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Kristin Pinto-Wilson  
(Partnership for Latino  
Success, Leominster, MA),  
Circle: A Relationship-based  
Dialogic Approach to  
Growing Out of Racism

## ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to discover whether Circle could be used to foster individual and collective transformation regarding issues of racism. The director for the Partnership for Latino Success designed and implemented a dialogue series called "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves" for individuals to engage in a Circle journey about racism in daily life, relationships, and the community. The dialogues focused on microaggressions, relearning relationships and engaging in meaningful collaborations, and removing shame and blame from social change efforts. This researcher engaged in the dialogue series as a participant/observer and interviewed eight individuals who participated in at least two of the three dialogues.

Based on the findings, a shame-free environment enables individuals to share and listen to stories and their subsequent reaction to stories, which increases their awareness of participation in microaggressions. The mechanics of Circle encourage individuals to suspend reactions to someone's story, reflect, and choose behaviors based on one's values and the collective goals. This fosters a sense of personal empowerment and hope to build connection across seemingly disparate life experiences, and encourages individuals to grow out of racism.

Participants are now utilizing Circle and components from the dialogue series in the context of their home, clinical work with individuals and families, as a strategy of

organizational development, community organizing, and anti-racism efforts. These are a few examples of how Circle can be used to grow out of racism and work to improve life in one's home, work and community.

CIRCLE: A RELATIONSHIP-BASED DIALOGIC APPROACH  
TO GROWING OUT OF RACISM

A project based upon an investigation with the Partnership for Latino Success, Leominster, Massachusetts, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2009

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Circle is a method used by some indigenous communities to seek consensus through open dialogue among all members. An adaptation of this method was used by the director of the Partnership of Latino Success. In 2008-2009, this agency invited participation in three Circles to foster understanding of themselves, their relationships, and local social change challenges. This study examines the experience of some of the participants in this dialogue series "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves".

The "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves" dialogue was created for people interested in learning about themselves and others in order to improve the professional systems and community systems they live and work in. The purpose of this dialogue series is to create a supportive environment based on respect, trust, honesty, acceptance, compassion, and forgiveness, and foster critical thinking about oneself in relation to others and their environment. It is a series of three dialogues, approximately one a month for three hours each. The first dialogue focused on microaggressions and took a closer look at how individuals treat one another. The second dialogue focused on relearning relationships and engaging in meaningful collaborations. The third dialogue is aimed at removing shame and blame from social change efforts and building conscious, just and peaceful communities.

In recent years, the social work standards of practice have expanded to include more multicultural education and practice as well as social justice efforts, which include social and political transformation within individuals and communities (Daniel, 2008, pp. 21-22). As it is currently understood that many mental health concerns are a direct result of the environment people live in, it is crucial for social workers to intervene in the systemic structures that may contribute to the challenges clients face. In keeping with the National Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics, it is considered an ethical responsibility for social workers' practice to extend beyond the individual and include community and policy intervention in regards to social justice efforts (Daniel, 2008). My intent on evaluating this dialogue series is to learn more about how social workers may practice social justice efforts in alignment with the professions code of ethics.

Most of the scholarly work in addressing ways to practice anti-oppression efforts in the field of social work pertain specifically to teaching methods for schools of social work. The study of this dialogue series seeks to stretch beyond the classroom and contribute to knowledge about how anyone invested in the community may practice anti-oppression social change efforts. This evaluation may be used as a potential theoretical framework and practical learning through interviews with participants of the dialogue series. This study may be of value to the field of social work, as well as the realms of sociology, systems thinking, education, and anti-oppression efforts.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to explore and utilize relevant bodies of knowledge used in the design of the dialogue series and other research or scholarly work on projects of similar interests. There will be an exploration of the literature, which describes the academic thought that lends to a need for the dialogue series. Then the theoretical framework used in the conceptualization and design of the dialogue series will be explored, including public pedagogy, critical pedagogy, popular education, and the more modern concept of engaged pedagogy. Included will be a plethora of knowledge on the role of values, relationships, and love in the use of dialogue as pedagogy. Finally, there will be a description of the Circle model used to maintain the integrity of the dialogue processes. The need and ways to build oppression consciousness will be discussed in this literature review.

#### What needs to be addressed?

According to President Clinton's past Race Advisory Board: (1) racism is currently (and historically in the U.S.) one of the most divisive forces in this society, (2) policies and practices are still founded on racist principles creating discrepancies between whites and people of color, (3) racism is such an ubiquitous force in U.S. society, it continues to be invisible to most people in the dominant White group, (4) most Whites are unaware of the privilege and power they bear and how their beliefs and actions perpetuate the system of racism in the U.S. (Wing Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri,

Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007, p. 271). The silence and invisibility of the current form of oppression against people of color lends power to the dominating group and strength to the continuation of the oppressive dynamic based on race.

Martin Luther King, Jr. writes to the citizens of the United States of America that we must undergo a "true revolution of values" in "Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community" (Dawson, 2001):

The stability of the large world house which is ours will involve a revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing"-oriented society to a "person"-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.

The division that occurs as a result of historically oppressive regimes renders a society morally and spiritually bankrupt. In order to overcome this bankruptcy, connections must be built on a human to human level. According to Mezirow (1998), adults are responsible to engage in a process of critical reflection in order to become aware of the whole current reality, recognize if inhumane structures are in place, decide how to change and transcend the oppressive dynamics, and build the confidence and ability to work for collective change.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Public Pedagogy as Cultural Politics

As Martin Luther King, Jr. told the United States of America it is time for a "true revolution of values", one might ask what would be the engine for this revolution? Stuart Hall (1992, 17-18), believes it is an ethical and political imperative to use:

The intellectual resources in order to understand [and transform] what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihumane in the capacity to live with difference.

Stuart Hall (1992) and Henry Giroux (2000) believe pedagogy is a political and moral practice essential to the positive progression of human existence. According to Henry Giroux (2000), pedagogy is a central principle to social change, and examining the intersections of culture (race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and class) and power are essential in disrupting and transforming the inhumane. Giroux (2000, p.353) reflects on Halls works and states it is through public pedagogy as cultural politics, "culture enables a critical reading of the world from a position of agency and possibility, although within unequal relations of power." Giroux (2000, p.355-356) believes public pedagogy rooted in compassion and social responsibility in the context of a critical reflection of the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday life is the place where social change begins.

"One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness." (Freire 1973, p51). It is through dialogue and critical reflection of one's own experience in relation to others' experiences that the human consciousness can once again be restored.

According to Shields (2004, p. 119), "if we remain silent about color and culture, we are pretending that everyone is the same. We are ignoring differences that may lead to deeper and richer relationships and increased understanding of ourselves and others.... Those who do not find their color or cultural experiences represented... cannot participate with the same awareness of the situations represented...." The silence sends

the message that the experience and way of life of the subjugated is not normal, and is therefore something to be ashamed of and meant to be hidden. Developing a community where difference is honored and understood requires a critical look at socially divisive matters with respect, dialogue, and a continued expansion of awareness, acknowledgement and action.

According to Brown (2004, p. 87), "transformative learning may occur as a result of a life crisis or may be precipitated by challenging interactions with others, by participation in carefully designed exercises and activities, and by stimulation through reading or other resources." Community-based learning, where adults come to see themselves as change agents and educators in their own community is one strategy to promote civic responsibility through deep reflection and praxis (Brown, 2004, p.97). Susan Lee (2000, p.207) expands on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning as she maps her own curriculum for transformative learning:

A transformative curriculum engages an individual to question his/her current assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives of society, while allowing space for critical reflection and open dialogue. The teaching and learning process is to be holistic to allow an individual to develop and change cognitively, emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually, and ultimately allow him/her to be able to contribute to society with an evolved perspective on equity, inclusion, and social change.

### Popular Education

“The historical tradition within popular education is to promote social change through education and create a dialogue among the disenfranchised, as well as with society at large, concerning the political strategies to eliminate social inequality” (Zacharikis 2008, p.19). Popular education emerged in Latin American around 1970 in the people’s struggle for economic justice and dignity. Prior to this, it is said to have

originated from the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The goal of popular education is to provide community based education, including political content, and foster a critical collective consciousness to engage individuals in social change. According to Hammond (1998, p.7), popular education should (1) include appropriate political content, (2) encourage active participation and the development of critical collective consciousness, and (3) include all people. The belief is that learning empowers people by teaching practical skills, intellectual growth and self-confidence, and education is an essential part of social transformation.

#### Model for Individual Change

Changing one's mental models is the highest leverage of change (Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts, & Kleiner 1994). "Mental models are the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world"(Senge et al, 1994, p.235). Human beings use these mental maps to make sense of everything we experience. It is mental models that allow for two individuals to witness the exact same situation and have two completely different stories and interpretations of what happened. The mental model is the lens the individual looks through which allows the person to pay particular attention to some details while negating others and applying their own meaning to it. If a person's mental model is changed, their perspective of reality changes. Senge (1990) noted that:

The discipline of mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on "learningful" conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others. (p. 9)

hooks (1994, p. 38,40) found it to be difficult for individuals to change their mental models, and decided there must be a setting for individuals to voice their fears, talk about what they are doing and why they are doing it. For this to happen there must be an effort to build a space of inclusion, openness and intellectual rigor, where people are connected by a common goodness and shared commitment.

According to Fullan (2002, p.18), the improvement of relationships is the single common factor that occurs with successful change. He notes change agents must be in relationship with a diverse group of people, especially people who think differently, and they must be aware of their own emotional makeup. Relationship and internal awareness are interconnected through ongoing dialogue within the relationship, and critical reflection within oneself.

### What is Dialogue?

As Bakhtin (1986, p.7) notes, "A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures." According to Bakhtin (1984) dialogue and relationships are a way of life, and it is the life long process of entering into relational dialogue, recognizing fundamental differences and making sense of life in this world that makes us fully human. Bakhtin viewed dialogue as the way one gains awareness of one's own place in the world, and among equal relations will bestow an awareness on others too. According to Bakhtin (Hirschkop & Shepherd, 1989), access to public discourse was equivalent to political power, as it allowed one to participate in a deliberative process where social values and priorities were determined.

According to Freire (1973, p. 3), "to be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world", and a critical understanding of being human in the world comes through a dialogic process where there is equal stake in participating in a learning process within the relationships". Freire (1973, p.45) defines dialogue as a horizontal relationship between persons, which includes empathy between two or more poles, and when linked by love, humility, hope, faith, and mutual trust can engage in a critical search. Freire believes it is the human capacity to critically perceive, reflect and engage in the world through creative choices that is the defining differential characteristic from animals. Freire (1973, p. 4) defines adaptation as the process of changing to fit current circumstances or conditions, as a "behavior characteristic of the animal sphere; exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanization". Therefore, how one responds to his/her reality can either humanize or dehumanize their experience by either adapting as an object to their circumstances or integrate and intervene as subjects to their reality. Freire and his modern followers (Freire 1993, hooks 1994, Giroux 2000, Kincheloe 2008) believe the role of education is to humanize individuals through a conscious action to transform the world.

Bartlett points out, "for Freire all learning is relational, and knowledge is produced in interaction" (Bartlett, L. 2005, p. 346). According to Freire (1993, p. 92-93)

True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.... For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality in behalf of the continuing humanization of men.... Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue

there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.

With this in mind, it is impossible to separate critical consciousness from a dialogic process. It is human nature to participate in dialogue just as it is a defining characteristic of being human to engage in critical thought, and one cannot happen without the other.

### Critical Consciousness

Brookfield (1995) defines critical reflection as:

The process by which adults question and then replace or reframe an assumption that up to that point has been uncritically accepted as representing commonsense wisdom; the process through which adults take alternative perspectives on previously taken for granted ideas, actions, forms of reasoning and ideologies; and the process by which adults come to recognize the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values. (p. 2)

It is the process of critical reflection and dialogue that allows for a critical consciousness to emerge. Freire defines dialogue as "the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized", and it requires profound love, humility, and faith in humankind to create and re-create a humanizing experience of mutual trust among dialoguers, hope, and critical thinking (Freire, 1973 p.87-93).

