Using Intergroup Dialogue to Promote Social Justice and Change

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Intergroup dialogue is a public process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues such as politics, racism, religion, and culture that are often flashpoints for polarization and social conflict. This article examines intergroup dialogue as a bridging mechanism through which social workers in clinical, other direct practice, organizer, activist, and other roles across the micro–macro practice spectrum can engage with people in conflict to advance advocacy, justice, and social change. We define intergroup dialogue and provide examples in not-for-profit or community-based and academic settings of how intergroup dialogue has been applied to conflicts around topics of race and ethnic nationality, sexual orientation, religion, and culture. We recommend practice-, policy-, and research-related actions that social workers can take to understand and use intergroup dialogue.

KEY WORDS: *change; conflict; dialogue; micro–macro; professional identity; social justice*

Social workers are not strangers to polarization and conflict, whether these phenomena manifest themselves in family or organizations, as personal discord, or as political dispute. Social work spans the internal–external, personal–political continuum in research and practice and addresses conflict at all levels of society. Topics such as politics, racism, religion, and culture are often flashpoints for social conflict, and individuals who hold strong beliefs can quickly become polarized by these highly charged subjects, with results that range from personal stress to acts of individual and international aggression.

Social workers are also not strangers to polarization in our own profession. In many ways, micro and macro practice remain compartmentalized and rarely overlap. A focus on psychotherapeutic practice concerns those who view the fundamental mission of social work as addressing the larger societal needs of society's most disenfranchised members (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Conversely, the profession's historical emphasis on social justice presents a dilemma to workers in traditional mental health and medical models who focus on the internal dynamics, deficiencies, and strengths of individuals, dyads, and families (Dewees, 2002). The goal of integrating individual need and social activism poses a duality in the social work profession that has been difficult to span.

In this article, we examine intergroup dialogue work as a bridging mechanism through which social workers in clinical, other direct practice, organizer, activist, and other roles across the micro–macro practice spectrum can engage with people in conflict to advance advocacy, justice, and social change. *Intergroup dialogue* is a facilitated community experience designed to provide a safe yet communal space to express anger and indignation about injustice. It is a method through which social work practitioners who struggle to effect social change may address power, cultural differences, and divisive issues constructively (Agbaria & Cohen, 2002). Intergroup dialogue has the potential to harness extraordinary power toward the goal of achieving personal and community transformation, conflict resolution, advocacy, and social change.

INTERGROUP DIALOGUE WORK

The extensive literature review carried out for this article indicates that intergroup dialogue work in the public arena is widely representative of many disciplines and is gaining currency in social work (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). A thorough review of theoretical approaches

CCC Code: 0037-8046/06 $3.00

influential in the development of intergroup dialogue is beyond the scope of this article, but we provide an extensive bibliography elsewhere (Dessel, Garlington, & Rogge, 2005).

Definition

Intergroup dialogue work is a process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues about which views differ, often to the extent that polarization and conflict occur. As noted earlier, intergroup dialogue in the public arena is a facilitated community experience designed to provide a safe yet communal space to express anger and indignation about injustice. Participants are engaged in, witness, and are affected by a facilitated community experience. They strive to avoid unproductive language, foster new listening skills, improve communication patterns, value differences, and develop shared meanings (Chasin et al., 1996). Intergroup dialogue potentiates a democratic process that acknowledges and respects all parties, creates a context that reinforces the notion that change is possible, and transforms relationships toward positive social change. Through such changes, public decision making is influenced, and new, previously unexplored results can be produced (Schoem, 2003; Zubizaretta, 2002).

Characteristics of intergroup dialogue include fostering an environment that enables participants to speak and listen in the present while understanding the contributions of the past and the unfolding of the future. This type of environment is created by factors such as the choice of location for the dialogue, the establishment of communication and relationships with dialogue participants, and knowledgeable design and facilitation of dialogue. Participants are asked to suspend assumptions, confirm their unfamiliarity with each other, be spontaneous, and prepare for unanticipated consequences. They are encouraged to collaborate willingly, be vulnerable, and believe in the authenticity of all participants (Cissna & Anderson, 2002). Public dialogue is a facilitated process with various pedagogical, participatory, and other dynamic approaches to such facilitation (Shor & Friere, 1987).

Intergroup dialogue among those who do not know each other, on topics about which opinions may differ, brings into focus the possibilities for genuine openness, listening, and transformation. In a recent community-based, intergroup dialogue on same-sex marriage facilitated by Adrienne Dessel, a transformative opportunity arose when participants from a local Baptist church raised the possibility that their religious community could choose to marry gay and lesbian partners if they desired, even though they might have to break from their parent organization. As this definition and example illustrate, intergroup dialogue as a social change process includes relational concepts and interventions familiar to social workers across the micro–macro practice spectrum.

