

From Separate Corners to Dialogue and Action

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Abstract How can higher education programs engage students in building a shared commons to address inequalities and foster commitment to intergroup collaboration? Intergroup dialogue is one such possibility to provide forums for meaningful engagement among students from diverse backgrounds. Findings from field experiments at nine colleges and universities show that students in intergroup dialogues increased significantly more than counterparts in control groups and social science comparison groups in their critiques of inequality and their commitments to post-college action to redress inequalities. Further, students in intergroup dialogues rated the frequency of the core communication processes more highly than the social science comparison students. The communication processes help account for the greater increase in students' critiques of inequality and commitment to post-college actions.

Keywords Intergroup dialogue · Intergroup relations · Inequality · Education · Communication · Community building

I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we have

different stories, but we have common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—toward a better future. ...But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. ... if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care or education or the need to find good jobs for every American.... Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. ... we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African American community and the larger community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation...

—Barack Obama, *Toward a More Perfect Union*, March 18, 2008.

How do people come out of their respective corners to work together toward a more equitable union? Barack Obama posed this challenge when he took the issue of race and racism head on. Persisting racial inequalities and privileges—through residential, school, religious, and occupational segregation—separate people not only physically but psychologically and socially. Be it race, income, or other markers of stratification, the separate corners become spaces of refuge. Some retreat out of fear of the “other,” others retreat to maintain a sense of self and social dignity, and yet others retreat not out of choice but due to the harsh realities of the constraints to fuller participation in institutions that impact the quality of their lives.

Obama's call for community members to come together to work on issues affecting them resonates with a number of efforts locally and globally aimed at reversing

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hostilities, inequities, and segregation. A common cornerstone of these efforts has been a focus on deliberation and dialogue as means of meaningful engagement across differences. While many would say that dialogue is just talk, scholars and practitioners argue otherwise: “Sustained dialogue is more structured than a good conversation.... Its purpose is to provide an experience in changing relationships within the dialogue group. Its destination is to design a plan for changing relationships in the larger community” (Saunders 1999, p. 81). In the United States, study circles are the most widely used means of bringing together constituents and stakeholders with different perspectives to deliberate about community problems (McCoy and Scully 2002; Walsh 2006). In the Middle East, Palestinians and Israelis have joined in dialogues about their respective understandings and preferred solutions to the conflict in which they have lived since 1948 (Abu-Nimer 1999; Golan and Kamal 1999). The Summer Youth Dialogue Program in Detroit, Michigan, brings together high school youth to interrogate and break down the boundaries of racial residential segregation (Fisher and Checkoway forthcoming). The MixItUp program of the Southern Poverty Law Center engages even younger school children to cross social boundaries (Holladay 2008).

Understanding Group-Based Inequalities

As Obama conveyed in his speech, a recognition of structural racial inequalities that underlie social problems—such as in the academic achievement gap, health disparities, and lack of economic opportunities—is fundamental to any substantive engagement and collective problem solving. Yet, as social scientists have shown, understanding group-based inequalities is difficult (Hunt 2007; Kluegel and Bobo 1993; Kluegel and Smith 1986). A fundamental attribution bias underlies this difficulty (Ross 1977). People tend to explain differences between people as coming from differences in the individuals themselves rather than from the structural or institutional factors that affect groups of people differently. For example, poor academic performance, low income, and low quality of life are more apt to be explained by differences in individual motivation, values, and behaviors than by systematic differences in quality of schools, access to social networks leading to employment opportunities, and residential segregation. This tendency to favor person-centered causal explanations over situational and structural explanations is particularly pronounced in societies high in individualism such as the United States (for a review see Oyserman et al. 2002). It is also fostered by beliefs in a just world in which everyone deserves what he/she receives (Hunt 2000) and

by a motive, also presumed to be universal, to justify and legitimize the system and existing social arrangements (Jost et al. 2004). The bias to favor individualistic explanations for disparities also derives from segregation such that when racial, ethnic, and social class groups live separately from each other, it is difficult for them to interact and learn what obstacles different groups of people face in society (Bullock 1999).

Teaching about inequality thus has to overcome numerous impediments to understanding differences and disparities. Students can ingest information about inequality but to truly understand it, they need to engage actively with the material, just as they need to engage in laboratories in science courses that take them beyond mere reading and listening to lectures. We contend that intergroup dialogue is an effective kind of education for overcoming the psychological and social impediments to learning about and critiquing inequality, and applying that learning to commitments to act to redress inequality. In this article we test the efficacy of intergroup dialogue for increasing critique of inequality as well as commitment to action. We do this in two ways: comparing change in critique of inequality and commitment to action among dialogue students to students in a randomized control group and also to students in traditional lecture/discussion social science classes. We start by describing a critical-dialogic model of intergroup dialogue that focuses on four communication processes—appreciating difference, engaging self, critical reflection, and alliance building. We discuss the goals of intergroup dialogue, pedagogical strategies, and communication processes that frame the learning environment for students. We then describe a research collaboration of nine colleges and universities investigating the effects of a critical-dialogic approach to intergroup dialogue on students’ critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action. We discuss the results in the context of criticisms of intergroup dialogue from some conservative and progressive educators, and, drawing on our results, suggest practices for educational and community dialogues.

