

## **Walking the talk: Reflections from a Community-Focused Dialogue Series**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper provides a historical background and review of the literature on intergroup dialogues, with a focus on community-engaged dialogues. The authors illustrate the format, purpose, and community factors involved in the Day of Dialogue (DOD), an intergroup community dialogue series. An expansion of Zúñiga and Nagda's (2001) stages of intergroup dialogue is used to critically examine dialogue issues and provide a structure for culturally appropriate, community-engaged implementation. Lessons learned from three years of DOD implementation are provided, including the following themes: Balancing process and content, maintaining flexibility, defining roles, identifying biases, identifying/engaging key players, allowing voices to be heard, mindfulness toward environment/structure, and promoting movement towards action. Concrete suggestions to guide future practice around creating effective, culturally appropriate, and community-engaged dialogues, as well as effectively empowering communities and fostering social change, will be discussed.*

*Keywords:* community dialogue, intergroup dialogue, community empowerment

**Author Note:** The authors wish to thank all of our community partners and funders, who have made (and continue to make) the Days of Dialogue possible. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of our colleagues on the Challenging Racism and Empowering Communities through Ethnocultural Research (CRECER) team to the planning and implementation of the Days of Dialogue as well as their suggestions for and review of an earlier draft of this manuscript. We also thank the staff of the University of Miami School of Education Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, whose contributions make each Day run smoothly. Finally, we thank and affirm all participants that have attended these events. This project thrives because of the richness of our local communities.

## Introduction

The conflicts of societies around the world are often rooted in historical legacies of social divisions—be they religious, ethnic, political, national, regional, or otherwise. In the context of an increasingly pervasive sense of disunity, the intergroup dialogue format has seen increased popularity as a method of fostering cross-cultural understanding throughout communities and higher education institutions nationally and internationally (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). Despite this proliferation, only limited scholarly consideration has been given to linking theoretical frameworks of intergroup dialogue to the structure and process of engaging communities in meaningful and productive dialogues, and to the practical steps for planning, implementation, and follow-up in particular. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of intergroup dialogues in the context of community change, and to bridge the gap between theory and implementation. Important considerations related to the format, purpose and community factors involved with these dialogues are examined and important lessons learned from a specific dialogue series are provided with the aim of informing future community-engaged practice.

## Theoretical Foundations of Intergroup Dialogue

Theoretically, intergroup dialogues are founded in Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which posits that when one interacts with a member of another group (i.e., an outgroup), not only are negative views about the individual changed, but positive views are also then generalized to other (out)group members. It is not by contact alone that progressive change is purported to take place, however. This theory highlights the importance of equal status, intergroup cooperation, shared goals, and the support of these goals by laws and social structure. More recently, the model has evolved to include the importance of context and intervening variables, such as social norms and group-based perceptions (Ata, Bastian, and Lusher, 2009).

Another foundational component of intergroup dialogue is Tajfel and Turner's (1979) conceptualization of the *intergroup-interpersonal continuum* which describes the range of social behaviors inherent in interaction between two or more individuals. To illustrate, the authors propose the assumption that more intense intergroup conflicts are likely to be characterized by behavior as a function of respective group memberships, rather than by their "individual characteristics of interindividual relationships" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 34). Hurtado (2001) and Kardia and Sevig (2001) highlight similar distinctions between social identity (i.e., affiliation with groups) and personal identity (i.e., identity as individuals). It has been found that when individuals base their interaction on social identities, distance and differentiation may lead to uncertainty and anxiety about interacting with those of different backgrounds (Hurtado, 2001). In order for effective communication to occur, and threat to be managed, contact situations must allow *personal* identities of individuals to emerge. Advancing such interactions one step further, social identities must ultimately become salient in order for members to develop more positive regard for outgroup members, extending the interaction from interpersonal to intergroup. In other words, in order for positive effects of contact to be extended beyond immediate, episodic situations, it appears to be necessary for interactions to span the intergroup-interpersonal continuum. Intergroup dialogue offers the opportunity to connect interpersonal relations with structural (i.e., intergroup) issues (Nagda & Derr, in press) and thus these dialogues may have implications for individual, interpersonal, and systemic change (Dessel & Rogge, 2008; Nagda & Derr, in press).

## **Intergroup Dialogue as a Social Change Process**

One of the primary assumptions of intergroup dialogue is that the participants will likely have different socio-historical legacies, hold stereotypical views of each others' behaviors and values, and question whether they are members of the same community (Schoem et al., 2001). The intergroup dialogue process allows for social interaction with diverse peers and facilitates learning about others, increasing the probability that participants will develop the skills necessary for optimally interacting with others of diverse outgroups (Hurtado, 2001). On an individual level, engaging in an intergroup format requires appreciating difference, critical self-reflection (e.g., examining ideas, experiences, and perspectives), engaging one's own self as an active participant (e.g., sharing, inquiring, and reconsidering perspectives), and building alliances (Nagda, 2006). Indeed, research in psychology and education offers evidence for the contribution of intergroup interaction to individual development—including complex thinking and empathic skills, linked with both cognitive and social development (Hurtado, 2001).

