2004

Talking When Talking is Tough: Taking on Conversations About Race, Sexual Orientation, Gender, Class, and Other Aspects of Social Identity

Joshua Miller
Smith College, jlmiller@smith.edu

Susan Donner
Smith College

Edith Fraser
Smith College

TALKING WHEN TALKING IS TOUGH: TAKING ON CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER, CLASS AND OTHER ASPECTS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Joshua Miller, Ph.D.
Susan Donner, Ph.D.
Edith Fraser, Ph.D. [1]

Introduction

Conversations connect us to other people. They can be a source of intimacy and pleasure, reinforcing our sense of belonging, affirming who we are and what we believe in, bolstering our sense of self worth. Conversations can also become difficult, painful, confusing and frustrating. In difficult conversations we can feel alienated, misunderstood, attacked and even victimized (Stone, Patton & Heen, 1999). For this reason, many people avoid having difficult conversations. When a conversation involves an aspect of a person's social identity and group allegiance and is between people with varied social identities then the potential for misunderstanding increases. Differences in social identity do not only involve 'difference', but also represent societal inequities of power, privilege and oppression.

Yet as social work educators and practitioners, it is not only difficult to avoid conversations that involve aspects of our social identities, it contravenes our professional ethics. In this paper we will discuss the need to talk even when talking is tough, the challenges of talking about issues of social identity between people with different social identities, and the negative consequences of failing to have tough conversations. Drawn from research and our practice and teaching experience, we conclude with

---

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Smith College School for Social Work Monday Night Lecture series in 2000.

recommendations about ways to better facilitate seemingly intractable conversations. Our findings are relevant for teaching, discussions with colleagues, community advocacy, and our work as clinical practitioners.

<div align="center">The Importance of Talking When Talking is Tough</div>

The United States of America is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse countries in the world. Due to historical legacies and current social realities, differences in power and privilege are manifest in diverse groups. For example, gay and lesbian people do not have the privilege of marriage, which means that they are not as able to share their partner's assets and benefits, as do heterosexual people. White people assume that they can live where they choose and not be stopped by law enforcement officials while driving due to their skin color, a reality that people of color cannot take for granted. Differences in social and economic class inevitably represent vast differences in the power to spend, purchase goods and buy services and resources. In these dimensions diversity in the U.S. is not just a source of difference, but also a font of inequality (Miller, 1997, 2003).

Diversity is a defining characteristic of human experience that increases a person's consciousness of who they are in relation to other people. This manifests externally through group allegiances and internally by a person's identity, how they view themselves in relation to others. This sense of one's self and choices about group affiliation are shaped by our experiences and encounters with other people. These encounters can be both positive and negative. A consequence of negative encounters can be a wish to withdraw into groups where one is surrounded by similar people, increasing social isolation and reinforcing a sense of 'us' and 'them'. Group allegiances can anchor

individuals but also be a source of group conflict (Group for The Advancement of Psychiatry [GAP], 1987). People who are perceived as different can become symbolic "others," who are seen as being different, "diabolical," morally deficient or less human (Fisher, 1990; GAP, 1987; Miller & Schamess, 2000). Negative perception of members of different groups enhances the positive identities of members of the in-group (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Conflict with members of other groups also enhances the bonds between members of the in-group (Coser, 1956). Historically, violent subjugation by the more technologically advanced of the less technologically advanced has been a destructive way of resolving diversity (Diamond, 1997). Engaging in difficult conversations about meaningful differences and similarities offers a possible alternative to resolving differences by force, which has led to wars, genocide, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing and displacement with massive waves of refugees.

Implicit in violent resolution of conflict is the dehumanization of the other group or person. This can happen on a large scale, with blanket denunciations of a particular ethnic, religious or racial group but also occurs in day-to-day interactions with colleagues, family and friends (Stone, et. al., 1999). Engaging in healthy conversation involves empathy and concern and respect for the other person; viewing them as a "thou" or "you" (Buber, 1957) rather than as an object or two-dimensional stereotype. Although the effort to truly understand people who are different (or in turn to risk the vulnerability of being understood) can be demanding and arduous, such conversations can ultimately be transformative. They can alter our sense of self and our understanding of people who have heretofore been dismissed and misunderstood, permitting the unfolding of a richer, more complex and compassionate sense of others and ourselves.

What are the Consequences of Avoiding Difficult Conversations?