Intergroup Dialogue

Intergroup dialogues bring together students drawn equally from two social identity groups that share a history of contentious relationships with each other or have lacked opportunities to talk in meaningful ways. Intergroup dialogue aims to promote greater intergroup understanding of identity and inequality, to improve and deepen intergroup communication and relationships, and to connect dialogue to action and greater capacity for intergroup collaborations (Zúñiga et al. 2007).

Communication Processes in a Critical-Dialogic Model of Intergroup Dialogue

Nagda (2006) delineated four intergroup dialogue communication processes that help define a critical-dialogic approach to intergroup dialogue. The term *dialogic* denotes a focus on relationships, what Baxter (2004) calls a relation “between self and other, a simultaneity of sameness and difference out of which knowing becomes possible” (p. 109). Influenced by theorizing about dialogism in communication studies that draws particularly from Buber (1970) and Bakhtin (1981), the dialogic part of our model stresses how students from two groups co-create or constitute themselves and their relationships through communications. Thus, *appreciating difference* refers to the intentional listening to and learning from others while *engaging self* involves personal sharing and inquiry.

The term *critical* in this model of intergroup dialogue denotes a focus on how power and privilege influence the lives of people in different social groups. This aspect of the model draws upon Freire’s (1970) concept of critical consciousness, which includes an analysis of power as well as action to bring about greater social and economic justice. We also draw from critical race theory, particularly its emphasis on the way structures in the law and other institutions shape how race, gender, and class operate in society (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). These two intellectual traditions share pedagogical and analytic principles designed to enable individuals to claim their own social realities through story-telling and other narrative methods. In the critical-dialogic model of intergroup dialogue, *critical reflection* involves participants in examining their own and other students’ perspectives and experiences through the lenses of power, privilege, and inequality. *Alliance building* involves participants in working through disagreements across identity groups, and talking about ways to collaborate on action.

This model of intergroup dialogue, by combining both the critical and dialogic elements, differs from those that are focused more on deliberating about policy issues without in-depth relationship building and without informed structural analysis of inequalities—such as Study Circles (McCoy and Scully 2002)—and from still others that are more inquiry-focused but do not explicitly attend to the sociopolitical context—such as Bohmian dialogue (Bohm 2004). The critical-dialogic model is also the only one that pays attention to having equal numbers of participants from different social identity groups (see also Dessel et al. 2006; Zúñiga and Nagda 2001).

Pedagogical Features

Three pedagogical features typify the intergroup dialogues (Nagda and Zúñiga 2003). First, an *active learning*

educational curriculum includes conceptual content and experiential activities, historical and social science materials, writing assignments, and questions to stimulate dialogue and reflection. The curriculum is organized to progress from teaching what dialogue involves, examining how social identity is understood within literatures in social sciences and in their own lives, exploring commonalities and differences across identities in racialized/gendered experiences, practicing dialogue about controversial issues (such as immigration, hate crimes, body image, and safety and violence on campus), to connecting this learning to alliance building and action. Second, *structured interactions* help set up the optimum conditions for positive contact (Allport 1954)—groundrules for engagement, a small group setting with equal number of students from the two identity groups in dialogue, opportunities for students to know each other in personal ways, and participation in collaborative projects. A combination of individual time for reflection and dyadic or small group conversations is used to stimulate dialogue in the whole class. Students meet in both caucus (shared identity) groups and in mixed groups so as to explore common and different experiences within each group and across the two groups. Finally, *facilitative guidance* helps create a comfortable and inclusive environment and encourages maximal participation. Trained facilitators—faculty, professional staff, graduate students or undergraduates—work in cross-racial or cross-gender teams. Having a facilitator who also identifies as a member from each of the identity groups in dialogue assures the presence of voices from both in the leadership of the class.

Together, these pedagogical features of intergroup dialogue foster communication processes among participants that explain *how* intergroup dialogue produces effects.

