some relationship to the ability to engage in interracial dialogue.

Relevance of the study

There are clear educational and economic indicators in the existing popular and professional literature that suggest substantial value in learning more about what promotes interracial dialogue. This need is addressed by hooks, as quoted by O'Brien (1999). hooks wrote, "luckily, there are individual non-black people who have divested of their racism...we have yet to have a significant body of writing from these individuals that gives expression to how they have shifted attitudes and daily vigilantly resist becoming reinvested in white supremacy" (p. 411). Realizing, of course that this described need refers specifically to the White participants, hook's commentary nevertheless supports the idea that there is value in and an unmet need for further research in the area of voluntary racial dialogue.

Sternberg's (1997) findings on racial dialogue suggested that "identifying conditions under which racial dialogue will be possible and meaningful for all participants" (p. 226) is a recommended path for

future research. This particular study addresses the dearth of research by examining exactly what develops a propensity for such engagement and dialogue.

Education

Given the unanswered questions and controversies regarding diversity education, this study may inform curricular and programmatic decisions on prejudice reduction, racism and other diversity related issues. Researchers in the fields of counseling, education, psychology and social work have asked questions about the purpose, effectiveness, and techniques used in multicultural, intergroup, as well as race-related instruction (Briggs, 2001; Constantine & Gainor, 2001; Diaz-Lazaro, C. M. & Cohen, B.B. (2001); Marcus-Newhall & Heindl, 1998; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001; Morelli & Spencer, 2000; Salzman & D'Andrea, 2001; Slavin & Cooper, 1999; Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillett, Valli, & Villegas, 1998).

In multicultural education literature, specifically, there are many questions about the effectiveness of multicultural and diversity curricula, and about how such ideas and skills can and should be taught (McFalls, & Cobb-Roberts, 2001; Salzman & D'Andrea, 2001; Pine & Hilliard, 1990; Steele, 1997; Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillette, Valli & Villegas, 1998). Effectiveness of curricula that focuses on diversity issues or racism may be enhanced by discussion of factors that could facilitate classroom dialogue and participation. In addition, more knowledge about such factors may facilitate discussions with the public regarding the need for and effectiveness of such programs.

As mentioned above, recent psychology and social work literature critiques multicultural curricula for painting a broad stroke acceptance of differences while failing to address racism at all (Briggs, 2001; Goodman, 2001; Morelli & Spencer, 2000). The omission of racism, oppression, and privilege from multicultural and diversity education serves to further substantiate the idea that educators are not immune from the general discomfort that Americans experience with regards to discussion of race and racism and that they too tend to avoid such interaction.

For many educators, addressing the complex and sensitive issues surrounding race relations is daunting. Pine and Hilliard (1990) who are concerned with teaching skills related to race suggested that

to confront racism in a free and open discussion, students and teachers will have to develop assertiveness, listening skills, group problem-solving skills, and effective strategies for conflict resolution. Dealing with stereotypes, biases, and differing personal values and constructing a climate that fosters intergroup interaction and understanding are complex efforts that demand sensitivity and empathy (p. 596).

Insight into what factors establish willingness on the part of individuals to purposefully engage on race-related issues may assist with this charge.

Public school systems in general also may find this proposed study germane as they grapple with how to deal with increasing diversity and how or whether to address diversity or multiculturalism throughout the curricula (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Bigler, 1999; Slavin & Cooper, 1999). Indeed there is evidence that schools that avoid dealing with race-related issues may be compromising student potential. Bacon, Swartz, and Rothfarb (1991) indicated that school climate, including the degree to which students feel comfortable interacting with classmates of different races and ethnic backgrounds, is a key element regarding their academic and social growth. Certainly this contention gives solid rationale and reinforced purpose to pursue study of interracial dialogue.

