

Racial Dialogue Among Women: A Group Relations Theory Analysis

In memory of Rhetaugh G. Dumas,
PhD., R.N., FAAAN

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ABSTRACT

Engaging in racial dialogue is essential as the world becomes increasingly diverse. The aim of this article is to describe how unconscious processes play a role in the disconnections that exist between racial ethnic groups and to explore how authentic dialogue about race can be an important vehicle to help us understand the perspective of the other, creating a collaborative process to foster less aggressive and more meaningful relationships. We provide a case example and an analysis of racial dialogue among women from four racial ethnic groups – white, black, Asian, and Latina. Finally implications for research, practice and limitations are outlined.

Key words: racial dialogue; ethnic dialogue; conscious and unconscious processes; group relations conferences, embedded intergroup theory; working with differences.

One of the major problems we face in society and the world today is finding ways to communicate across differences and learning to develop an understanding of other cultures without making or targeting those who are different as ‘evil doers’ or ‘the negative other’. If we are to effectively work across differences, we must learn to engage in authentic dialogue that will help us understand the perspective of the other, creating a collaborative process to foster less aggressive and more meaningful relationships. *Racial dialogue* is a dynamic process that involves two or more individuals talking about race or communicating across racial ethnic groups in a context that brings forth feelings or thoughts about racial differences due to affiliation or power differences (Zuniga et al., 2000). The feelings and thoughts that surface can either enhance and strengthen connections

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or create serious disconnections in relationships. Enhanced understanding and behavioural change may occur only if these feelings can be tolerated, labelled, and discussed authentically.

Authentic racial dialogue can be enhanced through a deeper understanding and awareness of the emotions and unconscious processes that contribute to racism. However, there has been little focus on unconscious processes that have an impact on interpersonal and group behaviour as it pertains to working and dialoguing across differences (Devine and Vasquez, 1998). When there is animosity, hatred, lack of understanding of world-views and cultural perspectives, the unconscious can be exhibited through mechanisms of defence that have served to protect oneself emotionally. An understanding of the role of unconscious processes in interpersonal, group and intergroup relations and their relatedness to systemic processes can help to create a better world. This paper addresses the subtle, unspoken nuances that are elicited by emotions and unconscious processes that occur in intergroup behaviour.

We choose to focus on racial dialogue among women in this paper because the authors have observed some interesting patterns of the ways in which women from different racial ethnic backgrounds engage in racial dialogue in group relations conferences. We have learned from some literature on women's development that they have a strong sense of connection to others (Miller and Stiver, 1997). Also, there is literature that suggests that women are generally more sensitive to social injustices such as racism and discrimination than their male counterparts (Sidanius et al., 1995; Neville et al., 2000), which may be attributed to the oppression experienced as women. For example, in the USA women continue to earn less than their male counterparts, receiving approximately eighty cents for every dollar men earn (US Department of Labor, 2005). Another study suggests that women's response to stress is not well characterized by fight-or-flight, as research has assumed, but better characterized by a pattern termed 'tend-and-befriend' (Taylor et al., 2000). We are not suggesting that women are more adept at working across racial differences, only that there is literature that indicates some proclivity to forming connections.

The overall aim of this article is to explore some of the racial and cultural dynamics that occur among women of different racial ethnic groups in order for us to understand those that exist in the broader society. In doing so, we will examine the conscious and unconscious processes and emotions that underpin racial dialogue among women, as well as explore the ways in which racial dialogue can be transformed from destructive to constructive, disconnection to connection,

inauthentic to authentic. We provide a case example drawn from our work in group relations workshops to enhance understanding. The case is used to provide an understanding of racial dialogue among women from four racial ethnic groups – white, black, Asian, and Latina – using the theories underpinning the group relations model and embedded intergroup relations. A discussion of disconnections and ways of working with differences will be presented, using concepts from relational-cultural theory (RCT) (Miller, 1976).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The group relations model

The theoretical roots of the group relations model can be traced to Wilfred Bion, Melanie Klein, Eric Miller, A. K. Rice, and Kurt Lewin. The group relations model is grounded in psychoanalytic (Klein, 1959; Bion, 1961) and systems theory (Lewin, 1943; Rice, 1975) and has its roots in the Tavistock tradition, which began in London. Due to the interpersonal and relational aspects of groups, we propose that these psychoanalytic approaches enhance understanding of racial dialogue in groups. However, it is important to note that, in recent years, many of the leaders in group relations work have begun to work from a more relational psychoanalytic perspective than a traditional psychoanalytic Kleinian approach. Accordingly, our analysis of group and organizational dynamics is influenced by relational psychoanalytic perspectives (Mitchell, 1988) as well as more contemporary relational theories such as RCT (Miller, 1988), which focuses on relationships and the cultural context within which interactions among individuals and groups occur.