Research on Intergroup Dialogue

A growing body of research supports the impact of intergroup dialogue. Research focusing on outcomes shows that participation in intergroup dialogue helps students: (1) to understand their social identities (Khuri 2004; Nagda and Zúñiga 2003; Spencer et al. 2008), and to interrogate the causes of group-based inequalities (Alimo et al. 2002; DeTurk 2006; Gurin et al. 2004; Lopez et al. 1998; Wayne 2008), (2) to build deeper relationships across differences in which differences in power are not denied but actively engaged (Boulden 2006; DeTurk 2006; Khuri 2004; Nagda 2006; Nagda et al. 2004; Spencer et al. 2008; Wayne 2008; Yeakley 1998), and (3) to utilize critical consciousness and relationship building to promote intergroup collaboration and action (Lopez et al. 1998; Nagda et al. 2004; Rodenburg and Huynh 2006). With the exception of research with youth programs (Boulden 2006; Spencer et al. 2008;

Wayne 2008) and community programs (DeTurk 2006; Walsh 2006), the majority of the empirical research has been conducted on intergroup dialogues in higher education settings.

Three problems characterize the research. The first is the problem of causality. None of the prior research used random assignment of students predisposed to take dialogue courses to an experimental treatment (a dialogue) or to a control group so as to determine if change over time can actually be attributed to intergroup dialogue. With the best of the designs (pre-post assessments) that have been used, it is still impossible to know if the change that students show from beginning to end of a term would have taken place even if they had not been in dialogue courses. The second is the nearly exclusive emphasis in the research on outcomes, with no or little attention to the processes that take place within dialogues that may account for the effects of dialogue. Even when there has been some attention to processes that help explain the effects, it has been on the psychological processes that occur within individuals, and not the interactional processes among individuals (Stephan 2008). The third is generalizability. All previous studies have been case studies evaluating specific dialogues at a single institution but not across institutions. We address these limitations in the research reported here.

Using a randomized experimental design in addition to comparisons to social science courses, we investigate effects of intergroup dialogue on students' critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action across nine colleges and universities. Specifically, we hypothesize first that students in intergroup dialogue courses will increase their critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action to redress inequality more than participants in a randomized control group. Secondly, students in intergroup dialogue courses will increase their critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action more than their counterparts in the social science comparison courses. Thirdly, students in intergroup dialogue courses will indicate higher frequency of all four communication processes than students in the social science comparison courses. Finally, higher levels of the communication processes produce significantly greater change in the students' critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action.

Methods

Nine colleges and universities collaborated over a 4-year period to implement a standardized critical-dialogic model of intergroup dialogue on their campuses, and carry out a common set of field experiments to examine the effects of intergroup dialogue. The intergroup dialogues involved in

this study lasted a full academic term (10–14 weeks) and met for weekly sessions of 2–3 hours each.

Research Design

Field Experiments

On each campus, students who applied to enroll in a race dialogue were randomly assigned either to a race dialogue or to a no treatment control group; students who applied to enroll in a gender dialogue were randomly assigned either to a gender dialogue or to a no treatment control group. The dialogue (experimental group) and control groups comprised the field experiment component of the study. Altogether 26 race experiments and 26 gender experiments were conducted. Random assignment of students to dialogues and control groups is an important feature of this research because it controls for the change and development that would have occurred over time had students not participated in an intergroup dialogue.

Social Science Class Comparison Groups

The study employed a non-randomized condition, social science classes on race or gender, to assess if demonstrated experimental effects of intergroup dialogue derive only from content learning rather than from the method of dialogue. Altogether 13 social science race comparison groups and 13 social science gender comparison groups were conducted. The social science classes followed the traditional lecture/discussion method but like the dialogue courses focused on content about race or gender. Thus, if the results were to show significantly greater change among dialogue than among social science comparison students, the study would lend support to the importance of the method of dialogue beyond content learning about race and gender.

Participants

Each race experiment and each gender experiment was comprised of 28–32 students, 14 to 16 students divided as equally as possible by race and gender. The average across the 52 experiments was 27% white women, 24% white men, 26% women of color, 23% men of color. Across the 52 experiments, 742 students were in the dialogues and 721 in the control groups.

The social science comparison groups were also comprised of 14–16 students, also divided as equally as possible by race and gender. The average across the 26 comparison groups was 28% white women, 24% white men, 27% women of color, and 21% men of color. Students enrolled in social science classes about race and ones about

gender volunteered to participate. Using demographic information collected from the volunteers, approximately four students from the white women, white men, women of color, and men of color volunteers were randomly chosen to serve as social science comparisons for each gender dialogue and for each race dialogue. The dialogue-social science comparisons included a total of 867 students, 429 in the dialogues (a subset of the larger experimental sample where dialogues were conducted simultaneously with social science comparison groups) and 438 in the social science comparison groups.

Students in all three groups (dialogues, control groups, and comparison groups) completed a pretest at the beginning of the academic term and a posttest at the end of the particular term when they were enrolled in one of these classes or were in the control groups.

