Group Relations Race Relations Conversations

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In the wake of the George Floyd murder and the absence of resolution in the shooting death by police of Breonna Taylor, Group Relations International offered a series of conversations on race relations. The aim of these sessions was to provide a space for those of us with group relations experience to explore our relationship to race. This reflection shares the design of the events, key themes that emerged, and potential avenues of further inquiry.

DESIGN

Given the health and safety concerns posed by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the Group Relations Race Relations conversations were offered virtually. While there was thought to focus participation to those from United States, it was evident at the time that movement for Black Lives was a global phenomenon. As such differing times were offered for the sessions to accommodate optimally international participation. The same design was repeated at each conversation. Given the dialogic nature of the approach and the presence of a different membership each time, those who wished could gain a benefit from participation in more than one session.

Presenting a Methodology

An announcement was sent out via the Group Relations International mailing list and social media outlets. Enrollment was open to anyone with at least one group relations conference or training experience. The sessions were titled *Group Relations Race Relations Applications* to place the emphasis on these being reflection rather than "here-and-now" experiential events. Each participant was asked to attend the session with their learning about race grounded in a specific group relations experience.

Forging the Container

Each virtual session opened as members entered with music, specifically jazz to honor a genre with African American origins. A conscious decision was also made by the two co-facilitators to have the first voice of welcome in the event to be that of the Black facilitator.

The flow of opening included a welcome and a statement of the aim of the event. Emphasis was placed on noting the dialogic and reflective nature of the 90-minute session. Reference was also made to the likely pull to convert this experience into a small or large study group mode. The co-facilitators stressed that the task of this event was in the application of race relations experience in group relations to inform present thinking and behavior. These conditions were seen as essential to provide a container for the experience while reducing regressive and contentious propensities observed in other recent race-related events in the group relations community.

From our facilitators' perspective these sessions were grounded in Racial Inquiry. This approach to dialogue begins with *curiosity* to learn about the experience of others and *compassion* for a journey that may be different from one's own. Racial Inquiry takes a stance that acknowledges systemic racism as a given with the aspiration of living into anti-racism being present for those who chose to enter this level of dialogue. With this foundation, the dialogue enters the conditions where the inquiry into unique individuality and the intersectionality of shared humanity can be more readily explored.

Following these opening elements, each participant was asked to offer a word in the chat that characterized how they were entering the event. While a theme of anxiety was prevalent in what was shared, expressions of openness and curiosity were also evident.

Modeling the Work

The co-facilitators re-stated the invitation: "Group Relations International is offering a reflective space to explore how your experiences related to race in conferences influence your current conversations, actions and work related to anti-racism. To put it differently, what have you learned in conferences in terms of race and how do you apply it today? Please be prepared to share at least one story." In elaborating on this invitation the facilitators emphasized the personal learning about yourself in terms of race. Recognizing that members would likely enter these dialogues with differing levels of capacity and anxiety related to conversations on race, the broader question was designed to create sufficient space for any level of participation.

The co-facilitators, however, modeled by sharing stories where they gained insights learned about their own implicit biases, blind spots, internalized oppression, and active racist projections. The depth of this modeling was to signal the level at which Racial Inquiry begins and the requisite vulnerability for learning at new levels to be enjoined.

Creating Self-Organized Groups
The groups for the dialogue were randomly generated by the breakout room function of the videoconferencing platform. While some thought was given to the co-facilitators making group assignments, it was decided that the digital default would reduce the pull to fantasies and projections onto the co-consultants about how the groups were formed. Groups of approximately five-six members were generated to create optimal opportunity for potential intimacy of voice, to replicate the upper end of application group size in conference, and to reduce the pull to small study group dynamics.

There were a number of boundary conditions for these dialogues. In terms of time, the dialogue breakout sessions were 45-minutes. Within the session, each member was afforded up to five-minutes to share their story *without interruption or comment* until all members had shared.

In terms of roles, it was recommended that each group designate a facilitator (not group relations consultant) to assure each person gained an opportunity to speak in an order that the group determined together or more organically within the process. Each group was also to have a timekeeper that attended to time boundary for each speaker as well as the overall time boundary for the session. The group was also asked to designate a spokesperson and/or scribe to document a summary of the learning and themes to be reported to the plenary at end of the dialogue.

The task of the dialogue was to share the stories on race from their group relations experience. Upon hearing from each other, the group was to identify themes and points of resonance with one another. In sharing the points of connection and divergence, the group was given the further task of discovering a metaphor that described the experience.

The task, roles, and boundaries were presented verbally to the entire group prior by the co-facilitators in advance of the members entering the breakout sessions. Once in the breakouts, the same information was delivered in a broadcast to each group. The co-facilitators remained in the main virtual room to address any technical questions and assist any members who faced technical issues and needed assistance to be placed back into their groups. A decision was made not to visit the breakout rooms to honor the processes as they were unfolding and trust the capacity of those who were participating to self-manage and self-organize.

The groups received a broadcast when there were 20 minutes, five minutes and one minute left before the closing of the dialogue. At the time boundary all rooms were closed at the same time with each person returning virtually to the main screen.