THE ROOTS AND LANGUAGE OF DIALOGUE

Physicist David Bohm, one of the most-cited authors on dialogue work, noted that dialogue has its origins in the Greek word "dialogos": "dia" meaning "through" and "logos" meaning "the meaning of the word" (Bohm, 1996, p. 6). The creation of a stream of meaning that flows among and through participants and attendance to the space among people are enduring concepts in the dialogue literature. Bohm (1996) conceived of dialogue as a "multifaceted process through which we explore our closely held values, the nature and intensity of emotions, the patterns of thought processes, the function of memory, the import of inherited cultural myths, and the manner in which neurophysiologic processes structure moment-to-moment experiences" (p. vii). He challenged people to mutually exchange their perceptions of the world without either forcing them on each other or conforming, as a means of revolutionizing our culture (Bohm, 1992).

Dialogue affects our thinking as it influences our assumptions. Bohm (1996) referred to the neurophysiological concept of proprioception, or self-perception, and highlighted the problems that arise in society when individuals are not proprioceptive in their efforts to communicate. He postulated that if certain thoughts and assumptions could be suspended and we could share our opinions without hostility, then we would be able to engage in "collective thought" that moves more creatively in new directions. We are more likely to think together if we can create shared meaning and a collective consciousness rather than simply search for facts. In dialogue, people become observers of their own thinking (Senge, 1990). As Shor and Friere (1987) suggested, to the extent that we reflect on our reality and communicate to each other, there is knowing and social transformation.

Currently, adversarial forms of communication dominate public discourse. For those involved, the

negative consequences range from aggression to the elimination of creative solutions (Pharr, 1996; Tannen, 1998). Intergroup dialogue is designed to be among the least adversarial forms of communication and can be differentiated from other forms of public discourse such as discussion, debate, and mediation by examining the roots and concomitant uses of these words. "Discussion," for example, shares the same root as "percussion" or "concussion" and implies a passing back and forth of ideas with the goal of pursuit of truth by one party. "Debate" stems from the root word "debatre," "to fight," and refers to a formal exchange of opinions in an argumentative form that involves attack, defense, and the potential of destructive outcomes. The root word of "mediation" refers to "a division in the middle," or settling a dispute, but not inherently to engaging in personal growth. Chasin and colleagues (1996) noted that without personal growth, resolutions achieved through mediation may have no enduring value.

Just as intergroup dialogue is different from other forms of public discourse, it is distinct from clinical, therapeutic processes such as group therapy. Certainly, dialogue and therapeutic interventions that engage multiple participants share an essential, common reliance on exchange, interpretation of meaning, and transformation. Both processes emphasize the importance of skilled facilitators. Intergroup dialogue, however, does not ensure confidentiality or address individual issues and internal dynamics to the degree that therapy does. Although both dialogue and therapy depend on interpersonal dynamics, expectations about the purpose, nature, and degree of self-disclosure differ. Isaacs (1999), for example, talked of speaking "to the center of the room" (p. 380) in intergroup dialogue—focusing on an object such as a candle—as a technique that intentionally avoids the deeper, intensive interpersonal interactions inherent in group therapy processes. For social workers, the use of intergroup dialogue as an approach to intergroup conflict combines the strengths of micro and macro practice by creating an opportunity for critical self-analysis and relational engagement together with systemic and structural change.

APPLCATIONS AND OUTCOMES

The illustrations of intergroup dialogue in not-for-profit or community-based and academic settings that follow summarize the context of the application, groups and issues addressed, outcomes reported, and evaluation methods, when evaluation information has been reported. The examples of intergroup dialogue reviewed here use a variety of qualitative and quantitative data collection and assessment methods that range from anecdotal report to hierarchical regression analysis. We note methodological issues that in some cases limit claims to successful outcomes and document evidence that speaks to the promise of intergroup dialogue.

These examples are drawn from the not-for-profit or community-based and academic settings, two major domains in which social workers carry out a variety of functions. Overlap often occurs across such settings, as with the Multicultural Experience in Leadership and Development (MELD) example described in the next section, in which social work academicians engaged with the community to evaluate the public dialogue experience.

NOT-FOR-PROFIT OR COMMUNITY-BASED SETTINGS

Intergroup dialogue in community-based contexts ranges from study circles with small groups to international cross-cultural dialogues.