From a broader viewpoint, intergroup dialogue serves as a "vehicle for more individuals to feel comfortable with conflict, social differences, and sociohistorical legacies that shape their daily interactions" (Schoem et al., 2001, p. 1). In addition to individual influences, intergroup dialogues have the capacity to be useful at the community/group level by bringing people together in an attempt to address systemic issues and differences, especially those related to race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic status. Shared individual and familial experiences, as well as common values, connect group members and form a sense of community, while dialoging within and across groups allows for increased group level understanding of the experiences and values of other groups (Grodofsky & Soffer, 2011). The process also can help individuals recognize their role within the group and assist the group in recognizing their collective power in effecting community change (Grodofsky & Soffer, 2011).

University settings have been a popular venue for the implementation and evaluation of the individual and community capacities of intergroup dialogues, employing pedagogical, experiential and extracurricular dialogue techniques and opportunities (Dessel et al., 2006). In a recent example, a multi-university research group designed and implemented a uniform curriculum and research design, including random assignment, to assess the effects of intergroup dialogue on university students (MIGR, n.d.; Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, & Zúñiga, 2009). A total of six race dialogues with six control groups, and six gender dialogues with six control groups were conducted across nine institutions over three years. Analyses found consistent positive effects on intergroup understanding (e.g., awareness of inequality, identity engagement), intergroup relationships (e.g., motivation to bridge differences, empathy), and intergroup collaboration and engagement (e.g., motivation for engagement, confidence in taking action and in behaviors). Increasingly, the spotlight is being cast on the use of these approaches at the community level and beyond (e.g., Pruitt & Kauffer, 2004). Many communities—nationally and internationally (e.g. Grodofsky & Soffer, 2011; Harris & Young, 2009)—have embraced principles of intergroup dialogue to create opportunities for members to come together and explore differences, with the ultimate goal of bridging these differences, addressing conflict, and/or fostering understanding and cohesion.

## Intergroup Dialogue and Marginalized Groups

Research concerning intergroup relations has centered on understanding the experiences of the oppressed (Dulin-Keita, Hannon, Fernandez & Cockerham, 2011; Nadal et al., 2011), the attitudes and behaviors of those in power (McLeland & Sutton, 2008; Persson & Musher-Eizenman, 2003), and outcomes of these experiences for individuals, communities, and society (Franklin-Jackson & Carter, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Sue 2010). With the exception of educational programs directed at majority groups (Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2005), *interventions* tended to focus on targeted groups (Brondolo, Gallo, & Myers, 2009), creating programs aimed at increasing access to socially restricted resources or coping with discrimination. While these programs or interventions are critically important, they focus on coping with a problematic environment, rather than changing the environmental structures, oppressive attitudes, and interpersonal segregation that promote discrimination. From the perspective of fostering intergroup understanding and exchange, such programs may actually reinforce the distinctions of "us" versus "them," rather than foster a sense of exchange and understanding. Only recently have interventions focused on the interpersonal aspects of discrimination, incorporating both the oppressor and oppressed in an educational and conversational experience in the form of an intergroup dialogue.

Intergroup differences are especially relevant when bringing together people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural identities and/or addressing issues of disparities and imbalance in power and resources. When people from different communities gather, each group will bring a unique set of histories, circumstances, and goals. Care must be taken to foster an environment that allows individuals to speak and listen in the present, while also "understanding the contributions of the past and the unfolding of the future" (Dessel et al., 2006, p. 304). The legacy of historical social structures is an important consideration in bringing together individuals from differing social groups.

In their review of intergroup dialogue evaluations, Dessel and Rogge (2008) highlight mixed findings with respect to the issue of power imbalances and perspectives of dialogue for nondominant versus majority group members. Nagda, Kim, and Truelove (2004, as cited in Dessel & Rogge, 2008) and Nagda and Zuniga (2003, as cited in Dessel & Rogge) found that, compared to White students, students of color thought more positively about conflict and rated dialogues as more valuable. In a secondary school setting, students of color reported being able to share their perspectives and rated their learning as higher, compared to White students (Nagda, McCoy, and Barrett, 2006, as cited in Dessel & Rogge, 2008). In another study, however, only about half of the students of color (compared with all of the White students) reported feeling that the groups could learn from each other (Miller and Donner, 2000). In a study of impact on educational outcomes at the university level, White students were found to experience the largest effects (e.g., active thinking, intellectual engagement, belief in compatibility of difference and racial/cultural engagement) from participation in intergroup dialogues, compared to students of color (Gurin et al., 2002). In a meta-analytic study of 526 papers (reporting 515 studies) on intergroup contact, written between 1940 and 2000, Pettigrew & Tropp (2006) concluded that "while contact had a reliable (modest) impact upon intergroup perceptions, this effect was more apparent for majorities" (p. 766). Finally, in a community dialogue project comprising Arab-Palestinian and Jewish participants, goals of Arab and Palestinian participants focused on "instrumental or action-oriented outcomes," while the goals of the Jewish participants were more "expressive and relational" in nature (Abu-Nimer,