### Critical Pedagogy

What unlocks people from the paralyzing despair and the recycling anger of oppression? How can invested members of society move beyond the despair of the oppressed and the guilt of the oppressor that immobilizes them from changing the reality of oppressive cycles? Paulo Freire would likely answer "Education for Critical Consciousness" (the title of one of his translated books) is the key to liberation. The



theoretical foundation of the design of the dialogue series is rooted in Freire's ideology of popular education and critical consciousness as well as hooks perspective of engaged pedagogy. Bartlett notes, those who draw on Freirian ideas seek to "create progressive social change and more egalitarian social relations" (Bartlett, L. 2005, p. 345). Freire's perception of education is not the more traditionally practiced form in the U.S. where the student is to be a passive receiver of knowledge given by an institutionally-determined expert. Instead, his understanding and practice of education is a dialogic interaction among individuals invested in learning and growing together in order to become a critically conscious active participant of society.

Educators and scholars have found it necessary to create an environment of respect, which encourages the development of critical consciousness, is open to personal and collective transformation, and fosters reflection through a dialogic process in order to learn and practice a new paradigm of relationships, collaborations, and institutional structure that is not built on oppression (Daniel, 2008, p. 34).

### Engaged Pedagogy

bell hooks goes one step further than critical pedagogy with an emphasis on well-being in "engaged pedagogy". hooks (1994, p. 15) states, "that means teachers must be actively committed to a process of self actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students." hooks (1994, p. 17) believes educators must engage in a self-actualization process that includes their body, mind, emotions and spirit in order to provide the pedagogical processes that will fulfill the students yearning for a liberatory education that will aid them in their own struggle for

self-actualization. hooks (1994) quotes Chandra Mohanty from her essay on "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberation Education in the 1990's":

Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of opposition analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systemic politicized practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claims to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically. (p.22)

Could this also be true for transforming society and other oppressive structures?

#### The Role of Relationships and Values in Social Change Efforts

Margaret Wheatley (1994, p.32) argues that facts cannot be understood in isolation, but instead in relation to others. She states, "in the quantum world, relationships are not just interesting; to many physicists, they are all there is to reality"(p.32).

Shields (2004, p. 115) states, all socially just learning must be rooted in relational pedagogy and democratic values. It is in the process of making sense of the current reality with people who may have varying mental models and therefore different perspectives that a critical awareness of the current reality emerges. This can only happen in the conditions of inclusion, respect, and a desire for excellence and social justice.

The relational-cultural model developed by the theorists at the Stone Center, Wellesley College (Jordan, 2000 p. 1007) is based on the beliefs that people grow through and toward relationships; growth toward mutuality characterizes mature functioning; mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of relationships

that foster growth; and mutual empathy is the vehicle for change. The relational-cultural model also emphasizes the importance of cultural context. Socioeconomic forces are seen as central to people's functioning in daily life. As a result of disconnection and lack of relationship, people become less clear, less productive, and ultimately withdrawal, which inhibits positive growth in individuals' lives and community as a whole. This leads to a sense of isolation. According to the relational-cultural model, isolation renders one immobilized and in a state of self-blaming, and the shame associated with this can only be healed by empathic connection (Jordan, 2000 p. 1008). On an individual level, one can heal by experiencing empathy in a therapeutic relationship. Much research has been done on the healing power of empathy in therapy (Kohut, 1984). Once many people within a community have withdrawn, the community at large suffers. At this point there is a need for a larger process to occur with the intention of building quality relationships and re-engaging with the needs of the people involved.

### Circle

Circle is a process traditionally used by the Tlingit First Nation People of the Yukon Northwest Territory to sustain the well-being of the community and individuals who make up the community. Since the early 1990's the Tlinglit people have shared and trained groups of people in the United States to utilize Circle in hopes of healing the pervasive social disconnection in communities from the impact of colonialism and imperialism. As Circle has been used in the United States and Canada it has become commonly referred to as Peacemaking Circles. For the sake of respect to the Tlingit First Nation People, from where this process came, in this paper this process will be referred to as Circle.

Kay Pranis (2001, p.1) describes Circle as a healing, empowering process that honors the presence, dignity and wisdom of every participant. She describes Circle as a process “that emphasizes the connectedness of all things, supports emotional and spiritual expression, and gives equal voice to all.

### Definition

Circle is an indigenous ceremonial process intended to bring people together in order to understand one another, build connections, and solve community problems (Pranis 2001, p.1). Circle is an egalitarian tool of communication built on shared values and a consensus process, which fosters community conflict resolution, personal healing and new ways of solving problems. In this tradition, a talking piece is used to give the power of speaking to the person holding it and the power of listening to those not holding it. Circle is a process designed to foster a sacred space that allows for full expression, deep listening, and thoughtful reflection. Circle is based on relationships built on respect and love. Circle draws on the wisdom of each participant to direct the collective wisdom of the group.

### Origin

The Tlingit First Nation People of the Yukon Territory in Northwest Canada have traditionally used Circle as a means of rebuilding community, resolving conflict, or repairing harm. Phil and Harold Gatensby of the Tlingit people gifted this particular process of Circles to people outside the Yukon Territory in the early 1990s (Pranis 2001, p.8). In the Yukon, Circles are now used as part of the justice system to deal with conflict and harm. Minnesota has incorporated Circles in the Criminal Justice system as part of the Restorative Justice Movement. Circle has become a popular modality in the

international movement of Restorative Justice. In general, Circle is used by a number of communities and organizations for problem solving, support, building connection, and healing.

### Values and Relationship Based

Circle is an indigenous practice, which emphasizes healing and learning through a collective group process. Circle is based on values including, but not limited to, equality, consensus, accountability, safety, healing and respect. Circle promotes responsibility, reparation, restitution, emotional support, reconciliation, reintegration and healing for all participants. Circle contributes toward building safe, thriving, peaceful communities. Circle is primarily designed to heal relationships among people and within the community. The fundamental principle of Circle is the interrelatedness and sacredness of the individual with nature, family, community, society, and the universe (Bellefeuille & Thomas, 2006 p. 4). Circle is designed to reflect this principle for participants to allow for an individual and collective learning experience.

### Equality

Circle is “intrinsically non-hierarchical and inclusive, representing respect, equality, continuity, and interconnectedness” (Bellefeuille & Thomas, 2006 p.4). Connors explores restorative justice through the lens of oppression theory. He finds that restorative justice is not restorative unless the context of societal oppression is considered in its historical context as well as the current implications in regards to the specific account being addressed. According to Connors, the systemic root cause of criminal conflict is the imbalance of uncorrected historical oppression, not individual deficiencies or pathologies in the offender (Connors, 2004, p. 267). Similarly, McCold (1996, p.95)

recognizes existing social structures at the root cause of the criminal conflict. Therefore system reform is embedded in restorative practices like Circle. It is important to determine whether or not Circle can foster the system reform that is necessary in seeking just communities. Can Circle “incorporate minority intellectual traditions and discourse, such as oppression theory, that speak more directly to the reality of offenders who originate from historically oppressed group context”? (Connors, 2004, p. 266) Otherwise, these reforms merely replace “unequal treatment in an unequal situation with their equal treatment in [what remains] an unequal situation.” (Connors, 2004, p. 261)

Everyone present is part of the circle. Regardless of age or status, all people have a place in the circle, and every place is equal because every voice is valued. The egalitarian structure of the circle demonstrates the understanding that many different perspectives on an issue exist, all of which are needed for a full understanding of the problem. Although each individual has a unique contribution, all present are nonetheless part of a continuous whole, which represents a force greater than the sum of its individual parts. (Boyes-Watson, 2005, p.295)

The Navajo have also traditionally used a circle process referred to by the Navajo people as “a gift from the creator to keep us in harmony” (Meyer, 2002). Circle fosters the development of positive relationships in families, communities and system. This builds “a stronger community with greater unity across truly diverse participants” (Boyes-Watson 2005, p. 191). According to Boyes-Watson (2008), Circle is a space for genuine honest dialogue between those who are marginalized and those at the center, creating the possibility of systemic change.

### Empowerment and Transformation

Empowerment is an important measure of the equality of Circle. If Circle promotes equality, then everyone participating will experience self-determination and

empowerment at some level. Four key components of an empowerment process include (1) a critical reflection of one's attitudes and beliefs about one's self and one's sociopolitical environment as a sense of self that promotes action on one's behalf; (2) validation through a collective experience; (3) an increase in one's knowledge and skill to think critically; and (4) action taken for personal and political change (praxis) (Gutiérrez, Parsons & Opal Cox, 1998, p.20). Can Circle foster a process that includes these four components?

Gutiérrez, Parsons and Opal Cox (1998) suggest four dimensions (personal, immediate systems of family and peer group, service delivery systems, and political structures) of intervention activities from the individual to the sociopolitical that illustrate empowered action. If Circle contains these four dimensions, they have the capacity for individual and collective empowerment. Boyes-Watson (2008) proposes, "Circles are not a means for others to fix individuals or problems in the community but an opportunity for community to take steps towards its own empowerment and transformation."

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves" dialogue series was designed and facilitated by the director of the Partnership for Latino Success in North Central Massachusetts. It is worthy to note, this director has been professionally in relationship with North Central Massachusetts for 4.5 years as the Director of the Partnership for Latino Success (previously known as the Twin Cities Latino Coalition) and simultaneously the Associate Vice President of Inclusion for Mount Wachusett Community College for the past 1.5 years. The facilitator has also been a resident of North Central Massachusetts for the previous 3.5 years. In this context, the director has been invested in building relationships professionally and personally within this community for over four years. In the scope of this time, this facilitator has utilized the Circle model in a variety of dialogues with a wide scope of participants, topics, and purposes. This facilitator has also trained 250 people in the region in the Circle model. The Partnership for Latino Success concluded through a needs assessment in the region the root cause of most issues (education, crime rates, gang activity, health disparities, etc.) is race and poverty. This data has been accepted by local mayors, superintendents, chiefs of police, United Way, etc.. The Partnership for Latino Success has since sponsored a number of initiatives to address the issues of racism and poverty. In one of these initiatives in the past year, approximately fifty professional community members of North Central Massachusetts requested a venue to further explore racism and the



implications of racism within the community, particularly the community of human service providers. The dialogue series, "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves", was designed in response to this group's request.

A direct exploratory qualitative study of the participants was chosen to examine the dialogue series, "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves", on microaggressions, engaging in healthy relationships, and removing shame and blame from social change efforts. This exploratory qualitative study utilizes flexible methods in order to learn from the participants about their experience in the dialogue series through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. An exploratory study is used to better understand the impact the use of the Circle model had for participants, how the dialogue series impacted the participants, and to explore what factors most impact the quality of the participants' experience. Data were collected through participant observation and taped semi-structured interviews, then analyzed thematically. This chapter presents the methods of research used in this study and further describes the sample selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

### Sample

This study calls for a convenience sample. At the conclusion of the program, this researcher asked for volunteers who had participated in at least two of the three dialogues to take part in this study by participating in semi-structured interviews. Eight individuals who volunteered had attended at least two of the three Circles. They were interviewed by this researcher.

Of the eight participants, all are women over the age of 18. Five of the women identified as White and of varying European descents; one identified as multi-racial of

Indian descent, one identified as being from an interracial family, and one identified as Puerto Rican and from a multi-racial family. There is a possibility of bias due to the fact this researcher knew some of the participants.

I participated in the Circle series as a participant/observer in order to more fully understand the experience of the dialogue series. This allowed this researcher to be better prepared to interview the participants and develop a relationship of trust with the interviewees.

This researcher asked the participants of at least two of the three Circles to participate in the research study. The recruitment process began at the end of the final dialogue. The nature of this project was described to the Circle participants at end of the final Circle. A recruitment letter was provided to each participant that includes pertinent information, such as statement of purpose, this researcher's role in the project, as well as the nature of the study. This researcher did not further contact potential participants who did not contact this researcher or give this researcher permission to contact them.

Participation in this project was strictly voluntary. Each participant had the right to refuse to answer any question in the interview. Should a participant withdraw, all materials pertaining to her/his participation in the study would be immediately destroyed. A participant could withdraw from the study up to two weeks after the date of the interview.

### Data Collection

The participant observation methodology of this study included direct observation of the dialogues, participation in the dialogues, and analysis of each dialogue's design.

As a participant observer, this researcher maintained field notes pertaining to the design and content of the dialogues.

Participants who volunteered their contact information and expressed interest in participating in this study were contacted by this researcher by email and/or telephone. During this correspondence, the researcher explained the details of the study, and answered any questions the participant had.

Face to face interviews were conducted and audio taped following the final dialogue with eight individuals for approximately 60-90 minutes per participant. Areas covered in the interviews included, but were not limited to: what participants learned, how the dialogues impacted participants, and what they viewed as the best feature and the most problematic feature of the dialogues. During the course of each interview, this researcher utilized a list of interview questions that served as a guide in asking the participants open-ended questions.