However, Morelli and Spencer (2000) in a study of five school districts reported that, in general, the districts did not communicate policies to deter racism and bigotry or support multicultural education and anti-racism education as part of the curriculum. The combined feedback from the staff in the districts studied included the recommendation from educators that more “research and evaluation of MCE [multicultural education], ARE [anti-racism education] or other anti-oppression efforts to increase intervention and teaching effectiveness” (Morelli & Spencer, 2000) are needed. As schools grapple with how to address racism and prejudice, insights into what facilitates race-related dialogue may be useful in teacher or instructor education at all academic levels, in educational institutions outside of traditional academia, with parents, and in community based agencies. This study proposed here is designed to contribute to the discourse on these questions.

Workplace

Demographic records reveal that the complexion of America is changing. The United States is becoming increasingly multi-racial; intermarriages among individuals from different racial groups are becoming more commonplace (Meacham, 2000; Ponterotto, 1991; Scott, 1997). In an increasingly

diverse society, there is substantial importance being placed on one's ability to effectively interact with others who are different from oneself in the workplace (Carnevale, Gainer, Meltzer, 1988; Carnevale, 1991; Carnevale & Porro, 1994). The need for citizens and a workforce able to demonstrate human relations skills (race related and general) is substantially attested to in literature on race relations, employability, personal and professional success, and emerging demographic and cultural changes (Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Consumer Reports, 1995; Guttman, 1995; Penrice, 1995; Nation's Business, 1995; Pomice, 1995; Von Daehne, 1994). Ninety percent of the employers in Planning Job Choices, 2001 rated interpersonal skills as the top competency that they desire in an employee. This broad range of discourses about human relations competencies suggests considerable interest in further research regarding race relations and/or "diversity competence."

By entitling their book chapter "Diversity and the New Economy," Carnevale and Stone (1995) emphasized this notion. They stated that, "economic and demographic changes [have] focused attention on the impact of diversity on the economic performance of organizations and whole economies.... As a result, recognizing and valuing diversity is increasingly regarded as important for economic as well as demographic reasons" (p. 47). Diversity competence is critical in a society that is uniquely positioned by its democratic ideals of equality and inclusion and through its increasingly diverse population.

Carnevale and Stone (1995) elaborated that, "economic and technological changes characteristic of an emerging new economy are increasing both the value and the importance of successful human interaction in the workplace. In a diverse culture and workforce such as our own, successful interaction between employees and customers is predicated on our mutual ability to acknowledge and value the differences among us" (p.50). It may be reasonable to speculate that this ability to acknowledge and value the differences between people, recognized by Carnevale and Stone, may be an essential competency that is needed for and exercised by participation in interracial dialogue on race.

The need for diversity competence in the workplace is also described by Goleman (1995 & 1998). He cited the shifting demographic through which White males are becoming a minority not only in the workforce but in the customer base, as one reason that diversity competence is economically relevant. In addition, he described an "increasing need for international companies to have employees who not only put any bias aside to appreciate people from diverse cultures (and markets) but also turn that

appreciation to competitive advantage” (p. 155-156). He highlighted the potential economic benefits of increased creativity and energy, which are likely outcomes of a diverse team approach (Goleman, 1995 & 1998).

Those who are able to demonstrate human relations skills on the job are being rewarded (Consumer Reports, 1995; Guttman, 1995; Penrice, 1995; Nation’s Business, 1995; Pomice, 1995; Von Daehne, 1994). Even the medical field, traditionally known for its strict scientific, “objective” worldview, is beginning to require medical students and doctors to focus on their interpersonal skills because the field is coming to the awareness that the ability of medical professionals to relate to people is vital to their success (Consumer Reports, 1995).

Public discourse suggests that individuals with the awareness, knowledge, and skills related to working with a diverse population may be well-positioned to engender success in others. Goleman (1997) illuminated the value in this skill by suggesting that, “beyond zero tolerance for intolerance, the ability to leverage diversity revolves around three skills: getting along well with people who are different, appreciating the unique ways others may operate, and seizing whatever business opportunity these unique approaches might offer” (p. 158).