We have described above the worst consequences of avoiding difficult conversations across difference: violence, war and human destruction. In our daily work and lives, we encounter other negative consequences of avoiding difficult conversations that are also destructive, if less nihilistic. In this paper we utilize examples from college classrooms to explore the destructive consequences of avoiding challenging conversations about difference and extrapolate this as well to clinical practice.

One consequence of avoiding challenging conversations is that the utilization of defense mechanisms, such as denial and projection, are common responses to interpersonal stressors. An example of denial in classrooms and other groups is a statement frequently made by white people: "People are people, I never see color." This can serve to abort a discussion about race and racism by denying that the construction of race has any meaning in people's lives. Such discussions will usually create a sense of discomfort among participants. Along with strong affect there are often perceived threats to a person's identity (Stone, et. al., 1999). If clinicians are unable to talk about issues of social identity clients often feel invalidated or invisible.

If a group member challenges or questions such a statement, people can become angry and defensive. We have observed students retreating after such confrontations and glaring at the professor for the rest of a course without speaking or sitting at an angle that avoids making eye contact. A form of projection occurs when an offended student accuses others of being racist for raising the topic of race and racism. Similar responses can occur with other aspects of social identity such as sexual orientation.

The tensions and anxiety engendered by discussions of difference often lead to attempts to change the subject or to discount the importance of discussing difference by disavowing the social identity of the other person. For example, an African American professor may raise issues of racism when discussing the history of social welfare policy or a lesbian professor may question the relevance of sexual orientation in a class on family policy.   They, in turn, may find that they are challenged about the relevance of these issues because of who they are. Common student responses are "this is a class about the history of social welfare policy, not racism – why do you keep distracting us from the central course content" or "we need to examine real family policies – this is not a class about sexual orientation."

It is not surprising that discussions about differences can lead to challenges to and distancing from people who are different. Genuine conversation may necessitate confrontations with the various forms of denial that people have developed to avoid recognizing power and privilege differentials in their daily lives. Here is an example:

> Recently at a small Christian college in the south, two lesbian women of color were invited to speak to students in a social work class. During the discussion, students were unusually quiet and distant. The class was unable to actively engage with the presenters, who (at least on the surface) were different in many ways from class members. In the next class the students confronted and challenged the professor, after they condemned and questioned the presentation and the presenters. Subsequent conversations revealed the difficulty and sense of discomfort this all-female class of students had with women of color who differed from them in so many ways, e.g. class, gender identification and sexual orientation. To engage in this difficult conversation required the students to confront their own homophobia and internalized oppression, which could lead to a conversation the students wanted to avoid. In order to engage in meaningful conversation with the lesbian presenters, students had to recognize and confront their own privilege and their own role as agents of oppression.

One way of conceptualizing the social hierarchies and power differentials associated with differences in social identity involves the notions of 'agent' and 'target'

(Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Along any one dimension of social identity are those who have privilege (agents) and those who lack privilege (targets) and who are the objects of discrimination. Typical examples of agents are whites, males, heterosexuals, upper class people while common targets are people of color, women, homosexuals or bisexuals, and poor people. Agents often lack awareness of the privileges that accompany this status. So whites often believe that racism is a problem of the past because they never encounter it. Married heterosexuals need not think about the negative consequences of not being able to share employment benefits with partners. Wealthy persons rarely appreciate the experience of trying to survive on TANF benefits. McIntosh (1989) has referred to the privileges that agents carry as an "invisible knapsack."

Failure to engage in meaningful conversations with people who are targets, whether in the classroom or the consulting room, reinforces the invisibility of privilege for agents. They often do not understand or grasp the experience of targeted people and are surprised and shocked to learn about experiences of targeted groups. Most people with agent status do not view themselves as having power and privilege (Goodman, 2001). Thus, when agents are confronted with the inequity of their unearned privilege and are not engaged in meaningful dialogue, they may experience cognitive dissonance (Miller & Schamess, 2000). They can experience a conflict between their internalized beliefs of having earned their place in an fundamentally just society versus the realization that they have benefited from advantages of birth in an essentially unjust social order. Since most people like to think that their social world is fair and that they have earned what they have achieved, it is often easier to blame target groups for their own predicament. So people of color are held responsible for their higher rates of

incarceration, lower rates of employment and shorter life expectancies due to cultural differences, lack of a work ethic or poor self-care, rather than their social, political and economic marginalization.