Psychoanalytic theory: splitting, and projective identification

One of the premises of the group relations model is that the individual acts on behalf of the group, given the group norms and the cultural context in which the group occurs. From a psychoanalytic perspective, groups engage in unconscious and conscious behaviours that are attributed to the anxiety that most people experience in groups and organizations. Using Klein's object relations theory, Bion (1961) noted that groups trigger primitive fantasies, such as the infantile desire to join others in an undifferentiated entity, at the same time creating fear of being rejected or abandoned by the group, or of losing one's identity and sense of self. The tension of wanting to connect and to be independent or disconnected from the group often generates anxiety in its members that can lead to certain

mechanisms of defence such as splitting, projection, and projective identification. Splitting and projective identification are two of the most commonly used defences when anxiety is high and feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability in group and organizational life are stimulated; these defences can become even more intense when issues of race, ethnicity, and gender become the focus of the dialogue (Wells, 1990; Gabelnick, 1993; Cheng et al., 1998). *Splitting* involves dividing the world into good and bad, polarizing those perceived to be in one subgroup against those in another (Kernberg, 1976). *Projective identification* involves projecting and depositing those negative aspects of self into an individual from another racial ethnic group. It is an interpersonal process that requires the target of the projections to receive and take in the projections as if they were true. The targeted person may behave in ways that are consistent with the projections. For example, white women may split off their feelings of anger and project them on to black women if the white women do not feel comfortable with their own feelings of anger. The identification comes if the black women, given other life circumstances, identify with the anger, even though the anger may not necessarily be what they are experiencing at the time.

According to open systems theory, the group-as-a-whole or system is a set of interrelated and interacting parts that endeavour to maintain some balance in the midst of outside influences (Von Bertalanffy, 1973). A crucial aspect of any system is survival in its environment (Rice, 1975). An open system also represents processes that occur between smaller groups or sub-systems that are separated from their external environment by physical and psychological boundaries that define what is inside and outside the sub-systems and the system as a whole (Alderfer, 1977). Relationships and the quality of relationships among sub-systems is determined by the extent that sub-groups are able to express their own ideas and accept those of other groups (Alderfer and Smith, 1982). From a systems perspective, racial and ethnic groups represent various sub-groups or sub-systems that function as parts of the entire system. This system could be an institution, a community, a state, nation, or, more broadly, the world.

We have found Alderfer's (1991) embedded intergroup theory to be helpful in understanding behaviour that occurs between different racial cultural individuals and groups. The individual reflects a uniquely related set of roles representative of an intergroup. Individuals belong to multiple identity groups, including the ones they were born into, such as race and gender, as well as to other groups that they choose to belong to, such as professional, work, and social groups. In embedded group theory

every transaction between two or more people depends upon (1) the unique personalities of the individuals, (2) the messages the individuals receive and internalize from their own group, and (3) the present and historical relationships between the groups that the individuals represent. (Alderfer, 1994, p. 221)

Some features of this theory are group boundaries, power differences among groups, parallel processes of change that occur among suprasystem, system, and sub-system entities.

Each person has multiple identities, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, religion, and so on, with some of these identities being more salient than others at certain times. With this in mind, women belong to both gender and racial ethnic identity groups. While gender has tended to be more salient for white women, many women of colour have found their racial ethnic background often to be more salient (Hurtado, 1989). In fact, it is the oppression of multiple identities such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender that women of colour are confronted with. The biological connection that white women have as mothers, lovers, daughters, and partners to white men provides them with more economic and social benefits in their gender roles than that of women of colour.

