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Finding a Seat for Social Justice at the Table of Dialogue and Deliberation

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Abstract

What does it mean for the dialogue and deliberation or public engagement community to exclude social justice from its mission and activities? Many dialogue and deliberation organizations, though clearly not all, shy away from either an explicit or implicit acknowledgement of issues of social justice or inequality, and power and privilege. This article argues that the field needs to 1) work intentionally for social justice and serving the public good for a strong, diverse democracy, 2) confront the illusion of neutrality, and 3) address issues of privilege and power. It discusses five principles to achieve this goal.

Keywords

dialogue, deliberative democracy, social justice, power and privilege, public engagement community

Several years ago I sat as a founding board member on a fledgling dialogue and deliberation organization that was working on its mission statement. “Can we state that our purpose is to use dialogue and deliberation to build a more socially and racially just democratic society?” I asked. I was told, no, because language like ‘social justice’ is political and will offend people, and this group needed to be neutral. “Well, then, could we say that our purpose is to make a difference in the world?” I asked, thinking that this language would be acceptable to my colleagues. Again, I was emphatically told the answer was no. The program director and board members again made clear that I was overstepping their bounds. One of the more conservative-leaning members of the board offered what he thought was a modest compromise, asking whether the group could just say that we promote dialogue and deliberation in pursuit of a more peaceful world. The word ‘peace’ was apparently political as well, and his suggestion, too, was not approved. In the end, this dialogue and deliberation organization decided its mission was limited strictly to promoting good discussions and conversations. So much for social justice, making a difference, working for peace, doing good, strengthening democracy, advocating for liberty, freedom, or equality, etc; there would be no place for any of that in this D&D organization.

What does it mean for the dialogue and deliberation or public engagement community to exclude social justice from its mission and activities? Many dialogue and deliberation organizations, though clearly not all, shy away from either an explicit or implicit acknowledgement of issues of social justice or inequality, and power and privilege. They believe that the mere fact of stating that their group and activities are open to some non-specified “public” group makes for inclusion of all people, and that conversations which are supposedly neutral, whatever the substance or topic, are in and of themselves serving a worthwhile social purpose.

I thoroughly enjoy good conversations. It’s great to engage with other people and to be in the company of other people. But when I think about the purpose of dialogue and deliberation as a field and as organizations, I know that I am hoping for much more than a supposedly neutral conversation.

I believe the field needs to 1) work intentionally for social justice and serving the public good for a strong, diverse democracy, 2) confront the illusion of neutrality, and 3) address issues of privilege and power.

First, most people, whatever language they choose to use, regardless of their political affiliation, perspective, or point of view, share a hope for a better society and believe in a more just world. To use the foundation of a just society or a better world as a common starting point allows for purposeful dialogue and is an invitation to a wide range of people, perspectives and viewpoints. Even the Pledge of Allegiance speaks of “liberty and justice for all,” so it’s surprising that those words are too often taken off the table in dialogue and deliberation organizations because they are seen as “too political.” To ignore social justice serves only to diminish the opportunity and promise that dialogue and deliberation have to offer.

Second, ignoring inequity and inequality predictably leads to the marginalization and exclusion of less privileged groups and those expressing unpopular opinions. Rather than opening the door to open discussion and dialogue by invoking a value of neutrality, when issues of social justice are left off the table it signals to people who are concerned with such issues that the conversation

will support the status quo, that substantive change will not result, and that they are unwelcome at the table.

Third, declaring an approach of neutrality, without accounting for power and privilege, almost always privileges those in power. The invocation of unexamined neutrality ignores the power relations embedded in social issues, makes invisible the privilege and power of members of different social identities actually participating in any dialogue and deliberation, and serves to silence less privileged voices. To presume a priori an approach of neutrality mistakenly creates an unequal situation from the outset.

Fourth, efforts to convene substantive dialogue and deliberation without a social justice orientation typically end up as an exercise to give already privileged people more power. When the D&D community gathers people together for good discussions and conversations without any acknowledgement of or attention to issues of social justice, power or privilege, it simply creates space for a privileged group of people to gain an even larger voice and to reify existing inequalities. Admittedly, some in the D&D community who previously felt excluded have carved a niche for themselves and found a voice in public discourse through D&D, but too often when doing so without any social, racial, economic and/or other justice orientation, they have left even further behind those with even less privilege and power.

Fifth, issues of power and privilege are present in dialogue and deliberation whether or not people are ignorant of their presence or choose not to acknowledge them. The fact that people with more privilege are unaware of their power or may consciously choose to ignore it, does not mean that such dynamics are not present and salient in dialogue and deliberation.

We live in a time of vast racial and economic disparities within and across nations, challenges to basic democratic foundations, threats to the sustainability and very survival of the planet, and global conflicts putting large populations at risk. It is incumbent upon us to use the opportunity of dialogue, deliberation, and public engagement to share diverse perspectives and work purposefully towards a more just society and to make a difference in the world.

Author Information

David Schoem is Director of the Michigan Community Scholars Program and teaches in the Sociology Department at the University of Michigan. He is co-editor with Sylvia Hurtado of *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace*. He is a co-founder of Michigan's Program on Intergroup Relations. His most recent book is *College Knowledge* and is co-editor of *Integrative Pedagogy: Teaching the Whole Student with Heart, Mind, and Spirit* (Stylus Press, forthcoming 2015). He received his Ph.D. from University of California Berkeley, his M.Ed. from Harvard University, and his B.A. from the University of Michigan.