Measures

Critique of Inequality

Students indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree strongly; 7 = agree strongly; 3 items; $\alpha = .67$) how much they agreed or disagreed with “racial/ethnic profiling is a serious problem in our society,” “there should be stronger legislation against perpetrators of hate crimes,” and “the biases built into the legal systems contribute to the inequality in our society.” Students’ critique of inequality was assessed on the pretest and posttest for participants in all conditions—dialogue (experimental), control, and social science comparison.

Post-College Commitment

Students indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all important; 7 = extremely important; 5 items; $\alpha = .89$) how important the following activities will be to them personally after college. Items included “influencing the political structure (e.g. voting, education campaigns, get-out-the-vote, etc.),” “influencing social policy,” “working to correct social and economic inequalities,” “helping promote inter-racial/inter-ethnic understanding,” and “working to achieve greater gender equality.” Students’ post-college commitment was assessed on the pretest and posttest for participants in all conditions—dialogue (experimental), control, and social science comparison.

Communication Processes

In the posttest, we asked students in the intergroup dialogues and the social science comparison groups to rate aspects of their learning environment. For each set of students, we specified the class (intergroup dialogue or the

social science course) that they were to assess. Specifically, students indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much) the extent to which each of the communication processes occurred during their course. Factor analysis of their judgments of 20 items supported the hypothesized structure of the four processes—engaging self, appreciating difference, critical reflection, and alliance building (see Nagda 2006).

Engaging self (5 items, $\alpha = .81$) included “being able to disagree,” “sharing my views and experiences,” “asking questions that I felt I wasn’t able to ask before,” “addressing difficult issues,” and “speaking openly without feeling judged.” Appreciating difference (4 items, $\alpha = .84$) included “hearing different points of view,” “learning from each other,” “hearing other students’ personal stories,” and “appreciating experiences different from my own.” Critical reflection (4 items, $\alpha = .76$) included “examining the sources of my biases and assumptions,” “thinking about issues that I may not have before,” “understanding how privilege and oppression affect our lives,” and “making mistakes and reconsidering my opinions.” Finally, alliance building (7 items, $\alpha = .90$) included “sharing ways to collaborate with other groups to take action,” “understanding other students’ passion about social issues,” “working through disagreements and conflicts,” “other students’ willingness to understand their own biases and assumptions,” “listening to other students’ commitment to work against injustices,” “talking about ways to take action on social issues,” and “feeling a sense of hope about being able to challenge injustices.” An index of all four communication processes (20 items, $\alpha = .94$) was created as well for regression analyses.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Students in intergroup dialogue courses will increase their critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action to redress inequality more than their counterparts in the control group

In testing this hypothesis, we conducted a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each dependent variable, thus accounting for interdependence in data collected at separate time points (pretest and posttest) for the same participants. Time (pretest versus posttest—within subjects) and condition (dialogue versus control—between subjects) were entered as independent variables.

As hypothesized, participants in intergroup dialogue showed significantly larger increases in critique of inequality than participants in the randomized control groups (time by condition interaction, $F(1, 1376) = 22.34$,

Table 1 Descriptive summary of data on outcomes and processes across conditions

		N	Pretest		Posttest	
			M	SD	M	SD
<i>Experimental comparisons</i>						
Outcomes						
Critique of inequality	Dialogue	675	5.49	1.15	5.70	1.15
	Control	701	5.44	1.13	5.39	1.18
Post-college	Dialogue	675	4.92	1.43	5.14	1.37
Commitment to action	Control	699	4.90	1.42	4.81	1.45
<i>Social science comparisons</i>						
Outcomes						
Critique of inequality	Dialogue	406	5.53	1.14	5.84	1.08
	SS Comp	416	5.54	1.00	5.52	1.06
Post-college	Dialogue	406	4.95	1.42	5.20	1.40
Commitment to action	SS Comp	417	4.77	1.35	4.77	1.37
Communication processes						
Engaging self	Dialogue	410	–	–	5.66	0.94
	SS Comp	400	–	–	4.90	1.22
Appreciating	Dialogue	410	–	–	6.25	0.77
Difference	SS Comp	400	–	–	5.64	1.10
Critical reflection	Dialogue	409	–	–	5.73	0.92
	SS Comp	399	–	–	5.21	1.09
Alliance building	Dialogue	409	–	–	5.37	1.11
	SS Comp	400	–	–	4.45	1.27

$p < .001$; see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Figure 1 shows that the dialogue students and control group students did not differ when the semester began (pretest $t(1449) = .35$, $p = .73$), but differed significantly at the end of the term (posttest $t(1063) = 4.79$, $p < .001$). Indeed, dialogue students became more critical of inequality, demonstrating significant change over time, $t(700) = 5.42$, $p < .001$, while students in the control group did not change, $t(674) = -1.23$, $p = .22$.