1999; Alatar et al., 2004). These examples highlight the fact that members of the minority group (i.e., community members of color) may evaluate the usefulness or success of dialogue based on outcomes and social action rather than solely on the relational elements of the interaction.

Overall, these reviewed findings suggest that organizers of such programs must be mindful of varying motivations, expectations, and evaluative perspectives marginalized groups may hold relative to those from majority/dominant (as defined by the unique context of a given community) group. This point is of particular significance for the Day of Dialogue, to which we now turn, for which race, ethnicity, and culture have been focal topics.

### **Intergroup Dialogue Implementation: Day of Dialogue**

The Day of Dialogue (DOD) is a day-long forum that provides neighborhood leaders and community members a space to identify the needs of an identified community, and to develop strategies to address them. Since 2008, the Challenging Racism and Empowering Communities through Ethnocultural Research (CRECER) team in the University of Miami's School of Education and Human Development has facilitated the DOD in collaboration with various community partners (primarily social service agencies) to highlight pressing social justice issues impacting the Miami-Dade community. The DOD model focuses on bridging the gap between diverse groups so that community leaders, community members, and others are all able to engage in meaningful interaction across typical sociopolitical boundaries (e.g., race/ethnicity, social class, educational level). While the program is logistically supported by a campus-based research team, the design and implementation of the program is accomplished through a community-based participatory research model, in which community partners (such as the Miami Coalition for Christians and Jews, Catalyst Miami, and the Thelma Gibson Health Initiative) identify community needs, guide the planning process, identify and engage participants, and dictate the content of each dialogue. The research team provides logistical support, and theoretical expertise on the facilitation of community dialogues, but it is the community partners and representative attendees who drive the agenda and participates in the dialogue itself. The first- and second-authors of this article are student members of the research team and have each been involved in supporting the planning and implementation of at least one DOD. The third author is the creator of the DOD model and faculty mentor of the research team, functioning as the primary interface with community partners.

The community-engaged nature of the program warrants a flexible design, with topic, participants, format and structure changing based on the identified community needs. The first DOD, *Addressing the Needs of Blacks in Miami*, took place in 2008 and sought to bring leaders from ethnically diverse (e.g., African American, Haitian American, and other Caribbean American) Black communities (as well as leaders and groups from other ethnic communities and relevant educational, economic, and health agencies) to identify the economic, health, and education issues affecting Blacks in Miami, and to develop strategies for social change, including a potential partnership between the community and the University of Miami. The next DOD, *Networking through Dialogue: A Focus on American Indian Students at UM*, sought to address the post-secondary educational needs of the American Indian community in Miami. This dialogue brought together American Indian students with University of Miami faculty and staff to discuss strategies to create a supportive network for American Indian students, and to effectively promote their academic advancement. The most recent DOD, held in October 2010,

was themed *Building Bridges across Cultures: Promoting Education*. The event brought together local school staff, parents, and representatives of nonprofit, educational, and community-based organizations representing Miami's various cultural groups to discuss the significance of culture in the education system. The 2011 DOD (which took place after submission of this manuscript), was organized as an extension of the 2010 DOD, and engaged attendees around the theme of *Accepting Differences: Building Trust*.

### **Organizing Framework for Implementing Intergroup Dialogue**

Zúñiga & Nagda (2001) describe four stages of intergroup dialogue common across models: (1) Setting an environment for dialogue, (2) developing a common base, (3) exploring questions, issues or conflicts, and (4) moving from dialogue to action. These stages provide a framework to better organize and understand "the core sequence of tasks" (p. 313) involved in the dialogue design process, and broadly capture the crucial components of intergroup dialogues as described in several models (i.e., collective inquiry, critical-dialogic education, community building and social action, conflict resolution and peace building). In the next section, an expanded application of Zuniga and Nagda's intergroup dialogue stages is discussed using specific examples from the three DODs described above. For each stage, a "DOD in focus" is discussed to illustrate the key elements of the stage and specific lessons learned about each stage. For community-based dialogues, in which interactions span diverse subpopulations, an important addition to this model is required: Taking specific and purposeful steps to engage multiple stakeholders and perspectives within communities. This step begins long before the dialogue itself and is essential to the other stages of dialogue.