Another way that diversity competence is economically relevant to the world of work was explained by Steele (1997). Steele’s studies demonstrated that stereotypical messages associated with particular social groups act as obstacles to achievement, even in individuals who have proven competence in a specific performance area. Employers who want their employees to be as productive as possible would, therefore, have economic interest in eliminating the negative effects of stereotypes in the workplace. Particularly relevant to diversity competence, or the ability to work with people from different social groups than one’s own, is Steele’s finding that negative effects of stereotypes can be reduced by practices such as developing relationships that affirm the potential of individuals.

Indications are, however, that Americans are less able to get along with one another (Goleman, 1995; Penrice, 1995; Farkas, Johnson, Duffet & Collins, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Public Agenda’s recent report indicates that Americans recognize that progress has been made to show more respect and consideration to people of color and people with disabilities. However, 73% of African Americans said that fellow Americans still either “need improvement” or “fail” when it comes to treating them

with respect and courtesy (Farkas, et al., 2002). The general sense that, as a culture, we need to learn how to relate more effectively suggests that further research in the area of intergroup relations is needed and supports the relevance of this inquiry.

While social justice educators strive to reduce bias through activities such as interracial dialogue, the business world seems focused on increasing the competencies in employees that interracial engagement can develop. Given the widespread interest in cross-cultural experiences and the outcomes of prejudice reduction efforts, exploration of interracial dialogue and how to facilitate it seem to be promising areas of investigation.

Theoretical framework

A hermeneutic inquiry asks the foundational question, “What are the conditions under which a human act took place that make it possible to interpret its meanings?” (Patton, p. 113). This question is central to the work proposed here, because the context of racial obsession and the simultaneous avoidance of genuine engagement on the subject are critical to understanding the value of the inquiry. As such, the socio-cultural backdrop of racism in the United States will inform the interpretations of this research. A descriptive research framework is appropriate due to the nature of the main research question. The proposed study will seek to provide descriptions of what are assumed to be multiple elements that stimulate interracial engagement on the topic of race.

Research problem and questions

In order to provide a framework for the inquiry process with study participants, particular areas of focus have been explored. Based on related literature, areas that seemed worthy of specific exploration are related to moral development, interpersonal skills, empathy development, racial identity development, and inquiry regarding specific life experiences. The intent in constructing this framework is to provide structure and rationale for areas of investigation, but to also promote flexibility within the framework that will allow for unanticipated lines of questioning to emerge during data collection.

The guiding research question of this study is: What can be learned about factors that contribute to the self-selection of participants in interracial dialogue on race relations? Subsidiary questions are also posed: 1) Which skills in particular, if any, are implicated as important to the decision to participate? 2) Are there other characteristics or experiences that this group might share? 3) How might these

factors be interpreted to inform further study in this area? The three subsidiary questions are to be addressed in order to continue lines of inquiry on already published literature and to allow for the discovery of new insights on the subject. It is my intention that this study will contribute meaningful data to address these questions.

Importance of the study

Results of this inquiry have the potential to contribute broadly to the social sciences, particularly to the fields of counseling, psychology, sociology, and education. Examination of the factors and motivations that prompt individuals to engage and persist in interracial dialogue are critical because specifically designed cross-cultural contact, such as interracial dialogue, is considered to be an effective tool for prejudice reduction and dismantling of racial tensions (Marcus-Newhall & Heindl, 1998; Slavin & Cooper, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 2001).

It is Dalton's (1995) view that our avoidance of racial discussion has created a state of paralysis and that progress on racism will not be made until serious dialogue is commonplace. He said that, "the reasons for this paralysis are several, but chief among them is our failure to engage each other openly and honestly around race" (p. 28). Terkel (1992) referred to race as the American obsession, but in his first few pages referred to the avoidance of the culture in speaking openly about this topic of such preoccupation. He described Americans' tendency to speak about race in coded or veiled language and called Americans "somewhat diffident in language, if not behavior" (p. 4) when it comes to race. Terkel's book, presumably his contribution toward racial dialogue, is an entire volume capturing the voices of people engaging on race.