Wells (1990) defines a group as functioning at five levels: intrapsychic, interpersonal, group, intergroup, and group-as-a-whole. For the purposes of this article we are more concerned with the intergroup and group-as-a-whole levels. Thus, we consider racial ethnic subgroups in the context of the entire society as a whole. An exploration of these levels of group functioning allows us to focus on disconnections within and across groups. The intergroup level allows us to consider relatedness between racial ethnic groups, and the group-as-a-whole allows consideration of the functioning of the social system in which women from the different racial groups interact. Some characteristics to consider in intergroup relations are group boundaries (e.g., time, task, territory), power differences (e.g., available resources), affective patterns (e.g., polarization of positive and negative feelings among groups), cognitive formations such as distortions (e.g., perceptions of subjective and objective phenomena to explain experiences), and leadership behaviour (i.e., behaviour of group representatives) (Alderfer, 1991). Within each group or system there are issues of boundary, authority, roles, and tasks to be considered that will vary according to the culture of the societal group. The social identities of the individuals, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, influence the culture and behaviour of groups. For instance, they affect how groups authorize an individual to take up various

roles, as well as the perceptions of how boundaries are to be managed or controlled. For example, women of colour and white women are perceived differently and take up their gender roles differently; the historical roles of entry into this country, as well as the avenues for advancement through marriage and the prescribed standards of femininity, are different (Hurtado, 1989). Since, in this paper, we view groups as an entire entity and as sub-groups, women of all races and ethnicities are seen as one group, but they comprise a sub-group in the context of society as a whole. Black, Latina, Asian and white belong to subgroups, each with varying levels of resources, privilege, and power. Each of these groups of women also has different stereotypes and attitudes ascribed to them because of their group identity.

CASE EXAMPLE

Below is a case example of racial dialogue among women from four racial ethnic groups: white, black, Asian, and Latina. We note the multiple differences that exist within these four groups. However, due to the differential level of power and privilege ascribed to each of these four groups, we decided these broad racial categories are sufficiently meaningful in our examination and analysis of intergroup racial dialogue and dynamics. This case is a fictional description drawn from multiple large self-study group experiences in group relations conferences by the first author. It is not a report, but a composite representation of situations that have occurred repeatedly over a number of years and have served as a stimulus for further study (McRae et al., 2006).

Group relations conferences are intensive experiential laboratories that allow the observing and studying of intergroups in action, creating a microcosm group to demonstrate the relations among groups in an organization (Alderfer and Smith, 1982). The concern is not 'to avoid anxiety, but to provide opportunities to examine its effect on behavior and to learn ways of dealing with it, so that its outcome is constructive' (Rice, 1975, p. 89). Group relations conferences are often called workshops, and are offered in the form of non-residential weekend or longer residential workshops, where a temporary educational laboratory is created for the purpose of studying its own behaviour in the here-and-now of the experience. The number of members is restricted to keep the size of the temporary structure manageable for self-study.

The case example is entitled 'Holding, inquiring and sitting out race'. It refers to some difficult recurring patterns that have assisted

us in our understanding of racial dialogue among women. It should also be noted that the first author, who is an African American woman, has directed several group relations conferences. The second and third authors, a Chinese Canadian and an African American woman, respectively, have both worked as consultants in group relations conferences.

Holding, inquiring and sitting out race

In a large self-study group event

all members of the conference (typically 30–70 participants) meet together with the task of studying their own behavior in a situation in which face-to-face interaction is problematic or impossible. Two to four consultants, depending on the number of members, are assigned by the conference director to provide consultation to the Large Groups' task' (Hayden and Molenkamp, 2004).

The conferences we refer to have all had the theme of working with differences as they relate to authority and leadership in group and organizational life. For the purposes of the case example, we created a group with forty women, twenty-five white, eight black women, four Asian, and three Latina). The role of the consultants, who represent authority in the temporary institution, was to consult to the here-and-now experiences in the group. As the group sat in a spiral configuration with four female consultants (white, Asian, Latina and black), three black female members became angry at the group for not wanting to talk honestly about their feelings about race. They accused the group of being afraid to do exactly what they had come to the conference to do. For some time it seemed that they were the only people talking in the large group of members. Their anger was intense and many members sat with their eyes down, not making any eye contact or acknowledging the points being made by the women. Finally, two of the white women began to ask the black women a number of questions about their feelings about being black, such as, 'Could you say more about what your experience is as a black woman in this group?' or, 'Why are you so angry about what is going on in this group?' The white consultant intervened, 'Perhaps if the white women could speak to their own experiences of race there is a possibility for dialogue.' The white women sat silently, not responding until one woman spoke about her similar experiences of being discriminated against as a woman. This comment seemed, again, to make the black women angry; one asked, 'Can you speak to your privilege as a white woman?' After some discussion