Local Community-Based Intergroup Dialogue

A series of Interfaith Dialogue Forums, organized through the regional office of the National Conference for Community and Justice and facilitated by Adrienne Dessel and other National Conference for Community and Justice board members, were held in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 2003 and 2004. Faith-based groups are an integral part of local social fabric, and a point of both convergence and divergence for many in understanding their own lives as well as the greater society. Forum topics included interfaith perspectives on racism, winter holidays, religion in government, and same-gender marriage. The dialogues provided opportunities to examine biases, highlight differences and similarities among groups and individuals, and consider possibilities for social change. This example illustrates the opportunity, through design and facilitation of dialogue, to implement both clinical and community practice social work knowledge of individual and group dynamics and social action. Evaluation of the forums was anecdotal, informal, and self-selected. Feedback from participants included letters and phone calls in which respondent

comments highlighted the promising practice of interfaith dialogue and the importance of having more frequent public forums to promote inclusion and change in the community.

Intergroup Dialogue in Leadership Training

In Detroit, Michigan, the MELD community program incorporated dialogue in a yearlong multicultural experience in leadership development. MELD is an example of how intergroup dialogue in leadership training can affect the larger community. Information was gathered from participants at regular intervals. Qualitative and quantitative questions focused on program goals and skill acquisition. Alvarez and Cabbil (2001) noted in regard to focus group, phone interview, and mailed survey evaluations: "Participants reported reaching their goals of personal change and commitment to social change and acquired tools to work on that change. Alumni continued their involvement in programs, such as an exploration of gay and lesbian issues in the workplace and a critique of Middle Easterners in the media" (p. 14). Although Alvarez and Cabbil described their evaluation design, they did not discuss research limitations or provide future research recommendations.

Intergroup Dialogue in a Public Forum

For social workers, the Canadian Policy Research Network serves as an example of public participation and community empowerment through a one-day deliberative dialogue at 10 locations across Canada. The purpose was to examine citizens' vision for Canada in 10 years, what steps should be taken to fulfill that vision, and the role citizens and organizations would play to achieve that future. After the dialogue, 162 (40 percent) of 408 participants responded to mailed, self-report surveys about the effect of dialogue participation on how they defined their roles in public life and how dialogue promoted citizen participation in civic affairs. Ninety-one percent of survey respondents described dialogue as useful in improving communication with decision makers, 69 percent indicated that they had taken additional steps to stay informed about public affairs (that is, reading the newspaper or watching television), and 45 percent indicated that their participation in community meetings and contact with political representatives had increased since the dialogue (Saxena, 2003). These changes are positive; however, Saxena did not discuss validity threats such as respondent self-selection or other limitations to this research.

Application of Intergroup Dialogue in the Middle East

Intergroup dialogue has been applied, with reports of varying success, in international to local conflict and coexistence work among members of Arab, Palestinian, and Jewish communities. Dialogue studies among these communities illustrate a mixture of desirable and undesirable outcomes. In a case study of intergroup work with American Arab and Jewish communities, Norman (1991) found that although interethnic conflict continued to create tension, intergroup dialogue helped group members manage conflict and engage in social action. Khuri's (2004) participant observation study of an Arab–Jewish intergroup dialogue in an academic setting suggested that students increased their ability to "interact with those who were different from them, to recognize multiple perspectives, and to clarify their own beliefs and identities" (p. 244). Alatar and colleagues (2004) surveyed members of 28 Arab–Jewish–Palestinian dialogue groups in the United States and Canada to examine approaches to intergroup dialogue and to determine group challenges and needs. These researchers found that group members expanded their activity in public education and outreach initiatives related to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. On the basis of these findings, they recommended organizing a national network of dialogue groups, expanding training and other resources for intergroup dialogue about interethnic conflict and using intergroup dialogue for public education and action.

The utility of these findings and recommendations in regard to Arab–Jewish–Palestinian dialogue are subject to the inherent limitations of their selected research designs as well as study-specific implementation flaws. Taken together, these and other studies reported in this article suggest that intergroup dialogue can lead to positive individual attitude and behavioral change that can in turn lead to greater involvement in social justice action. This evidence appears sufficient to warrant social workers' investment in exploring the approach. Of particular ethical salience, however, are studies that document unsuccessful intergroup dialogue interventions.

Limitations of Intergroup Dialogue. Abu-Nimer (1999, 2004) assessed intervention models of the

six largest Arab–Jewish encounter programs in Israel, using quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, action research, and longitudinal studies. Seventy-five interviewers observed interpersonal–individual, intragroup, and intergroup–collective processes. Abu-Nimer also examined intervention processes that involved affective, cognitive, contact, and socializing experiences, many of which included intergroup dialogue. Although both Jewish and Arab participants reported some success, Arab participants were overall disappointed by limited relationship-building contact with Jewish students and by limited dialogue focused on political and structural societal change. Abu-Nimer (2004) concluded that interethnic dialogue promoted "genuine reconciliation *only when it addresses conflict issues and needs, mutual and exclusive perceptions of justice, and a shared vision of the future* [italics added]" (p. 418). Suleiman (2004) and Abu-Nimer (2004) also identified important limitations in intergroup dialogue design and implementation that included a poor balance of power distribution between Arab and Jewish participants. Arab participants had to speak in Hebrew instead of Arabic and were less familiar with the informal education and group process techniques of these encounter programs (Abu-Nimer, 1999). Both Abu-Nimer (1999) and Alatar and associates (2004) found that nondominant group Arab and Palestinian participants tended to seek instrumental or action-oriented outcomes from intergroup dialogue, whereas the goals of dominant group members (that is, Jewish participants) were more expressive and relational. Palestinian participants, for example, reported that one has to "walk the talk": Action, not dialogue, leads to social change (Alatar et al.).

