



Practice of Freedom

**R-E-S-P-E-C-T:
Culture, Power, and Interactional Norms in Intergroup
Dialogue**

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In the United States and around the world, the past few years have seen increasing challenges to social justice education. Diversity, equity, and inclusion programs have been dismantled, teaching on critical race theory has been censored, and students express fears of speaking out on issues of race, gender, and social identity more generally. The convergence of these conditions exacerbates the silencing of marginalized voices and threaten opportunities for consciousness raising and dialogue across difference. One potentially fruitful response to this actuality is structured intergroup dialogue, which aims to counter participants' reticence and power imbalances through ground rules and skilled facilitation.

Structured dialogue about and across difference is an increasingly prevalent feature of the academic landscape and of other workplace, community, and social movement contexts. Often referred to as *intergroup dialogue* (because its intent is to foster understanding across social groups), it is structured by the leadership of trained facilitators and the explicit inclusion of norms, guidelines, ground rules, or community agreements. Intergroup dialogue programs on college campuses have proliferated since the 1980s and have been extensively documented and theorized in the education literature (e.g., Hicks, 2021; Maxwell et al. 2011; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Zúñiga et al., 2007).

Definitions, Goals, and Actual Outcomes of Intergroup Dialogue

Zúñiga et al. (2021) describe intergroup dialogue (IGD) as a “critical-dialogic praxis,” a form of social education that “seeks to engage difference, social identity, and social justice through an intentional process that attempts to enhance equity across two or more social identity groups with distinct subject positions and statuses in asymmetrical power relations” (p. 4). It is based on Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis which posits that intergroup contact can

reduce prejudice under conditions such as equal numbers and equal status of participants. The structure provided by ground rules and skilled facilitation is presumed to enable the amplification of the voices and perspectives of otherwise marginalized group members. More specifically, the aims (according to Zúñiga et al.) are for participants to see the inevitably partial nature of their perspectives and need to understand others' perspectives in order to make sense of their own; to develop empathy across groups, and to understand the workings of systems of oppression and how they might be transformed.

The Public Conversations Project, similarly, has delineated the following goals of intergroup dialogue:

1. The promotion of generous listening, reflection before speaking, or acting, and genuine thoughtful speaking
2. Participants' recognition and commitment to relational intentions, long-range purposes and capacity to shape what happens
3. Participants' ownership of the process
4. Openness to others and mutual recognition
5. Recognition of the complexity of self and other, and an inquiring stance
6. A sense of safety, security, and trust
7. Equal conversational power (Herzig & Chasin, 2006, p. 141, cited by Dessel & Rogge (2008, p. 215))

Outcomes of intergroup dialogue have been subject to a plethora of studies summarized by Dessel and Rogge (2008) and Frantell et al. (2019). According to Dessel and Rogge, "students in academic college settings have reported increased learning about the perspectives of people from other social groups, development of analytical problem-solving skills, valuing new viewpoints, understanding the impact of social group membership on identity, gaining increased awareness of social inequalities, and raised awareness of racial identity for both white students and students of color" (p. 224). Notably, differences have been found across racial groups. Increased perspective-taking was more pronounced among white students, whereas students of color experienced more positive views of conflict, less intergroup divisiveness, and increased positive relationships with white students (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). In community settings, researchers cited by Dessel and Rogge (2008) have found:

stereotype reduction, increased understanding and empathy, recognition of the impact of ethnicity on individual identity and group interactions, increased perspective taking, increased awareness about structural power relations, and complex thinking about diversity [as well as] improved communication and cross-racial interaction skills, provision of support and development of friendships, and uncovering common ground and initiating joint action on shared issues of concern (pp. 224-225). Frantell et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis largely affirmed these same outcomes.

The need for dialogue across difference has become ever more apparent in the current social climate, especially within the United States. Heightened awareness of racial injustice, hate crimes, and political divisiveness (fueled in part by media and distrust of it), have sparked programs, initiatives, events, and new pedagogical approaches that emphasize synchronous (and usually face-to-face) interpersonal dialogue. While most of these are one-time events, rather than the continuous programs that characterize some definitions of intergroup dialogue, many of their goals and processes are otherwise largely the same. Even workshops not explicitly focused on

social identity or intercultural communication are often initiated with presentations about ground rules.

