

Race Relations 2020 Columbia, South Carolina

History of Program

Race Relations 2020 began in the fall of 2001 in Columbia, South Carolina, as a project of the South Carolina Council for Conflict Resolution and the Community Mediation Center of Columbia. The two groups set out to create a process for promoting positive race relations in the community. A design team of three African American women and three European American women, all with backgrounds in conflict resolution, came together to design the process. They worked from two facilitators manual, blending exercises and processes from both the Study Circles Resource Manual and the Omega Circles Manual. Omega Circles grew out of the race relations work of the Palmetto Project, a statewide nonprofit organization that has initiated over 100 projects that put new ideas to work in South Carolina. The design team drew extensively from the Omega Circles manual and consulted regularly with the Palmetto Project staff. Omega Circles derived its process from the Study Circles Resource Center model, modifying it to create a slower and more gradual discussion into race.

In the first two circle groups, the group used four of the six design members to facilitate the sessions. All six members met weekly to debrief and modify the process. They recruited participants through neighborhood associations and churches. The most recent group was recruited through the Eau Claire Community Council, the umbrella group of over 40 neighborhood associations, who received a grant from the City to promote participation in Race Relations 2020. The design continues to be modified, increasing the emphasis on personal transformation and making more explicit the connections between individuals and the neighborhood association they represent.

Eau Claire was originally a separate, all white community on the periphery of Columbia. It was incorporated into Columbia in the 1950s and is today between 70 and 75 percent African American. Race Relations 2020 began through the leadership and facilitation of Dr. Maier Dugan, who at the time was on faculty at Columbia College, where she founded a graduate program in conflict resolution.

Program Overview

The project goals are to 1) provide a way for participants to enhance their understanding of perspectives and experiences of neighbors of other races; 2) improve our own understanding of our own racial attitudes and behaviors, and their impacts; and 3) generate ideas and implement strategies for improving race relations in the community.

The program is constantly evolving to better meet the needs of the community and to incorporate other best practices. This description is a snapshot of one group and the process used with them. A diverse group of 20-30 participants came together for 9 meetings, including a two-part envisioning workshop. Participants were expected to report back to their constituent groups. Meetings are generally 2 to 3 hours in length, and include food and drinks.

The circles follow a pre-designed curriculum, but have been modified to meet the needs of participants in a group. The more recent co-facilitation of Joan Walker Scott, who has a long experience of diversity awareness work, also led to the modification of the curriculum content and way facilitation is done. This is an evolving process.

Meetings 7, 8, and 9 are the longest of the nine sessions, and have often been combined into one envisioning and action planning session on a Saturday. Key stakeholders are invited in to participate with the group in the Envisioning Workshop. This process allows for greater ownership in the creation of a shared vision and increases the potential for collaboration in the action steps.

Future groups will likely be shortened from nine sessions to ensure participation from community members who might not be able to make that long of a commitment. With more experienced facilitators, there is also less strict adherence to a pre-designed curriculum so that issues that arise can be dealt with directly. Plans are in place to train a new group of facilitators to handle deep conflict within the group and to prompt participants to probe more deeply.

Sample Outline of the Nine-Session Curriculum

Meeting 1: “Seek First to Understand...Then to Be Understood”

The goal of this session is to engage participants in the circle process, develop clear guidelines for participation, and define active listening skills that will be used throughout the sessions. Participants have an opportunity to practice and receive feedback on their listening communications skills.

Meeting 2: “Who Am I Yesterday/Today?”

This session is about the world in which we grew up and how it has shaped our view of community.

Meeting 3: “American the Diverse”

This session is intended to force each person to take a stand on a race and gender question to which there is no answer. You can play a helpful role in the group conversations by occasionally asking proponents of a particular view questions like, “What did you think of what she just said?” or “Do you react when you hear someone take such a strong position?”

Meeting 4: “Race and Economics”

This session is intended to help participants look at issues of economics, which is very much related to race in South Carolina.