about how difficult it was to say anything in the group, one of the consultants asked if the black women were the only angry members and wondered why they took up the responsibility of voicing the group's anger. She then asked if the group was in fact angry at the consultants, who clearly represented the differences in the group, but were not addressing the differences in the group in a more direct way, and that perhaps they wanted better role models, as the consultants were not being perceived as doing their jobs well enough. This intervention from the black consultant provided an important opening for the voices of the white, Latina, and Asian women, who began to voice their disappointment and frustration at the group and the consultants. Finally, one white woman spoke about her anger at the group and the consultants for not acknowledging the concerns of the white women and of her envy of how free the black women seemed to be at expressing their feelings. Another white woman spoke about her sense of isolation and disconnection when it came to the issue of race as a white woman. She wanted to join, but felt excluded since she had not experienced the same kind of discrimination as the black women. When it was pointed out by one of the consultants that the white women were the majority in the group, one white woman spoke of her difficulty in taking up the power in numbers and her fear of isolation from the women of colour. Near the end of the group session, the Latina and Asian women spoke of their frustration with the group's continuous focus on black and white issues, not acknowledging the other ethnic groups in the room. The comments by the Latina and Asian women helped the group to think about inclusion and exclusion and made them more aware of the many differences that existed in the group. It also demonstrated the ability of Latina and Asian women to give voice to their experiences.

CASE ANALYSIS

Group relations model

In applying components of the group relations model, it is important to understand that the quality of group interactions and task performance of the women in the group, along with the interventions of the female consultants, ultimately resulted in the process of making certain unconscious processes about race, identity, power, and privilege, conscious. It is also important to understand that throughout the group session, the women's expressions and interactions were all related to survival of the group (McLeod and Kettner-Polley, 2004). Moreover, the group was, from a psychoanalytic perspective,

engaging in unconscious and conscious behaviours that were related to feelings of anxiety experienced by the group members. Much of this process, however, manifested itself in the projection and internalization of stereotypes and the enactment of stereotyped behaviours.

Initially, the black women who identified and spoke about their anger allowed the other women to shut down and not deal with their own anger. When the other women were able to claim their anger, the black women were able to speak of their fears of being perceived as too aggressive and hostile, of taking up the stereotypic role of black women. Stereotypes serve as a form of control, creating categories of powerful and not-so-powerful (Fiske, 1993). For example, the traditional stereotype of the angry black woman, which has its roots in historical intergroup relations, was used in the case example to objectify the black women in one instance as both angry and demanding. Collins (1990) described *controlling images* as images obtained from the dominant culture that have the power to maintain the stratified and oppressive systems of race, class, and gender even when the political and economic conditions that generated those systems do not exist any more. Just as relational images formed by experiences in previous relationships cause people to be less receptive and open to new experiences, controlling images also hinder movement, change, growth, and transformation in relationships between individuals and groups (Walker and Miller, 2004).

Furthermore, Walker and Miller (2004) suggest that controlling images become internalized so that they become people's relational images and the 'cultural becomes psychological' (p. 144). In the case example, the black women acted according to the controlling image of women as angry, aggressive, and hostile. By taking up this role (i.e., identifying with these feelings), the black women allowed the other women to hold on to the more traditional positive, feminine qualities of being even-tempered, friendly, and amiable. At the same time, the white women in the group upheld the image of themselves as the inquirers about race, succumbing to the controlling image that white women know less about race than women of colour. As long as members of both majority and minority groups hold on to the historical, controlling, and relational images that keep them in prescribed and restrictive roles (e.g., black woman as angry and aggressive), both groups will continue to deny parts of their experience and dominant groups will continue finding it difficult to know the effects of their actions (Walker and Miller, 2004). When minorities collude with the majority group and take in these projections by fulfilling the dominant group's expectations and stereotypes, they become disconnected from not only others but themselves as well,

since these roles they are enacting are not fully their own (Connolly and Noumair, 1997; Cheng et al., 1998; Leary, 2000). These disconnected and isolated groups will continue to interact with each other's controlling and relational images – abstractions – rather than their true authentic selves. In the case presented, the consultant pointed out that the black women were taking the responsibility of voicing the group's anger, which allowed the other group members to own some of their own anger, and made room for more authentic dialogue about racial differences.

