

Dialogue Circles on Race: Examining the Impact of Intergroup Dialogues about Racism in a Community Setting

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Introduction

The 2014 killing of Michael Brown Jr. in Ferguson, Missouri, was witnessed (on video replay) by large numbers of Americans—white, Black, and other persons of color. It was a brutal, heartbreaking, public event that shocked many (primarily white people) and confirmed the worst fears of others (mostly Black Americans and other people of color.)

For the Salem Interfaith Council (SIC),¹ a multifaith organization in a predominately white, affluent Northeastern town, Michael Brown Jr.'s death was a pivotal event in its self-understanding and its work. Well-respected, with representatives from roughly 20 houses of worship, the SIC, in its 40 or so years of existence, had addressed pressing social concerns through various forms of public witness such as vigils, marches, and public statements. However, it had never declared its *ongoing* commitment to combatting racism and white supremacy.

1. Salem Interfaith Council is a pseudonym for the actual organization.

An SIC member, a Black Baptist pastor, recognized that these forms of public witness were not enough to make systemic changes and called on the Council to commit to a longer-term strategy for dismantling racism. Thus, the SIC Anti-Racism Committee (ARC) was formed. Its mission, in part, is to “keep issues of racism front and center in the work of the Salem Interfaith Council and to fight against injustice and white supremacy through educating its membership.”²

The SIC Anti-Racism Committee’s Flagship Program: Dialogue Circles on Race, Grounded in Scholarship and Experience

Framework and Design

In the sections that follow, we describe the development and design of Dialogue Circles on Race (DCoR), a flagship program that SIC ARC created to carry out the educational component of its mission. Dialogue Circles on Race is a program of cofacilitated conversations about systemic racism, informed by accurate and often painful accounts of United States history. The dialogic framework is critical; its purpose and guidelines differ from discussions or debates. A dialogue provides a “container”—a framework designed to enable conversations about challenging topics while preserving and deepening the relationships between participants. A small group of ARC members developed the original DCoR design and curriculum. Later, the Dialogue Circle Subcommittee (DCS) was established and took over both curriculum design and facilitator development.³

The design and structure of the DCoR was informed by two areas of scholarship: (1) Intergroup Dialogues (IGD) offered on college

2. This comes from the Salem Interfaith Council’s Anti-Racism Committee mission statement (2017). Since this is a pseudonym, the actual mission statement from which this derives has not been shared.

3. Both authors are senior members of the DCS and contribute to ongoing curricular and facilitator development.

campuses, with semester-long curricula and cofacilitated dialogic sessions; and (2) dialogic practices developed by nonprofit conflict resolution organizations.

Intergroup Dialogues (IGD)

Intergroup Dialogue was first developed in the 1980s at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and was provided to students during a period of racial strife and conflict on many American college campuses. IGD is defined as “a facilitated, face-to-face encounter that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating and action between two or more social identity groups who have a history of conflict or potential conflict” (Zúñiga, 2003). These semester-long Dialogues were designed to establish connections through conversation and mutual learning, supported by a curriculum of weekly readings and other materials. Two decades later, a group of educators from the Five College Consortium in Massachusetts⁴ realized the possible effectiveness of this model for *faculty and staff* on their campuses and created the six-week long Intergroup Dialogue Initiative (IGD) to bring groups of people together across their different identities in “safe” spaces.

Conflict Resolution Organizations

The development and promotion of dialogic practices has also emerged from the conflict resolution community: Everyday Democracy, Essential Partners, and the Sustained Dialogue Institute. Everyday Democracy’s (ED) Dialogue to Change process was designed to help communities “initiate institutional and policy changes to move toward a more equitable, multi-racial community” (Everyday Democracy, n.d.) in small, facilitated dialogue groups. Applying ideas from family

4. The Five College Consortium comprises Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mt. Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, located in the Pioneer Valley.

therapy, Essential Partners' (EP) Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) approach is designed to "help people live and work better together" (Essential Partners, n.d.) with a goal to stimulate a "new" conversation that increases understanding of the "other" as a person, rather than a stereotype or "position." Finally, the Sustained Dialogue Institute's (SDI) programming is designed to help people transform conflictual relationships and to design processes toward change around the world (Sustained Dialogue, n.d.).

SIC's Dialogue Circles combines a "dialogic" process with a curriculum of critical information—about structural racism, Black intellectual thought, white supremacy culture—and so it resembles the IGD model in that regard. However, DCoR is not primarily focused on disparate group identities but rather on *shared history*, although one that has differential impacts on white and Black Americans.