### **Engaging Communities**

Dessel, Rogge, and Garlington (2006) define intergroup dialogue in the public arena as "a facilitated community experience designed to provide a safe yet communal space to express anger and indignation about injustice" (p. 304). Thus, an intergroup dialogue format aims to provide the opportunity for reciprocal exchange across groups. One of the potential pitfalls of academic dialogues and institutional research surrounding these dialogues is failing to engage the communities and constituents addressed by the content of the dialogue. This may create a *talking about* (rather than *talking with*) dynamic, and fail to infuse the experiences and views of various groups.

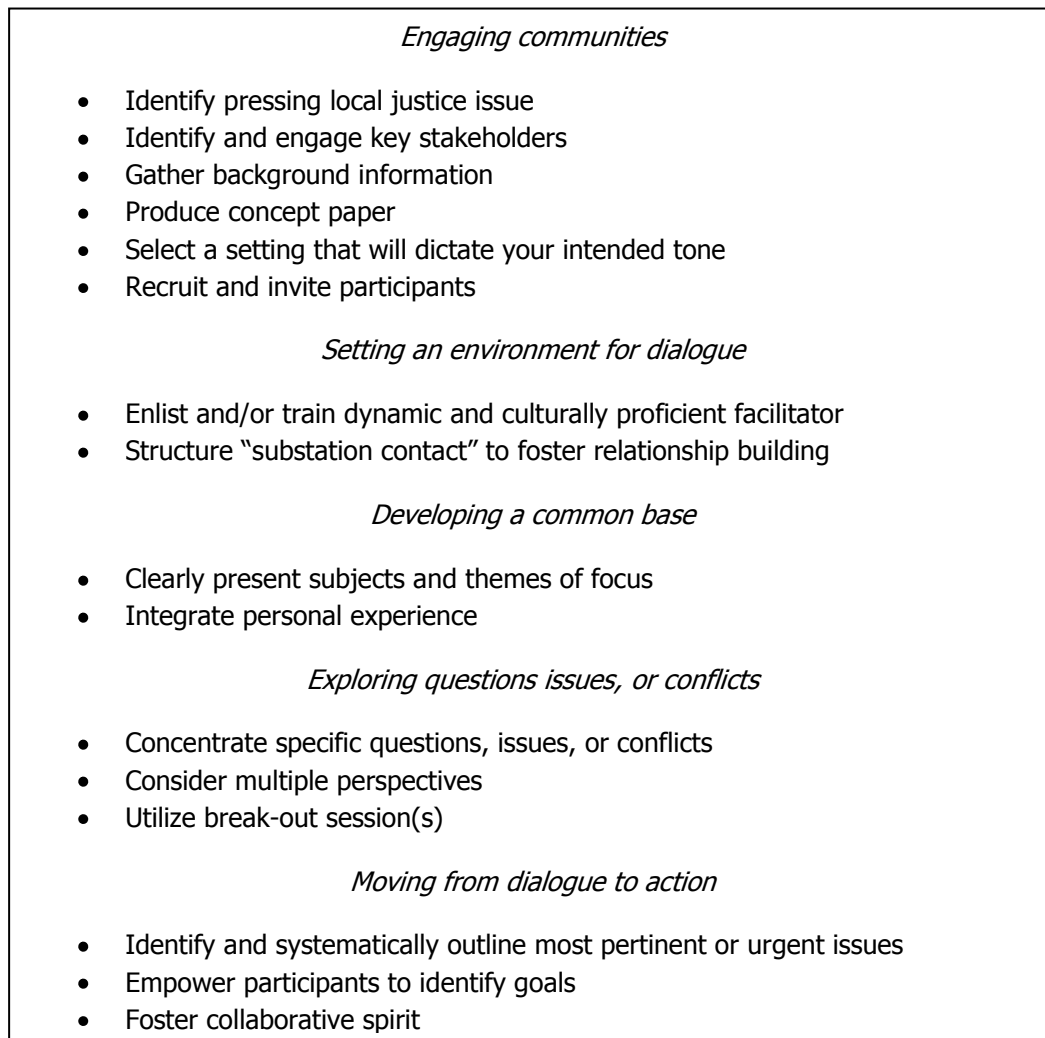
Forging and strengthening community partnerships are two keys to setting the stage for meaningful dialogue. This format promotes vital collaboration with a certain base of community leaders and advocates, who are an important part of the dialogue process, as they may already be informed about community strengths and committed to systematically resolving intergroup concerns. At the same time, it is crucial to reach beyond the scope of the "usual players" and engage individuals and groups who represent the varying view-points held within a community.