The interviews were audio taped using a digital recorder. This researcher took notes during the course of and following the interviews with participants. These notes became part of the data collected and analyzed. The interview was transcribed selectively according to whether sections of the interviews prove ambiguous.

Minimal risk from participation was anticipated. It was thought participants might be uncomfortable if the questions raised remind them of difficult experiences. Participants might also be concerned about how the researcher would utilize the information following the interview and if their participation may become known to others. Issues of confidentiality were addressed with each participant at the beginning of the interview. The researcher requested the participant to bring to her immediate

attention anything that unsettling about participating. The researcher reminded participants to utilize the therapeutic resource list made available to them by this researcher if they should need to process experiences that came up in the interview.

Participants were emailed informed consent forms prior to the interview. They were asked to review these materials before coming and could still make a decision about their interest in participating at that time. The researcher reviewed the informed consent aloud and asked the participant to provide a signed form before the interview began. Extra copies of the informed consent were provided at the interview and participants were given a copy for their records.

This researcher was committed to protecting participants' confidentiality and fully understood participants may fear material shared could be recognizable to other participants, should they read any publications of this study. Data in this thesis and professional publications or presentations would be presented in the aggregate without reference to identifying information. This researcher would also refer to interviews by code numbers instead of by participants' names. This researcher's advisor will have access to the data after identifying information has been removed. This study consisted of interviews that were audio taped, and because the researcher has a commitment to protect confidentiality, she will listen to the audiotapes in private. While this researcher cannot guarantee anonymity to participants involved in this study, she was committed to protecting participants' confidentiality, and expressed this to each participant in the interview. This researcher will prepare data from this study for presentations and publications in such a way that participants will not be identified. Data will refer to participants as a group, and quotes will be disguised.

## Data Analysis

The first analysis of data focused on the design of the dialogue series. The data were analyzed from field notes through the participant observation methods.

This research gave each participant a folder number, which matched the number of the digital audio recording of their corresponding interview. The data from each interview were then organized by three major themes from the interview questions. First was the theme of what participants learned about themselves, others, and being in relationship with people of different races and cultures. Second was a measure of the quality of the content and processes used in the dialogue series. The final theme of analysis was based on the value and impact of the actual Circle process.

The final step of data analysis was organized according to insight discovered through the course of the data collection process. Secondary themes such as the quality of facilitation, the reason the dialogue series was important to participants and suggestions for moving forward with it, as well as the value of building relationships arose through the data collection process and were analyzed accordingly.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This study is an attempt to evaluate a dialogue series, and explore the use of the Circle process to discuss issues of racism and obstacles in social justice efforts on a human to human level through individual stories and relations in a collective process. This chapter will present the data from the researcher's observation and participation in the dialogue series, and the data from interviews with eight women who participated in at least two of the three dialogues. Six of the eight interviewees participated in all three of the dialogues. One interviewee participated in the dialogue first and third dialogues, and another interviewee participated in the first and second dialogues. Five of the eight interviewees identify as white women of varying European descent. One participant identifies as being from an interracial family. Two interviewees identify as women of color who moved to the United States at a young age (one woman identifies as multiracial and of Indian descent and another woman of Puerto Rican descent from a multicultural family).

The dialogue series was designed around the following three major themes: microaggressions – understanding and changing how we treat each other; relearning relationships – engaging in meaningful collaborations; and removing shame and blame from social justice efforts – building just and peaceful communities. The dialogues were scheduled to occur once a month. It is important to note the second dialogue was cancelled from its originally scheduled date due to the regional ice storm that left the

state in a State of Emergency. The following two dialogues were pushed back a month, which left two months between the first and second dialogue.

The interviews contained thirteen questions organized around the following major themes: what the individual learned through their participation in the dialogue series; what they found valuable about the dialogue series and how it impacted their work; and their perspective of the value of the Circle process. The findings are organized around the design of the dialogues and the participants' response to the content; what participants learned from the dialogues and how it impacted them; the participants' perspective on Circle; how the participants valued the facilitator and processes utilized; and the impact the dialogue series had on participants' work.

### The Dialogue Series Design: Content

#### Microaggressions

The first dialogue of the series was on understanding and changing how we treat each other with a focus on microaggressions. Prior to the first dialogue the Director for the Partnership of Latino Success sent out the article "Racial Microaggression in Everyday Life: Implications for clinical practice"(Wing Sue, Dapodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007) for participants to read before attending the dialogue. The term microaggression was first coined in 1970 by a Harvard Psychiatrist in an attempt to explain the "indignities heaped on black people, sometimes unknowingly, by whites" (Troiano, 2007). The term has since been expanded to include all people of color. According to Wing Sue, et al. (2007), "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and

insults toward people of color." The microaggressor is typically unaware of the insult and harm committed toward the person of color, and therefore these incidents of harm usually go unacknowledged and unaddressed. This article, read by participants, created a taxonomy of typical racial microaggressions that occur in everyday life. The participants of color found this article helpful because it gave a name to something they experience regularly and a language to talk about it. A woman of color participant responded to this article and stated, "We really need to learn how to see those microaggressions more than the blunt racism. It's important to pay attention to how it affects a person when someone acts in that way even if they think they are not doing it."

The white participants found this article extremely helpful in understanding and identifying microaggressions, and it helped give them the information needed to begin shifting their behavior in efforts to not be the microaggressor. A white participant reported:

The microaggression was just an astonishing article to me. It made me realize how clueless I am. It really brought it home in some specific ways through some of the stories the authors talked about. It was talked about in such a level of detail that it was really easy to internalize in a different way than I had before.

The article gave the participants coming into the dialogue series detailed context about how racism plays out today and the impact it can have. When asked what content in the dialogue series had the strongest impact, all but one participant commented on the dialogue about microaggressions. This dialogue series began with a clip from an Emmy award winning reality television series called *Black. White.* produced and created by Ice Cube and R. J. Cutler about a black family and a white family that trade races and experience what life may be like in the other family (race's) shoes. After this video clip,



the facilitator showed a brief powerpoint on the definitions of microaggression, microinsult, microassault, and microinvalidation. Following this, the group was broken up into smaller groups of four, and asked to discuss, "How present and powerful are microaggressions in your life, your work and in the community?" We came back as a large group and shared some of what was discussed in the smaller group. Some of the responses were as follows:

- They are present the moment we step out of our homes, everyday twenty-four/seven. We are mindful and careful of how we affect others.
- I'm aware of the fact there was no anger or pain shared as part of the discussion people were having about having to deal with them twenty-four/seven.
- We have choice about how we deal with it. I choose not to give it too much energy. I can't let it be the prime focus of my life as an African American woman.
- I feel it present all the time, everyday. I could be assaulted anytime. How do I deal with this with my kids? It feels so big.
- I don't think I see these microaggressions. I'm totally oblivious. I don't know.
- A lot of us ignore this because life goes on. How am I going to try to make the community understand what I feel?
- Not to be disrespectful to her experience, I will share one that happened to me.

In response to the story a woman of color told about a microaggression that happened to her, a white woman responded with what was perceived as a microinvalidation. As this occurred in the actual dialogue, the facilitator took the opportunity to acknowledge what was happening regarding the impact and the intentions of what was spoken. The woman of color was invalidated by the white woman's response to her story of a microaggression, and the white woman clearly meant no harm

and did not understand how what she said was invalidating and could have a harmful impact.

This moment of looking closely at microaggressions and how they occur not only out in everyday life, but also right there in a dialogue about microaggressions had a strong impact on many of the participants. Five of the eight participants found this experience to be the most valuable in regards to the content of the dialogue series. Four of the five identify as white women and one identifies as a woman of color. A white participant reflected on how she felt at the time of this experience in the dialogue and stated:

Wow, now I'm feeling a little paralyzed. I don't know what to do or say that's not going to be offensive. I don't want to say something that's wrong. A lot of it is unconscious and a lot of it is unintentional. That was a little heavy. I felt like I need to learn a lot more because I work with a diverse population and the last thing I want to do is inadvertently say something offensive, and have a person not come back to seek help again. I'm not sure I have a full understanding of all of this in enough of a way that I feel like I know how to handle it in interactions with other people.

Another participant who identifies as coming from an interracial family reflected on this part of the dialogue as follows:

It was nice to have (the facilitator) stop action at one point in that first session and deal with what's happening right now. Let's take a snap shot. Let's look at it. I didn't think we necessarily got to this point of great understanding about it. I felt like little bits of awareness popped up, and still huge areas of not understanding. But the door wasn't closed on further understanding. It certainly opened up the opportunity and little bits of awareness, at least the awareness that different people in the room were seeing things differently. It was named. It was discussed. It appeared to be shocking to some people, but it was addressed. So there was at least that moment of awareness of a moment named in different ways by different people. I think that's something.

The facilitator went on with the dialogue through the powerpoint presentation by describing what she calls the "Catch 22" of why the person targeted does not respond to

an incident of microaggression. She defined the "Catch 22" as three fold. First, is the difficulty of determining the validity of a microaggressive incident (recognizing patterns of types of incidents that may seem unrelated to others). Second, the target of the microaggression not responding due to the inability to determine if a microaggression has occurred, uncertainty about how to respond, fear of consequences, exhaustion, rationalizing that it will do no good to respond, or simply denying it happened at all. Third, responding out of rage makes the person feel better, but has bad consequences in the long term. The "Catch 22" describes some of the reasons why the issue of microaggressions can be so difficult to address.

A few participants recognized the diversity of how people perceive and deal with microaggressions, and therefore why there is no one right way to address this form of racism. A white participant stated:

There are definitely very different ways people handle, process, reject, deal with, or respond like rubber, whatever comes at them just bounces off, and others who do not give attention or energy to hurtful interactions at all. You could definitely see the different ways people in the group deal with microaggressions. There are some people that seem to reject the entire concept of it.

The facilitator broke the group up in the same previous small groups to briefly answer the following questions: What is the impact of microaggression in our lives, at work and in the community? What are the deep impulses that drive us to treat each other this way? How do we change these within ourselves, at work and in our communities?

The groups then briefly shared some of what was discussed, because there was little time left. The following is what the groups reported:

- We can start by building a group to become more self aware.
- Step back and reflect. Think before you talk.

- Choose to act from a place that is not driven by anger. Educate yourself, and keep the door open to conversation.
- Live with intention. Acknowledge the microaggressions. Build community.
- Take account of the moment, because the level of risk changes with time.
- Assess psychological safety.

This dialogue was closed rapidly to respect our agreement to end on time. A white participant reflected on how she felt after this dialogue:

Coming out of the microaggressions dialogue, my awareness of myself was that I'm not paying attention at the level that I could be most of the time. It reinforced how easy it is to slip into a state of unawareness, and not be quite listening. For me it is a challenge to have the discipline to listen all the time. This is not such an easy thing to do.

Another white participant stated:

The microaggressions dialogue was particularly poignant for me, having conversations with women of color and hearing their stories about microaggressions. It just never dawned on me, I could walk out of my house and the first person I meet when I buy a cup of coffee, there is a chance of a microaggression. Some of the specific descriptions, I had no idea. I know I come from a middle class privileged background, not wealthy, but definitely privileged in terms of education and in terms of social safety nets. I had no idea what some of my professional peers, other women in the community go through. I had no idea, and I don't know how that kind of thing could have ever come out. Unless we became very close friends over a period of time, maybe that would have never come out.

Overall, participants reported the content of microaggressions had the greatest impact on them. They all wanted to continue the conversation, and go deeper into this issue.

### Relearning Relationships

The second dialogue focused on relearning relationships and engaging in meaningful collaborations. Prior to this dialogue the facilitator sent out an article titled

"Community is not a Place but a Relationship: Lessons for Organizational Development" by Carolyn Boyes-Watson. This article states the case that organizations must perform more like members of the community with a centralized value on relationship in order to be effective as organizations play an increasing role in family and community life.

The facilitator began this dialogue with a powerpoint presentation. She designed a flow chart to illustrate the vicious cycle of systemic intervention causing more resources to institutions, which creates more powerful institutions yielding weaker communities which loops back to systemic intervention. We briefly reflected on the article with a description of community as people, relationships, and place.

The facilitator then asked us to do a drawing of the people we consider to be our community with their names and the connections between people. We then broke up into small groups to share our drawings and reflect on how we determined the membership of our community. In a large Circle we shared what determined the membership of our communities. Some of the responses are as follows:

- Where I could go be myself, get support and nourishment, and give it as well.
- I left off the people and places where I lose energy (energy sinks) and get irritated.
- People of similar interests, goals and friends.
- People who impact my life on a daily basis in all ways.
- I included people who are not alive because they impact me everyday.
- My community spans across many time zones.
- My community is geographically based.
- I include people I'm not comfortable with, but they are once removed.