Dialogue Norms and Ground Rules

Dialogue program organizers, facilitators, and course instructors recognize several reasons for establishing ground rules at the outset. Defining the parameters of acceptable participation, and asking participants to commit to them, can help people to feel safe taking risks necessary for their own learning and that of their fellow learners. At their core, dialogue ground rules ask participants to be open, honest, and forthcoming, while also showing respect and care for the feelings of others. A typical list of guidelines includes things like listening actively, sharing air time, speaking from experience and avoiding generalizations about groups, respecting confidentiality, and listening respectfully to different perspectives (see Adams et al., 1997). Rules like these have recently come under scrutiny and been problematized for a variety of reasons (e.g., Arao & Clemens, 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Indeed, any set of norms inevitably reflects cultural, ontological, epistemological, axiological, and ethical perspectives, and is therefore ripe for problematizing. The purpose of this paper is to tease out some of the inherent tensions from the point of view of identity, culture, values, and power relations. I aim to explore the following thorny issues: (1) confronting the risks and burdens of marginalized group members, (2) cultural connotations of “respect,” and (3) attempts to establish “safe spaces.”

Risks and Burdens of Dominant and Marginalized Group Members

While intergroup dialogue poses both benefits and challenges for all participants, those faced by members of marginalized groups are different from those experienced by dominant group members. Whereas participants whose social identities afford them relative power (e.g., those who are white, male, heterosexual, etc.) come into dialogue facing risks of guilt or shame over their unearned privilege, those who participate as members of oppressed groups face different threats. If appropriate ground rules are not effectively established and enforced, they are likely to face the same oppressive dynamics (e.g., stereotypes, prejudice, microaggressions (Sue, 2010), muting (Kramarae, 2009), discursive closure (Deetz, 1992), and double-binds (Bateson, 1972)) that exist in less structured environments. Even with effective structure, people who face these dynamics habitually are also at risk of (1) being triggered by behaviors that resonate with prior traumatic experiences and (2) taking on the burden of educating their more privileged counterparts.

Indeed, some scholars (e.g., Leonardo & Porter, 2010; James-Gallaway, 2023) have pointed to harm that can be caused to students of color by being asked to enlighten white participants. James-Gallaway (2023) observed that white students in IGD tended to practice what he termed “racial voyeurism” by “passively consuming the experiences of [students of color]” (p. 8). Out of a combination of ignorance and fear of offending or being called racist, he found, “White students generally refrained from openly discussing issues of (their) White racial identity” (p. 8). This racial voyeurism, he asserted, “functions as the consumption of racially marginalized beings by the racially privileged as a practice of racial power and superiority that reinforces and sustains racism and White supremacy” (p. 4). Other research cited by James-Gallaway (2023) has described ways in which white students disrupt dialogue about race through hostility, negative comments, talking over students of color, and claiming victimization. My own research (Author, 2010, 2011) also illustrated instances in

which white and heterosexual dialogue participants tried to direct the sharing of LGBTQ participants and people of color to meet their own instrumental and voyeuristic needs. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) explain that many of the guidelines for dialogue within social justice education can contribute to these problems. The celebration of personal experience, for example, can elevate individual stories over big-picture analyses of power relations in ways that enable dominant group members to position themselves as victims of discrimination. The validation of all participants' perspectives, similarly, can hijack interrogation of oppression when some participants refuse to acknowledge it. And the assumption of universally good intentions can remove accountability from participants who commit microaggressions. "In practice," they conclude, "the expectation that safety can be created in the social justice classroom through universalized procedural guidelines is always about the dominant group's safety" (p. 7). Another difficulty for dialogue participants representing oppressed groups is the expectation of "civility." This guideline can be leveraged to suppress the expression of emotions (especially anger) and assertive challenges to individuals' discourse or to the cultural status quo. As Altahmazi and Abid (2023) have asserted, impoliteness can be "a necessary form of restorative public intervention" (p. 527). The notion of civility is also culturally loaded and often applied in ways that are reflective of white American politeness norms. Hammer (2005), for example, has identified cultural differences in communication norms in contexts of conflict. Whereas some cultural groups tend to value emotional expression during conflict, others, such as most white Americans (Martin & Nakayama, 2022), expect emotional restraint. Similarly loaded is the notion of "respect."

Respect

Central to most sets of dialogue ground rules is the demonstration of respect. Indeed, research has established that when individuals feel respected by their fellow group members, they develop both a secure sense of self and a commitment to the effective functioning of the group (Simon, 2007). This is especially important, of course, when the very goals of the encounter involve intergroup understanding or appreciation. The problem, though, is that there is little consensus about how respect should be defined or enacted (Mackenzie & Wallace, 2011). Some scholars (e.g., Darwall, 1977; van Quaquebeke et al., 2009; Simon, 2007) have distinguished between "appraisal respect" and "recognition respect."