People of color, and other socially targeted groups, experience many negative consequences when confronted with such ignorance and arrogance. One effect is a sense of frustration and rage (Hardy & Lasloffy, 1995), exacerbated when agents fail to even engage in discussion about the differences in experiences. This can lead people to feel marginalized, unacknowledged, and invisible. Since such topics raise anxiety with agents, they often avoid them, even when members of target groups try to raise them. Targeted people may experience this as being ignored, devalued and not cared for. Failure to address these different experiences can leave both agents and targets feeling mistrustful, hurt and angry. Unfortunately, target populations often internalize their anger and hostility with serious consequences, such as accelerated rates for African Americans of high blood pressure, ulcers, obesity and lower life expectancy (The National Academy of Sciences, 2002).

There are also group ramifications for failure to address issues of diversity, in addition to personal consequences. Davis (1992) has found that in sociology classes, which focus on inequality, classroom climates of resistance, paralysis and rage are often generated. The denial of important differences in identities and power differentials can lead to a lack of authenticity in groups. This can lead to a sublimation of disagreements into a conspiracy of silence, manifested by a hegemonic group consensus that stifles dissent, nuances or critical thinking. Another outcome may be conflict and clashes that result in scapegoating, withdrawal and interactional strains. This in turn negatively

affects group cohesion and adversely influences the ability of the group to work

productively together. Here is an example of this process:

> In a graduate social work program, students were participating in a process group as one component of their learning experience. The group was structured for 5 sessions, which were held during class time and co-led by students. The process group had proven to be a successful learning experience for many years and the focus was usually on the struggles of first year graduate students adapting to graduate school. One year the group attempted to deal with issues of difference, specifically race, in these sessions. Students seemed unable to process this content internally. There was free floating anxiety and anger as students struggled to explore race in the context of the group. Students who attempted to encourage a deeper conversation of this issue were scapegoated and one student of color was fearful about returning to the group because of this painful experience. The professor, who had taught this course for a number of years, noticed that group cohesion and productivity were limited in this process group. Apparently, the content and student anxieties about privilege and power had a profound impact on group cohesion and work effectiveness.

In our consultation work with clinical agencies, we have often found a similar

process in play. Difficult conversations between staff members often go underground

because of anxiety and threats to individual identity and group cohesion. Workers report

that they are confused about how and when to bring up issues of difference with clients in

individual and group work. This same dynamic also occurs with supervisory

relationships.

Thus, it is not surprising that denial of difference and avoidant behavior has

negative effects at the organizational level. This can make for an uncomfortable working

environment for staff, who feel different, marginalized, stereotyped or actively oppressed.

Morale suffers, productivity is jeopardized, staff turnover may soar and the cohesiveness

and solidarity of the work group is compromised. When "minorities" are hired they may

feel tokenized and isolated. Time and energy can be expended on conflicts and

miscommunications that occur because issues of difference have been ignored and avoided. Submerged tensions are more prone to erupting unexpectedly; catching administrators and employees by surprise and creating barriers that inhibit productive dialogue and conflict resolution.

If such conversations are not occurring at the staff level in clinical settings, the odds are high that they are not being handled well with clients. Failure to acknowledge issues of social identity in clinical sessions can lead clients to feel as if their experience is being negated (Carter, 1995; Helms, 1990; Helms & Cook, 1999; Ridley, 1995). A sense of self, which has often been impugned by societal affronts and indignities, can suffer further wounds, including a sense of being disrespected. Targeted populations will mistrust agencies that deny or fail to acknowledge their existence. Dropout rates and no-shows may rise. Ultimately, this leads to an organizational failure to meet the needs of clients. However, there is a danger that the clients will be blamed, rather than an organization taking responsibility for the negative impact that their system has on consumers,. This can lead to dismissive statements such as "they do not really want help", "they lack motivation", "their culture does not respect punctuality", and "they are not psychologically minded."

Lapses of empathy and understanding that can occur when issues of difference are not discussed can lead to compromised out-reach efforts, biased intake processes and erroneous and inadequate discharge planning. The entire organizational environment, ranging from the pictures and magazines in the waiting room to the way clients are addressed and communicated with can express bias, intolerance, disregard and organizational arrogance.

Lastly, the same divisiveness, denial, distrust and cultural clashes that occur on an organizational level are also happening on a societal level when there are no mechanisms to discuss difference. This failure implicitly reinforces the status quo, which involves literal and symbolic prejudice, marginalization, scapegoating and other forms of oppression. People will see and hear what they already believe because there are few, if any opportunities for challenging and interrogating their preconceptions.