Racial dialogue is stalled when women of colour and white women take up the stereotypic roles often ascribed to them and there is no willingness to discuss and understand how perceptions and stereotypes were formed and how they affect interactions (Brazaitis, 2004). Culturally, women are socialized to take up stereotypic roles ascribed to women from their particular racial ethnic group. One of the paradoxes of 'human nature is that it is always a manifestation of cultural meanings, social relationships, and power politics – not biology, but culture, becomes destiny' (Lorber, 2001, p. 54; see also Butler, 1990).

It should be noted that, in the case example, both the Asian and Latina women deferred, for most of the group session, to the interplay of gendered and racial dynamics and expressions of privilege and power among the black and the white female group members. From a cultural perspective, it may be particularly difficult for Asian women, depending upon a number of factors, such as level of acculturation or generation status, to voice their anger. First, for women who are more interdependent (as opposed to individualistic), the ability to control behaviours, thoughts, and emotions to accommodate others is an important aspect of self-esteem, since self-restraint is required to put others' needs and desires first (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Furthermore, interdependent individuals have a tendency to adjust themselves to the social context rather than change the situation so that they can meet the needs and goals of the group (Yang, 1986; Morling and Fiske, 1999). Thus, given the uniqueness of group relations conferences, women who are more interdependent may be assessing the needs and wishes of the group before expressing their feelings, which is what the group needs most. Paradoxically, expressing feelings – and especially negative feelings such as anger – is in direct contrast to the values of many Asian women, so the expression of one's feelings in this group context requires these women to access the Western, more individualistic parts of themselves. They must act white to give the group what it wants and, in doing so, this often creates dissonance within the more collectivistic-orientated Asian members. Consistent with the

tendency for members from collectivistic cultures to keep their problems to themselves to avoid interpersonal conflict, there have been a number of studies that found Asian students tend to keep their problems to themselves rather than to confront them (e.g., Yeh et al., 2001; Yeh and Inose, 2002). Similarly, Wasti and Cortina (2002) found that Turkish and Hispanic American women kept their problems to themselves more than the Anglo American women in their study. The authors attributed this finding to the Turkish and Hispanic American women's collectivistic cultural orientation, which is related to a concern for harmony and disapproval of confrontation and conflict. This may explain both the Asian and Latina women's reluctance to voice their anger and their feelings of disconnection early in this group.

Hurtado (2004) suggests that skin colour and access to power and privilege for Chicana women may also be related to conflicts concerning a desire for connection and the threat of disconnection in professional environments. Torres (Jordan et al., 1997), in an audiotaped panel discussion of women from the Stone Center Diversity group concerning working in multicultural contexts, explored her need to continually minimize her Mexican/Chicana side in order to avoid disconnection from white women; she described her dilemma as making her 'too Latina to be White and too White to be Latina'.

The Latina women and the Asian women in the large group felt left out of a discussion that was about race. Where do Latina and Asian women stand in racial dialogue? Is race only a black and white issue? Do non-black and non-white women feel that they have to take sides and, if they do, what do they have to lose by taking sides? Eventually, minorities compete with other minorities for positions of status and power and, in doing so, they inflict on to each other the suffering they have endured from the majority group, contributing to a world of disconnections and fragmentations (Cheng et al., 1998). Thus, racism and discrimination are, in effect, manifestations of people's insecurities and anxieties that become projected on to less dominant groups (Allport, 1954; Clarke, 1999).

Embedded intergroup relations theory

What the case example illuminates are the ways in which women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are socialized to take up their role, the ways in which they are perceived, and their experience of the role. Categories such as race, ethnicity, and class are embedded in these roles and influence social relationships and power politics (Spelman, 1988; Collins, 1990).