Among those, like Dalton (1995) and Terkel (1992), who have written extensively on the topic, there seems to be a common view that engagement and dialogue on race and racism is vital to progress in this area among individuals and as a nation. John Hope Franklin, Chair of the Advisory Board of President Clinton's Initiative on Race, was quoted as saying, "we must begin to encourage a dialogue [on diversity]; one without acrimony but with civility" (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001, p. 164).

In its broadest sense, the inquiry proposed here strikes at the heart of this idea that we need to sit down and talk so that we can learn to get along. This proposed line of questioning may provide assistance to educators, employers and those interested in social justice, who strive to facilitate or develop such

skills in individuals through intentional intervention. Discovery of factors that promote this valuable enterprise of interracial engagement has meaning, then, for its ability to inform future discourses on race relations.

Methodological orientation

The methodological orientation that underlies the design of this study borrows principles from the emerging paradigm of participation. Participation refers to a qualitative data gathering approach that recognizes the generation of new knowledge by the indigenous culture being examined (Campbell & Salagrama, 2000). The philosophical orientation of participation is rooted in sociological and anthropological approaches to data gathering (Canadian International Development Agency, 1997). The vantage point of this type of orientation is that the individuals who are the subjects of the research are the experts and that it is their knowledge of the topic that gives the research direction. This qualitative approach is thus distinguished from more traditional quantitative research where the researcher imposes the parameters on knowledge acquisition. In a traditional quantitative strategy the researcher determines the variables that are most salient and worthy of attention through some sort of manipulation. Participation makes explicit use of the more typically qualitative characteristic of flexible structure and informal data gathering.

Campbell and Salagrama (2000) said “the use of participation is considered by many development practitioners to have provided a new paradigm in research and development, one that is completely different from the more conventional top-down approaches” (p. 1). Motives behind the use of participation can be to empower the population through their participation, or to help to close the gap between the world of science and the world of indigenous cultures (Campbell & Salagrama, 2000). Participatory methods utilize a more collaborative strategy between participants and researcher than is typical with more traditional approaches.

Participation has received attention in recent years from development researchers in particular for its strengths in facilitating timely and useable data to make programmatic decisions. In addition, researchers and financiers of programs have begun to realize the economic and philosophical importance of social and cultural factors to accurate and meaningful collection of information (Kane, 1997). In other words, asking questions directly of those embedded in a particular culture has been shown to produce meaningful data that is relevant to the particular context being examined. This type

of orientation avoids the sole use of quantitative data which typically uses surveys, censuses, or administrative records as sources of information that are designed by, and thus reflect the biases of, individuals outside of the culture in question. Qualitative indicators, “because they are people’s perceptions and viewpoints...are typically obtained from sources such as public hearings, attitude surveys, interviews, participatory rural appraisal, participant observation, and sociological or anthropological field work” (Canadian International Development Agency, 1997).

The major motive for the use of participation here is functional in that a qualitative approach like participation is the most effective avenue for knowledge enhancement regarding this topic. “Qualitative analysis is used to understand social processes, [like] why and how a particular situation that indicators measure came into being” (Canadian International Development Agency, 1997). The questions of “why” and “how” can typically not be answered completely through the use of a formal survey that allows for a set of forced choice responses. Given the dearth of research on participants in interracial dialogue on race, an attempt at this point to isolate variables or to quantify factors for statistical analysis would be framed with only speculative support. Primary involvement of the individuals who can most personally and expertly respond to the research questions indicates the appropriateness of this participant-oriented study that seeks to examine the intricacies of a socio-cultural phenomenon.

In addition, this study is intended to be both naturalistic and descriptive. This study is naturalistic in that, as the researcher, I will not be instrumental in the formation of the original study groups nor have I “attempt[ed] to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 39) in any other manner. These race study circles were already functioning under the coordination of the YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh Center for Race Relations and Anti-Racism Training, and therefore, were not structured for the purpose of this proposed study. These study circles could be viewed as a type of naturally occurring focus group. My interaction with the participants took place after their participation in the study circle had been completed. This type of study is considered naturalistic because it asks participants to reflect upon their naturally occurring behavior that was not manipulated by the researcher.