- Spatial difference correlates with emotional distance.
- Focused on expanding outside of biological family relationships.
- People with same passions and concerns.
- Start with self, family, friends, people of same concerns, elder, broker, and including those I don't know and haven't met yet.
- Places I feel connection, places of dialogue, that's my community.
- People who have been supportive, people who are there when you need them, people I don't even know who show up and are there.

The group reflected on who we considered to be our community, and where and with whom we spend most of our time. We recognized how much organizations are increasingly becoming part of our community.

The facilitator identified three major challenges to building community through organizations: the hierarchical leadership model, the responsibility vacuum, and the primary focus on mental and technical skills. The hierarchical leadership model inherently works against building quality relationships due to the competitive, boss-like nature of being or becoming better than your colleagues in order to grow and progress. The primary focus on mental and technical skills leaves out the emotional, physical and spiritual component of one's wholeness and well-being. This type of environment does not foster connection and relationship building. Participants of the dialogue commented on how the best results occur through relationships, whether in the private business sector or the non-profit social service sector. A white participant reflected on this in the interview, and she reported:

It's important to build community within an organization, and it's not easy to do. I came from a top down organization, and I never like that because it felt like you had to fight your way to be heard. I came to a consensus building program within a bureaucracy. It's much harder with consensus decisions making, much harder.

Sometimes we would walk out of the room and feel beaten up, but we really felt connected. As a team we have stayed together, some of us stayed together almost ten years now. It wasn't all comfortable meetings. It really took a lot, but having all these different viewpoints pull together, because at the core of it we all had the same value and the same wish. I feel like we are a community or a family even. Sometimes we feel really close and in sync, and sometimes one of us or some of us don't. We fall apart and we say, 'that's it. I want to get out of here. This is too hard.' And something pulls us back. So when I thought about it from the second dialogue, I thought, 'we are really a community'. Everybody said the same thing about us, 'Something feels like a community in there'.

Due to a shortage in time the group moved on to watch a short film produced by Amnesty International called *Binta and the Great Idea*. The facilitator posed the following questions to discuss in response to this film: What kind of collaborations did you notice? What was the role of formal institutions in the context of community? Which community functions did you see that are organizational functions in our culture? What are some new ideas you think we can implement to strengthen communities by using our organizational resources despite all the obstacles? As the group went around the large Circle responding to these questions, we gradually noticed that people had completely different interpretations of what was happening in the movie. This led to a very interesting conversation about how we could all watch the same thing and all perceive completely different realities. A white participant reported on this experience in the interview:

It took us a while to realize that some people had just watched a different movie than other people had, and they were speaking from their experience. It was probably a real analogy for what is really true in the world. People are watching really different movies. It was kind of a technicality that there was a right answer to this particular situation. It tracks back to that sense of 'geez, how do we do this?' Now we know we are watching different movies, well then what do we do with that information. We are constantly skating past this stuff that doesn't get dealt with, and really prevents the ultimate product from being a deep product. The orientation towards being results oriented can really get in the way of having

these deeper conversations, because they take time and they take people willing to put in the time.

The issue of not having enough time continued to come up. The participants wanted more time to continue to move deeper into the conversations.

Another white participant found the film to be helpful, and she was grateful to leave with a sense of hope the film instilled in her. She stated:

I left feeling hopeful, like there is a way. Sometimes it feels like it is too far gone, and how do you get back to something that is more helpful and more productive and will benefit the community as a whole. How do you deal with obstacles? Some of the things that were spoken, and in the movie, showed different ways other people are making it work or have tried. That was encouraging to me. To hear some of the content, and know some people really think a lot about this. Some people have some really good ideas on how to address it and how to change it. Hearing about some of that and seeing some examples in the movie, was probably one of the most powerful parts of the dialogues for me.

#### Removing Shame and Blame from Social Change Efforts

This dialogue focused on removing shame and blame from social change efforts in order to build just and peaceful communities. Prior to the dialogue the facilitator sent out an article by Margaret Wheatley titled, "Can I be fearless". This article emphasizes the need for leadership to act from fearlessness. Wheatley defines fearlessness as an act of love and wise action that takes times and discernment. She emphasizes the need to become familiar with one's fears and build a close relationship of curiosity with those fears. The dialogue opened with an informal discussion about this article. Participants were very grateful for the particular article, and stated they found it inspirational and timely. The facilitator shared some of her personal stories regarding the practice of fearlessness as a leader.



The facilitator then passed out markers and paper, and asked the group to draw or write our responses to the images we were about to see. The facilitator then showed a slide show of thirty ads, which used shame and blame to promote social change. Afterwards, the participants were asked to share what it was like to view the ads. Many participants stated they felt awful and wanted to give money out of guilt and to feel like they could do something to make a difference. Guilt was a common feeling that led participants to want to do something, but because they felt there was nothing they could do, they resorted to wanting to give money. A participant who identifies as being from an interracial family stated in the interview:

I noticed with the advertisements that I get annoyed with the advertisements that, in my mind, try to use guilt as the motivating force to have to do the right thing. I prefer finding out if there are ways to motivate ourselves that are not strictly stemming from 'I'm bad if I don't do this', and more generative motivators.

In general, it seemed more white participants responded with feelings of guilt, and more participants of color responded with anger and frustration. Everyone reported having bad feelings of some sort. Some reported feeling motivated to do something and others felt paralyzed, like it was too overwhelming and too far gone to do anything about it.

After this dialogue the facilitator broke us up in small groups of four to five people to come up with an advertisement that involved no shame or blame to motivate the community on issues of poverty or disenfranchised youth. Before closing, the groups shared their ideas and the conversations that emerged in the process. The group found this to be a thought provoking and inspirational activity.

In the interviews, a few participants reflected on a desire to remove shame and blame from diversity efforts and anti-racism trainings. A participant who identifies as being from an interracial family stated:

I'm really wanting diversity efforts and stuff like that to examine those other motivations beyond shame. I don't think that's the way I grow to contribute more. I have a general impression that a lot of attempts to help people understand how to have better relationships across races can use a lot of shame. I think sometimes it is counterproductive. I think there is a difference between helping somebody have empathy and be able to picture a little more of what another experience would be like and have some sadness and shame if they realize there is pain in that, versus being hit over the head, 'this is how you're supposed to think, you're just wrong not to think it'. I think so much more is possible than that. I've been amazed in this dialogue series and the effort in the community, to have dialogues about difficult topics like racial disparities, and have something positive happen in those dialogues.

A woman of color reported the shame and blame dialogue had the strongest impact for her. She stated:

Speaking on how to remove shame and blame so we can come to a clean, honest, crystal clear conversation where everybody is equal is most important, because that is what it is all about. The shame and blame, I don't want to hear. We know the harm we have all felt and feel. I think it is important for everyone's story to be told. Then we need to move forward, or we won't grow. The shame and blame piece I think really created an impact. For people who were not people of color in that Circle, I could see their faces when they hear, 'It's not your fault', and the relief of being accepted here.

The value of a shame and blame free environment is elaborated on in the findings on the value of Circle.

#### What Participants Learned and Received from the Dialogue Series

Through the course of the dialogues, the participants came to realize they all wanted the same thing. They wanted to help make the world a better place for everyone. This was not discussed openly in the dialogues, but was recognized as a central point in many of the interviews. Four major themes emerged through the course of the interviews

in response to what the dialogic process fostered for them and on what they got out of "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves": self-responsibility, quality relationship, safe space, and hope. The following is a deeper look at what these four themes mean to the participants of the dialogue series, discovered through the interviewing process.

### Self-Responsibility

It became apparent through asking participants what they learned through the dialogue series, how it impacted them, and what was the overall take-away message they received from the dialogue series that self responsibility was a central theme. Each participant felt they had the responsibility to increase self-awareness and change the way they act so they have a positive impact on their environment. This self-selected group of people felt it was their responsibility to be the best person they could be and do their part to make their community the best it can be. It is the belief in self-responsibility that brought each participant to the dialogue series. The three central themes to emerge as one's self-responsibility is: deep listening, a not-knowing stance, and a shift from intentions to impact.

*Deep Listening.* Each of the participants described listening as the most important factor for "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves. Everyone said it is important to listen more, and they really emphasized what they meant by "listening". This is evident in the following participant's remarks about her experience in Circle in the dialogue series:

People just relating to each other in a really respectful way, really listening to each other, really listening to what is being offered. This is something that is not always evident in other areas of my life. I really liked that. It really filled me in a way that I haven't had for a while, and it made me realize I need to do something different. I need to find more of that somewhere.

It is important to recognize the act of speaking as a gift or "offering" to those present.

This is an important aspect of deep listening. As a deep listener, what is being offered is honored and respected regardless of your personal opinion or perspective. This is emphasized in another participant's comments regarding the quality of listening in the Circle process:

People really strived to listen. It was like it was your job in the circle to listen. I've been to many meetings where people forget our job is to listen, including myself. It is a privilege. It's a responsibility. Instead of making it random, not knowing when you can or should or shouldn't speak up, but it makes it clear not only when you should be listening, but when it is your time to speak. I felt a stronger responsibility to be thoughtful and to contribute. I wanted to make good use of my time to speak.

The privilege and responsibility to listen to what is being offered has an equal and opposite aspect, which this participant spoke to: the privilege and responsibility in speaking. The participants felt the significance of their own personal contribution to the dialogue. They felt heard. They felt of value.

Many participants found it important not to respond to what people were sharing, and to let it really sink in and allow for integration before speaking in response. It allows and encourages time for reflection in response to everything that is being spoken. One participant stated,

I think you really have to listen a lot. What in the dialogue series that allows you to do that is that we all have the opportunity to speak. Or 'this is not my time to talk, this is my time to listen'. And everybody gets heard. It goes around, especially if there are eight or ten people in the group. Wow, I may have said one thing at that point, but now that I've heard everyone else I have something different to say. It really makes you stop and listen better, and sometimes that in itself creates change.

Many participants commented on the fact they do not practice listening and don't feel listened to in most other environments. There was a recognition amongst some of

the participants that people have forgotten how to communicate. One participant explains the reason for this in the following way:

When we talk to kids and we say what's happening at school, the first thing they say is that the teacher is not listening to them. They don't listen. No, teachers don't have a lot of time to listen. So we become conditioned to not listening. People don't understand, when you are young you build these pieces. If there is no one there to help you build these skills of listening and respect, then how are you going to get it?

It is clear from the participants' response that listening is an essential skill, and it must be practiced regularly in order to change the world to make it a better place. This may mean there needs to be a relearning of how to listen, which may require a clear process to do so. This will be discussed later with the findings regarding the Circle process.

*A Not Knowing Stance.* In addition to listening, when the participants were asked what they learned from the dialogue series all eight discussed the importance of not judging or making assumptions about another person. A few participants, particularly white participants, recognized biases they didn't know they had prior to the dialogue series. "I realized I have my own biases, and that there is a lot to learn. It is a constant process. Try as I might, I really need to work harder." This was a sign of how the dialogue series helped increase individuals self-awareness, particularly their awareness of preconceived notions about other people. One White participant described a particular bias she became aware of:

I recently recognized a bias that I wasn't aware I had.... I think I did always have a bias, which is really awkward for me to say, because I didn't know it was there. The vast majority of people of color I've known in my life, worked with, gone to school with... were from poor backgrounds, were financially challenged, had families that were split up. That is kind of all I knew, until recently, as I come to know more people of color from broad spectrums of socioeconomic, educational realms. I didn't know I had this bias.

As a result of developing this increased self-awareness, participants found it imperative to work diligently at not judging or making assumptions about other people. "Now I work to not jump to conclusions, not assume that someone has any particular background or experience, unless I have a little more fact, or any fact to go on."

A woman of color participant described the dialogue series as, "a way to really get to know people". When asked what she learned about herself through the dialogue series, she described the following as the most important thing she learned:

I walked into a space where I basically knew almost everyone sitting there, and when I say 'know' them I mean their names, what agency they were from, who they might be to community, where they may live. I had that immediate assumption of knowing people there, but I was wrong. What I learned was despite the fact I knew a name, there was so much I learned from people. That took me back to realize I didn't know them before.