In our consideration of women from four broadly socially defined racial ethnic categories – black, white, Latina, and Asian – we have learned that each carry certain stereotypic roles that are influenced by the messages received and internalized as well as the historical intergroup relationships, which set the emotional frame for unconscious processes to surface in racial dialogue among them (Alderfer, 1994).

In terms of the salience of group identity, the case example reveals that the black women took up the physical manifestations of racial group membership as more salient in their relatedness to other groups (Aldefer, 1991; McRae, 1994). They also took responsibility for initiating the dialogue on race and, by doing so, became the *'holders of race'*, making it difficult for others to engage. As members of a group that has an intense history of discrimination in the USA, the black women were perceived as being the most authorized to discuss race. It has been postulated that group members gain from denigrating members of another group by projecting the negative aspects of their identity on to the others, making the other diabolical, morally deficient, and less human (Erikson, 1968; Fisher, 1990). One result of this type of projection can result in the splitting off of unwanted aspects of negative identity on to the denigrated other. Moreover, race and ethnicity are avenues to denigrate others, which can create acute disconnections. In this group, the black women became the stereotypical angry, aggressive, negative *'other'* for the group. The white women were the *'silent inquirers'* attempting to connect by identification with the perceived victim (Reed & Noumair, 2000), allowing the black women to enact their anger while they sat in silence (Leary, 2000). The Asian and Latina women seem to *'sit between the fray'*, not giving voice to their anger at being excluded until near the end of the group.

Competitiveness among women and the inability to own a desire for leadership can foster stereotypes and disconnections among group members. Another perspective to be considered in this case is that the black women may have felt more empowered to take up roles of leadership in the group because the director was a black woman and the consultants represented each of the four racial groups being discussed. Although the white women were a majority in terms of number of members, the staff's racial diversity may have negatively affected their sense of empowerment to take up leadership in the group. Also, one way of competing among women may be to allow the denigrated group to give voice to issues that are unpopular. Allowing this to occur puts the issues on the table for discussion that can then be led by those who are perceived as less angry and

volatile. While the consultants in this case seemed ready to address the issues as they surfaced, it is our experience that the availability for such consultation is best when the consultants have done some substantial work around difference on their own.

Authentic racial dialogue

Relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976), is particularly useful in understanding authentic racial dialogue and the ways in which disconnections can be transformed into connections or avenues to a deeper understanding of difference when talking about differences. Relational-cultural theory emphasizes that people primarily yearn for connection, and that people grow and develop a sense of meaning and well-being through their relationships with others (Jordan, 2001). According to RCT, individuals and groups will experience both connections and disconnections in any relationship. These disconnections occur both at the personal and societal level (Jordan and Hartling, 2002). As people seek to maintain connections and the desire to differentiate, disconnections occur. Acute disconnections occur when people fail each other empathically, misunderstand, or in some way do not hold up to each others' standards of behaviour. When engaging in racial dialogue, acute disconnections can be intense, breaking down communication and severing relationships, especially when there is a power differential between sub-groups. When those who are less powerful experience prejudice or biased attitudes and behaviour, they begin to bring only certain parts of themselves to the relationship in order to protect their vulnerable parts. Those with more power may bring only certain parts of themselves that they want to be seen in order to protect their more vulnerable parts. These dynamics create, at best, inauthentic racial dialogue. These disconnections and relational injuries, however, can lead to increased understanding of existing differences when the injured party is able to discuss their feelings and the other person is able to respond in an authentic manner (Jordan and Hartling, 2002).

Disconnections in racial dialogue

In this case example, it is apparent that the initial disconnection between the black and white women was impacted by fear. The white women reacted with fear to the black women's intense anger and the black women were later able to address their fears of being perceived as aggressive and hostile. Friedman (1995) suggests that it

is difficult to work with differences if women maintain a cycle of denial, accusation, and confession. In this case, the black women accused the white women of not dealing with race as an issue. The white women reacted with questions that sought an explanation of something that they may not have been as aware of and an acknowledgement of the gender similarities, but they did not give voice to race. This was experienced as denial by the black women. When challenged further, one white woman confessed that she was having a difficult time because she could not identify with the experience of black women, and another expressed her anger. According to Holvina (2004) denial, accusation, and confession lead to a dead end, a stalemate, and keep anger, guilt, and shame under cover. Friedman suggests that movement from such a stalemate requires a script of *relational positionality*, which involves the recognition of power differentials and privileges of each party. In this group, the black women were privileged to have a black woman in the role of director of the conference, which gave them the privilege to voice their concerns. The white women had the privilege of being the majority race in the conference and, in society, that which controls resources.