This study is also descriptive in that it seeks to illuminate and understand characteristics of a group of people and the meaning of a set of behaviors viewed within a particular social context. I will, along

with the participants, become a co-constructor of meaning because these findings will be gathered, interpreted, and presented by me as the sole researcher. In fact, my selection of the research topic and research questions at the outset, is necessarily shaped by my biases, interests, and assumptions.

van Manen (1990) offered that,

a good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way (p. 39).

Toward the goal of revealing the essence of an, as yet, unexplored experience, this inquiry examines skills, characteristics, and life experiences of a purposefully selected sample of participants in an interracial study circle on race. The data collected will attempt to illuminate the factors that contributed to their participation. This type of exploration is intended to illuminate this heretofore unexamined lived experience and seeks to interpret its meaning.

van Manen (1990) cited Gadamer's clarification of the two meanings of interpretation.

In its original meaning, he [Gadamer] says, interpretation is a *pointing to* something; and interpretation is *pointing out* the meaning of something....The first kind of interpreting 'is not a reading in of some meaning, but clearly a revealing of what the thing itself already points to....We attempt to interpret that which at the same time conceals itself'(p.26).

The second type of interpretation is hermeneutically descriptive in the sense that it does not merely reveal a phenomenon, but creates some meaning out of its existence (van Manen, p. 26). This study proposes to both reveal and attach meaning to a phenomenon. It will attempt to reveal the essence and significance of participation in an interracial study circle and to closely examine the antecedents of, or contributing factors toward, such behavior. No body of research exists that investigates this particular angle on intergroup participation.

Study Circles

The study circles selected for this study are coordinated by the YWCA Center for Race Relations and Anti-Racism Training, a branch of the YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh. The Study Circle Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut provides a curriculum, available nationally, that is a clear example of a program designed to create a forum for intentional discussion on race relations (Flavin-McDonald, & McCoy, 1997). The study circles coordinated by the Center use this curriculum as the foundation for their group dialogues. A race study circle, as defined by the Center and for the purposes of this inquiry, is a five-to-twelve-member group of adults of different races convened to discuss race and

racism. The community dialogue groups are facilitated by an interracial team, that has participated in a previous study circle, and has been trained to facilitate the exploration of a prescribed curriculum on race.

Weekly, for five two-hour sessions, group members sit together and discuss such topics as their own experiences with race, definitions of racism and related terms, the nature of the race problem, proposals for progress, White skin privilege, internalized racism, and affirmative action. A participant in a community study circle, for the purposes of this inquiry, will be considered persons who not only joined, but also persisted through the entire course of the study circle.

Purposeful sample

In light of the need for more research on race-related education and intergroup dialogue, this study proposes to examine the characteristics, skills, life experiences, racial identity, and motivations of participants relative to their participation in interracial, race study circles. This examination of participants in race study circles is worthy of this particular intellectual inquiry for several reasons. Participants in such a group have characteristics that are worthy of examination because they are *voluntarily and intentionally* participating in a unique process that involves both intergroup contact and engagement on the topic of race and racism.

These participants are unusual because typically cultural norms and intergroup anxiety prevents individuals from participating in such intergroup discussions, however, these individuals volunteered for such an experience. Therefore, these individuals are a rich source of information on the propensity to engage in racial dialogue and on the motivating factors and lived-experiences that allow the participant to overcome, cope with, or dilute the social anxiety that typically discourages interracial race discussion. In addition, these individuals do not have any known prior experience with their group that would affect or bias their responses to me, the interviewer, regarding any of the characteristics to be examined in specific.

The study circles coordinated by the YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh Center for Race Relations and Anti-Racism Training are utilized in this study because they have the greatest potential for capturing the most representative sample of the phenomenon in question. Although other interracial discussions are facilitated by other organizations they often integrate additional issues or focus areas that might

confound this research. For example, mediation centers coordinate interracial groups but specifically attract participants who have interest in mediation and the legal system. Jewish centers or other religious groups organize interracial events or discussions but do so within a particular religious context and may attract participants that subscribe to particular religious beliefs. Although the YWCA was founded as a Christian organization, its widespread use by people of all religious and secular traditions render it, in a modern and practical sense, religiously unaffiliated.