Both of the participants quoted above, speak to the feeling of knowing someone, and finding out the idea of the person they had in their mind is not necessarily who that person really is. Participants felt they were really able to get to know people through hearing their stories in the Circle process, and their stories were more valuable than identifying information. This is evident in the following remarks by a Latina participant:

At the dialogues, there were Latina women who would never think the way I think, and I heard it and felt it through conversation and their stories. I thought, wow, that's interesting that this Latina could be close to my age, but we could be so different in how we think.

This participant discusses the importance of not making assumptions or judgments about people from similar cultural backgrounds. This points out the importance of having a mindful stance of "not knowing" about other people until they tell you about themselves, and this is true amongst people with differences and similarities. A participant who identifies as being from an interracial family stated:

The race thing is so important and at the same time it is so many different things. You can't just go by what somebody looks like or any one aspect. There are so many people I know, their appearance says very little about who they are. At the same time it (race) does matter, it matters in all kinds of complex ways.

This really gets at the complexity of racism, and the importance of acknowledging race, while simultaneously making no assumptions or judgments about people, white or people of color. As you can see through these findings, race and ethnic identifying factors are a central theme of importance. It was woven throughout the dialogue and it was woven throughout each participant's interview responses.

This same participant who identifies as being from an interracial family shared a bias about white folks that she was very aware of during the dialogue series:

I tend to be suspicious of white people. Even though I identify as being from an interracial family, I'm also a very pale, white person who's ancestors came from the Mayflower-type of person. Most of my life I've been very suspicious of white people, because of what they might say next or do next that's going to feel hurtful to me, on behalf of myself and the people I love in my life. I'm really prejudice of prejudice people. I'm judgmental of judgmental people. I'm thinking there is something not quite right about that. I'm really prejudice against white people that they could be racist before I even know them. I'm not very tolerant. I sat there and listened, but I noticed annoyance. Maybe even unfair annoyance. Even though I get mad at other white people for not knowing how to be validating, it's not like I have it figured out either.

This points to the difficulty of letting go of biases that serve as a protective agent. There seems to be a distinct difference between having biases and making judgments and assumptions about people without realizing it versus being aware of the bias and holding on to it by choice as a defense or protective agent. Participants acknowledged an importance to become self-aware of their biases as if it was their responsibility to do so. The participants then found it to be crucial to enter a relationship with no assumptions or judgments to allow for space to really get to know the person. According to the

participants, the judgments and assumptions not only damage the possibilities of developing a relationship; they don't allow room to really hear the individual's story.

The value and significance of becoming aware of one's own biases is evident in the following white participant's response to what she learned about herself in the dialogue series:

For me a big piece that came out from all the sessions had a lot to do with me living in Fitchburg, living in a very diverse community. I have kids that are in the public school system, and I feel really confused with some of my own beliefs and own practices. I don't know what to do with my kids sometimes. They are in a very diverse school system. I want to know how to guide them, but sometimes get tangled in my own biases. What can we do? How do we address this, and what do I say? How can I learn more for myself so I can be a good example for my kids? What do I tell them? I don't want them to have some of the same biases that I have, but they are learning from me, and I'm still learning.

This sums up the importance and need to increase self awareness, and understand what one does not know. Participants found this to be very difficult, because as one white participant stated, "When you don't know what you don't know, you don't know it." The participants found the dialogue series as an effective process in aiding them to become aware of what they did not know they didn't know. Taking the not-knowing stance with no assumptions or judgments allows people the opportunity to learn the truth about one another through listening to each person's individual story. When asked what they learned through the dialogue series about being in relationship with people of different races or different cultural backgrounds, one white participant responded, "I obviously don't know much at all. I need to learn more about people's individual and collective stories to better understand." Another white participant stated,

I think it is all about listening. You never completely know somebody, so you really have to pay attention. You may not have the right perspective, or they might be changing. I really have to listen more, and even let the puzzles go.



Another white participant stated,

I think in general you must keep your heart and your mind open. There are going to be differences and there are going to be disagreements. Ultimately we have to learn to get along, and we need to be a community. Keep yourself open. Try not to be critical or condemning or act in a way that creates separation instead of bringing people together. I'm not always sure how to do this, but I know this is what it takes. I became very aware of this in the dialogue series.

Another participant referred to a famous quote by Socrates, "The more I learn, the more I learn how little I know." Overall, the participants expressed a need for a not-knowing stance. This is the need to develop an awareness that there is so much unknown, and respectfully open yourself to learning. This was captured when a participant who identifies as being from an interracial family described what the Circle process means to her:

Circle for me is a place to be able to sit there in the not-knowing and trust. Even though there might be hurts and misunderstandings, and I might cause some of them, and I might receive some of them. There is something bigger that is going on, and there may be little ways to repair or lay the groundwork for repair and see something new.

*Shifting from intentions to impact.* According to the participants, one of the largest learnings from the dialogue series has to do with paying attention and responding to unintended consequences. Some participants, particularly white participants, realized in the first dialogue series they may say insensitive things without ever realizing it. All participants realized they all have good intentions. They all wanted to treat each other with respect, and they all tried to do this. Regardless of their good intentions they realized it was possible to have a hurtful impact on others. One participant stated she learned the following in the dialogue series:

I learned that I must make comments that are interpreted in a way I have no intention of them being. I was horrified and upset with myself when I upset

another participant. I don't feel I treat anyone any differently, but apparently, I must on occasion say things that are insensitive without knowing it.

With the understanding everyone in the dialogue series had good intentions, the participants decided it was important to take the time to address the impact of comments that were unintentionally hurtful.

### Quality Relationship

Another significant theme, which emerged from the interviews, was the value of building quality relationships. Participants reported they felt like they developed quality relationships through the dialogue series by listening to each other's stories. Through these stories and these relationships, participants report they learned more about themselves; it helped them grow to be better people; they learned more about how to be with and relate with people through differences of race, cultural background, and other differences; and it helped them better understand themselves in relation to their environment and greater community.

Every participant referred to the value of building relationships through the dialogue series. A participant of color described the following as the greatest impact and take away message from the dialogue series:

I realized what other people have gone through when we created this group of people that would meet and discuss racism. It was a really great idea for me to go to this. I met a lot of people. I educated myself, and I realized how diverse the community is. I wasn't sure I would fit in to this group at first, but it was a pleasure to be there. I made a lot of friends. Overall, it was an education for me, and making new friends was the most important.

A white participant reported the dialogue series helped her realize what is most important to her, and that is relationships. She realized the culture at her work does not value relationships. She stated:

People talked about doing their job in a fearless way, or leaving what they do completely and starting on a different path. This made me realize in a lot of ways, I'm not doing what I want to do in my job. There are a lot of really good parts of it, but developing a relationship is not something that is encouraged. I felt like wow, I really need to start thinking about a different path, something that really allows more of this kind of stuff and values building relationships.

*The Value of Building Quality Relationships.* Many participants described quality relationship as the key to making community a better place. Through insight and understanding they felt they could have compassion and change their behaviors to be more validating and supportive of one another. A white participant described the value of building quality relationships as the following:

It helps people to understand each other better. We can build connections between people in terms of developing greater empathy and compassion for what someone else might be going through. Also helping you to better understand the differences or things you don't understand. When someone does something that is completely different from something you might do, you can better understand and stay open if there is a relationship. It doesn't have to break the relationship. People would get along much better if we just knew each other a little bit more. If you can keep open, look at the commonalities and come to understand the differences... it just seems it is not going to have any bad outcomes. Whereas, it is easy to judge a book by its cover, recognize difference, and create distance. When people don't interact they make judgments. If we can know each other on some level we might understand each other better. Then we could better work together toward common goals.

The participants realized they all were there with a common goal, to make the community a better place for everyone. They described relationship as a key element in working together toward this common goal. Another white participant stated:

The more we talked to get to know each other the easier it is to even approach the conversation about what we can do. Whereas, when people are alone as individuals, racism seems so big, and it is hard to know the right thing to do. But hearing from people and their experiences, their jobs, their community, and what they want in their life we realized we all want the same thing. Some people have a clearer sense of how to go about getting it, and others of us are just sort of looking for it. Hearing people's stories helps, and they are willing to help, but give me more so I can learn. So I can be part of doing this, and making it better.

*The role of relationships in addressing racism.* As previously mentioned, most participants remarked on how complex racism is, and how difficult it can be to talk about and come to understand. One white participant stated her take away message from the dialogue series was just how complicated racism is:

The first dialogue about microaggressions really accentuated to me how hard it is to get to the bottom of a single incident of a microaggression. Even when people are trying to be aware and trying to hear each other where the intention is set to address this very issue. At that point, people didn't know each other yet, and there wasn't a sense of trust established yet. The explicitness of the intention to address microaggressions was much greater than any other place I've ever been, and it was still very hard. That was one of the take aways for me from the whole series: it takes a lot of intention, sticking with it, giving it time, and it's still not an easy thing to do.

The issue of sticking with it, giving it time, and having a clear intention was addressed by another participant. This participant describes the role of love and/or respect in a relationship as the essential factor that keeps people together through difficult issues and difficult times.

It is easy to be in conversation with people we agree with or we feel have something in common with us. That's easy and safe. We can also feel safe disagreeing and arguing with those we love, because we can come back based on love and it's okay. In the group, the fact there was clear respect allowed me to step back when I didn't personally agree with something or somebody said something I found hurtful. Because of waiting and giving myself that time in the Circle process something really unique happens. It allowed me to think, tell my story, and not judge. We just listened to each other.

According to this participant of color, "listening and respect can be enough to hold people together through difficulties, even if they are very different." She believes it is the relationship that keeps people coming back no matter how difficult or uncomfortable previous conversations were. It is the action of coming back to talking that allows for change to occur. So the essential key is the relationship. She stated, "what keeps it safe

is that people can keep coming back to talking, and that is hope. It doesn't matter how many times you've messed up. You can always come back. Healing happens little by little."

The value of relationships and the role relationships play in addressing racism is evident in this participant's description of her take away message from the dialogue series:

I walk away with, despite the fact that a woman or a man can be from a place where they have never dealt with minorities, people of color, with any other culture, but who they are does not make them a racist. It does not make them wrong. It does not make them insensitive. It makes them not exposed to that group. So when that person says 'I don't know who you are. I don't know who Puerto Ricans are.' I can say, are you willing to listen to who I am, because that is what it's about. My Puerto Ricaness is great just like my apple pie, but are you willing to just listen to me. I will not judge. It's ok not to know all these cultures. My hope for that person is to start getting to know people by having conversation, because that's how you know. Someone really smart and really great once said, 'People don't know each other because they fear each other, and they fear each other because they don't know each other.' That was Martin Luther King, Jr.

### Safe Space

The participants described the dialogue series as a safe space, and they discussed the importance of having a safe space in order to reflect, build trust, develop quality relationships and discuss issues of racism. They described the Circle process as providing the safety needed for this through a transparent process, clear intention, and values such as equality, respect, patience, persistence, and courage.

Many participants remarked on the importance of having a clear process particularly given the complexity of a conversation about racism. One white participant stated:

Given the nature of the topics discussed and having a culturally and racially diverse makeup of the group there was something important about having a clear

process, and something about having the talking piece. It makes me a better listener.

The clarity of the expectations and guidelines of the process was a clear factor in the safety the participants felt. This allowed participants to listen and not react to what was being said by other participants. A participant of color reported:

We were listening to each other. It kept me safe. It kept everybody safe. It kept me safe in terms of not being too quick to answer back or respond to something that hurt me. It's done in a safe place, and there is dialogue that allows listening and respectful talking. I can be impulsive and feel like I have something I have to say. The Circle helps me wait on it and listen to the rest of the stories. Somehow what that person said, and what everybody else said gave me knowledge that not everybody knows what I know about my culture. Not everybody has walked in my shoes. Not everybody has been discriminated against, and that's no fault to them. I think listening and respect are the two keys that keep it safe and open up so many doors.

Participants continued to talk about the value of a listening environment and a process that safely encouraged deep listening and respectful talking. As an extension to the importance of respect, participants spoke to the power of being in a space that was free of blame. A white participant reported:

I felt it was a really safe space to learn more, to make mistakes, to put yourself out there, and not feel blamed. It also gave me the safety and courage to do more reflecting. The Circle process was such a big part of this.

It seemed to be very important for the white participants to be able to have a dialogue that was free of blame and shame in order to provide enough safety to make mistakes, learn from mistakes, and really self reflect throughout the process.

The values of the dialogue process participants referred to as being key components of having a safe space for a dialogue about racism included equality, respect, patience, persistence, and courage. These values are specifically built through the Circle process, and will be further discussed in the findings pertaining to the Circle process.