What Makes Talking Across Difference So Difficult

If there is such a clear benefit to having conversations across difference and the consequences of avoiding them can be so destructive, why are people so hesitant to engage in them? One reason is that many people lack experience in talking across and about difference. Racial segregation is still very common in neighborhoods (Feagin; 1999; Massey and Denton, 1993) and white people have frequently lacked meaningful encounters with people of color until they enter college or their workplaces (Shipler, 1997; Tatum, 1997). And even when people from diverse backgrounds are working or living together, often such dialogues do not take place. In a discussion between New York Times reporters, people of color and white, who had collaborated on a series about race in America, the reporters noted that there was a tendency in the office to shun talking about race and racism (Roberts, 2000). Because such conversations are difficult they are avoided but because they are circumvented they become even more challenging.

One reason for dodging difficult conversations is to spare people feelings of vulnerability. Conversations across difference can threaten a person's view of themselves as being good, knowledgeable, competent and not wanting to harm others (Stone, et al, 1999). They also confront agents with information about unearned

privileges (Miller & Schamess, 2000). This cognitive realization can be accompanied by strong emotions such as shame, guilt, fear, confusion and anger (Stone, et al, 1999; Tatum, 1997).

Talking when talking is tough can also challenge our cognitive templates and worldviews, which can be very destabilizing and disorienting, particularly for people with agent status. A straight, middle class, white male's experience of oppression is likely to be less salient than someone who is gay, poor, female or of color. For him, talking across difference may threaten cherished views that American society is inherently fair and that its institutions promote equality (Miller & Schamess, 2000) as well as his sense of self, which he may not perceive as privileged (Goodman, 2001). To reconsider that view is to reconsider assumptions about a reality to which he may be strongly attached and talking across difference may be experienced as a confrontation, which carries with it a heavy sense of loss (Wah, 1994). For people who have experienced oppression and marginalization, this person's worldview is likely to be experienced as contributing to the maintenance of oppression, which can be alienating and frustrating. Being exposed to bias or ignorance about unearned privilege and oppression can be a reenactment of what is already a source of pain and pressure for people with target status. This is further magnified when such discussions take place with a preponderance of agents and very few people who are societal targets.

Differing developmental levels of consciousness about social identity further strain difficult conversations. People who are targets usually have a much clearer vision of the social, institutional and interpersonal sources of their oppression than do agents. This can foster different levels of awareness about privilege and oppression, which can

become part of a person's identity. Within groups there are also varying levels of social identity; for example some white people have done a great deal of thinking, deconstructing and work around white racism while others barely know that it exists. Also, people have mixed and complex dimensions of their identities that intersect and interact. Thus a middle class, white lesbian may be targeted due to her gender and sexual orientation while enjoying privilege due to her race and class. Ultimately, people with agent status will, ideally, go through a process of deconstructing their privileged identity and reconstructing a non-supremacist identity; for targets the task is to develop a positive identity without internalizing harmful negative stereotypes (Cross 1990; Helms, 1990; Salett & Kaslow, 1994). Considering these different tasks and different levels of identity development, it is not surprising that there is tremendous potential for pain and misunderstanding in dialogues about difference.

Creating an Environment Where We can Talk and What to do When We Become Stuck

There are no quick fixes or easy solutions to the inhibitory mechanisms that we have described. However, we and others have found that there are ways to prepare the ground for fruitful conversations across difference, norms that further what Stone et al (1999) term a "learning conversation," and interventions that help when conversations become stuck. These suggestions are not guarantees against interpersonal conflict and misunderstanding; there is never a complete absence or risk or safety when talking across difference, but they improve the odds. We will focus particularly on groups talking across difference although the principles are also applicable to conversations between individuals. Our suggestions are applicable to classrooms, collegial relationships in agencies, and clinical work with clients.

1. Striving to create egalitarian space.

This initial goal may sound like a contradiction in light of what we have stated about unequal social power and privilege. However, appreciating these inequities enhances steps that can be taken to avoid recreating them in conversational spaces, such as classrooms. If a course is going to focus on race and racism, it is inadvisable to have a class of 22 individuals, with only 2 or 3 students of color. This is a set-up for all participants as it symbolizes the experience that people have in many social situations, a predominance of white people with fewer people of color, talking about racism. This problematic dynamic is further exacerbated if the professor is white.