The study circles examined here are more narrowly and intentionally focused on the issue of racism without the introduction of any other variable implied by the organization or coordinating body. The YWCA has an established history of focus on the issue of race and racism as demonstrated by the association's history, both nationally and in the Pittsburgh area where these particular study circles are coordinated. A brief outline of YWCA history makes this point.

In 1889, the first branch of the YWCA was founded and in 1916, English as a second language classes were begun. The YWCA was a leader in the Civil Rights movement founding its National Office of Racial Justice in 1965 and in the 1970s by adopting its *One Imperative: to eliminate racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary*. In particular, the YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh has continually prioritized programs that work toward eliminating racism and promoting diversity. In 1882, a home for Black orphans and children in need of foster parents was established and in 1917 the "Committee for Colored Work" was founded to assist African-American workers who wanted housing and jobs in wartime. In the 1970's, the Pittsburgh YWCA sponsored dialogue teams, a precursor to the study circles. In 1992, Racial Justice Awards were established to honor leaders in the community who work to eliminate racism. The establishment of the Center for Race Relations and Anti-Racism Training in 1996 is particularly significant in that its singular purpose is to provide opportunities for discourse and training related specifically to race, racism, and other forms of oppression.

Considering this combination of factors, examination of the study circles coordinated by the Center for Race Relations offers a unique opportunity to explore a specific group of people, gathered for a particular purpose. The issue of race and racism is the singular focus of the study circles, therefore, the likelihood that participants decided to partake in the group for some reason other than the exploration of the issue of racism is remote. If the goal, as it is here, is to study the factors that

promote interracial dialogue, the study circles coordinated by the Center for Race Relations are arguably the “purest” example of that phenomenon.

Interracial contact, such as these study groups, is worthy of inquiry because of its suggested ability to improve inter-group relations. According to the contact hypothesis, first suggested by Allport in 1954, prejudice and conflict will be reduced by inter-group contact if certain conditions are met in the interaction environment (Diaz-Lazaro & Cohen, 2001, p. 43). The contact hypothesis is “among the most researched psychological principles for reducing interracial prejudice” (Wittig & Grant-Thompson, 1998, p. 798).

The Center for Race Relations and Anti-Racism Training study circles potentially meet each of Allport’s 1954 criteria for positive inter-group relations which are, “equal status of all group members within the contact situation, cooperative interdependence among group members, normative support of positive relations...and interactions that disconfirm stereotypes and encourage the transmission of individuating information about group members” (Marcus-Newhall & Heindl, 1998, p. 815). So, in addition to being the most representative sample of this behavior available, these study circle participants are ideal key informants for this particular research because a) the groups offer opportunities for individuals to have meaningful contact with people from different racial and ethnic groups; b) the mixed-race groups are specifically designed to discuss race and racism; c) the groups are democratically organized, participants are considered equals, and the group facilitators assist the group with developing positive group norms; d) the groups are relatively intensive, meeting for two hours once a week for five weeks and e) the members are charged with completing cooperative tasks (like defining race or responding collectively to a case study).

According to Allport’s (1954) theory, when such criteria are met, it is likely that prejudice reduction will occur. Healey’s (1997) more recent version of the criteria that make prejudice reduction likely includes, “equal status, intensive interaction, noncompetitive relations, and cooperative tasks” (p. 49). Using either or both sets of criteria as a standard, the volunteer study circles are a viable and relevant strategy for prejudice reduction. Participants in such groups, therefore, whether or not they are familiar with the formal contact hypothesis, voluntarily engaged in a process that challenged them to question their own assumptions, to confront their own prejudices, and that explored a topic that invited conflict and controversy.