## Hope

A dialogue about racism is very complex and can be difficult. At times it is uncomfortable and can even be painful. A white participant talked about her experience in going to anti-racism trainings and diversity workshops, and she wondered why (in her experience) there were usually more people of color present than whites. She believed it was because white folks leave conversations about racism with a bad feeling after becoming more aware of racism, and therefore prefer not to return to those conversations. She hoped to encourage people to become part of a learning community and reflect on racism with a sense of hope through the use of the Circle process. A participant from an interracial family stated:

I really like in this dialogue and other Circle work that people can come together and have differences and have little moments of accidental breaks in respect of the differences, and that those are the possibilities for repair. Not only can that happen, but it is happening. It's happening right here, right now, and we were and are doing it. There is respect for everybody in the room. There can be little notices of breaks, we can come to understand, and then little repairs.

This participant believed there was a possibility for healing through the harmful comments and actions that occurred accidentally. She knew these types of harmful incidents occurred regularly everyday, and she found hope in seeing this occur in the Circle followed by recognition of the harm, understanding and a mending of the harm caused. The participants felt this can be hard work and one participant found hope in seeing others' willingness to do this work. This white participant stated the overall impact of the dialogue series was a sense of hope:

...that there are people who want to do this, who want to have more healing, and who are willing to do it, to set aside time to do it, to be vulnerable enough to do it. That there is a way to do it that is safe enough. That it is great there is so much of this going on here now, and it's sad there's not more of this going on here and in

other places. It's nice to have a way to do what otherwise doesn't feel possible. I feel lucky to be able to be part of this.

A few participants made comments they felt addressing racism felt impossible, and the Circle process made it feel possible again.

The Circle work is occurring in other places in the community, particularly in the schools. Some of the participants did not know about the Circle work prior to the dialogue. When they learned it was occurring in other places in the community with other people they were excited and felt hopeful. One white participant stated:

I was glad to hear from someone in the group that she had done this work in the schools. I was so glad to hear this was going on. I didn't know this was going on at my kids' schools. I was glad to hear that people in the community are helping the schools, because the schools are in need of a lot of help. The people doing this Circle work are actually doing really great positive things to make change in the schools, and I probably wouldn't have known that if I didn't come to the dialogue series. Hearing that taught me that people are paying attention, which sometimes it feels like nobody is and we are just going to stay stuck in this issue locally. Without this sort of interaction with people I wouldn't have known that this was going on in the schools. Even though I live in the community, I have children in the community, and I know a lot of people in the community and in the schools, I didn't know any of this was going on in the schools. It was really good to learn a bit more about what some people are doing to address issues of racism with our kids.

This participant said she left the first dialogue on microaggression feeling "so good about a lot of things." This is very different than leaving with a bad feeling, a feeling of guilt, or feeling overwhelmed and not knowing what can be done to make things different.

This sense of hope and feeling good about the change and efforts that are already occurring contributed to their desire to learn more about Circles and hopes to continue the dialogues.

Overall the participants thought the dialogue series fostered self-responsibility through listening, a stance of not-knowing, and responding to impact versus intentions;



quality relationships through understanding, empathy, and validation; a safe space through a clear process and values of equality, respect, patience, persistence, and courage; and a sense of hope for people to continue efforts in changing the world, community, and ourselves.

### Circle

Much of what the participants valued about the dialogue series was not just the content, but the integrity of the process maintained by the Circle process and facilitation. In the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on what they found valuable about Circle, how the Circle process impacted them, and if they thought Circle was a good way to build quality relationships and talk about difficult issues such as racism.

### Value of Circle

All eight participants found the Circle process to be an invaluable aspect of the dialogue series. They found many different aspects of the Circle as being valuable. All eight participants stated they liked the talking piece. They believed the talking piece is what allowed for deep listening and for each person to be heard without interruption or fear of interruption. One participant stated:

I find it to be a very inviting space. I really like the talking piece for one thing. I like the calmness. If I start going on about what I like about Circle there would be a lot of things. Earlier in life there was no way for me to talk in a group at all, but I think with a talking piece I could have, even back then. It was kind of too bad that there wasn't something like that then. Even now, I don't tend to feel too anxious about speaking, having an opinion, or even being seen in Circle.

Most participants attributed the magic of the Circle to the power of the talking piece and the designed flow of moving from one person to the next clockwise, with everyone

having the freedom to speak or pass. Another participant articulated the value of Circle and the talking piece as follows:

I wouldn't be doing it full service by saying it. I can list stuff off, but it just isn't the same as having the experience. I really do like the talking piece, the reflection it helps people do, and how it helps get everybody's viewpoints in there. It helps the quieter people talk. It helps the talkative people wait, more equality that way. I always like the completeness feeling, where it feels like even if something doesn't get said early on in a round of a Circle, things tend to come around, and the stuff that needs to be said for that day gets said. The way that happens is very powerful.

Another aspect of the Circle participants found valuable is the agreement and transparency of guidelines. The guidelines allowed for the people to have their needs met so they could establish safety through a process of consensus. A participant reported:

I really like that the guidelines are explored. That they are created and discovered by the group, that they are discussed. So it's known what is expected and agreed upon, and there is some space to decide how much attention to come to agreement on these things. To figure out how you build the basis of respect and safety with this group of people you are with.

Another participant stated:

I liked that everybody is treated equally. It wasn't a function of age or anything else. Being on equal footing was so refreshing from my work, which is fairly hierarchical. The transparent rules freed me to be more comfortable.

The process of creating transparent guidelines provided comfort and safety for participants, and the content of the guidelines provided the agreements needed for participants to safely open up and connect around a difficult conversation. Another participant described the following as the value of Circle:

It was the connection and relationship we were starting to build with people around this topic that really appealed to me. Using Circle as a means to talk about something that was hard and complicated. In some ways it is looking at an issue from so much more of a personal perspective and more of an emotional perspective than just a 'here's the research and here's the latest theory'. We worked it from another angle, and the Circle allowed for that to happen. It was more personal, which appealed to me.

In order for participants to open to a dialogue that was personal and emotional they needed to know they were not going to be blamed or shamed for speaking what was true for them. A participant stated this as being important to her, "the Circle felt safe to make mistakes, no shame or blame. I always felt accepted no matter what I said".

One participant elaborated on what it was like to participate in a dialogue that invited the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of a person. She stated:

Those sessions felt different from a regular meeting. The atmosphere was different. You were more aware of people coming in as whole human beings instead of their function of their organization and representing the voice of the organization. I think that is the biggest thing, an awareness of the wholeness. The room feels different because everyone is there in a larger way, more of them is present. It seems like there is more there to work with.

Five of the eight participants reported on the quality of the physical environment as being a valuable aspect of the Circle. One participant stated:

The circle is strong. The physical being in a circle is like being around a campfire. It is unifying. It creates safety in itself. There is an 'us-ness' in it that brings people together.

Another participant stated:

I felt like I was entering a healing room. To walk in with the centerpiece and know each item has a meaning and is there for a reason, that in itself made it safe for me.

Overall the participants found the Circle to be valuable because it allowed for deep listening and everyone to be heard, connections and relationships to grow, and wholeness of the physical, emotional, intellectual and physical to be honored.

### Impact of Circle

The participants also had the opportunity to express how the Circle process impacted them and how they felt as a result of the Circle process. The following are some of the quotes from participants about how the Circle impacted them:

I felt peaceful, like it was a spiritual process. It was not painful like it is when there is confrontations that usually occur when talking about sensitive and hurtful things like racism.

I believe a lot more is possible now. When I think about it I get joyful.

It felt very positive. It's a different experience than I get in other areas in my life. It was good to be in a place that challenged me and taught me at the same time.

It was more of a collaborative learning than just each one of us individually learning. I liked that, and I don't get that in other places.

It relaxed me. I felt decompressed afterwards. My mind wasn't racing. My brain felt healthy. I felt fortunate and glad I was able to be in that group.

I felt really safe. I felt there was no judging. I think it is one of the few places where people were not expecting me to say the right things.

One participant described what it was like to be in Circle through an analogy by comparing it to what it felt like to leave the Circle after we closed. She stated:

I think there is something magical about the process. So when it breaks up it is kind of like splinters of glass. I think there is a real strength in the Circle itself. I need to do a better job of actually taking that energy out and keeping it going. It feels like walking away from a campfire, turning your back on it and walking away from the warmth and the sense of security. Then back on the trail, and the crisp cold air kind of bites a little bit, like a splash of cold water. So I ask myself, what does it mean to carry this into the world? Is there a way to take the coals from the fire and bring them with you someday?

#### Circle: Building Good Quality Relationships and Talking about Racism

All eight participants thought Circle was a good way to build good quality relationships. They also thought building connection and relationships were essential to working together on common goals. One participant stated:

I think it helps people build more authentic relations sooner than later. It helps people get to a shared understanding and a certain level of respect sooner than later. You know how people forget how to breathe diaphragmatically? We forget how to communicate. How much small talk can you have with your neighbor and still not really know anything about them. I think having a process and a keeper, a little bit of structure and a little bit of a goal helps the connections happen faster.

Another participant reported:

The idea that every person has equal opportunity to participate, and contribute and be heard regardless of who you are and what status you might have in other areas. I don't know from the people who participated in our Circles if they were the boss, not the boss, unemployed, parents, etc. I don't know any of that about them, but we all had the experience in some way that brought us there to talk about the issue of racism. What I experienced is different from what other people experienced regarding racism, but it was all relevant. No one's experience was deemed more valuable than anyone else's there based on any stature that might have existed outside that Circle. I think that could be valuable in a lot of other settings. I think often time some people are given more power than others, which results in some people feeling they don't have much of a voice and aren't considered to be as much of the process or the solution or the discussion. So I can see it would be really valuable in lots of places, because it is built into Circle that everyone gets to participate and it's just standard.

All eight participants also reported they think Circle is a good way to talk about difficult issues like racism. They thought we did so successfully in the dialogue series.

One participant responded:

Definitely. We've done it now again and again. Its kind of rare to be able to do it, and certainly rare to do it with such peacefulness and have conflict within the peacefulness. Circle does hold it. One of the things we are doing in Circle is we are reflecting. We aren't just being in the conflict, we are reflecting upon whatever conflict we're in. In our society that is kind of unusual, and to have a whole group of people doing it at once is unusual too.

Another participant stated:

I think we started some of that. We didn't really take it to the level where we were coming up with solutions or group goals. We did enter into a conversation that, for me, was more helpful, more real than other workshops or things I've been a part of. It hit on the issue in a different way. I'm not really sure how to take it to the next level, but it seems like within the group, that is the whole beauty of it, what I might not know someone else might. As a group, collectively you have every individual contributing equally, as much as they want to and are able to towards this common idea or goal.

### Facilitation

An unexpected finding that emerged through the interviews was how important it was to the participants to have a pre-existing trusting relationship with the facilitator prior

to the dialogue series. Participants also pointed out key characteristics of the facilitator that was important to them for this particular dialogue to happen in a good way.

Participants found it more inviting because they already had some form of relationship with the facilitator. One participant stated:

I would be willing to bet that people had a training with (the facilitator) or knew her and trusted her first and foremost. I think that made it more inviting to people. The way she is able to approach things, face conflict and bring it back to community people and connection.

Another participant stated the facilitator:

... came across as being very relaxed, and you could feel the importance of this work. She isn't rigid or urgent or vibrating about it in a way you hear the 'uh-oh' music in the background. With her leadership and the way she got everybody talking I felt an acceptance that this is deep work and we can do it. The feeling I had was this is a real opportunity, we are doing something different, and it is okay for us all to be in these new waters together.

Many participants alluded to specific examples the facilitator gave and the personal stories she told, and how this helped them to connect and develop a deeper understanding of the topic. In the interviews, participants gave examples that showed the participants had internalized some of the messages from the facilitator. For example, messages of forgiveness, and one participant used the following quote from the facilitator as a barometer for her own actions, "Are your thoughts, actions and behaviors bringing you closer to love or further away?"

Another participant described the significance of the facilitator's role as follow:

She offered a kind of safety, because I figure she knows what she's doing around these kinds of conversations. I'm intrigued by having another round of dialogues, but it doesn't feel safe without the structure having (this facilitator) in charge. I feel she is really committed to this and has been working on it for a long time. She is likely to see what needs to be seen.