Meeting 5: “Forgiveness”

This session is intended to help participants explore the potential of interracial forgiveness through the lenses of their own personal experience with hurting and forgiveness.

Meeting 6: “Stereotypes: Fighting with Ghosts”

This session is intended to help participants get in touch with how members of different races stereotype each other and the impact such stereotypes can have on behavior.

Meeting 7: Envisioning Workshop: Part 1

To assist participants in maximizing their creativity in discussing how they would like race relations to be different in the future.

Meeting 8: Envisioning Workshop: Part 2

To assist participants to explore and clarify the ways in which the present situation promotes and/or impedes their visions.

Meeting 9: Action Steps

Assist participants in developing both group and individual strategies for moving toward their visions.

Principles of Practices

Facilitators

Co-facilitators of different races are preferred for modeling and creating an affirming space for interracial work. The ability to probe and challenge someone is greater with co-facilitators of both races. The same co-facilitators should work with a group from start to finish, trading off the lead of different portions of each session.

Facilitators must be engaged, vulnerable, and willing to share their own insecurities, doubts or fears. Facilitators must ask themselves and participants, “Why are we here?” More than preparing activities or speeches, black and white co-facilitators must prepare by doing the work with each other that they are asking the group to do—ground oneself in the experience, norm oneself, and sensitize oneself to the space. Facilitators are on a journey with the participants. Clarity comes from fearlessly looking within. Facilitators are encouraged to be ready to tell one of their own stories related to the session topic.

Confidentiality and Neutrality

For those from conflict resolution backgrounds, facilitators need to overcome their own notions of neutrality. There are many roles facilitators play that are not neutral:

“We are facilitators but we are also from the community. We are part of the “we” created among participants. In fact, if someone begins to attack someone, we redirect him or her to attack one of us so that we can absorb the energy and model how to truly listen and value that person’s journey. At the same time, we might ask a leading question when we disagree or feel information is not factual, but always in a way to get them and the group to explore more. We are not trying to be the ones with the answers, even though we do provide concepts and frameworks when it is appropriate.”

Confidentiality, in this process, becomes less stringent as participants are encouraged to share their experience back in their community. With an emphasis on intra-group interaction, almost all information shared is done at a group level. The safe space created in the circle promotes personal sharing often associated with confidential settings, yet the ground rules do not include a confidentiality statement and are at the discretion of each group. The level of respect engendered (and stated as an explicit ground rule) in each group promotes the possibility of sharing information outside the group, provided that it is done in a way that respects the integrity of all group members. Both facilitators and members are encouraged to conceal the identity of another group member when conveying a story from the group to outsiders.

Process

Structured exercises in the preliminary sessions build trust to be able to enter into more intense dialogue. Detailed scenarios provide an educational component, bringing out issues of discrimination, structural inequities, and privilege without personalizing it to specific group members. With more sophisticated facilitators, structured exercises become less important.

The sessions must build on one another, beginning shallow and wading in deeper each week. The first session creates an affirming environment so that people begin to open up in a mixed race group. Developing trust in the co-facilitators prepares participants for discomfort and the rocky road. There is no roadmap telling exactly where the group is going; they are on a journey that admittedly includes tough terrain. The facilitators attempt to create “aha” moments and then build on them.

Content and exercises around specific topics are introduced in the second session. Working through these topics prepares people for the envisioning process toward the end of the group. As the process evolves, the co-facilitators follow more of an emergent design, where the substance and activities are modified in light of what occurred in the previous session and the co-facilitators’ assessment of the progress of the group.

The strategy is to move from individual transformation to social change. Having participants structurally linked to an organization (i.e. neighborhood association) provides the mechanism for promoting social change as the individual experiences a transformation and takes it back. But, individual transformation does not necessarily result in social change. By asking participants to represent a community organization or group, social change is also promoted as they engage their constituent groups in the envisioning and action planning stage.