According to Jordan (2004), some disconnections and experiences of isolation are contextually driven by societal forces that stratify groups. Disempowerment and fear accompanies the disconnection and isolation created by the divisive forces in society such as racism. However, Jordan also contends that fear has the potential to move people towards or away from understanding differences. If people are able to turn to others rather than further isolate themselves in moments of fear, they may be able to learn new ways to be with their fear and transform an otherwise isolating experience into one that is moving and trust building. With the safety of the group structure and the interventions of the consultants, the black and white women were able to communicate despite and about their fears, creating movement towards a deeper understanding and ability to work with differences.

Shame is another emotion that has the potential for creating profound disconnections. In order to hold on to a sense of safety in the face of conflict that arises from racial stratification, people may cope by overwhelming or shaming the other or by silencing and shaming themselves (Walker, 2004). In the group described above, the black women's intense anger may have been a way of overwhelming and shaming while the other group members' silence may have been indicative of the shame they felt for not having experienced the same kind of discrimination that the black women did, and, perhaps, for being a part of the more dominant group perpetrating the discrimination. However, it is important for the groups involved to

be able to address these feelings of shame. Shame takes groups into isolation; disconnection results if groups feel it is unsafe to bring various aspects of themselves into a relationship (Jordan, 2004). To further exacerbate the disconnection, marginalized groups may move into a state of self-protective inauthenticity, when dominant groups restrain experiences that cause them to feel uncomfortable or threatened (Jordan, 2004).

Authenticity in racial dialogue

Jordan (2004) argues that self-empathy and empathy is what transforms disconnections. It requires an openness to being moved by the other person and an openness to be seen by the other person. Group relations conferences provide a contained space that is 'good enough' for group members to transform the strong emotions of fear and shame that pervade dialogue about race across racial groups into growth-fostering and trust-building experiences. Individuals are encouraged to explore their own experiences and feelings authentically, to present their authentic and open selves rather than their controlling or relational images, and to recognize and acknowledge the emotions (e.g., fear and shame) that may be keeping them separated and isolated. Jordan (2004) argues that patterns of disconnection and reconnection are largely unconscious. Thus, growth-enhancing opportunities and relationships are those that give people the opportunity to name the disconnection and explore the interaction pattern. In this way, group relations conferences are an ideal setting for these transformative experiences because they provide an opportunity for relational awareness, which enhances the group members' ability to engage in growth-enhancing relationships beyond the conference setting.

When responsibility for racial dialogue is shared, it helps to decrease defensiveness, and creates space for all to bring their whole selves to the relationship (Bell et al., 2003). For white women this means a willingness to claim their own perspective, including privilege, and the motivation for action to eliminate one's own guilt and shame (Steele, 1997; Bell et al., 2003). It also involves learning not to defer to black women or women of colour around issues of race; allies share responsibility for racial dialogue.

Dialogue and claiming of perspectives in these groups stimulated an interest in furthering the group and intergroup work. While the concept of 'boundary' has been traditionally conceptualized in psychoanalytic and developmental theory as a place for protection against the external world, from a relational-cultural perspective,

the boundary is seen as a place of meeting and exchange with others (Jordan, 2001, p. 93). Thus, boundaries that separate in-groups from out-groups such as race in society are prime locations and opportunities for working across differences to occur (Dovidio et al., 2002). Relational-cultural theory suggests that women yearn for connections and suffer from feelings of isolation. It is posited that women grow through connection and develop a sense of meaning and well-being in relationships over their life span. Drawing on their work on intergroup dialogue, Zuniga and collaborators (2000) suggest that the process of intergroup dialogue involves the articulation of conflicting perspectives, expression of feelings and experiences that provide opportunities for greater clarification of underlying sources of tension, and engagement in new behaviours that can increase self-awareness and sensitivity to others.