Typical avoidance of such contact is due to a) the discomfort and anxiety experienced by many individuals when anticipating interaction with people who are different racially and /or culturally from them; and b) the discomfort experienced when individuals are challenged to change their basic assumptions and beliefs about fundamental social constructs like race. Although inter-group contact is cited as effective in reducing prejudice and increasing understanding, it is often resisted altogether or is terminated as quickly as possible (Stephen & Stephen, 1985). This further illustrates the uniqueness of these participants because their participation in the study circle required repeated exposure to the potentially, anxiety-provoking experience.

The critical second factor that makes these particular group participants worthy of research is the fact that the subject of the groups' discussion is race and racism. As suggested by many writers on the subject of race (Dalton, 1995; Tatum, 1997; Thompson & Carter, 1997; Thompson & Neville, 1999) the discussion of this topic is typically avoided. A volunteer's decision to participate in an interracial study circle on the subject of race, in particular, is worthy of study because of its topic of race signifies further deviance from the norm.

The decision to participate is made *despite* any feelings of inter-group anxiety or desires for avoidance that may be experienced, both toward an interracial group itself and toward discussion of the subject of racism. Definition of the motivating factors and lived-experience that allow the participant to overcome or cope with the social anxiety of interracial race discussion is at the crux of this probe. These volunteer participants as a group can be reasoned to be a unique and rich source of information on motivation to engage in interracial dialogue on race. These individuals are an untapped, yet potentially fertile, source for descriptive data about how to engage people interpersonally on the subject of race.

Research Protocol

Individuals who voluntarily completed a race study circle through the YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh Center for Race Relations' program, were contacted by letter in order to request their participation in this inquiry. The sample target was approximately twenty individuals. My original protocol requested their participation in a community interview to discuss as a group their perceptions of factors that contribute to their participation in the study circle. After the first community interview involving five participants, it became clear that the group context was not the most effective means through which to

obtain the specific information that I needed from the participants. I amended my protocol and conducted, instead, key informant (individual) interviews, where the participants and I were better able to focus on their individual experiences and life stories.

Questions in the semi-structured interviews focused on moral development, racial identity, educational experiences, family history and values learned, and a wide range of life experiences including education, religious and/ or spiritual life, and community involvement. All participants also completed the Bar On Emotional Quotient Inventory, designed to assess emotional intelligence skills like interpersonal skills and empathy. Although these areas of concentration were targeted, as reasonable areas of exploration based on the literature review, my goal was to remain open to other relevant factors that revealed themselves as the process with the participants unfolded. Data collection has been an iterative process whereby I have amended my interview protocol as participants introduced new thoughts about how they came to participate in the study circle. I found it necessary to re-interview some of my first interviewees in order to follow lines of inquiry that emerged after their first interview was completed.

Challenges

This researcher's lack of any coursework in qualitative research has contributed to the major challenges of this study. Since time precludes reading volumes of texts on qualitative research (and even so, merely reading texts misses the rich and discriminating assistance that an instructor and peer discussion can provide), this has been a trial and error process. I am learning about qualitative research design and execution by doing it for the first time. Although I am a proponent of experiential learning, I would not recommend this strategy for completing a dissertation to others. Another challenge has been the complexity of the topic that I selected. Defining terms, and describing and providing a social context for a study on racism has been a substantial undertaking. When writing about or discussing an emotionally charged and complex subject such as racism, the limits and subtleties of language are exacerbated. Connotations and hidden meanings behind word choice become subject to debate and speculation. Hyper-vigilance to "saying it right" is an amplified challenge. The socio-cultural complexity of the topic lends further significance to the limitations of language and to attempts to maintain a clear, concise focus.

Another obstacle has been that the interview protocol that I originally designed proved to be unproductive after just the first experience. I had envisioned community (group) interviews as a way to make the best use of time and to allow the group members to brainstorm and generate ideas through their discussion. In actuality, the group forum resulted in a great deal of time off-task and was not an effective or efficient way to “get at” the research question. The protocol then, evolved from group sessions to individual sessions which I found to be much more focused and fruitful. This modification in my method of data collection is a clear example of how qualitative data collection can be an iterative process, or what Beebe (1995) termed “an open system that uses feedback to ‘learn’ from its environment and progressively change itself” (p. 4).