Results were similar for commitment to post-college action. As hypothesized, participants in intergroup dialogue showed significantly larger increases in commitment

to post-college action to redress inequality than participants in the randomized control groups (time by condition interaction, $F(1, 1374) = 26.34$, $p < .001$; see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Indeed, Fig. 1 illustrates that dialogue students and control group students did not differ when the term began (pretest $t(1448) = .50$, $p = .62$), but did differ significantly at the end of the term as dialogue students became more committed to take action after college to redress inequality (posttest $t(1384) = 4.33$, $p < .001$). Whereas dialogue students changed significantly over the course of the semester ($t(698) = 4.93$, $p < .001$), students in the control group actually significantly decreased during this time ($t(674) = -2.22$, $p < .03$).

Hypothesis 2: Students in intergroup dialogue courses will increase their critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action more than their counterparts in the social science comparison courses

Using the same analytical approach as described above, we found that participants in intergroup dialogue showed significantly larger increases in critique of inequality than participants in the social science comparison groups (time by condition interaction, $F(1, 822) = 23.55$, $p < .001$; see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Figure 2 shows that the dialogue students and social science comparison students did not differ when the semester began (pretest $t(863) = -.23$, $p = .82$), but differed significantly at the end of the term (posttest $t(822) = 4.23$, $p < .001$). Indeed, dialogue students became more critical of inequality, demonstrating significant change over time, $t(405) = 6.59$, $p < .001$, while students in the social science comparison group did not change, $t(415) = -.25$, $p = .81$.

Again, results were similar for commitment to post-college action. As hypothesized, participants in intergroup dialogue showed a significantly larger increase in commitment to post-college action to redress inequality than participants in the social science comparison groups (time by condition interaction, $F(1, 823) = 10.88$, $p = .001$; see

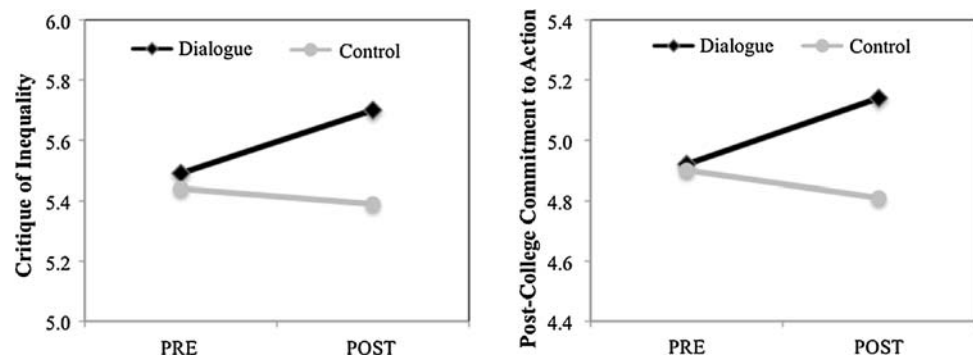
Fig. 1 Experimental effects of intergroup dialogue on change in students' critique of inequality and post-college commitment to action

Fig. 2 Effects of intergroup dialogue relative to social science courses on change in students' critique of inequality and post-college commitment to action

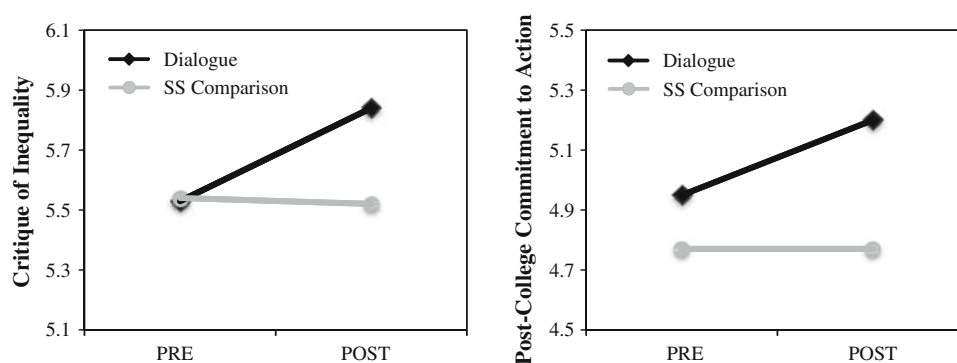


Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Indeed, Fig. 2 illustrates that while dialogue students and social science comparison students differed at the beginning (pretest $t(862) = 2.03$, $p = .04$) and end of the term (posttest, $t(824) = 4.45$, $p < .001$), dialogue students showed significant increases in their post-college commitment to action over the course of the term, $t(405) = 4.55$, $p < .001$, while students in the social science comparison groups did not change, $t(416) = .10$, $p = .92$.