Power Dynamics in Intergroup Dialogue. These researchers raise important concerns about the degree to which intergroup dialogue can truly overcome the dominant–nondominant power dynamics of social groups in conflict. Studies cited in the following section on academic settings also raise these concerns with respect to racial diversity, and we consider these concerns a high priority for future research on intergroup dialogue. Kuttab and Kaufman (1988), Alatar and colleagues (2004), and others suggest intergroup dialogue tactics through which inequitable power and other significant barriers have been—more rather than less—successfully addressed. Kuttab and Kaufman noted that "it is a rarely understood phenomenon that members of oppressed groups are generally ready and eager for dialogue" (p. 84). Given Kuttab and Kaufman's comment; indicators of the efficacy and challenges of intergroup dialogue for oppressed groups; and social workers' commitment to ethical, informed, skilled practice with members of oppressed groups, this intervention appears to deserve serious exploration.

Other Settings

Social workers can engage in intergroup dialogue at a growing number of centers and institutions (Table 1). The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, for example, promotes continuing development of the field of dialogue and deliberation through an extensive clearinghouse function; its database includes 4,200 practitioners and scholars. Search for Common Ground, an international nongovernment organization, and the National Issues Forums use dialogue to resolve social conflict and achieve societal change.

One of the most widely known not-for-profit dialogue programs, the Public Conversations Project of the Family Institute of Cambridge, has applied family therapy interventions to dialogue on intensively divisive topics. The organization's objective is to create new ways of relating among those who hold polarized positions. Its work involves extensive collaboration with participants in assessing, designing, convening, and facilitating dialogues (Chasin et al., 1996). Specific communication tools are used to prevent repetition of historical, entrenched, and unproductive communication patterns and to foster new ways of interacting that may lead to innovation and action. The organization works to resolve public polarization through dialogues such as those held with prolife and prochoice partisans after the 1994 murders of two workers in two women's health clinics in Boston and with stakeholders in land use disputes (Public Conversations Project, 2005).

ACADEMIC SETTINGS

Several social work academic programs have developed innovative approaches to diversity and multiculturalism that incorporate intergroup dialogue using pedagogical and experiential dialogue techniques, as well as extracurricular intergroup dialogue opportunities (Table 2).

Of the dialogue-focused academic centers and institutes that emerged in our review as most fully

Table 1: Not-for-Profit or Community-Based Intergroup Dialogue Institutes and Centers

Issue	Entity	Web Site	Reference
Multi-issue collaboration, practice, and resource centers	National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation National Issues Forums Western Justice Center Foundation	http://www.thataway.org http://www.nifi.org http://www.westernjustice.org/	Schoem & Hurtado (2001)
Abortion, interfaith issues, environment	Public Conversations Project	http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/index.asp	Khaminwa & Sadeghi (2003)
Diversity, interfaith issues	National Conference for Community and Justice	http://www.nccj.org/	Nagda et al. (1999), Khaminwa & Sadeghi (2003)
Education	Educators for Social Responsibility	http://www.esrnational.org/home.htm	Khaminwa & Sadeghi (2003)
Community conflict resolution, environment, racism, and diversity	Utne Reader Neighborhood Salon Public Dialogue Consortium	http://www.utne.com/salons http://www.publicdialogue.org	Khaminwa & Sadeghi (2003) Pearce & Pearce (2004)
Mental health communication	Taos Institute Center for Nonviolent Communication	http://www.taosinstitute.net http://www.cnvc.org	Khaminwa & Sadeghi (2003)
Organizational communication, international ethnic conflict	International Institute for Sustained Dialogue Search for Common Ground	http://www.sustaineddialogue.org http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/sfcg_home.html	Khaminwa & Sadeghi (2003)

developed and well-known, only the program at the University of Washington is housed in a social work program. The University of Michigan and University of Illinois identify social workers as key interdisciplinary collaborators. The Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan emphasizes dialogue groups as an approach to multicultural learning (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003; Spencer, 2004). The Program on Intergroup Relations has received funding from the Council on