Engaging visible, active and diverse members in the earliest and most central working group can aid in creating an informed dialogue agenda, as well as in the recruitment of other important members (Roberts & Kay, Inc., 2000). Community leaders who understand the benefits and challenges for their respective communities, have access to resources and connections, are administratively savvy, and possess marketing and promotional skills are essential for an effective event (Roberts & Kay, Inc., 2000). At the same time it is important

not to rely exclusively on the “superlative” organizations (i.e., the biggest, most powerful, most engaged). In other words, it is important to build a strong, diverse organizing coalition of leaders from various sects of the community, all of whom are committed to the mission of the dialogues.

In addition to playing a role in planning and implementing the day, community partners should take a central role in moving from dialogue to action. Discussing the stages of the dialogue process with community partners from the onset, and highlighting the importance transforming the dialogue into concrete community change initiatives, can assist in identifying partners who will accept this role. Ultimately, the sustainability of both the dialogues, and the resulting initiatives, lies in the hands of engaged community partners. In addition, careful consideration should be given to recruiting and inviting participants. In the context of intergroup dialogue, group makeup is a fundamental factor. Community partners should think critically about group dynamics and the environment that will be most meaningful for engaging in difficult dialogue.

Figure 1. Framework for Community Dialogue



*Note:* Figure 1 draws on the stages of intergroup dialogue as presented by Zúñiga & Nagda (2001).

### *DOD in Focus*

The initiation of a DOD is predicated upon the identification of a pressing local social justice issue by key stake holders, such as religious and community leaders, and/or other community members. In our experience key stakeholders are identified and engaged as potential partners; this is a key step for fostering involvement from various levels of the community and galvanizing cross-community support for the initiative. This involves taking a community inventory or mapping of key players—those individuals and groups who are addressing, funding, discussing, or struggling with a given issue. Often, specific individuals, groups, or organizations in a community serve as pillars and gatekeepers, whose support (or lack of) can have a tremendous impact on how the project is regarded by the constituents.

Promoting a loop of continuous community feedback from the outset will help to identify any “red flags,” or other nuances about a community that may inhibit program success. A striking example is provided by the significant backlash directed towards organizers of the *Blacks in Miami* DOD. Specifically, the community-based planning committee of the event was encouraged by some segments within the community to not go through with the event so as to not “rock the boat” or challenge the status quo. In addition, there were shared sentiments of doubt and frustration concerning the need to readdress a subject that has admittedly (and rightfully) received consistent discussion in the past with little concrete action. Despite some dissent, the organizers early in the planning process gained the support of a highly influential community member, whose stamp of approval sent a message to the broader community and garnered additional partners. Identifying the multiple sub-communities, acknowledging and addressing varying opinions about the dialogue’s implementation, and engaging as many constituents and view-points as possible in the planning is useful.

The *American Indians* DOD also shows a “lesson learned” regarding the importance of digging deep into contextual factors, making connections, and building bridges across groups. The original goal of this DOD was to bring together American Indian leaders throughout the local community. Due to complex historical and political issues, leaders were resistant to such a gathering but shared their concerns for the next generation of Native Americans and recommended a meeting focusing on Native Americans youth. Rather than abandoning the issue, the focus was shifted to young people and education—subjects on which the leaders were able to see beyond their personal beliefs. While the leaders did not attend the meeting, they were supportive of the agenda and assisted in planning the meeting, and an important step was made in gathering the next generation of the American Indian community. Participants in the event included American Indian University students as well as key stake holders at the university.

### **Setting an Environment for Dialogue**

Developing a climate for meaningful dialogue primarily consists of clarifying the purpose(s) and establishing guidelines or expectations. Included within this stage is the gathering background information. Understanding the context helps to lessen the barrier of being regarded as an “outsider.” It is suggested to “get local,” by identifying and investigating specifics of the issue in focus, including relevant statistics, reports or other coverage, and previous projects or initiatives of relevance to the local community. Creating a concept paper concerning the vision for the program is imperative and serves several functions. A clearly stated concept/vision



document provides funders, partners, participants and others with information and sets expectations related to issue background, program impetus, structure rational, and overall goals. This concept paper can be distributed beforehand and may also be included in information packets provided to participants.

Making more detailed background and educational information available separately allows for the focus of the day to be on the "here and now," as well as on the future. This also helps to avoid losing participant engagement from those for whom the specifics may be repetitive (e.g., to those who have "been in the trenches" or those for whom data is not the main focus) and also organizes and presents resources so that people can explore on their own. Given a focus on dialogue, overwhelming participants with data, information, or a rigid structure can be confusing, boring, or seem out of place. Instead, allowing for and encouraging here-and-now processing can foster greater investment by individuals. Part of contributing to this environment entails engaging a skilled group moderator and other presenters. Community members may be trained as facilitators, or professional group leaders may be utilized and trained on the unique needs of the community. Every individual officially involved in the program should be involved in training or discussion around the event culture and environment that is being fostered.