Hypothesis 3: Students in intergroup dialogue courses will indicate higher frequency of all four communication processes than students in the social science comparison courses

In testing this hypothesis, we conducted independent t -tests of the mean posttest composite scores for each communication process—engaging self, appreciating difference, critical reflection, and alliance building. As hypothesized, students indicated that all four communication processes occurred more frequently in intergroup dialogue courses than in social science comparison courses. Specifically, students in intergroup dialogue reported more communication focused on engaging self, $t(808) = 9.93$, $p < .001$, appreciating difference, $t(808) = 9.14$, $p < .001$, critical reflection, $t(806) = 7.28$, $p < .001$, and alliance building, $t(807) = 10.99$, $p < .001$, than students in social science courses.

Hypothesis 4: Higher levels of the communication processes produce significantly greater change in the students' critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action

To test whether the communication processes have a direct impact on increasing students' critique of inequality and post-college community involvement, we conducted separate multiple regression analyses for each outcome using students' posttest scores for critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action as dependent variables. Change over time is measured by controlling students'

posttest scores for critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action for their pretest scores. An overall composite score for the frequency of communication processes (i.e. averaging across all scale items for engaging self, appreciating difference, critical reflection, and alliance building measures) was entered as an independent predictor in each regression as well as controls for the effect of condition (dialogue versus social science comparison), topic (dialogue on gender or one race), and target/agent status (targets—students of color in race and women in gender dialogues; agents—white students in race and men in gender dialogues). Reported coefficients are unstandardized with standardized coefficients indicated in parentheses (see Table 2).

Critique of Inequality

Results show that the impact of communication processes was significant in explaining increased critique of inequality over the academic term (see Table 2). Thus, the more frequent the occurrence of the communication processes, the higher the increase in critique of inequality. Topic (gender or race) and status (target or agent) were not significant predictors of change in critique of inequality (see Table 2), importantly highlighting similar effects across courses focusing on race or gender content and across the students who identify with target or agent identities within the focus of the course. If communication processes focusing on engaging self, appreciating difference, critical reflection, and alliance building constitute core active ingredients of intergroup dialogue, then these processes ought to mediate observed differences in students' increased critique of inequality between dialogue and social science courses (presented above). Indeed, the effect of condition (social science comparison versus intergroup dialogue), $\beta = .32$ (.15), $SE = .06$, $t = 5.36$, $p < .001$, was significantly attenuated when communication processes were entered as a predictor of students' critique of inequality, Sobel = 5.59, $p < .001$, $\beta = .21$ (.10), $SE = .07$, $t = 3.15$, $p < .01$. Given that the effect of condition remains significant, we can conclude that

Table 2 Predictors of change in student's critique of inequality and post-college commitment to action

Independent variables	Critique of inequality			Post-college commitment to action		
	β	SE	<i>t</i>	β	SE	<i>t</i>
Pretest score	.56 (.55)***	.03	48.95	.65 (.64)***	.03	25.28
Topic (gender or race)	.07 (.03) ^{ns}	.06	1.14	.12 (.04) [†]	.07	1.82
Status (target or agent)	.03 (.01) ^{ns}	.07	.43	.06 (.02) ^{ns}	.07	.94
Condition (ss comparison or dialogue)	.21 (.10)**	.07	3.15	.10 (.04) ^{ns}	.07	1.40
Communication processes	.16 (.15)**	.03	4.70	.27 (.19)***	.04	6.99
	$R^2 = .39$			$R^2 = .53$		

Reported beta coefficients are unstandardized with standardized coefficients indicated in parentheses. Change in the dependent variable over the course of an academic term is accounted for by controlling students' posttest scores for the pretest scores. For topic, gender = 0 and race = 1. For status, target = 0 and agent = 1. For condition, social science comparison = 0 and dialogue = 1

^{ns} Non-significant; [†] marginally significant; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

communication processes partially mediated the observed differences in increased critique of inequality between students in the dialogue and social science comparison groups. Thus, the communication processes play a critical role in accounting for the larger increase in students' critique of inequality in intergroup dialogue relative to social science comparison courses.