Participants also remarked on the value of all the different ways information was shared and presented. The facilitator utilized scholarly articles to frame the discussion, powerpoint presentations, small group, Circle, drawing activities, films and slideshows. All eight participants thought the mix of all the processes used was a good balance and worked well together. One participant stated, "You couldn't separate one from the other in my mind. Everything worked well together". Participants commented on specific ways they learn best and how the design of different ways of presenting and sharing information fostered an ideal learning environment for everyone.

Participants liked how the article framed the dialogue and the film brought out learnings from the reading and set a focus for the dialogue. One participant stated:

The powerpoint presentations, logic models, diagrams and flow charts were really helpful. This is how I learn. The small groups were effective, especially to hear about people's individual experience with microaggressions.

Another participant stated:

I think they were all important. The conversation was and is a perfect balance. I am a painter and I'm a writer of stories by painting. So giving me that little opportunity to draw, I thought, 'I like this! I'm engaged!' It gave me a way to express how I felt. Maybe some people need to reflect what they saw in the videos. All the pieces were very well balanced.

Participants commented they appreciated having the opportunity to think "outside of the box" and express themselves in a multitude of ways. They each commented on how they don't get the opportunity to do this in other places.

#### Impact on the Work

Two of the eight participants felt the dialogues had no impact on their work. The other seven participants found the dialogues impacted their work or would like to apply what they learned to their work in varying ways.

One participant in social services was looking for ways to engage clients from the community, youth and adults, in a process of developing awareness about different cultures and religions, racism, and how to connect through differences. She found the Circle process to be an effective way of doing this and plans to use this process in her work. Another participant talked about how biases can play out on clients when you work with the public. She found the dialogue series important to become aware of her biases and work through them so she does not negatively impact her clients who are coming to her for help.

A clinical social worker thought the dialogue overlapped with the work she does.

She stated:

I look at having words around microaggressions and stuff to help name different ways of people invalidating each other, and then look at searching for ways to be more validating. The dialogues validated for me the philosophy I'm using in understanding self and helping other people understand self, and helping other people understand their relationships. It fits with how I want to better understand things going on in the community, and it has some of the same principles of being able to bring that respectful awareness to yourself and the other person at the same time. I'm interested in doing this work in the school systems. I picture what it would be like to do this work with families in this way. I started doing this with my own family, and it was a nice experience.

Five of the eight participants talked about how they are or would like to begin conducting meetings with colleagues in a Circle or something similar. One participant talked about how she would utilize the Circle process in her work if she could:

I would want to meet like this with staff, even given personal issues we deal with. We are all people. We all have things going on in our lives and it impacts the office. We could learn how to better support each other so the office runs better. If I had free range at work, we would meet as staff in a Circle and talk about what we are supposed to be accomplishing and how we want to do it. What strengths do you have that you could bring? What strengths do you have that might be different from someone else's? To be able to talk, be heard and share ideas.



Three participants talked about how they already utilize the Circle process or aspects of it in staff meetings. One participant began trying to utilize these new techniques as a result of the dialogue series. She stated:

I have faith in the process. It has given me confidence when we are planning discussions or meetings with other people in the organization to say, 'Why don't we try some different techniques to engage everybody in the room' instead of it being whomever talks the loudest first, which is kind of our organizational culture. In fact, a couple weeks ago I facilitated a day-long retreat for a non-profit board. I didn't do the Circle process, but I used concepts from it knowing that not everybody feels and communicates the same way. I used different ways of going around the room to ask people to contribute or pass if they want, and establish ground rules. They were "ga-ga" over that retreat. They sent me flowers the next day. I couldn't believe it. There is definitely something different that happens when people feel comfortable and are invited to contribute in a way that feels safe in doing that.

Three participants are working Circles into projects they are doing as a result of the experience they had in the dialogue series. One participant described one of these projects:

We are going to use Circle process as part of a community building technique in urban parks in the state. The whole idea is we wanted to engage and connect more people, neighbors and community advocates around what the open space, natural areas, playgrounds, and stuff mean to them, and how they can help make them better or get more of them closer to where kids are. That is definitely the most tangible outcome of the dialogue series.

Another participant was interested in utilizing this process to train staff within a statewide organization on diversity and inclusivity.

One participant has been utilizing Circle for a few years in her work and with her family. She stated:

You want to give what works to community and your family. It is important people have a safe space regardless whether people are conservative Catholics or Pentecostals or they practice white magic. We see the practice of having safe spaces to sit and talk and listen as being the main tool for working with families and dealing with staff issues. We are people. We are complex. We come in with

our own things. There have been great times and hard times, but what allowed us to deal with things and probably prevented people from losing their jobs was that we could sit in Circle. No one left those Circles without feeling they were heard, respected and held accountable. Now the staff say, 'I can't see us talking any other way'. There has to be a consensus that we all feel safe. We have an agreement that we are having a true and honest conversation. I do Circle a lot in my work, my life and in my house. Circle is action. I can teach other people about having honest conversations by having them myself.

She described one group of people who meet regularly in Circle:

On the second month they came back to me and said this stuff really works. Sitting and listening really works. Now there is a need to sit and talk, and take it out to the community and say this is working. Now they are inviting friends to come, and they are doing Circles at home.

### Suggestions and Conclusion

Everyone present in the final dialogue, including the eight interviewees, decided to continue the dialogues. It was decided to have three more Circles on the same topics so the conversation could continue and deepen. All the participants felt the dialogues were short on time, but it was decided to keep them at three hours long once every other month. One participant stated:

I can't imagine not continuing. I don't know how it would be possible, but if this group could stay together for two years and develop a real learning community. Then those people could go out and develop learning communities. That would be really wonderful!

Another participant stated:

The same group needs to come back. We are not done. We are just barely getting to know each other. Then we will be at a place where we ask what is the next step? How are we ambassadors of good conversations and respectful listening? I think what will happen is people will begin creating that kind of space where ever they go. I'm hoping it will be quite contagious and it will be replicated.

One participant talked about ways to make the dialogue series accessible to more people. She stated:

I know the pace and timing is important, but I'm wondering if there is a way to engage people for the first time in smaller chunks of time. The thought of sitting in Circle and talking for three hours sounds ominous. I'm thinking of the idea of wanting to get people to be better communicators, and how we can take this to scale. Or do we need to maintain something that works and let people come to it when they are ready.

Another participant stated:

Don't change anything. They are honest dialogues. I felt it worked really well because the group was usually not over twenty people. It gave people time to talk and really listen to the stories and what is being said. I've sat in other Circles where the group was really big and it worked, but I really like that there weren't so many people. It really worked.

More specific suggestions included expanding on the use of shame and blame in social change efforts, specifically in anti-racism trainings, and continuing to stop the Circle and take a closer look at microaggressions that happen within the Circle.

In conclusion, one participant stated, "I really enjoyed the whole process. I really feel I learned enough to know that I need to know a lot more, and I think that is a good outcome. If you come away from something knowing you need to learn more, I think it served its purpose". Participants hope to continue the dialogue and learn more specifically about Circles. A participant described her experience in the dialogues and reported, "There is a degree of therapy to it. It's all part of my personal growth. I also included this in my professional development for my job." In summing up what about the dialogue series works, one participant stated:

Time with each other, the stories, the feedback... It's never happened before. I can't say what it is that is working, but I feel it in my heart. I feel this is what we've been waiting for all this time. We can talk to each other. It cleanses. It is like a cleansing of not having assumptions or stereotypes. It is something that is pure and honest. That is just what it is.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative study examines the dialogue series, "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves", and explores the use of Circle to critically examine microaggressions in the context of relationships and the use of shame and blame in social change efforts through a consensus building process based on values such as equality, respect, courage, patience, and persistence. hooks (1994, p.48) quoted Antonio Faundez in an interview about the use of Paulo Friere's ideas of education to drive progressive political movements, "... in our early reflection of everyday life was that abstract political, religious or moral statements did not take concrete shape in acts by individuals. We were revolutionaries in the abstract, not in our daily lives. It seems to me essential that in our individual lives, we should day to day live out what we affirm." The day to day life of how we live out our values in relationship to one another is the driving force to "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves".

The dialogue series occurred in three parts: 1.) Microaggressions – really understanding and changing how we treat each other, 2.) Relearning relationships – really engaging in meaningful collaborations, and 3.) Removing shame and blame from social change efforts – really building justice and peace. This study sought to evaluate the value of such a process by interviewing eight individuals who participated in two of the three dialogues. The interviewees identified the four following themes based on what they learned and found valuable from the dialogue series: self-responsibility, quality

relationships, safe space and hope. They discussed the value of Circle and the value of utilizing Circle to build quality relationships and talk about issues of racism. They also commented on what they found valuable about the facilitator's role and the means of sharing and presenting information in the dialogue series. Finally, the interviewees shared how the dialogue series impacted their work and suggestions for next steps regarding the dialogue series.

According to the findings, it is valuable to teach and share stories about microaggressions in order to create a shared language and understanding of this phenomena that occurs regularly, targeting people of color everyday. It is validating to create a common language and understanding of the covert acts of racism that occur so regularly for people of color. The dialogue on microaggressions had the greatest impact particularly on the white participants by fostering an increase in self-awareness, deep listening, and focusing the response to a microaggression on the harm caused. It is common to hear the individuals of the dominant culture (white folks) respond to an unintended microaggression by stating they meant no harm instead of apologizing for the harm they caused. Typically, if a person accidentally steps on another person's toe, they would apologize and try to help the person get what they needed in order to alleviate the pain caused. The microaggression dialogue refocused the response of a microaggression in a similar way, by working to alleviate the harm caused with an understanding it was unintentional. This shift in response works toward building relationships.

The language of microaggressions lays a foundation, which allows people to tell their personal stories and experience of microaggressions. An understanding of how microaggressions play out allows for a potentially validating and empowering

experience. Through this understanding the group was able to recognize when a microaggression occurred within the dialogue, acknowledge it, and respond to the invalidation that occurred. This modeled the possibility of addressing racism when it occurs without the use of shame and blame. It is also interesting to note, this microinvalidation occurred when the group was not following the Circle process (the talking piece was not being used) and people were speaking out in response to one another's stories. The group resorted to this "popcorn" style of dialogue due to the pressure of little time before the closing of the dialogue. Overall, participants found it to be more important to take the time needed to reach a deep understanding of the topic discussed utilizing the Circle process.

Through the dialogue on relearning relationships, participants recognized the increasing role organizations play in the life of an individual's community. Therefore, they found a need to build quality relationships within organizations, and create an organizational culture, which honors the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of individuals. The participants also discovered how much people interpret the same situation so differently, and this leads to very different perceptions of the same situation. One can imagine how this might occur in everyday encounters within an organization and with clients as well. According to Senge (1990), reality begins to shift when a person's mental model changes. This occurs through a self-reflective process of "learningful" conversation in which participants express their frame of thought and are open to the influence of others. A deeper understanding of each other's perspective is essential in order to work together toward a common goal.

In the final dialogue, Removing shame and blame from social justice efforts, participants discovered the use of shame and blame usually led them to feel one of two feelings: guilty or angry. Participants then felt either paralyzed by the shame and blame motivators used in social change efforts, or they felt a need to give money because it was all they could think to do. In comparison, the participants described the activity of creating a social change advertisement without the use of shame and blame as thought provoking and inspirational. Some participants expressed a need to remove shame and blame from diversity and anti-racism efforts to promote inspirational, generative motivation. This suggestion is supported by the relational-cultural model, which states there is a need to heal the shame associated with isolation and disconnection, through empathic connection (Jordan, 2000 p.1008).

Freire (1970, p.96) states, "We must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes and fears—programs which at times increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness". Freire's work with popular education, critical consciousness and commitment to work toward liberation reiterates the findings of what participants learned through the dialogue, and what they found to be the four components the dialogues fostered: self-responsibility, quality relationships, safe space, and hope.

The participants most emphasized the responsibility to learn deep listening skills. They found the Circle to foster a level of deep listening, which regarded the speaker as offering a gift of generosity through his/her words. The Circle also fostered the speaker's responsibility to be thoughtful in the gift they had to offer in contribution of the collective

process. This called for taking the time to reflect on and integrate each person's contribution to the dialogue before responding when it was his/her turn to contribute. The Circle is a clear process, which engages participants in a process of relearning how to communicate effectively and contribute in a process of change through this style of thoughtful, mindful, collective dialogue.