Appraisal respect, according to Simon (2007), "is primarily concerned with differentiation between individuals" (p. 311). Again, this is key to dialogues aimed at promoting understanding about and across difference. The danger, though, is that:

Especially under a capitalist regime, appraisal respect likely transforms people from persons with indisputable dignity into things with only instrumental or exchange values (Kant, 1974, p. 68). People are then included in our equation merely because we consider them as means (or obstacles) to our own ends, and we respect them solely as a function of their instrumental value for our own agenda. (Simon, 2007, p. 312)

Recognition respect, on the other hand, refers to a type of respect which was historically associated with rank or status. Since the Enlightenment, though, the Kantian notion of "respect for persons" has imbued recognition respect with egalitarian connotations.

It implies that we include others in our equation not just as factors that reduce them to simple means to our own ends, but as factors reflecting their dignity as ends in themselves (Kant, 1974, p. 59-60). Furthermore, as a consequence of their *equal* possession of

dignity, all people deserve *equal* respect as persons according to this notion (Kant, 1974, p. 68). (Simon, 2007, p. 311, emphasis in original)

Simon (2007) concludes by advocating “recognition as an equal” as the key component of respect but offers some caveats. First, he observes that there are differences between individual/interpersonal respect and collective/intergroup respect, and that members of subordinate groups may have very different goals than those of dominant groups. Both appraisal respect and recognition respect, moreover, are reflective of individualistic values, which can complicate how they are understood cross-culturally.

To define respect specifically for the purpose of intercultural communication, Mackenzie and Wallace (2011) differentiate not only between appraisal and recognition respect, but also respect’s individual- and group-level orientations (from de Cremer, 2002). They also observe verbal, nonverbal, paralinguistic, and interactional dimensions, as well as components that include word choice, grammar use, kinesics, paralanguage, communication style, and attentiveness. In their review of literature, they note comparisons to empathy, perspective taking, encouragement, cooperation, politeness, dignified treatment, appreciation, admiration, esteem, honor, reverence, deference, fear, liking, equality, and tolerance; and cite definitions involving “expression of regard for a specific individual as manifested in listening, recognition of contributing value, awareness of social context, expressing empathy and offering information”; “the communication of equality valuation and genuine interest”; the act of communicating positive regard and recognition of autonomy”; and “a combination of politeness and deference” (p. 12).

Mackenzie and Wallace (2011) advocate for a combination of “appropriate” attitudinal and interactional responses, but this begs the question of what constitutes appropriateness. Indeed, their own research reveals vast discrepancies between cultures, even aside from the context and goals of any interaction. For many Koreans, for example, respect is communicated through formality, neutrality of expression, and recognition of (age-based) status, whereas for many U.S. Americans it is communicated through equal treatment and expression of pleasure. Another similar study they cite (by Bailey, 1997) contrasts Korean “restraint politeness” with African American “involvement politeness” characterized by laughter, animation, and joking. A third study by Griefat and Katriel (1989) contrasts what they call “dugri” speech (characteristic of Israeli Jews) with “musayara” (characteristic of Arabs), wherein the former emphasizes directness whereas the later emphasizes dramatic effusiveness (Mackenzie & Wallace, 2011). Augsburg (1992), similarly enumerated cultural differences related to conflict management, and identified the following as communicative norms associated with Western values: open self-disclosure; immediacy and directness; and the use of reasonable, rationale language. Respect, in sum, means different things to different people, and is a loaded concept given the existence of cultural differences, contextual considerations, and the significance of power relations.

Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces

A common way of framing the need for ground rules is the establishment of a “safe space,” where people feel comfortable bringing their whole selves into a dialogue and participating fully. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, for example, has adopted the language of Arizona State University’s Intergroup Relations Center to describe the objective of creating “an environment in which everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves and participating fully, without fear of attack, ridicule, or denial of experience” (cited by Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 138). Arao and Clemens, though, have challenged the “safety”

frame for letting participants off the hook from critically interrogating their preconceived assumptions when that interrogation can cause discomfort. They observe that feelings such as fear, guilt, anger, and sorrow are normal elements of intergroup dialogue, and contribute to its educational goals. As Harris (2018) elaborates:

Encouraging students to acknowledge and embrace that discomfort is important to their learning and maturation process, and most importantly, to developing a set of communication skills that will prepare them for productive contributions to public discourse on topics of inequality in the future (p. 253).