Table 2: Academic-Based Intergroup Dialogue Centers

Center	University	Web Site
Program on Intergroup Relations	University of Michigan	http://www.umich.edu/~igrc/
Intergroup Dialogue, Education, and Action (IDEA) Center	University of Washington School of Social Work	http://depts.washington.edu/sswweb/idea/
Words of Engagement	University of Maryland	http://www.ohrp.umd.edu/ WE/
Program on Intergroup Relations	University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	http://www.intergrouprelations.uiuc.edu/
Intergroup Dialogue Program	Occidental College	http://departments.oxy.edu/dialogue/
Social Justice Education	University of Massachusetts, Amherst	http://www.umass.edu/sje/
Intergroup Dialogue	Syracuse University	http://cstl.syr.edu/intergroupdialogue/
Intergroup Relations Center	Arizona State University	http://www.asu.edu/provost/intergroup/

Social Work Education's Millennium Project. Part of the Program on Intergroup Relations' research agenda is a longitudinal review of more than 4,000 college students who participated in diversity-focused dialogue experiences at nine public universities. To date, the findings of this review suggest that participating students improved their analytical skills, cultural awareness, and ability to think pluralistically and take the perspective of others (Hurtado, 2005).

Diversity-Focused Dialogues

At the Intergroup Dialogue, Education, and Action (IDEA) Center at the University of Washington School of Social Work, diversity-focused dialogues are integrated into social work education as an innovative method of teaching students about cultural diversity and oppression. The work of both the IDEA Center and the University of Michigan stands out in their intentional and structural emphasis on evaluation. For example, in one study of student participation in dialogue groups, Nagda and colleagues (2004) analyzed pretest–posttest survey data on the effects of dialogue and mediating processes on students of color and white students. Their hierarchical regression analysis indicated that both students of color and white students rated intergroup dialogue higher than lectures and readings, both types of learning were positively related to action outcomes, and students of color rated their involvement in this experience as more important than did the white students.

At the University of Michigan, Gurin and associates (2002) used well-conceived and detailed multiple regression analyses to examine data from a longitudinal database on white, African American, and Asian American students' perspectives of university diversity initiatives. They controlled for a range of student and institutional characteristics and tested how various diversity experiences with peers, perspectives, and civil discourse affected students' perceptions and how they engaged in learning. More specifically, these researchers studied the effects of students' exposure to three types of diversity (that is, diverse groups outside classroom settings, in classroom settings, and through participation in multicultural events or intergroup dialogues offered at the university) on five learning and democratic values outcome variables (that is, active thinking, intellectual engagement, the belief that individual differences and democracy can be compatible, the ability to understand the perspective of others, and racial and cultural engagement). In Gurin and associates' Michigan study as well as in a larger national study, all students' learning outcomes were affected positively in some way by greater diversity experience. The effects for white students, however, appeared to be the most consistent across types of diversity experience. White students experienced the largest effects from classroom diversity and participation in multicultural events and intergroup dialogues. Informal interaction affected Asian and African American students' perceptions that individual and group differences can be compatible with democratic values. African American students' participation in multicultural events and intergroup dialogue produced statistically significant, positive effects on their understanding of others' perspectives.

Smith College School of Social Work students, faculty, and staff were polled after engaging in an intergroup dialogue project about race. Dialogue goals included reduced racist attitudes and beliefs, improved cross-racial understanding, and ameliorated racial tension (Miller & Donner, 2000). Miller and Donner collected open-ended and scaled item questionnaire data regarding the "impact and meaning of the racial dialogue" to "describe and understand rather than to confirm cause and effect relationships" (p. 42). Students of color and white students agreed that racial dialogues were an important intervention in dealing with racism and reported greater hope that people from different backgrounds could listen to one another. White students, however, reported gaining more from the dialogues than did students of color; dialogue helped them challenge their feelings and opinions about race and motivated them to become more involved in antiracism efforts. Miller and Donner speculated that dialogue might provide more learning opportunities for white participants as they become more aware of their status and privilege, whereas people of color may see dialogues as useful only as they relate to social action.

At the University of Tennessee College of Social Work, student-initiated and -implemented Study Circles against Racism (SCAR) combined dialogue work with social work practical education. These groups drew from the work of the Study Circles Resource Center (2005), a national organization that provides curriculums for various study circle topics. Sarah B. Garlington, who was an MSSW

student and SCAR organizer; other student organizers; and participants used the groups to increase the depth of their self-education about oppression, to improve their capacity to work with diverse populations, and to effect social change. In one recent academic year, students completed seven groups, with five to eight students in each group and each group meeting over a five-week period. Students in four of the groups self-selected to participate; students in three groups participated as a supplemental activity to their program of study. In anonymous postgroup surveys, student facilitators noted the need for better and consistently implemented evaluation. In addition, they noted that personal engagement in the dialogue appeared to be higher in the self-selected groups than in the supplemental activity groups.