The process is designed to produce a sense of connectedness and identity among participants. The diversity of the group is critical because learning and growth take place as diverse participants express their struggles and connect to one another. All groupings—large and small—must have at least two representatives of any race, culture, or gender, to prevent someone from having to represent their group.

The process is organic, not one of simply tearing down racism. Even if someone exhibits internalized oppression, this is a survival tactic that, if taken away suddenly, could destroy the

person. The co-facilitators need to work with them, giving them the tools to create something new, allowing for plenty of time and offering reinforcements.

The project started as a dialogue group with facilitation done in the typical way for conflict resolution. With the addition of a facilitator trained in diversity work, the co-facilitators have moved to provide stories, short summaries, conceptual frameworks or metaphors to move the group forward. Consistent with the journey approach, the co-facilitators often provide this after a specific discussion, as the need emerges, not as prepared input for the session.

Goals

The short term goal is to increase the degree to which people are better able and more willing to talk across race about racial issues, not so much learning something as gaining confidence and being willing to take a risk. This new confidence and ability to talk to about race must be connected to the community, specifically to the neighborhood associations so they can take them to different place and be more inclusive.

The long-term goal is for people to turn the increasing diversity into the primary source of richness it can become, where people of different races and ethnicities feel genuinely valued for themselves personally and for what their culture, perspective, and experience contribute to the community. Race is a political and social construct, so as long as we talk about race relations we are perpetuating it. The real goal is to break down the barriers that keep people from realizing their human potential, empower people to look beyond race to appreciate their heritage, whatever it might be.

Ultimately, the work is about undoing racism through this individual transformation, where people gain insights and new attitudes that they take back with new behaviors in their spheres of influence. It is not about judging the persons or pushing on them specific information on racism; the approach is flexible and recognizes the complexities as the program strives to take people on a journey.

Content

Diverse participants come together to share openly from their past, where stereotypes come from and use their communication skills to really listen and challenge one another. There is also a clear educational component beyond facilitating dialogue. Specific issues, such as race and economics, are examined through exercises and elaborated on by the co-facilitators. While there are not reading assignments or homework, participants are offered frameworks, statistics, and some theory to better understand race and race relations. The educational content typically comes out in subtle ways, maybe even more frequently than the co-facilitators think.

Content is driven by the group. Because of the elicitive approach to the circles, the content of each session generally focused on that evening's theme. The facilitators did not follow a strict curriculum and willingly modified or even eliminated previously planned exercises or discussions in order to respond to needs and interests evident in the group.

Methodological Note

The research on Race Relations 2020 began with a thorough reading of the draft Omega Circles Facilitators Manual and a first attempt to derive underlying principles implicit in the activities proposed for each session. Then I drafted a set of overall principles that seemed to be guiding the work, based on the manual and several conversations with the Project Director. A site visit to Columbia, South Carolina, began with an audio taped joint interview with the Project Director (Maire Dugan, a white woman) and the co-facilitator (Joan Walker Scott, an African American woman) of the current circle, initially with both of them together and then with the co-facilitator by herself. I then interviewed an African American participant just prior to the fourth session of the circle. The co-facilitators had gained permission the previous week from all participants for me to observe the session. They introduced me and I spoke of my background and research. During the session I sat at a separate table and took notes of the interaction, nonverbal communication, and interventions by co-facilitators. Following the session, I interviewed a white male participant in the circle and then debriefed with the co-facilitators. The site visit concluded with a final taped interview with Maire Dugan, Project Director. I reviewed with Maire the initial principles I had drafted, which she either revised or confirmed.

I developed the principles of practice and report based on the site visit, my notes, and a review of the transcriptions of all interviews. The Project Director and co-facilitator identified some principles while others emerged from an analysis of their responses to questions and my own observations. The principles and report were submitted to the Project Director and co-facilitator, who provided clarification and feedback that was incorporated into the final document.