We recommend that in groups talking across difference that there are attempts made to invite parity in numbers between people with targeted and privileged status, particularly in the dimension that is the focus of the group. For example, in a class on racism, parity of group composition would be based on race and ethnicity, not on sexual orientation or social class. We believe that at a minimum there should be a critical mass of targeted people in the group, which in our experience is at least 1/3 of the participants. Although pedagogically ideal, this is not always possible due to federal restrictions that prohibit assigning people to classes on the basis of race or gender. Our suggestions in Section 5 below offer some ideas applicable for groups where the focus is on social difference and there are only a few group members with targeted social identities.

Groups do not run by themselves and difficult conversations fare better when there is clear leadership. Leaders and facilitators help to hold the process and are able to create a structure and process that fosters dialogue. We have found that co-facilitation, with one person having targeted status and one with agent status helps to further productive

conversations across difference. This allows for all participants to be able to see

themselves represented in the facilitators and for the facilitators to be able to role model

respectful and productive conversations across their differences. This also symbolically

shares power between people with different social identities.

2. <u>Establishing a Dialogic Framework</u>

Establishing norms and guidelines for discussion creates a framework and container

for engaging in conversations across difference. Although they may appear to be simple

and common sense it is useful to state them in the affirmative and to have them generated

by the group. Some basic principles that foster better conversations are:

- Confidentiality within the group.

- Sharing time and not taking up too much air space.

- Speaking for oneself and not representing one's social group – making "I" statements.

- Listening carefully to others.

- Striving for open-mindedness.

- Challenging behavior and ideas but not attacking the person.

- Seeking discussions that open up and explore complexity rather than reductionism
  and sloganeering.

Many of these principles foster a "learning conversation" (Stone, et. al., 1999), a

discussion where participants do not claim to know all of the answers, where one group is

not "teaching" another, where the object is not to convince but to explore, seeking the

gray areas and spaces of ambivalence (Becker, Chasin, Chasin, Herzig, & Roth, 1995;

Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker, & Stains Jr., 1996)). This involves deep

listening, genuine curiosity, empathy, recognition and acknowledgement, and willingness

to take responsibility. Implicit in this is a commitment to self-reflection, to knowing

oneself and accepting imperfections in self and others.

3. <u>Understanding the historical, social and political context in which the conversation</u>

<u>occurs.</u>

Since challenging conversations across difference do not occur in a vacuum,

participants do not leave their social selves at the door. Rather, such conversations draw

upon social identities, which are grounded in historical and material social conditions. It

is helpful, therefore, to provide information about the historical, political and social

context of issues and identities. For example, if the topic is sexual orientation, it is

important for group members to be aware of laws, social policies, cultural and religious

norms, and patterns of discrimination; sexual orientation is not simply about differences

in choices, values and life-styles.

When there are dialogues between groups that have had historical patterns of conflict,

such as Arabs and Jews (Bargal & Bar, 1994) or African Americans and Koreans in the

U.S. (Norman, 1994), it is helpful to have each group share their historical and social

narrative and to also listen carefully to the other groups competing or contradictory story.

Failing this, it is often difficult, if not impossible, for individuals and groups to listen

carefully and fully participate if they feel their group narrative has been marginalized or

silenced.

4. <u>Introducing concepts that predict and render meaningful common challenges.</u>

It can be helpful for participants to cognitively grasp common challenges to

conversations across difference. This can anticipate frequent sites of conflict and provide

explanatory social constructions. For example, when discussing race and racism, it can

be very useful to share paradigms about racial identity formation (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Hardiman, 1994). Or if the focus is more on cultural difference than a discussion about worldviews and cultural values (Sue & Sue, 1999) is helpful. When there is group conflict, a common defense mechanism is to dehumanize the other group and project negative and unacceptable aspects of self on to the "other" (Miller & Schamess, 2000). Recognizing this tendency makes is possible to explore and examine the projections should they occur during a difficult conversation. Stone et al. (1999) have offered a very helpful tripartite framework for understanding stuck conversations; They suggest that: 1. There are disagreements about content. 2. There are emotions that accompany the disagreements. 3. The disagreements pose challenges to the social identities of participants.