It has been suggested that contact situations provide participants with the opportunity to become friends through close interaction that prompt self-disclosure and other friendship-developing mechanisms (Pettigrew, 1998). However, the contact must be "substantial enough to allow the perception of common interests and humanity among group members" (Hurtado, 2001, p. 25). Participants are encouraged to suspend assumptions, confirm and explore unfamiliarity with one another, embrace the moment's uncertainty, prepare for unanticipated consequences, collaborate willingly, be vulnerable, and to believe in participants' authenticity (Dessel et al., 2006, p. 304). Thus, there should be opportunities for personalization and friendship building among attendees, without assuming that community members are already well acquainted. Furthermore, recognizing pre-existing community relational barriers, and establishing culturally appropriate rules for communication and openness can promote safety and participation.

### *DOD in Focus*

The DODs have encouraged and created an environment of safety and openness in a variety of ways. The *American Indians* DOD, for example, hosted a networking lunch prior to the group discussion. This allowed participants to engage informally and establish connections before the event began. The *Building Bridges* DOD wove into the event a series of unity exercises and activities, led by a dynamic and culturally proficient facilitator, who was supported by a local musician and storyteller. From the beginning, participants were led in a "Unity Circle," exercise, which set the tone for a day of open dialogue and sincere communication. In addition, a circular seating format and participant-informed structure and agenda encouraged active and passionate engagement by attendees of this (as well as past) DOD. Each dialogue has taken place in a comfortable, relatively neutral space. When these sorts of activities are not possible, it is important to build in an interactive segment, such as an informal lunch that allows for personal exchange.

## Developing a Common Base

Related to setting the environment is the task of developing a common base of knowledge—conceptual and/or personal—for talking across social group boundaries. A conceptual base of knowledge is necessary to ensure that participants are on the same page in terms of the subjects and themes to be discussed. This is especially important when gathering a diverse group of individuals who may be at different levels of exposure to a given topic.

Shared knowledge can also be tapped by integrating personal experience. Nagda (2006) holds that “personal sharing, inquiry, and reconsideration of perspectives” (p. 563) affect the “depth of intergroup connection” (p. 555) that develops. Discussing shared experience and acknowledging differences in experience are not only important indicators of the knowledge and awareness of a particular group, but also serve to orient the group towards a meaningful foundation for exchange.

When seeking to incorporate conceptual and personal knowledge in intergroup dialogues, achieving an optimal balance between content and process can be a struggle. While an equal balance between the two is preferable according to Beale and Schoem (2001), the authors suggest this view in the context of multiple sessions. In other words, across sessions there may be varying levels of balance that will ultimately be evenly distributed. With respect to the DOD framework (a single-day session), the balance between content and process becomes even more complicated.

Among the benefits of content are: Providing information that is beyond the scope previously known by participants, legitimizing participants’ experiences as worthy of research and analysis (i.e., as more than “just one person’s experience”), providing a range of critical viewpoints, and offering a broad and/or objective understanding about the issues at hand (Beale & Schoem, 2001). Among the benefits of process are: The sharing of real life experiences, bringing personal awareness, hearing and seeing multiple perspectives, broadening understanding of issues as well as group dynamics, providing a framework for dealing effectively with group dynamics, providing the opportunity to discuss importance of confidentiality, developing group trust and individual safety.

Another important note is that most participants come “with either or both the emotional baggage of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that they have experienced themselves and/or with incomplete, unexplored, and inaccurate information” (Beale & Schoem, 2001, p. 269). They may also come with strong opinions about local political or social issues, particularly if there is a long-standing and/or turbulent history related to the topic. Yet, as Dessel and Rogge (2008) state (p. 211), “dialogue is differentiated from debate, which involves taking positions and challenging others, and from group therapy processes, which focus more on an individual’s internal personal dynamics.” While personal emotional issues and viewpoints are important to acknowledge and address, it is also imperative to maintain the purpose of the intergroup dialogues, focusing on shared community and group strengths, concerns, and process. Acknowledging the personal, while focusing on the shared, requires skill and finesse. Thus, it is important to have group moderators who are able to attend to both the content and process.

### *DOD in Focus*

In the first two DODs, presentations were delivered on key areas related to the event subject, highlighting national and local data, including trends and contextual factors. Participants then engaged in conversations around the ways in which these trends were relevant to their community or how their community differed from these national trends, and what actions were needed to address these trends. At the American Indian DOD for example, students identified the absence of American Indian faculty or mentors on campus, the lack of cultural congruency between campus and tribal life, the lack of culturally relevant courses and majors, and the absence of an American Indian student organization, leaving American Indian students feeling isolated or unsupported on campus. Administrators echoed their concerns, identifying a lack of appropriate recruitment efforts and dependence on student-initiated programming. Both students and administrators also acknowledged the priority given to higher education by local tribes, as well as the enthusiasm of the small body of American Indian students, as strengths. The *Building Bridges* DOD included special invited guests from varying backgrounds and perspectives (including a high school student, parent/entrepreneur, and school social worker) who each shared a brief personal reflection related to the subject of the day. One individual in particular shared a story so emotionally moving that it sparked a deeply personal and reflective tone, and served as a reference point throughout the day. Mindful of maintaining a conceptual knowledge base along with the shift to focusing on participant-led presentations, participants were given folders with general and specific resources and materials related to the day's theme.