The participants also found it to be a responsibility to maintain a "not-knowing stance". This means learning enough to know there is so much one does not know, and therefore, having the capacity to open one's heart and mind to learning. A "not-knowing stance" requires one to shed all assumptions and judgments. Through the dialogues, participants found an individual's story to be more valuable than identifying information. They believed acknowledging how one identifies in terms of race and ethnicity is significant, but the meaning of this significance can only be discovered through listening to that individual's story. The opportunity for each person to share their story allowed others to really know that person. Assumptions, which lead to critical and condemning thoughts lead to separation, and separation impedes progress toward the common goal of making the community a better place for everyone. hooks (1994, p.43) believes, in work toward liberation the initial step of transformation is when the individual begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to political circumstances.

Building quality relationships is an important component of the dialogue series because it helps people learn more about themselves; helps them grow to be better; helps them learn how to be with and relate with people of different races, cultures, etc.; and helps people better understand their community and their role in community. Participants found quality relationships to be essential to working toward making the community a



better place and improving conditions by learning how to be more validating and supportive of each other. An increase in meaningful interactions decreases judgments, increases understanding and builds the capacity to work together toward a common goal, particularly in addressing issues of racism. Love and/or respect and listening are essential to keep people together and returning to conversations about difficult issues like racism. It requires persistence within a trusting relationship to keep people engaged in this difficult and complex issue. According to Freire (1973, p.45), a humanizing dialogue requires love, humility, hope, faith and mutual trust in order to engage in a critical understanding of the present and work toward an agreed upon vision of the future.

A safe space is required in order to self-reflect, build trusting relationships, and discuss issues of racism. This dialogue provided a safe space through a clear purpose to make the community a better place for everyone, a transparent process called Circle, and values of equality, respect, patience, persistence and courage. Participants knew it was safe to make mistakes and learn and grow from them, because the dialogue was free of shame and blame.

The dialogue allowed participants to experience a sense of hope, which is what they needed in order to feel it was possible to address an issue as complicated and difficult as racism. They experienced hope by witnessing the possibility of repairing the harm caused by a microinvalidation. Some expressed a sense of hope in response to learning about the work of Circles occurring in other places throughout the community, particularly in schools. It is important to feel the possibility of change in order to engage in making the community a better place for everyone.

Participants attributed much of the success of the dialogue series to the Circle process. The talking piece allowed for deep listening, time to reflect, thoughtful contribution, and everyone to be heard. Participants valued the equality and lack of hierarchy regardless of age, status, etc. This consensus building process and transparency in determining guidelines allowed for a space of connection, relationship building, and safety to discuss issues of racism. Circle honors the whole person (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects), builds an awareness of the whole and opens the collective to more possibilities. Participants described it as a healing and unifying space. Circle helped the participants feel peaceful, joyful, hopeful, positive, challenged, relaxed, healthy, and safe in a collaborative learning environment. They found Circle to effectively teach people to communicate respectfully and effectively, and allowed the collective to hold conflict peacefully in order to reflect, learn, and integrate what they learned.

It seemed to be important to the participants to have some form of relationship and trust with the facilitator prior to the first dialogue. The facilitator's ability to face conflict calmly and bring it to a point of connection for the participants was significant. Her capacity to peacefully approach the topic of racism with an attitude that reflected faith in the group to be able to work through issues of racism while building connection, and maintain a shame and blame free environment was also important. She was able to engage people in learning through sharing stories and giving effective examples. The combination of scholarly articles, powerpoint presentations, small groups, the larger Circle, drawing activities, films and slideshows allowed everyone of varying learning

styles to engage in the dialogue. These means of sharing and presenting information were well balanced and well integrated.

There were a number of examples about how the dialogue series impacted people's work. Specifically in social services, participants discussed utilizing Circle to engage clients (adults and youth) in a community process to develop awareness about issues of racism and other forms of oppression, and to engage students in school who are at-risk of suspension or expulsion. A clinical social worker found the language and understanding of microaggressions helpful in being more validating and helping others to increase self-awareness, relationship awareness, and awareness of oneself within the community context. In social services and education the dialogue series helped people become aware of biases so they can be more cautious not to project these unwarranted internal beliefs on clients or students. The Circle process can and is being used to effectively facilitate staff meetings or other organizational meetings in a way that allows everyone to contribute in a way they are comfortable with. Circle can and is used to address problems in the workplace, in the classroom, with family at home, and with friends.

Circle was used as a form of public pedagogy to facilitate a process of critical thinking and critical collective consciousness. hooks (1994, p.26) perceives social change efforts as changing the way we go about our daily lives so that our values and habits of being reflect our commitment to freedom. hooks (p.34) states "all of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions – and society – so that the way we live, teach, and

work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom".

According to the interviewees, "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves" includes the four components of an empowerment model outlined by Gutiérrez, Parson, and Opal Cox (1998, p. 20). The dialogue series fostered critical reflection of one's attitudes and beliefs, validation through a collective experience, an increase in one's knowledge and skill to think critically, and in itself is action taken for personal and political change. The findings from the dialogue series illustrate Circle has the capacity facilitate personal and collective empowerment by affecting individuals, family and peer systems, service delivery systems and political structures. It is also significant that participants unanimously chose to continue the dialogue series by further exploring the same topics of the three dialogues in three more dialogues primarily held in Circle, and many expressed a desire to learn more about Circle with hopes of becoming adept to keep Circle and replicate what they learned from the dialogues.

Based on the data, participants' experience of a shame-free environment enabled their ability to share and observe stories and their subsequent reactions to these stories. As a result, they seemed to be able to decide which behaviors they would choose to continue and which they would suspend when they found themselves actively participating as perpetrators and/or victims of microaggressions. The result of this use of choice was their experience of a sense of hope, deriving from their sense of personal empowerment through their use of will and choice. The mechanics of the circle process supported participants' own increased awareness of their personal power of choice, their ability to change behavior and their profound capacity for connection even across

seemingly disparate life experiences. Racism, within this context, became a set of unconscious learned behaviors that with careful exploration and the use of choice could be gradually transformed into opportunities for further personal development and connection with others. In a sense, the work of addressing racism, for them, seemed to turn into exciting and hopeful opportunities for further learning and growth.

A few limitations are worth noting. For one, it is unknown why some participants of the dialogue series did not return to participate in all three. The participants interviewed are the individuals who found it worth returning for at least two of the three dialogues and again for an interview. This researcher also participated in the dialogues and knew most of the interviewees prior to the dialogues. This could be a limitation in receiving honest feedback about the dialogues, or it could lead the interviewees to feel more comfortable to share things they may not be comfortable sharing with a stranger. Another limitation is the amount of time that passed between each dialogue and the interviews. Many interviewees commented on having difficulty recalling details from some of the dialogues.

It would be interesting to follow the replication of this model in other communities and with different facilitators to evaluate the efficacy of replicating it. It would also be interesting to follow up with this particular group and the continuation of the dialogues to learn the benefits and challenges that emerge. I would encourage more research in the use of Circle to address problems amongst individuals and within systems, such as but not limited to health disparities among people of color in healthcare systems, students at risk of suspension and expulsion in schools (disproportionately students of color), domestic violence in families' homes, and a disproportionate number of people of

color in prisons. These are all injustices social workers are ethically responsible to working to address. Circle facilitated positive personal and collective change through "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves". Can Circle help facilitate positive social change efforts in a variety of different ways?

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## APPENDIX A

## Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter

February 26, 2009

Kristin Pinto-Wilson

Dear Kristin,

Your amended materials have been reviewed. You have done a careful job and all is now in order. We are glad to approve your study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Roger Miller, Research Advisor

APPENDIX B

## Informed Consent Form

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Kristin Pinto-Wilson, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research project designed to explore the impact on the participants of a series of dialogues on racism and building meaningful collaborations for justice and peace through a Circle model. You have been asked to participate in this study because you participated in at least two of the three dialogues in this series. This study is being conducted for the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, and may be used in possible future presentation or publication on the topic.

As a participant, it is understood that you participated in two of the three Circles on "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves", and you are older than the age of 18 years. If you choose to participate, I will ask you to sit for a taped interview with me that will last approximately 50-60 minutes. Prior to the interview you will be asked to answer a few demographic questions. The interview itself will consist of semi-structured questions focusing on your experience in the dialogue series. I will travel to your job site to conduct the interview or will meet you at some other mutually agreed-upon location that is private and convenient for you.

Participation in this study may trigger feelings related to your oppression and your experience in the Circles. Please utilize therapeutic resources available to you, if you should want to process experiences that come up in the interview.

While there will be no financial benefit for taking part in the study, participation will allow you to share your experience in Circle as well as the impact the dialogue series had for you. Your contributions will provide important information that may be helpful in furthering the knowledge about the Circle process and building just, peaceful communities within both the professional and educational spheres. You may benefit knowing that you are contributing to the development of an inclusive model for building healthy relationships and dialogue about the impacts of racism. In thinking about the study, you may envision new ways you can continue to build healthy relationships and collaborations through an understanding of the impacts of racism. Furthermore, you will have the opportunity to put your struggles and successes in building relationships across racial boundaries for others to learn from.

Your confidentiality will be protected in a number of ways. The demographic questionnaire and the audiotape of the interview will be assigned a number for identification. You will not be asked to identify your name while the tape is running, and you are asked not to include any identifying information in any examples of case material you may use. Some illustrative quotes will be used in the thesis, but will be reported without identifying information and disguised if necessary. I will be the primary handler of all data including tapes and any transcripts created. My research advisor will have

access to the data collected during the interview including any transcripts or summaries created only after it is coded and will assist in the analysis of the data. In addition, any person assisting in transcription will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. I will keep the demographic questionnaires, tapes, transcripts, and other data in a locked and secure environment for three years following the completion of the research, consistent with Federal regulations. After that time, all material will be kept secured or destroyed.

As a voluntary participant, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time – before, during, or after the interview. You have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions in the interview. Should you withdraw, all materials pertaining to your participation in the study will be immediately destroyed. You may withdraw from the study up to two weeks after the date of your interview.

You may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee at Smith College School for Social Work with any questions or comments at (413) 585-7974.

**YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS; AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

---

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

---

Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for participating in this study. If you have any questions or would like to withdraw from the study, please contact:**

Kristin Pinto-Wilson  
*Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.*

APPENDIX C

## Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Kristin Pinto-Wilson, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research project designed to explore how clinicians put into practice concepts of cultural competency with Latino clients. This study is being conducted for the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, and may be used in possible future presentations or publications on the topic.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you participated in at least two of the three dialogues "Changing the World by Changing Ourselves". In addition, participants should be over the age of 18 years.

If you choose to participate, I will ask you to sit for a taped interview with me that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Prior to the interview you will be asked to answer a few demographic questions. The interview itself will consist of semi-structured questions focusing on your experience in the Circles and the impact the dialogues had on you. I will travel to your job site to conduct the interview or will meet you at some other mutually agreed-upon location that is private and convenient for you.

All interviews will be kept confidential, data in this thesis and professional publications or presentations will be presented in the aggregate without reference to identifying information. After the interview, I will refer to our audio-taped conversation by code numbers instead of by your name.

While there will be no financial benefit for taking part in the study, participation will allow you to share your experience in Circle as well as the impact the dialogue series had for you. Your contributions will provide important information that may be helpful in furthering the knowledge about the Circle process and building just, peaceful communities within both the professional and educational spheres. You may benefit knowing that you are contributing to the development of an inclusive model for building healthy relationships and dialogue about the impacts of racism. In thinking about the study, you may envision new ways you can continue to build healthy relationships and collaborations through an understanding of the impacts of racism. Furthermore, you will have the opportunity to put your struggles and successes in building relationships across racial boundaries for others to learn from.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY.**

**PLEASE CONTACT ME OR ALLOW ME TO CONTACT YOU AT YOUR CONVENIENCE TO DISCUSS SCHEDULING AN INTERVIEW.**

APPENDIX D

## Interview Guide

1. How do you identify in terms of race and ethnicity?
2. Which of the three dialogues did you participate in?
3. What did you learn about yourself through the dialogues you participated in?
4. What did you learn about others?
5. What did you learn about being in relationship with someone of a different race?
6. Is there anything you took away from the dialogues that you would or are applying to your work?

Describe content vs. process.

7. In thinking about the content of the dialogues you participated in, what did you find most valuable? Least valuable?
8. In thinking about the processes used (small group, large circle, drawings, films, powerpoint, etc.) what had the strongest impact for you? Least impact?
9. How did the Circle process impact you? What do you find valuable about it?
10. Do you think Circle can be used to build healthy relationships? Why or why not?
11. Do you think Circle is a good way to talk about difficult issues like racism? Why or Why not?
12. Do you have any suggestions?
13. Overall, what are you walking away with, what is the take-away?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the dialogue series?