Post-College Commitment

The impact of the communication processes was also significant in explaining increased commitment to post-college action (see Table 2). Thus, the more frequent the occurrence of the communication processes, the higher the increase in commitment to post-college action. Again, topic (gender or race) and status (target or agent) were not significant predictors of change in commitment to post-college action (see Table 2) though students in dialogues and social science courses focusing on race rather than gender do show marginally larger increases in commitment to post-college action. While condition (social science comparison versus intergroup dialogue) was a significant predictor of anticipated post-college involvement in analyses carried out *before* including communication processes as a predictor, $\beta = .30$, $SE = .07$, $t = 4.32$, $p < .001$, the effect of condition was no longer significant after including communication processes as a predictor, $\beta = .10$ (.04), $SE = .07$, $t = 1.40$, $p = .16$, indicating that communication processes mediated the original observed differences in increased commitment to post-college action between students in the dialogue and social science comparison groups, Sobel = 5.95, $p < .001$. Thus, the increase in anticipated post-college involvement of students in intergroup dialogue more than social science classes occurred substantially *because* of communication processes focusing on engaging self, appreciating difference, critical reflection, and alliance building.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to understand the impact of intergroup dialogue and the role of critical-dialogic communication processes in affecting the outcomes. Pre- and post-survey data from students randomized to take an intergroup dialogue or participate in a control group show important outcome and process findings. Regarding outcomes, intergroup dialogue students increased more in their critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action to redress inequality than students in either the control group or the social science comparison classes. Regarding process, students evidenced communication processes of appreciating difference, engaging self, critical reflection, and alliance building more frequently in intergroup dialogues than in social science classes. Most importantly, in linking the processes to the outcomes, we found not only that the communication processes were significantly related to increased critique of inequality and commitment to post-college action to redress inequality, but also that they mediated the impact of condition (dialogue versus social science class) on the outcomes. Thus, these meditational findings importantly inform the *process* by which a critical-dialogic approach produces effects on students' critique of inequality as well as their post-college commitment to action. In short, these findings tell us not only what intergroup dialogue does, but also how intergroup dialogue works.

Emerging Criticisms

Despite evidence for effects of intergroup dialogue and the increasing number of intergroup dialogue programs on college campuses, intergroup dialogue is criticized by both liberal/progressive and conservative scholars. On the liberal/progressive side, Gorski (2008) criticizes intergroup dialogue for being merely interpersonal, lacking a sociopolitical

analysis and privileging the privileged. In his view, the privileged are not sufficiently challenged to examine structural and institutional causes of inequality that advantage them and disadvantage others. He further charges that intergroup dialogue rarely makes social change a central goal. Such non-critical approaches to dialogue generally produce benefits mostly for the members of privileged groups and reinforce the tokenizing role of less privileged groups. For example, dialogues that emphasize interpersonal dynamics to the exclusion of socio-political analysis can focus just on creating harmony between groups, rather than on analyzing and working with conflicts between groups (Abu-Nimer 1999; Maoz et al. 2002).

On the conservative side, the National Association of Scholars, a national organization of conservative faculty and graduate students, has posted nine critiques of what they call “the progressivist near-monopoly of American higher education,” one of which focuses specifically on intergroup dialogue. Using web descriptions of intergroup dialogue programs, Wood (2008) criticizes the role of undergraduate peer facilitators (which some institutions but not all institutions use) and the problem, as he sees it, of the Michigan intergroup dialogue courses being only under the sponsorship of the College of Literature, Arts & Sciences and Division of Student Affairs rather than under the faculty senate. He also cites an imbalance and bias in political perspectives, too much emphasis on action and change, and an inappropriate pedagogy emphasizing personal experience. This view that reading and dialoguing about inequality and listening to students’ own experiences with inequality promote a “deep distrust of American society and an aggressive focus on racial grievance” underestimates the capacities of undergraduates to balance societal problems with appreciation for historical change and progress.

What these ideologically different criticisms have in common, beyond opposing charges about the socio-political content and action aspects of intergroup dialogue, is their disregard or disparagement of relational and collaborative learning. Liberal/progressive educators view relational processes as simply interpersonal and discursive, and not focused enough on socio-political analysis and action. Conservative critics blast experiential learning and the pedagogy of peer-facilitated group dialogue as a “radical departure from fundamental notions about appropriate pedagogy that have long been a part of university culture” (Wood 2008, p. 13).

Toward Meaningful Dialogue and Action

The critical-dialogic communicative engagement is crucially important in the students’ learning—bridging academic content with personal sense-making, interpersonal

relating with sociopolitical analyses, and classroom learning with community involvement. Students’ reflections on their learning, drawn from their final papers, help explain how they tied communication processes to their critique of inequality and commitments to action. We found that engagement of self and appreciating difference were common processes in students’ writings about learning from their peers. In accord with other studies of intergroup dialogue (Khuri 2004; Wayne 2008; Yeakley 1998), personal stories told by those who shared their social identities *and* those who were different were crucially important in the dialogues. A woman of color in a gender dialogue related that her new awareness of how gender affects her life came from listening to others: “Hearing other women made me feel like somebody had placed my whole world in a jar for me to look at. Piece by piece I took inventory of my beliefs and opinions about gender norms and then I began to reconstruct them.” By engaging herself in more personal and critical inquiry as a result of listening to other women, she began to unpack her socialization as a woman. When the perspectives and experiences students listen to come from those who are different from them, they examine the reasons for these differences and what the differences mean for their sense of social responsibility. A white woman in a race dialogue emphasized how stories told by students of color helped her appraise her social responsibility: “Listening to the stories of other students has helped me become accountable for the role I take in the larger system. I cannot claim innocence if I receive a privilege/benefit that I now know is given to me based on my race/ethnicity.”