### **Exploring Questions, Issues, or Conflicts**

The deepening of intergroup dialogue is facilitated by concentrating on one or more questions, issues, or specific conflicts. Essential throughout this process is the presentation and consideration of multiple perspectives; interacting with people of different backgrounds has been shown to have social and cognitive benefits (Allport 1954; Ata, Bastian, & Lusher, 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006). This focus can be driven by facilitator, participants, or a combination of both. Care should be taken in identifying facilitators who are competent in the nature of intergroup dialogue, interpersonal relations, and informed and engaged with the nature of the community's specific perspectives and historical context.

Creating a space for questioning, and for the voicing of respectful disagreement, is important. Ensuring that the community has an opportunity to share in a meaningful way and represent the variety of community opinions is vital. Engaging in small breakout groups, with a well-planned strategy for note-taking and reporting back to the group, is an optimal strategy to engage a large number of voices. Allowing multiple venues for communication may also be useful. For example, in addition to verbal dialogue, written communication may also be incorporated. Through the use of notecards or technology, participants can indicate their questions or opinions in a de-identified way. This not only allows for the inclusion of varying personalities and communication styles, but also allows true opinions and thoughts to emerge. Finally, an opportunity for evaluation and follow-up questions should be provided. Participants may develop questions or opinions after they leave the dialogue space, and a follow-up evaluation can provide an open space to indicate these questions. Organizers can provide responses to common questions within a follow-up report, and can use these questions and opinions to address future dialogues.

### *DOD in Focus*

The primary way in which the DOD format incorporates an interactional component is through the inclusion of structured “break-out” sessions which allow participants to engage in deeper dialogue within small groups. This type of discussion ensures that more voices are heard and a diverse range of issues will be raised. Bringing key points back to the large group provides an even greater reach in terms of the subjects addressed, as well as moving the group towards thinking about next steps. For example, in the *Blacks in Miami* DOD, small groups discussed issues of education, health, and economics. Each group was moderated by experts in these issues, and intensive notes were taken by the organizers, who focused on capturing the discussion in the participants’ own words. Members of each of the small groups reported back to the large group, overlap and divergence in the discussion were processed, and notes from each group were synthesized into a document that each participant later received. Through this process, the theme of education was congruent across groups, revealing a shared vision for participants. Also noted, however, was the absence of certain voices from the group. For instance, many of the community partners invited were involved in youth programs and education, whereas only a few represented health or business sectors. Thus, these small groups are useful not only in hearing multiple perspectives, but also in recognizing those perspectives that may not be present and that should be recognized and engaged in future community discourse.

The *Building Bridges* DOD exemplified the benefits of creativity and structural flexibility. Cultural performance and nontraditional motivational guidance added a unique element beyond the usual routine, to encourage openness and connectivity among participants. In addition, the nature of the unique group dynamics called for a more intimate conversation and process. In response to the ebb and flow of attendance over the course of the day, the format was shifted to conduct the break-out discussions as a single group. A broad theme of the intersection of culture and education engaged significant participant direction regarding the nature and subject matter of the conversation. Personal reflections were met with insightful and engaged discussion by all in attendance. Participants reported feeling encouraged as a result of the meaningful interaction with individuals who share a common sense of dedication and passion to addressing issues of discrimination and diversity of all kinds. For example, one participant reported “renewed motivation/energy to continue the work that I do, by connecting to the vibrant energy of participants”, while another simply reported “Positive energy! Healing! Affirmation! Confirmation! Shared belief! Inspiration!” At the end of the day, there was a palpable feeling of connection and solidarity across the group.

### **Moving from Dialogue to Action**

A popular perception of dialogue events is that they are “a lot of talk” that never seem to advance to meaningful action. Unfortunately, this belief is not always without merit. A primary aim of the DOD model, however, is to encourage *participant-initiated* action as an outgrowth of the event. Specifically, the dialogue process aims to empower participants to identify goals and work towards them in collaboration. One way to encourage this is taking an *issues and relationship* approach, which focuses on the underlying relationships that cause divisive problems, rather than on solely the problems themselves (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001). Dialogue may start with identifying a number of issues, but through purposeful process the most pertinent or urgent issues are identified and systematically outlined. Examples of community

and institutional changes from the community-wide, multi-site Study Circles program (Roberta & Kay, Inc., 2000) included visible and symbolically important events, improvement in status or situation of specific clusters within the community (e.g., improvements in retail shopping for Blacks), and improvements in openness and inclusivity of systemic planning and community-building processes and efforts.