For members of dominant groups, the “safe space” frame can be seen to excuse demands that people of color, for example, constrain their participation to conform to the emotional needs of white participants. Members of target groups, in turn, “are aware that an authentic expression of the pain they experience as a result of oppression is likely to result in their dismissal and condemnation as hypersensitive or unduly aggressive” (Arao & Clemens, p. 140).

Leonardo and Porter (2010) have argued that the expectation of safety in racial dialogue is a colorblind notion that ignores both the irony of antiracism for white participants and the fundamental impossibility of safety for participants of color in a racist society. They describe these safety discourses as “a veiled form of violence” against participants of color in already hostile environments for students “whose perspectives and experiences are consistently minimized” (p. 141). In practice, they observe, “safety” translates into protection for whites from being made to feel or appear racist or even identified as racialized beings. Often, too, they point out, “whites turn racism into an intellectualist problem, rather than a lived one” (p. 149). Instead, Leonardo and Porter assert, the experiences of frustration, anger, and pain should be embraced for their roles in promoting authentic, mutual recognition. Uncomfortable feelings are a natural part of what Deetz and Simpson (2004) called the “radical encounters with otherness” that constitute the transformative power of dialogue.

Instead of safe spaces, then, Arao and Clemens (2013) advocate for “brave spaces” in which dialogue participants embrace vulnerability and are willing to sit with and work through conflict. They point to several common ground rules which they find problematic. Instead of “agree to disagree,” for example, they recommend “controversy with civility,” which implies embracing and engaging with conflict. In place of “don’t take things personally,” they suggest “own your intentions and your impact.” This shifts the burden of offensive speech from the listener to the speaker. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), similarly, offer guidelines emphasizing mindfulness of emotions in the context of structural power relations. These include intellectual humility, differentiating between opinion and informed knowledge, examining defensive reactions and group-level patterns, and distinguishing between safety and comfort.

Other rules, such as “respect” and “no attacks” Arao and Clemens (2013) recommend asking groups to probe and seek collective definitions for. This last recommendation is echoed by Leonardo and Porter (2010), who advocate for meta-dialogue. They suggest, dialogue participants should recognize the relational nature of safety, and should ask the question, “who feels safe and toward what ends?”

Conclusion: Find Out What It Means to Me

As Cooks (2021) has observed, “[d]ialogue, as the equitable sharing of selves and others toward understanding and connecting around differences, has been idealized and politicized as the image of justice.... But dialogue also can create and/or maintain unequal relations of power” (p. 22). For dialogue to contribute to social justice, it needs to be structured in ways that (1) acknowledge and address cultural differences in the meanings of “respect,” “dialogue” (see Carbaugh et al., 2006), “communication” and “ethics” (see Cooks, 2021); (2) understand the very different positions from which dialogue participants engage; and (3) balance tensions between protecting and challenging participants. To achieve all this, it requires both skillful facilitation and the establishment of guidelines for interaction.

Regarding ground rules, I endorse most of the recommendations of Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), Arao and Clemens (2013), and Leonardo and Porter (2010), described above. I agree that “brave spaces” are more appropriate goals than “safe spaces,” since anger, pain, guilt, and fear are normal parts of the social learning experience. Civility, correspondingly, should be advised with caution given its associations with censorship of anger and silencing of marginalized voices. In general, though, the specific language of guidelines that are presented to dialogue participants are less important than *how* they are introduced.

Dialogue facilitators should propose ground rules in ways that are clearly connected to the goals of dialogue, which are for participants to see the inevitably partial nature of their perspectives, to develop empathy across groups, and to understand the workings of systems of oppression and how they might be transformed. This requires honoring participants’ identities, experiences, and willingness to participate, while also holding them accountable for their critical thinking and respect for others. It means assuming good intentions but calling out discourse with oppressive impacts. And it means speaking from experience, but doing so with humility, recognizing that one’s knowledge is partial.

Most importantly, because dialogue involves the sharing of meaning, and because the meanings of words vary across cultures and contexts, it behooves facilitators to guide participants through discussion about the meaning of concepts like respect. Meta-dialogue enables groups to explore the significance of communicative ethics within the contexts of their own identities and lived experiences, which can be an enlightening process. As Otis Redding wrote, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Find out what it means to me. What does respect mean to you?”

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