For people with diverse positions and backgrounds, study circles bridge the two purposes of promoting individual understanding and working cohesively for change (Houle & Roberts, 2000). For social work students, engaging in the SCAR groups also helped to bridge the micro–macro methods of practice. As a national model, study circles have been used in other academic arenas, such as building relationships between schools and communities. A wide range of community-based applications and the complexities of evaluating study circle outcomes are detailed in Houle and Roberts's (2000) best practices report. In this report, the researchers collected data from 17 communities that used study circles to respond retroactively to local conflicts and events that engendered community uneasiness and conflict, as well as proactive efforts organized around upcoming events. In concert with the 17 communities, Houle and Roberts used qualitative research methods that included focus groups, surveys, individual interviews, observation and written materials review, and community tours. Participants in a number of the 17 communities studied the effectiveness of study circles with regard to changing attitudes and actions related to individual and institutional racism. Houle and Roberts's report documented study circle outcomes such as the creation of a race relations task force to increase diversity in a school board.

ASSESSMENTS OF INTERGROUP DIALOGUE

In their summary of the state of intergroup dialogue research, Schoem and Hurtado (2001) noted that although much remains to be done with regard to methodological rigor and evaluation, several studies have documented positive changes in program participants, processes, and outcomes based on dialogue participation. Schoem and Hurtado's review suggests that participant changes include increased personal and social awareness with regard to identity and difference; increased knowledge about other groups and social inequalities; greater commitment to social responsibility and action; reduced stereotyping; more complex thinking; improved communication skills; and a greater ability to manage conflict. As a result of the IDEA Center, University of Michigan, and other studies summarized in this article, intergroup dialogue has been targeted as an important pedagogical method for preparing social work students for professional practice that is culturally competent and oriented in social justice (Hurtado, 2005; Nagda et al., 1999; Nagda & Zuniga, 2003).

RECOMMENDATION

In this article, we have explored the practice of intergroup dialogue and its implications for social workers across the micro–macro spectrum. This exploration has revealed important merits and limitations, in light of which we recommend that social workers consider intergroup dialogue as a viable intervention through which to work with groups in conflict to advance social justice and change. This recommendation is paired with the caveat that although sufficient evidence appears in research studies to warrant its further use, there are sufficient limitations in existing research, particularly in community-based settings, to prioritize additional research efforts, as we discuss in the Research section. As with all interventions, practitioners across the micro–macro spectrum should approach the use of intergroup dialogue with a critical eye toward engaging in informed, ethical, and evaluated implementation.

Social workers have much to contribute to intergroup dialogue given our professional knowledge, skills, and experience with relationship building, oppression, individual empowerment, advocacy, and systemic approaches. Conversely, intergroup dialogue in community-based and academic settings offers social workers another venue for social intervention that can involve individuals, groups, organizations, community, and society.

Enhancing Practice and Preparing New Practitioners

In community-based and academic settings, the use of intergroup dialogue interventions to improve intergroup relations is expanding. To use this approach ethically, well, and wisely, social workers must understand the differences and similarities of intergroup dialogue in comparison with other forms of public discourse, group therapy, and other clinical approaches and with related interventions such as multicultural education, conflict resolution, and workplace diversity initiatives (Stephan & Stephan, 2001).

For social workers in clinical, other direct practice, organizer, activist, and other roles, one of the first steps to engaging in intergroup dialogue is to understand more fully its history, theory, and application. Not-for-profit organizations such as the Study Circles Resource Center and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation identify many community-based opportunities for dialogue training. Contacting such resources can be a means of locating others interested in intergroup dialogue locally, nationally, and internationally. In their own communities, social workers can locate existing intergroup dialogue activity through grassroots advocacy, faith-based, and other organizations engaged in social justice work. The Interfaith Dialogue Forums, mentioned earlier in this article and facilitated by Adrienne Dessel, are one outcome of such a connection.

Every social worker knows of polarizing social issues in her or his own community. Exploring the feasibility of intergroup dialogue is an excellent incentive for clinical social workers, social work organizers, activists, and others across the micro–macro spectrum to work together in ways they might not have previously. Greater knowledge about intergroup dialogue can only enhance social work's capacity in group work, multicultural communication, and conflict management. Conversely, the application of therapeutic and direct practice, group management, public speaking, organizing, activism, and policy practice skills are all important to improve relationships and pursue social justice with groups and communities in conflict.

There are several benefits to preparing baccalaureate- and master's-level social work students to use intergroup dialogue. First, coursework and field integration would expose students to the multidisciplinary theoretical nature of this work and prepare students with the knowledge and skills to practice it (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003). Spencer's (2004) Intergroup Dialogue Facilitation for Multicultural Social Work course exemplifies intergroup dialogue pedagogy. Several academically based social work programs incorporate dialogue work into core curricula. Second, providing this content is consonant with social work's mission of pursuing empowerment, social justice, and change through building relationships. Finally, including intergroup dialogue content can engage faculty, students, and field agency personnel across the micro–macro practice spectrum in collaborative, creative, and productive work.

