



Touchy Topics Tuesday: An Interracial Dialogue Program Promotes Understanding

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Most people who live in the United States lead racially segregated lives, whether they want to or not. Because of how our residential, educational, and economic institutions are set up, many Americans are denied the opportunity to develop meaningful cross-racial relationships.



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Segregated societies are inherently unequal. Racial segregation impacts health, economic well-being, educational well-being, identity formation processes, and implicit biases. Policymakers and social justice practitioners who are concerned with supporting a multiracial, democratically viable society, like the United States, should be concerned about racial segregation and ways to remedy it. This is also true for individuals who live in states that are creating anti-diversity policies (e.g., Florida, Texas), but who want to understand how they can still participate in and encourage grassroots anti-racist spaces in their state contexts.

“In metropolitan areas that perpetuate segregated social lives, grassroots intergroup dialogue programs can be a crucial component of the racial justice infrastructure.”

Highlights

TTT participants engaged in behavioral shifts that can impact the racially segregated status quo.

By understanding what motivates people to engage in groups like TTT, we can learn how to bring more people into discussion about racial justice.

We talked with the participants in a grassroots, interracial dialogue program, called Touchy Topics Tuesday (TTT), in St. Louis, MO. Founded by Tiffany Robertson, TTT met weekly in voluntary, interracial groups to discuss topics related to race, equity, and justice. The two-hour weekly discussions were intellectually stimulating and often emotionally charged. We wanted to understand what motivated the participants to attend this demanding and voluntary anti-racist program and how participants believed that they benefitted from their participation in it.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community Psychology is one of the few fields that talks explicitly about how the macro-level constructs of power and equity shape individual-level experiences. Our study looked at a community-based intervention, specifically around racial justice.

Methods

In January and February 2021, we talked to 30 TTT participants (11 participants of color; 19 white participants) who had participated in the program. In one-on-one interviews via zoom, we asked about their experiences with TTT, their life pre-TTT, and their life post-TTT. The research team came together to systematically find patterns and themes that emerged in their responses.

Results

- Participants shared three intertwined motivations for attending TTT. First, participants reported a catalytic moment brought them to TTT. These are discrete events—like the election of a president endorsed by White supremacist organization—that cause individuals to look for antiracist educational opportunities. Second, some participants reported a long-term commitment mindset brought them to TTT. This refers to a state of mind, often motivated by underlying a desire to learn and/or act for racial justice. Finally, most participants reported that someone in their social network brought them to TTT. In fact, we found that a participant’s social network was by far the biggest motivator for sustained attendance at TTT. Who you know matters—and it matters to when and how often you show up for interracial dialogue opportunities.
- After participating in TTT, participants discussed intellectual, relational, and emotional outcomes. Participants particularly talked about how intellectual and emotional outcomes intersected. As one White participant stated clearly, “almost every discomfort [in TTT] was matched by an insight.” In other words, many participants recognized that the intellectual growth the achieved from TTT was matched by their emotional growth in engaging with these types of anti-racist conversations.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Intergroup dialogue programs are typically studied in universities or other institutional settings. Given the hostile environment of some states and institutions towards diversity, equity, and inclusion work, research on effective community-based interventions is growing more important. This qualitative research study supports the newer evidence-base for community-based antiracist interventions.

Practice: TTT is a grassroots intervention. While it was not developed as an intergroup dialogue program, it shares many of the same features. Anyone who is interested in intergroup dialogue as an antiracist intervention—both in a community setting or an institutional setting—can learn how to motivate individuals to join their groups and how to advertise the benefits of participation.

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