PLENARY
The content of the breakout group dialogues was revealed through the report of themes and metaphors. Upon returning to the main room, a structured plenary was guided by the co-facilitators. The task of the session was presented as a reflection on the learning from the smaller groups. The spokesperson from each group was given up to two minutes first to present the metaphor(s) of the group followed by the themes and tone. In some cases, amplification and clarification was offered by other group members. This process continued until all groups were presented. The remaining allocated time, which varied based on the number of member groups, was devoted to an open plenary where the focus remained on curiosity, resonance, and reflections on race related to what emerged in these reports and insights from one's own experience of the dialogue.

Themes and Metaphors
The themes from the dialogue made evident that race relations conversations, even when conducted with an emphasis on inquiry, curiosity, and compassion remained challenging. The emotional tone from the reports consistently referred to the complexity that became evident, the sense of exclusion that was experienced, and the heaviness that was carried. The capacity to integrate the emotions that were activated, meet the vulnerability that was offered, and validate journeys different from one's own were but a few of the reflections presented. What was key about the report of these tonal elements was the relative absence of shame to silence oneself and blame to silence others. Courage to voice – in some cases for the first time - and reveal shadowy learning edges as well as listen through familiar triggers and tender trauma meant that the violence of silence was abated. Fewer toxic projections onto others for racial ignorance and far less self-deprecation upon discovering often unconscious yet active racism allowed each dialogue to continue beyond the familiar known narratives. Generative and empathic listening where the potential for new learning was available *by using the shared group relations orientation as the basis for this work,* allowed the dialogues to be generative. Even when evidence of engaging in painful splitting and becoming the repository of race-related rage was reported, the dialogues were able to provide the kind of holding necessary for new learning to become the norm for the overall experience.

The metaphors from the groups were equally filled with texture, complexity and paradox. Among the most vivid was that of a beautiful butterfly that had been pinned and labeled, preserved but so fragile to touch that it could disintegrate. Beyond the facile formulation of this metaphor being about "white fragility" alone, this mixed-race group went on to describe a process of mutual projection where each, irrespective of race, felt seen and unseen at the same time. While able to hold the importance of the focus on race, the group also realized that to do so meant that other bits of oneself, one's identity, and one's humanity was held in abeyance. They saw the challenge of the current state of racial discourse being one where being canceled by ignorance and oppression in terms of race meant that other aspects of being remain lost to direct any deeper experience of one another.

Other metaphors were similarly rich. One was the proverbial "fork in the road," which in this instance represented the splits inherent in conversations on race. Another was a "scarf" that was misheard as being a "scar" where the difference between what can be taken on and off and that which leaves permanent evidence of a wound was explored—and the implications of this difference when addressing anti-Black racism. The delicate line between playful affection and painful aggression was considered in a group that saw their dialogue as being like "a den of bear cubs" who found it difficult to reconcile these contrasting yet concurrent emotions. In a similar way another group wondered about what they could "shoulder" when it came to race. They realized there was tightness in their shoulders as they began the dialogue which was transformed to become the vulnerability and responsibility to shoulder and carry the heavy load of anti-racism when such conversations are often met with a blend of intimidation and silence.

A sample of other themes and metaphors were:

- Healing
- Identities beyond race
- Sharing stories that build connection and bridges.
- A broken bridge/A shattered mirror
- Repairing broken bridges – between play and trauma
- A two-edged sword, cutting through and breaking through
- Containing space/Building prison
- Taking off the rose-colored glasses

While each of these themes and metaphors spoke to a blend of stories, one other where the group characterized their work as a "swamp" may best describe what such an exploration of race in a group relations context reveals. This group spoke of the delicate ecosystem that is represented by a swamp, yet much of the complexity is not visible. Below and near the surface of waters that appear to be still is an abundance of life where the boundaries are often murky and obscured. The vista is unclear and solid ground is not to be found. While one is able to traverse a swamp, the prospect of encountering a predator is always in consciousness. As such, a journey into a swamp requires vigilance and readiness to defend oneself if the waters become troubled. In more concrete terms this group also spoke of what could be seen but placed more emphasis on what could not be seen below the surface. It left the question of whether it was valid to remain only on the edge of such a swamp, as not to do so would also be a way to invalidate the desire of those who seek to continue the journey and assure that such voices are closed out.

Closing the Work
The remainder of the session gave the members an opportunity to offer reflections on the learning, make associations rooted in personal insights, and speak to resonance with what was emerging. While staying primarily "in the room" and taking care to stay focused on the substance of this actual experiences, references and allusions to the available content were welcomed. As all microphones could be opened, each member was free to make contributions to the session. Those who chose to speak represented sentiments the they were surprised and pleased that they were able to discover a setting where, despite the potentially contentious nature of the inquiry task, most felt heard and honored while they listened and learned somewhat intimately *with* others.

The session was closed with the co-facilitators asking each person verbally to share one word or phrase to characterize their experience of the overall experience of the event and place this offering in the chat. In sharp contrast to the opening sentiments, the tone of the closing was one where connection, insight, hope, and learning were common expressions.

NEXT: PREPARING THE WAY

The Group Relations Race Relations Applications was a series of conversations where a dialogue process based in Racial Inquiry was employed. This event, designed a prototype for future work on racial equity and anti-racism, was to determine ways that a group relations orientation could be used to further exploration of race relations. The outcome of these conversations suggests that when a strong container with clear boundaries is established, opportunities for learning related to race are abundant and valued. The co-facilitators and Group Relations International will make use of what came from this event to inform future virtual and face-to-face offerings. These conversations have been a means of preparing the way, likely more experiential in nature, where race and other dimensions of social justice can continue to be the focus of applied study grounded in group relations.