What we learn from women in this case study is that awareness of difference can enhance racial dialogue and promote better communication. Women of colour who have experienced a sense of injustice, who have been socialized to attend to the collective community, and who tend to live a bicultural existence in this society, are more prone to give voice to their concerns about race and racism (Bell et al., 2003). When there is a mix of women of colour and white women willing to give voice, to engage in racial dialogue, there is much potential for intellectual, emotional, and relational learning. Holvina (2004) proposes four skills that are important for working with differences '(1) inquiring and disclosing, (2) asking difficult questions, (3) making differences explicit and showing support, and (4) seeking common ground' (p. 11). She notes that while, in general, the assumption is that members of privileged groups will inquire and those with less privilege will be expected to disclose, it is clear that all parties must inquire and disclose. Holvina suggests that difficult questions are often embarrassing to ask because they indicate ignorance; they make one feel vulnerable by opening up subjects that are considered taboo. In the case example, the consultants helped the women to disclose, make differences explicit, and to share common ground. The consultants were also able to tolerate the group's anxiety and their expressions of it, as well as their expressions of anger and conflict, which is another important skill when working with differences.

IMPLICATIONS

Becoming more effective in recognizing and working with unconscious processes related to race in group and organization life has important implications for research and practice.

Implications for research

In terms of research, there is a need for further clarification and understanding of how racial ethnic stereotypes and psychodynamic processes influence intergroup behaviour, especially given the complexity of intergroup racial dialogue. The focus on the group-as-a-whole in group relations conferences permits the study of the interdependent behaviours between groups (Hayden and Molenkamp, 2004). The case example presented in this paper was developed from years of working in group relations conferences. We suggest that future research on groups should engage the participants in helping them make sense of and/or capture the essence of the groups' experience. For example, using a narrative approach, groups could be videotaped and each participant would be asked to review the videotapes and provide narratives of what they saw going on in the group, which would allow the commonalities and differences between participants and researchers' perspectives to be explored (Josselson and Lieblich, 1997). This type of research would further address the limitations of intergroup theory identified by Devine and Vasquez (1998) in interactions between majority and minority group members.

The examination of gender as it relates to authority and leadership in groups is another important direction for future research. Rosenbaum (2004) identified the group as mother and the psychological and behavioural implications of group members unconsciously experiencing the group as being powerful and female. She posits that the 'genderedness' of a group's identity has significant implications for understanding a group's functioning. In addition, the gender of the group's facilitator also impacts the group's dynamic. According to Rosenbaum, the presence of a female facilitator may further intensify the group's projective experience of the group-as-a-whole being a powerful female entity, thus exacerbating existing anxieties concerning female power and authority.

Implications for practice

'Difference is celebrated superficially at one level; on another, it is the subject of the loving preservation of "us" and the malicious destruction of "them" ' (Clarke, 1999, p. 25).

Racial dialogue involves sharing perspectives and experiences, and learning how to work with differences that exist among various social identity groups. In the twenty-first century, racial dialogue is essential for an understanding of how social and psychological data

is both structured and constructed as it informs practice and policy. First, racial dialogue that challenges participants to examine the complexity of their experiences, learning to acknowledge projections, and owning both the good and the bad behaviours created by the anxiety of differences, will generate more integrated experiences for clients and practitioners. An increased awareness about unconscious processes such as projection and projective identification becomes the first step towards owning those devalued parts of ourselves, thereby disengaging from the projective cycle that perpetuates racism and discrimination. Second, developing increased understanding of the types of behaviours that foster disconnections and those that create opportunities for working across differences will foster more productive work within and across racial ethnic groups. Third, the more mental health professionals and other practitioners are able to engage in authentic racial dialogue, the more likely they will be able to help the broader community in communicating effectively about race.

LIMITATIONS

Group relations model has underlying assumptions that may be inconsistent with the world-view of members with different cultural orientations. For example, the model's emphasis on verbal communication and emotional expressiveness may cause members from more collectivistic cultures to be labelled quiet, resistant, or passive, when, in actuality, their discomfort or silence could be related to cultural incongruence. While group relations work cannot be (or should be) free of cultural values, it is important to recognize and to be cognizant of the cultural assumptions inherent in the theories and models used in order to prevent certain groups from being viewed from a pathological perspective and to promote the viewing of those groups through a more appropriate cultural lens.

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