Evolution of the DCoR Model

Design and Participation

Dialogue Circles consist of five two-hour sessions, held over five consecutive weeks. The Circles are composed of six to 12 participants and are cofacilitated by two trained facilitators, ideally of different genders, races, and /or ethnicities. Dialogue Circles were initially designed as four one and one-half-hour sessions over a four-week period. After the first "semester," however, it became clear that six hours was *insufficient*, so the format was changed to allow for ten hours of Dialogue.

Originally, most Dialogue Circle participants were members of Salem's religious congregations. Held in person, the sponsorship and location of the dialogues within the facilities of the SIC member congregations seemed to contribute to their appeal and credibility. It was significant that three synagogues, of different Jewish denominational affiliations, as well as several Christian congregations, also of varying denominations, were holding dialogues simultaneously in their respective buildings. This provided wonderful "cross-pollination" as

members of the different faith communities got to know one another as fellow anti-racism sojourners.

Over the first three to four years, the racial/ethnic breakdown of participants was approximately 23% Black, 67% white, and Asian American and Latino/a participants at less than 5% each. However, over the last several years, the number of Black participants dropped to about 16%.⁵ Approximately 80% of participants have been female. Most participants have ranged between 40 and 80 years of age, with some notable exceptions.

In March 2020, halfway through a five-week Dialogue semester, the COVID pandemic led us into lockdown along with most of the world. Faced with uncertainty about whether a safe “container” and challenging content could work online, a few groups stopped meeting while others experimented with meeting via Zoom. Learning that online sessions felt safe and powerful to participants, and that meaningful connections were made, we have continued to offer all sessions via Zoom through the 2023 spring semester.

DCoR Curriculum

The first offering of Dialogue Circles on Race in 2015 contained two essential components: a curriculum highlighting key events and patterns in Black and white history (17th century through the present), and a session structure based on established dialogic principles. Theories of adult social justice education identify the importance of creating a “container” that elicits a sense of safety and belonging so that participants are willing to risk being open to painful and challenging materials and insights (Adams et al., 2023; Kegan, 1982). Rather

5. The Salem community is predominately white (75.6 % white; 8% Asian; and 6% Black). About 5% of the white community members identify as Hispanic. By far, the largest number of Black participants have been from an extremely large regional Baptist church. After the Black population—reached through church connections—had already participated in DCoR, the percentage of Black participants declined. Fifteen to 20% of participants have been Jewish, 70% Protestant, roughly 5% have been Catholic, and roughly 2–3% have been unaffiliated.

than focus on intergroup similarities and differences, like IGD, DCoR was designed to expose participants to an American history that was rarely, if ever, taught in school. While the experiences of Black and white participants differ, it is deeply disturbing for all to relive and/or absorb these truths. Being a part of an intact group, over a five-week period, builds a sense of connection and shared experience. The principles of dialogue⁶ seem to deepen both connections and learning.

Given the scarcity of comprehensive, accurate information about the history of “whiteness” and “Blackness” in most US educational systems, we determined that participants needed both a *framework* and *definitions* for recognizing and discussing structural racism. For example, our definition of “racism” was “advantage based on race” coined by Wellman (1993) and cited by Tatum (2017, p. 87.) The curriculum included topics such as the invention of race, the GI Bill’s de facto exclusion of Black veterans, the “Invisible Backpack,” the New Jim Crow, the history of lynching, Affirmative Action, and much more. Inevitably, the weekly readings (roughly 30–60 minutes) painted a painful picture of Black oppression and chilling instances of white obliviousness. This composite “story” was shocking and disturbing, in differing ways, to both Black and white participants. Many posed questions such as “Why didn’t I know this?” or “Why wasn’t this a part of my education?,” asked with pain and frustration in their voices.

In 2018, a new intermediate-level curriculum (i.e., “2.0”) was introduced. After completing the initial “1.0” curriculum, participants began to ask for more. The 2.0 curriculum examines the origins of racist thought and ideas; understanding and “abandoning” whiteness and intersectionality, especially regarding Black women; and becoming anti-racist. The 2.0 curriculum also contains more voices of Black scholars and writers, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Ibram X. Kendi, Beverly Tatum, and Kimberle Crenshaw.