Strategic considerations for moving to action include context (e.g., social and historical), specific characteristics and goals of participants, resources (e.g., time, money, people, and facilities), and linkages to other dialogue efforts. Explicitly talking about goals, action steps, and strategies leaves people feeling energized rather than drained. Moving to action does not mean that the organizers are responsible for a given follow-up, nor should attendees be pressured to action. Instead, organizers should actively encourage brainstorming, idea exchange, collaboration, and participant-led follow-up. Providing a way to communicate following the dialogue may be appropriate, perhaps through the formation of a listserv or email list. An action committee may also be formed to carry forth the energy and ideas of the dialogue.

### *DOD in Focus*

Despite the challenges, there has consistently been an element of hopefulness and rejuvenation at the end of DODs. Moreover, there has been action: concrete and immediate, as well as indirect and long-term. The *Blacks in Miami* DOD resulted in several community meetings of leaders across the Black community (something that was not historically a common occurrence), and the creation of university-community partnerships and programs aimed at improving educational access and psychosocial wellbeing in the community. Through this partnership, the group developed a plan and a proposal to local elected officials to create a Community Education Center in an impoverish community and after two years, the proposal was accepted and construction will start in building the facility. In the case of the *American Indians* DOD, the event helped to galvanize a group of students, and provided a safe space to explore the issues and ideas affecting the population at the university. The dialogue resulted in a connection of students to several campus resources, the creation of an American Indian student organization on campus, and a full day of student-run campus events celebrating American Indian heritage and culture. The *Building Bridges* DOD, overall, continued the tradition of encouraging the expansion of perspectives and fostering the communication between local organizations. There was a strong sense that individuals and organizations doing similar work should continue to identify opportunities to work collaboratively. Several follow-up meetings (initiated by DOD participants) were scheduled, with a focus on transferring the momentum into the next DOD, and moving towards collective action.

What has been especially inspiring about facilitating these follow-up initiatives is the strong sense of collaboration (including generosity in pooling resources) and desire to come together to move to action. It is essential to note that the reported action steps are participant-driven. The University team seeks to provide a "space" and platform for progress, but does not seek to function as the driving force behind any given agenda or developmental trajectory.

In addition to concrete community action, another important by-product of the DODs is the production of a comprehensive report, summarizing the content, process, and outcomes of each dialogue. From a content point of view, these reports provide a venue to share the research presented within the Dialogues, summarize small and large group discussions, highlight

important themes, strengths, issues, and questions, and outline action items and future plans. From a process perspective, the reports allow for reflection on successes and challenges, as well as serves to provide a resource to initiate, inform, and improve future dialogue.

## Conclusions

In a world where group differences contribute to prejudice, violence, and even war, it is not enough to hope that something will eventually change. As advocates for social justice and community change, the active creation of opportunities for sustained and positive intergroup contact is imperative (Hurtado, 2001). Moreover, this contact should seek to engage participants in exploring both social and personal identities, this spanning the intergroup-interpersonal continuum. This paper discussed a specific intergroup dialogue program as an example for infusing structure and community engagement into an action-oriented community dialogue process. This framework leads from dialogue to action, allowing participants to discuss opportunities for communities and individuals to move towards action of their own choosing, rather than being led to a certain viewpoint or requiring specific action (McCoy & McCormick, 2001).

While the general dialogue framework may remain the same, the range of possible issues and participants requires multiple and varied dialogues. Furthermore, the experience of convening intergroup dialogues shows that issues of multiple and intersecting identities and varied positions of power emerge in discussion. There are no “fixed boundaries” with respect to focusing on a single relationship, such as race or gender (Schoem et al., 2001). Whenever a group of people is brought together, a unique system is created, in which interpersonal dynamics will vary greatly from one group to the next. Add to this the rotation of topics, and each DOD has transpired in notably different ways. A key aspect of this diversity across dialogues is that different contextual factors will be relevant to each. As the DOD examples have shown, it is essential to be aware of, and responsive to, the unique dynamics of the given content area, especially as it pertains to local reception, by parties directly or indirectly involved. Similarly, each DOD is conceptualized not simply as the event itself, but as a process, for which the *before* and *after* are just as meaningful. Given the diversity of topics and participants, no two DODs will look or feel the same; however, it is important to maintain some uniform, research-based structure throughout the preparation and implementation process.

While intergroup dialogue can be challenging to implement, there are some key strategies that can be used to ensure that the planning and execution of these dialogues are successful. Future community dialogues can learn from the Day of Dialogue itself, but can also learn much from the process it models, infusing community engagement and individual participation, environmental and topical considerations, a movement to action, and their own reflective process. Given the right structure, such dialogues can facilitate intergroup understanding and cooperation, which may ultimately foster collective action and social change—systemically and individually.

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