In addition to sharing concepts that illuminate challenging conversational dynamics, it is also useful to view tough conversations as part of a process, one that has a history and a future. Everything need not be resolved in one discussion. Work has been occurring before the conversation and will continue afterwards; we don't reach "there" but we can move in the right direction. And just as people's identities move through a developmental process, so do conversations that are generated by shifts in consciousness and self-awareness.

5. Having mechanisms for dealing with stuck conversations.

Challenging conversations across difference will inevitably have moments of uncertainty, frustration and conflict. While it can be helpful to predict this, so it is seen as normal rather than aberrant, it is also necessary for facilitators to have ideas about how to intervene. We have implemented a number of helpful strategies in such situations,

which are also useful when there are groups with very few people with targeted social identities:

- Dividing into caucus groups – If the discussion is about racism, it can be useful to divide into homogenous caucus groups, where participants share some perspectives by virtue of their social identities, and to pose questions to each group. Then groups can return and share what they considered with the larger group. This permits exploration of challenging issues while decreasing personal vulnerability.

- Using "fishbowls" with larger groups – this involves having a smaller circle within a larger group (7-8 people) so that the highly charged material can be explored in a more intimate setting but is witnessed by the entire group. It helps for fishbowls to always have an empty chair so that members of the larger group can filter into the fishbowl and members of the smaller group can return to the larger group (Miller & Donner, 2000).

- Going around the circle. Often when there is conflict a few participants get locked into an antagonistic or alienating dynamic while other members of the group become bystanders. It can be helpful for facilitators to intervene and ask a question that responds to themes embedded in the conflictual dynamic, requesting that each group member briefly respond. If this intervention is employed, it is important to have a "pass" rule, meaning that any person can decline to speak so that no group members are forced to participate. When using this approach it can be useful to think of questions that seek out areas of ambiguity and uncertainty (Becker, et. al, 1995; Chasin, et. al, 1996).

- Utilizing structured exercises or role-plays can be helpful if the overall group process seems stuck or participants appear to be overly hesitant or only responding to the topic in a highly intellectualized, abstract fashion.

6. Considering solutions as well as problems.

While a thorough exploration of problems and roadblocks is essential, it is also important to consider solutions and ways to move forward. Research on racial dialogues has indicated that people of color will consider this a worthwhile endeavor if there is more than just talk and that the discussion leads to taking concrete actions against racism (Miller & Donner, 2000; Study Circles Resource Center, 1998). Thorny and sensitive discussions about issues of social identity can leave participants feeling dispirited and overwhelmed if simply left in a thicket of unresolved problems. This can foster a tendency to blame rather than take responsibility. Complex and difficult conversations are productive when they inspire hope and a commitment to action. As Primo Levi (1985) described in his novel about resisting Nazi atrocities, If not now, when, to struggle is to be alive, even against overwhelming odds. To consider solutions, contemplate and take action is to maintain hope and a sense of efficacy.

7. Tie tough conversations to organizational commitments.

Challenging conversations about identity and oppression take place in an organizational and institutional context. This context frames the conversation, giving it meaning and purpose. Organizational commitments to confront and challenge oppression often create the conditions for having such conversations and, recursively, the organizational culture is then transformed. It is important for sponsoring organizations to demonstrate their commitment to institutional change, social justice, self-examination,

and reevaluation of mission, policies, ideology and practices. This may heighten tensions and frustrations within an organization, and necessitates a commitment to engaging in difficult conversations as part of a broader organizational change process.

Conclusion

Talking when talking is tough is not always pleasant and entails risks. However the perils of not having such conversations are even greater and ultimately more damaging to individuals and groups. The conversation is not an end in itself but will hopefully contribute to better understandings, different ways of viewing oneself and others, and to organizational, social and political commitments to work for change and social justice. If such conversations are occurring in the classroom and agency lunchroom, there is a greater likelihood that they will also be taking place in the consulting room. There are no foolproof or risk-free ways of conducting such conversations and there are no guarantees that they will be beneficial or successful. We have attempted in this paper to describe better ways to foster substantive discussions about challenging and complex issues that are personally meaningful and socially relevant.

References

Bargal, D., & Bar, H. (1994) The encounter of social selves: Intergroup workshops for Arab and Jewish youth. Social work with groups, 17(3), 39-59.

Becker, C., Chasin, L., Chasin, R., Herzig, M., & Roth, S. (1995) From stuck debate to new conversation on controversial issues: A report from the public conversations project. Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 7(1/2), 143-161.

Buber, M. (1957). I and thou. NY: Scribner.

