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Abstract

Concerns about the inadequacy of using dialogue to address the material realities of race and racism motivate this essay. Hence, I reflect on the current state of conversations on race, diversity, and inclusion from the standpoint of cultural and racial “others.” To orient my reflections, I first unpack assumptions about what might constitute “productive” public deliberation on race. I argue that productive public engagement exercises on race (a) move participants into praxis, (b) require participants to consider cultural identity differences, and (c) demand an understanding of how social forces such as racism and whiteness hinder and/or enable public engagement processes. I then reconsider public engagement from a cultural lens and rethink intercultural communication as publicly deliberating highly charged topics such as race. Finally, I caution against relying on cookie-cutter formulas to address complex issues such as race and recommend utilizing the strategy of *counter-storytelling* in public engagement exercises on race.

Keywords

Dialogue on Race, Intercultural Communication, Social Justice, Cultural Identity Differences, Counter-Storytelling

“It is shocking to know many of my classmates have sat in predominantly white classrooms throughout their lives and then they will be expected to work in diverse workplace,” wrote a self-identified Black woman in one of my intercultural communication classes. I share my student’s sentiment in reflecting on the current state of conversations on race, diversity, and inclusion. As a woman, person of color, and international faculty, I have often been involved in public engagement exercises around issues of diversity and inclusion. There is no doubt in my mind that public engagement exercises can be orchestrated to promote diversity and inclusion, and there are productive examples such as dialogues held by organizations such as the Public Conversation Project and Everyday Democracy. Nevertheless, I, as a racial and cultural “other” in the United States, remain skeptical about *how* public engagement exercises promote racial justice and inclusion. In particular, I am concerned about the extent to which dialogue on race and difference is adequate, possible, or productive. McPhail (2004) argues that dialogue is an inadequate “strategy for dealing with the material realities of race” (p. 210). Simpson (2008) contends that discourses of “color blindness” and invisibility of whiteness hinder “dialogue about race in the United States” (p. 139). Stemming from such concerns, I will reflect on public engagement through a cultural lens and rethink intercultural communication with/in moments of “publicly” engaging/disengaging cultural others.

To situate my reflections, I share a few memorable moments that symbolize the challenges in organizing public engagement exercises around race and difference. In a town-hall meeting on diversity, one male college student said that rarely had he been a target of homophobic slurs except for a surprise encounter at the bar when intoxicated male friends out of nowhere verbally attacked his gay identity. Immediately, one Black woman responded: “A drunk tongue speaks a sober mind.” In a food-for-thought session, one White male angrily protested the Community Relations Commission’s campaign slogan, “Inclusion happens here,” and stated, “The slogan is a lie.” The Commission, authorized by city government ordinance, endeavors to promote intergroup harmony within the local communities. In both exercises, most participants were able to speak their minds, but they did not move beyond “more than just talk.”

What I find challenging about these moments corresponds to working assumptions that are central to my thinking. First, productive public engagement exercises on race need to move participants to some sort of explicit action or *praxis*, “a process of critical, reflective, and engaged thinking and acting” (Sorrells & Nakagawa, 2008, p. 26). I have come to believe that dialogue on race is insufficient as an end in itself and the transformative impact of such dialogue lies in the praxis it creates (McPhail, 2004). For example, dialogue on race might result in unlearning prejudices about cultural others, enabling the voiceless to have their voices heard, and questioning sociocultural norms that privilege some at the expense of others. Second, participants in those exercises need to consider how cultural identity differences (e.g., race, nationality, gender, sexuality, and class, etc.) are communicated and/or not communicated. My ongoing work evidences that cultural identity differences are tied to unequal power relations and affect the processes and potentials of relating across difference to promote social justice (e.g., Chen & Collier, 2012). Third, individuals and groups work toward social justice need to understand how public engagement exercises and processes are enabled and/or hindered by larger sociopolitical, cultural, and structural issues such as racism and whiteness. Without a structural view, social justice work might run the risk of blaming the victims.

Considering public engagement through a cultural lens raises several questions for me. First, to what extent are the assumptions, principles, and practices of public engagement culturally shaped, informed, and constituted, and how can centralizing “cultures” advance what we know and do not know about public engagement? How does “public engagement” look similar or different to members of different cultural groups (e.g., based on nationality, race, gender, and class)? As an example, Ellis and Maoz's (2007) study evidences cultural differences in what counts as reason and argument. To what extent are the taken-for-granted assumptions undergirding public engagement work culturally specific to particular groups (e.g., White Anglo-Saxon Protestants)? Second, if we agree that public engagement exercises take on culturally specific meanings, which cultural group's belief and value systems dominate, or are privileged in, the current understanding of public engagement? Which cultural groups have been systematically ignored and neglected in public engagement research and practices? Also, to what extent can the dominant principles and practices of public engagement be translated across cultural borders?

On the other hand, treating intercultural communication as publicly engaging/disengaging cultural others in deliberative exercises (e.g., classroom discussions about race, diversity workshops, etc.), raises questions about what it means to “deliberate” about politically charged topics such as race, difference, and whiteness. Not surprisingly, whites and people of color experience conversations about race differently. For example, a White female student of mine wrote, “I am of the dominant race and therefore find it hard to personally identify with people of a minority who are discriminated against because of it.” In contrast, an African American male wrote, “I dislike when my [African American] culture is easily being picked on as an example of racism or any of the form of discrimination.”

Further, I am cognizant of issues of power that are tied to histories, politics, and economics. How do unequal power relations emerge, circulate, and function to enable and/or hinder dialogue on race and difference? How is an individual's ability to speak and listen publicly tied to both the self and other's privileged/disadvantaged cultural identity positions? For example, many international individuals like me are perceived to speak with a “foreign” accent. Sometimes our accents mark us as outsiders, and other times our accents trigger a narrative of “presumed incompetent” others (Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). When minority others like me speak, I often wonder how we are heard and if we can be heard without adjusting our ways of speaking. What are social norms, practices, and ideologies that encourage/discourage ethics of engaging *with* racial and cultural others? How do we engage in deliberative exercises about race and difference without such conversations becoming divisive?

So, what will it take to organize public engagement exercises on race and difference productively? The bottom line is that cookie-cutter formulas are inappropriate for addressing complex issues such as race. Instead, it requires a deep commitment to re-imagining alternatives that can challenge the status quo to benefit all. For example, critical race theorists and practitioners have utilized the strategy of *counter-storytelling* that views the lived experiences of people and communities of color as legitimized sources of knowledge. The produced stories have been used to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies. I encourage all of us to act, relate, and think outside any traditional boxes that limit rather than empower us to work together.

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