Critical reflection and alliance building are not simply abstract but examined in daily realities that the students in dialogue share with each other. For example, a white man in a gender dialogue said: “It was mind blowing to hear the women in my group speak of things like how lucky they felt to focus on things that were not stereotypical for their gender. I had never realized that when I told people that I wanted to go into biology, people may have reacted differently were I a woman.” The importance of sustained engagement for building alliances cannot be understated. While critical reflection provides a means of examining these relationships in the context of the larger society, continued engagement also provides a way of changing these relationships in the dialogue setting and then extending that to changing relationships outside the dialogue setting. Alliance building across differences speaks specifically to this collaborative change potential. A white woman in a gender dialogue reflected: “As we got more involved in our ICP [intergroup collaboration project] groups, I realized that the best way to work in a group of diverse people is to embrace the differences among us, rather than pretending that they do not exist. Acknowledging that we are all different, some of us more or less

privileged than others, created an open and honest atmosphere where we all felt free to be ourselves and express our ideas without judgment.” When students from privileged backgrounds understand and acknowledge their privileged status, students from less privileged groups become more open to engaging across differences. A woman of color in a race dialogue made this point: “It made a huge difference to me in getting involved in my ICP when [a white woman] said that she had taken advantage of her privileges on this campus, partly just from being white and partly from having a lot of money. When she said that she now gets it that the environment here gives her support and safety that isn’t always there for minorities, I was ready to trust the ICP project a lot more.” Working through these differences, as a man of color in a gender dialogue related, allows students to realize different ways of taking action than they had earlier imagined: “Building alliances requires much more than just laying down demands on a few issues. It takes full commitment and determination from all parties. Such alliances are formed out of desire and passion for bettering our world, not because of sympathy. Instead, these relationships should revolve around empathy.”

Limitations

By providing the first experimental test of intergroup dialogue, particularly across nine colleges and universities, this study addressed important gaps in prior research in intergroup dialogue. However, four limitations are noteworthy. First, while we were able to attribute the effects to the efficacy of dialogues using an experimental design, the results are not generalizable beyond this population of students. Second, it is not yet clear whether the positive effects of intergroup dialogue are sustained over time beyond the end of the intergroup dialogue. A 1-year follow-up of students is currently underway. Third, because posttests were administered right at the end of the academic term, it is possible that the intergroup dialogue students, relative to students in the control and social science groups, were subject to demand characteristics; dialogue students may know what the researchers were seeking to find. Fourth, while all dialogues were balanced equally across four demographic categories—white women, white men, women of color, and men of color—students of color included members of several historically marginalized racial/ethnic groups. It is important to make clear that not all students of color have the same experiences in intergroup dialogue. Unfortunately, the identities of students of color who could participate in the present study were constrained by the limited population of members from different racial/ethnic groups on each of the participating college campuses.

Conclusion

An oft-quoted statement by Cornel West reckons, “Dialogue is a form of struggle; it’s not chitchat” (Lerner and West 1996, p. 266). Be it in classrooms or in community settings, the struggle to move from separate corners to dialogue and action must explicitly address the complexities posed by bringing together people who are not only different in their social identities but also positioned differently in the systems of privilege and inequality. It is not simply enough to bring students and community members from diverse backgrounds together. These communicative interactions must be structured and facilitated in productive ways.

Learning about inequality and its differential impact on the lives of people in different social groups will necessarily raise discomfort, contentious disagreements, and potential political conflicts. For the struggle involved in intergroup dialogue not to perpetuate prevailing social stereotypes and relationships, several cautions are important. First, while it is important for differences to be linked to collaborative action, a focus too early or too exclusively on finding common ground may shortchange meaningful engagement across differences. Dialogic relationships absent critical analysis can reproduce power inequities. As Simpson (2008) argues, “When discourses of color-blindness are invoked to discredit or dismiss the lived experiences of people of color as invalid, inaccurate, or irrelevant, the interaction can only be reproductive of color-blind beliefs. ... it precludes a space where the status quo can be challenged, and, thus, is fundamentally anti-dialogic” (p. 143). Second, action without dialogue may also reproduce the agendas of privileged groups through indifference to inequality or paternalistic actions such as in taking over the agency of subordinated groups by “doing to” or “doing for” them. Or, subordinated groups may feel that they have to “do it by themselves.” Ultimately, actively engaging differences is an opportunity to understand diverse perspectives and build commitments to collaborative action. Communicative interactions and alliance building, informed by critical analysis and engaged relationships, opens the possibility of “doing with” in building a just community.

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