Carter, R.T. (1995). The influence of race and racial identity in psychotherapy: Toward a racially inclusive model. NY: Wiley.

Chasin, R., Herzig, M., Roth, S., Chasin, L., Becker, C., & Stains Jr., R.R. (1996). From diatribe to dialogue on divisive public issues: Approaches drawn from family therapy. Mediation Quarterly, 13(4), 323-345.

Coser, L. A. (1956). The functions of social conflict. NY: The Free Press.

Cross, W.E. (1991). Shades of black: Diversity in African-American identity. Philadelphia: Temple.

Davis, N. J. (1992). Teaching about inequality: Student resistance, paralysis, and rage. Teaching Sociology, 20, 232-238.

Diamond, J. (1997). Guns, germs and steel: The fate of human societies. NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

Feagin, J.R. (1999). Excluding blacks and others from housing. Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research, 4(3), 79-91.

Fisher, R.J. (1990). The social psychology of intergroup and international conflict resolution. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Goodman, D. J. Promoting diversity and social justice: Educating people from privileged groups. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (1987). Us and them: The psychology of ethnonationalism. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Hardiman, R. (1994). White racial identity development. In E.P.Salett & D.R. Kaslow (Eds.) Race, ethnicity and self: Identity in multicultural perspective (pp. 117-140). Washington, DC: National Multicultural Institute.

Hardiman, R., & Jackson, B. (1997). Conceptual foundations of social justice courses. In. M. Adams, L.A. Bell, & P. Griffen (Eds.) Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook(pp. 16-29). New York: Routledge.

Hardy, K.V. & Lazlaffy, T.A. (1995). Therapy with African Americans and the phenomenon of rage. In session: psychotherapy in practice, 1(4), 57-70.

Helms, J. (1990). Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Helms, J.A., & Cook (1999). Using race and culture in counseling and psychotherapy: Theory and process. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Levi, P. (1985). If not now, when? New York: Penguin.

Massey, D.A., & Denton, N.A. (1993). <u>American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass.</u> Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

McIntosh, P. (1989). White privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack. <u>Peace and Freedom.</u> <u>July/Aug.</u> pp. 10-12.

Miller, J. (2003). Societal abuse and neglect of children. In J. Miller, I. Rodriguez Martin, G. Schamess (Eds.). <u>School violence and children in crisis: School and community based strategies for social workers and counselors</u> (pp. 85-99). Denver: Love Publishing.

Miller, J. (1997). Societal abuse and neglect of children: What do these phenomena tell us about ourselves? <u>Smith Studies in Social Work, 67</u> (2), 197-212.

Miller, J. & Donner, S. (2000). More than just talk: The use of racial dialogues to combat racism. <u>Social work with groups, 23</u> (1), 31-53.

Miller, J. & Schamess, G. (2000). The discourse of denigration and the creation of other. <u>The Journal of Sociology and Social Wefare.</u>

Norman, A.J. (1994). Black-Korean relations: From desperation to dialogue, or from shouting and shooting to sitting and talking. <u>Journal of Multicultural Social Work, 3</u>(2), 87-99.

Ridley, C.R. (1995). <u>Overcoming unintentional racism in counseling and therapy.</u> Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.

Roberts, S. (2000, July 16). The way we live now: Round table writing about race (and trying to talk about it). <u>The New York Times,</u> Sect. 6, p. 11.

Salett, E.P., & Kaslow, D.R. (Eds.) (1994). <u>Race, ethnicity and self: Identity in multicultural perspective</u> (pp. 117-140). Washington, DC: National Multicultural Institute.

Shipler, D. (1997). <u>A country of strangers: Blacks and whites in America.</u> NY: Knopf.

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). <u>Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most.</u> NY: Viking.

Study Circles Resource Center (1998). <u>Year 1-1997: A report on the focus groups.</u> Pomfret, CT: Author.

Sue, D.W., & Sue, D. (Eds.) (1999). <u>Counseling the culturally different: Theory and practice</u> (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Tatum, B. (1997). "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race. NY: Basic Books.

The National Academy of Sciences (2002). Unequal treatment: Confronting racial and ethnic disparities in health care. http://www.nap.edu/openbook/030908265x/html/.html.

Triandafyllidou, A. (1998). National identity and the 'other'. Ethnic and racial studies, 21(4), 593-612.

Wah, L.M. (1994). The color of fear (video). Berkeley, CA: Stir Fry Productions.