Influencing Policy

Social workers across the micro–macro practice spectrum can use intergroup dialogue to influence policy within organizations, among organizations working together, and in the public policy arena. The ubiquity of such applications within and across government, business, not-for-profit or community-based settings, and academic sectors complements the fact that social workers operate in and across these sectors. Houle and Roberts's (2000) best practices report illustrated the use of dialogue-based study circles to introduce community members' opinions into school board policy decisions, which changed the shape of school district operations. Study circles are often used to evaluate and redesign intra-organizational policies with regard to diversity concerns and to bring together community representatives to assess interorganizational policies.

Social workers in clinical, other direct practice, organizer, activist, and other roles all participate in various ways and times in intra- and interorganizational task forces and coalitions that seek to improve social, economic, and environmental well-being. Intergroup dialogue frequently entails multiple organizations working together to identify and define problems, to collect information, and to understand issues in depth, with the intent to shape interorganizational policy. Public policy can benefit from the application of dialogue skills and values. Intergroup dialogue has been used, for example, to shape a community input process that incorporated neighborhood members' concerns about a federally funded Empowerment Zone (Seitz, Hansen, Rogers, Lartson, & Hundley, 2002). Dialogue is inherently present in participatory empowerment approaches to public policy making, to

which the social work profession is no stranger, whether the arena is local, regional, national, or international.

Continuing and Expanding Research

There are important methodological issues to be examined with regard to the utility of intergroup dialogue. Research on this intervention in community settings is in an early stage, and the methodological rigor used to assess outcomes, particularly outside of academic settings, has been relatively low. Yet, as indicated by some of the more rigorously designed and implemented studies to date, there appears to be sufficient evidence of the merit of intergroup dialogue to warrant further study in both academic and community-based settings. On the basis of this article's discussion of intergroup dialogue, we emphasize four aspects of research on which to focus next to improve the intergroup dialogue knowledge base.

First, the research reviewed in this article indicates that attentiveness to the importance of evaluating intergroup dialogue is on the rise, but much yet needs to be done. In this regard, a comprehensive compendium of research methods and tools used to assess intergroup dialogue would be of great utility to community practitioners and to academic researchers. Schoem and Hurtado (2001) and others have identified, for example, three key sets of variables that need greater understanding: (1) who engages in intergroup dialogue and why; (2) the characteristics of public dialogue processes; and (3) short- and longer term outcomes in regard to participant learning, behavior, interpersonal relationships, work and community environments, policy changes, and other indicators of social change.

An intergroup dialogue research compendium would catalog whether, how, and by whom data about these and other variables have been collected and analyzed. Research methods and measurement tools that span the qualitative–quantitative continuum would be described, validity and reliability statistics would be reported, and relative strengths and limitations would be critiqued. Such methods and tools would cover the gamut of appropriate options, including focus groups; participant, wait list, and comparison groups; external consultant program evaluation; action research; participant surveys, exercises, and essays; pre- and posttest, cross-sectional, quasi-, and experimental designs; and cross-sectional to longitudinal timeframe designs (Hardiman & Jackson, 2005; Houle & Roberts, 2000; Stephan & Stephan, 2001).

Second, the overall rigor of methods used to assess intergroup dialogue, regardless of community-based or academic setting, must be improved. Anecdotal reports, broadly defined interview processes, and nonsystematic observation are the reported basis for claims to positive outcomes in many cases (Khuri, 2004; McCoy & Scully, 2002; Schatz, Furman, & Jenkins, 2003). The value of in-depth, context-rich qualitative information is not to be discounted, yet the limitations of such information with regard to, for example, generalizability and replicability of applications and outcomes must be made clear and critiqued explicitly. Other studies, such as the MELD and Canadian Policy Research Network applications, describe the use of cross-sectional self-report surveys and focus groups, yet may not specify risks associated with sampling issues, social desirability response, or other serious threats to the validity and reliability of their results (Alvarez & Cabbil, 2001; Saxena, 2003). Claims of successful outcomes, without specification of study limitations and suggestions as to how to improve research that follows, at best present an incomplete picture of the results and may promote the use of misdirected interventions.