Periodically, both the 1.0 and 2.0 curricula are modified to address more current history, emerging issues, and related materials. For

6. The “principles” or “guidelines” include speaking only for oneself, listening with curiosity, respecting silence, saying “ouch” when wounded, and others.

instance, the murder of George Floyd brought into the spotlight police brutality toward Black bodies. Our revised curricula continue to “hold up” the experiences and voices of Black Americans while also confronting white dominance and supremacy culture and the history of “whiteness.” For example, the session on how whiteness was constructed in 17th century America provides disturbing insights into how race has been used strategically as a tool and a weapon, socially and politically, since its inception (Battiloro, 2021; Kendi, 2016).

It should be noted that the Dialogues have no religious content, nor do they proselytize religious beliefs in any way. However, they are grounded in values such as human dignity, justice, and equity, values that are important to most people of principle—those who participate in Salem’s faith communities and those who do not.

Gauging the Impact of Dialogue Circles on Race Evolution of Participation: Town Leaders and Neighboring Communities

As noted, when Dialogue Circles were launched in 2015, they were held in person at some of Salem’s participating houses of worship. The early participants were usually recruited via these congregations, with outreach soon broadened via word of mouth, social media, and postings in other settings. A concerted effort was made to enlist Salem’s civic, educational, and not-for-profit organizational leadership. By around 2018, DCoR participants had included Salem’s mayor and Common Council members, police chief and officers, school principals and teachers, and other community leaders, along with the staff and coworkers whom they encouraged to participate.

Once the Dialogue Circles were well-established, we received inquiries from leaders of local social justice organizations in nearby communities. These leaders believed that offering Dialogue Circle sessions within their geographic communities would attract more local participants (i.e., they would feel more “invited”; minimize driving after dark, etc.).

In 2019, we began to offer in-person sessions in several neighboring communities. The local leaders had been correct: participation from those towns increased dramatically. The DCoR mailing lists were expanded to include names from the social justice organizations within those communities, increasing Dialogue Circle's reach by roughly 40%!

In April 2023, we completed the 18th semester of the Dialogue Circles on Race. There were six cofacilitated groups and around 60 participants. Thus far, more than 900 people have participated in either the 1.0 or 2.0 curriculum or both.

What Participants Report about Impact

From the launch of Dialogue Circles in 2015, participants have reported that their experiences have been both overwhelmingly positive—and challenging. More formally, we ask participants to fill out written evaluations after the final Dialogue session of each semester. Virtually every respondent reports that their understanding of systemic/structural racism has been enhanced. They have responded with statements such as: “I more fully understand the cumulative and generational effects of systemic racism in our country”; “Wow, yes! I see it everywhere. I feel like I had an ice bucket dumped on my head and [I] woke up”; “I continue to be struck by the distortions of the history I was taught—and am dismayed.” When asked what had changed for them post-DCoR participation, we heard powerful testimonials: “Increased comfort level during discussion about race. I talk about this stuff with more people (coworkers, friends)”; “More self-awareness about how my all-white upbringing produced a sense of superiority over people of color; a horrifying realization.”

We also asked them to describe what changes they wished for in the future. Several asked us to continue creating new content for future Dialogue Circles while one participant recommended that we “have more of this kind of circles, particularly at public libraries, public schools and

churches.” Another opined that our educational system had to change: “Black History Month is not going to move us to an understanding of the long-standing consequences of racism.”

Most recently, in 2022, we collected information from Dialogue Circle participants, at a “reunion” of sorts, about the “impact” of DCoR one to two years after they had completed the program. We polled attendees, asking them what changes had occurred in their thoughts or behaviors about race and/or racism since their participation (see Table 1). Of the participants who responded, 85% said that they were “more eager to engage in such conversations” and more than half (56%) said they did not “fear discomfort in these conversations as much as they had previously.” When asked about actions they had taken, 86% reported having attended presentations related to race and racism, 58% had attended social justice events and/or protests, and 47% had joined social justice and/or anti-racism organizations. In addition, 72% said they had encouraged others to participate in Dialogue Circles.

Table 1. Poll Data from the Dialogue Circles alumni event, April 2022.

Question 1. As a result of your participation in Dialogue Circles on Race, how has your experience with conversations on race and racism changed? (Please check all that apply.)

I am more eager to engage in these conversations.	85%
I am more likely to seek to educate people on what I’ve learned.	83%
I am more likely to engage in conversations about people’s beliefs.	71%
I don’t fear discomfort in conversations as much as I used to.	56%
The conversations I have feel more honest.	54%
My conversations have not changed.	10%

Question 2. Since you have participated in Dialogue Circles on Race (DCoR), have you exhibited any of the following behaviors? (Please check all that apply.)