Managing the scope of each interview was also a challenge. Since the nature of the research question necessitates delving into each participant’s life experiences, the semi-structured interview protocol often looked more like it was “loosely-structured”. Each interview contained its own idiosyncrasies, twists and turns and focus. An ongoing challenge was to find ways to “get at” the interviewee’s level of moral and racial identity development through interview questions; therefore, my methods of addressing these topics evolved as data collection progressed. Assessing for levels of moral development and racial identity was a cumbersome process since probing questions were necessary to, sometimes roughly, discern levels of developmental stages. The interviews in general were replete with prodding and probing to get the participants to dig more deeply into their decision-making, motivations, and life experiences that may have contributed to their participation in the study circles. In many cases, this process prompted significant memories to surface that had seemingly been forgotten or would have been dismissed or overlooked by the interviewees.

Triumphs

Often one of the most significant obstacles to research studies is obtaining an adequate sample group. In the case of this study, the goal of twenty participants, to constitute a purposeful, rich example of the phenomenon in question, was easily met due to the more than adequate response from the study circle participants invited to partake in the study. Although scheduling mutually agreeable interview times and appropriate locations was not without difficulty, the goal of twenty participants was achieved. In addition, the diversity of the sample group in terms of age, gender, race, and socio-economic status is wide. This has the potential to produce a richer, more meaningful study, than if the group were more homogenous.

Another personal triumph has been the quality of the interview experiences with the participants. The participants' life stories have been inspirational and fascinating, which has made the interview process pleasurable and interesting rather than a sterile exercise with data. I credit the quality time spent with the participants as one of the factors that has contributed to another triumph which is that, despite all of the given obstacles to dissertation completion, I am still actively working on it! A major triumph is the fact that themes among the participant's experiences have begun to emerge, although the data is still being coded. Those emerging themes are discussed below.

Emerging Themes

As my interview tapes are being transcribed, some themes are emerging (as of this writing). Most participants had parents who valued education a great deal and instilled that value in the children. Perhaps as a reflection perhaps of this value, almost all of the participants have achieved at least a four-year college degree. Most participants also expressed an interest in introspection. They were intrigued and interested in participating in the study circle in order to learn more about themselves and to learn about others' perception of them.

Another theme that has emerged is "gemeinschaftsgefühl", an ideal suggested by the psychologist, Alfred Adler, to be a critical value in personal well-being. Gemeinschaftsgefühl is essentially, social interest, and is explained by Adler as a value held by "socially contributive people interested in the common welfare" (Corsini & Wedding, 1995, p.53). Most of the participants share a worldview that included some sense of responsibility to care about and to want to positively affect the experience of others in the society. Adler described this as the development of a "sense of being a part of a larger social whole" (Corsini & Wedding, p. 52). There are possible links to be explored between this value of social interest and participants' stage of moral development.

Many of the participants had significant memories of role models who demonstrated some type of activist or community involved behavior. They were either politically involved or took stands on community or social issues. For some participants, this was behavior demonstrated by parents; others had specific memories of being inspired by another person's active commitment to social values.

Consistent with what might be expected in relation to Helms' racial identity development theory, preliminary findings indicate that participants have moved to the Internalization stage (for People of

Color) or Autonomy/Emersion or Autonomy (for White people). They have explored their own racial identity and have actively made themselves open to examining the experience of those in different racial groups. People who are Black have accepted their own Black racial identity and can form healthy relationships with those of other racial groups, particularly people who are White. People who are White have questioned myths and stereotypes about other racial groups and have replaced them with more accurate information. Often, they have engaged in active learning about other cultural groups and have made connections among all forms of oppression.

Since this study is a work in progress, no information is yet available on the results of the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory. Analysis of the emerging themes, implications, and recommendations for future research will become available as this study is concluded. The answer, though, to the rhetorical question, “can we talk?” is “yes,” if we resolve to do so, despite our fears and anxieties. What might be the most immediate outcome of this study is that by talking about talking about race, we are!

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