Research on intergroup dialogue that uses stringent quantitative assessments with pre and post measures of knowledge, attitude, and behavioral change; control groups; other elements of quasi- and experimental designs; longitudinal timeframes; and more sophisticated statistical analysis procedures is not yet reported widely but is expanding (Gurin et al., 2002; Nagda, Kim, & Truelove, 2004). To date, these more sophisticated assessments have occurred in academic settings. One important challenge for some of these more complex studies is separating the effects of intergroup dialogue from other interventions used to promote multicultural understanding and social change (Hurtado, 2005). The University of Michigan's multi-university study of intergroup student dialogues on race and gender is moving beyond the norm of case studies and exploration of cognitive outcomes to longitudinal, qualitative, and quantitative assessments of often neglected factors, such as participant self-selection, process (that is, event duration, ground rules, facilitation techniques), and postdialogue action (Hardiman & Jackson, 2005).

Qualitative approaches to intergroup dialogue evaluation can reach higher levels of sophistication and insight with greater use of techniques such as interrater training, systematic observation, and content analysis (Stephan & Stephan, 2001). From our viewpoint, intergroup dialogue assessments would benefit best from carefully thought out mixed qualitative–quantitative designs that enrich understanding of this phenomenon from aggregate and in-depth perspectives.

Third, research on the efficacy of intergroup dialogue in not-for-profit or community-based settings must be expanded to evaluate it more fully as a means of achieving social justice and change. In community-based settings, perhaps the first challenge is to persuade practitioners to collect data in the many settings and configurations in which intergroup dialogue occurs. Practitioner and participant buy-in to the benefits of evaluation is a challenge in many practice settings. Social workers can contribute to intergroup dialogue work by familiarizing themselves and other community-based practitioners with evaluative tools and assisting in their implementation and analysis. A rigorously researched intergroup dialogue evaluation compendium as described earlier, particularly if available in a public forum such as the Internet, would help practitioners choose appropriate and feasible evaluation tools and disseminate new information and research findings. A commitment on the part of not-for-profit institutes and centers to establishing comprehensive evaluation processes could signal a turning point in this regard. The key is combining a participatory research approach to engaging stakeholders in dialogue in the development of goals and evaluation with quantitative methods that assess relevant findings to processes and outcomes.

The fourth aspect of research emphasized here is understanding the experiences of oppressed groups in intergroup dialogue. Crucial outcome, design, and implementation issues such as reported by Abu-Nimer (1999) and Suleiman (2004) emphasize the ongoing need for in-depth assessment of power differentials between dominant and nondominant groups. That is, can dialogue level the playing field, and if so, under what conditions? If not, what are the ethical implications of using an intervention that may at best reinforce the status quo? What might we learn through comparison of the structure and dynamics of intergroup dialogue with related interventions such as multicultural education, conflict resolution, and workplace diversity initiatives (Stephan & Stephan, 2001)? At a fundamental level, is intergroup dialogue itself a culture-bound intervention that favors dominant groups, and if so, what alternatives should be studied?

A similar ethical issue arises from research that suggests that dominant group members (that is, white college students) may profit more consistently from intergroup dialogue than nondominant group members (that is, African American college students) (Gurin et al., 2002; Miller & Donner, 2000). What ethical issues arise when members of traditionally oppressed groups find themselves placed in the position of educating dominant group members? Can dialogue succeed when one group seeks action and the other, knowledge, and if so, how? To address these issues, Gurin and associates, Miller and Donner, and others referenced in this article recommend facilitation methods that foster interpersonal and intercultural communication, address political context, encourage group identity and cohesiveness, and provide historical information on status and power differentials. These concerns are not new to researchers in intergroup dialogue, or in closely related areas such as multicultural responsiveness and competence initiatives. They continue to be, however, central issues of concern with which to reckon.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Intergroup dialogue work has the characteristics of an intervention that can be a point of convergence and common purpose for social workers in clinical, other direct practice, organizer, activist, and other roles across the micro–macro spectrum. This intervention combines psychological and relational insight with principles of empowerment, social justice, and diversity and a holistic recognition of multiple truths (Pearlmutter, 2002). It has the potential to bring individuals and communities together, help them identify social problems, and lead to social action. It is consonant with social work in its interdisciplinary theoretical base and practice. Through their own efforts and in concert with others, social work practitioners can use intergroup dialogue to synthesize clinical–direct practice and community organizing–activist skills to promote social change.

The working definition of social work practice established by the Commission of Social Work Practice in 1956 identified the purposes of social work

as identifying potential areas of disequilibria among individuals or groups, helping to resolve problems that arise out of such social instability, and seeking out the maximum potential in individuals, groups, and communities (Gibelman, 1999). Today, we continue to strive toward our professional mandate to improve individual and societal well-being, particularly for and with those who are most vulnerable, oppressed, and constrained by environmental forces. Through intergroup dialogue, we can test in yet another venue how to bring social work knowledge of the inner and relational world to bear on community practice to achieve the internal and external transformations that lead to social justice and change. SW

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Original manuscript received July 15, 2005
Final revision received January 3, 2006
Accepted April 27, 2006