Attended educational presentations related to race and racism.	86%
Encouraged others to attend DCoR.	72%
Attended social justice events and/or protests.	58%
Joined social justice and/or anti-racism organizations.	47%

Became involved in advocacy for social justice legislation.	40%
Attended Summit Interfaith Council Anti-Racism Committee events.	33%
Held ongoing meetings with other DCoR participants (e.g., book discussions, casual conversations).	30%

Participants in poll: n = 50

Next Steps: Ongoing Facilitator Development

Skilled, sensitive facilitation is a foundational element of Dialogue Circles on Race. Facilitators need to create safe, though not necessarily comfortable, spaces in which participants will learn painful new information and recognize misinformation, risk saying “the wrong thing,” and grow in both self-awareness and in the ability to “see” structural racism. One measure of “success” is that participants are eager and willing to return for another session.

We believe that there are three instrumental elements in providing effective DCoR facilitation: facilitator selection, facilitator training, and the practice of cofacilitation. Current facilitators identify DCoR participants whom they believe are good candidates to become facilitators. Candidates respond to the Facilitator Information Form (e.g., Dialogue experiences, facilitation history, and experiences with race/racism), and some are invited to be trained as facilitators.

We, the authors, as professional educators and facilitators, have developed and deliver formal training for all first-time facilitators. First offered in 2016, the eight-hour training program has been updated and revised.⁷ Newer content includes essential facilitation skills, self-awareness and social identity, and conflict resolution. For the first time this year, we engaged a recognized social justice education expert to offer a half-day retreat for *all* facilitators and to provide individual coaching to each cofacilitator pair. The retreat content focused

7. Another ARC member helped to develop and deliver the first two iterations of new facilitator training.

on self-awareness, determining what the group needs at any point in time, and *practicing* essential skills. As a group of white, Black, and Asian facilitators, we plan to engage an interracial team of expert consultants to explore facilitators' own racial identity development and its role in our facilitation effectiveness.

Cofacilitation has been a foundational element of Dialogue Circles. Whenever possible, we select facilitator pairs whose social identities differ on race and/or gender. We see the evolving relationship between the cofacilitators each semester as key to the effectiveness of their group sessions. We offer strategies, materials, and guidelines to encourage effective communication.

Questions for Future Research and Practice: What Elements or Conditions Are Necessary to Offer a Program Similar to DCoR?

From our experience, necessary elements include an organization with a Board or subcommittee to oversee the DCoR program, a (part-time) program coordinator, an existing curriculum or the capacity to develop a new one, and a group of dedicated facilitators and the capacity to train them. The Salem Interfaith Council (SIC) is comprised of individuals with moral and spiritual commitments to social justice and anti-racism; it is also deeply rooted in Salem and its surrounding communities. Perhaps other groups (e.g., community educators, nonprofit organizations [religious or secular]) committed to social justice and to dismantling racism might also implement a similar program.

The Impact of Devoting More Time in DCoR for Structured "Storytelling"?

During the first DCoR session, participants share, in dyads, reflections about their earliest memory of "race." Unsurprisingly, white and Black participants report differences in the age at which this awareness occurred and on its impact. On college campuses, IGD curricula also include sharing

one's story of social identity formation. Such "storytelling" is believed to impact participants' abilities to bridge differences through a *deeper understanding of their own racial history and that of others*.

An example of the power of storytelling comes from the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project (IGD). This project⁸ begins with questions such as: What could be learned about one's own experiences through deep conversations with younger and older LGBTQ+ community members? And what does it mean to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community: past, present, and/or future? The LGBTQ+ IGD spends the first hour of each dialogue encouraging folks to talk about their personal experiences regarding selected topics and histories (e.g., gender, race, ageism, family, etc.).

It may be difficult to add more time for the structured sharing of personal experiences in SIC's DCoR without compromising space for other essential topics. Expanding the number of sessions per semester is one possible solution.

Conclusion

We have described the origins, principles, and evolution of Dialogue Circles on Race over the last seven years. We believe that each of the factors described above contribute to DCoR's impact. Despite our deep belief in the effectiveness of the "content-plus-dialogue" design, we continue to be surprised and inspired by the strong connections that develop between participants and their deep engagement with the material.

Bios

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8. This project is a partnership between the Center on Halsted, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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