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To cite this article: Nancy Rodenberg PhD & Nancy Huynh (2006) On Overcoming Segregation: Social Work and Intergroup Dialogue, *Social Work with Groups*, 29:1, 27-44, DOI: [10.1300/J009v29n01_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v29n01_04)

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v29n01_04



Published online: 08 Sep 2008.



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On Overcoming Segregation: Social Work and Intergroup Dialogue

Nancy Rodenburg
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ABSTRACT. Social work with groups may be used to reduce prejudice and discrimination. This paper reports on a case study of an interracial, intercultural dialogue group that has met together for over six years to share experiences based on race, ethnicity, and culture. The group exemplifies a group work model known as intergroup dialogue. Pettigrew's (1998) longitudinal intergroup contact theory was used to explore why this group has remained together so long when others have not. Factors contributing to group success included friendship potential, individual readiness, facilitation strategies, and varied and repeated contact across multiple settings. Implications for group workers are discussed. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Intergroup contact, longitudinal intergroup contact, intergroup dialogue, prejudice, friendship potential

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Social Work with Groups, Vol. 29(1) 2006
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/SWG>
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doi:10.1300/J009v29n01_04

INTRODUCTION

In 1954 Allport reported this short parable in his detailed study of prejudice:

See that man over there?
Yes.
Well, I hate him.
But you don't know him.
That is why I hate him. (p. 265)

If it is true that a lack of knowledge about each other breeds prejudice, our segregated society offers little hope of improvement. Despite legal remedies such as affirmative action or *Brown versus the Board of Education*, racial and ethnic segregation persists. Neighborhoods (Massey, 1994) and schools (Irons, 2002) are still often segregated and unequal. If people seldom interact during routine daily life, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination can result.

Social services reflect this ongoing segregation and inequity. For example, Whaley (1998) cited widespread racism in mental health services. In child welfare, poor and minority children receive less successful service (e.g., Courtney et al., 1996; Potter and Klein-Rothschild, 2002) and racial disparity exists in juvenile (Bridges, Hsia, and McHale, 2004) and adult justice (Horton, 2002). Social work professionals have expressed deep concern about persistent inequality within our social service delivery system (Van Soest and Garcia, 2003).

If a lack of contact between people viewed as "different" contributes to prejudice, one corrective step is to facilitate increased interaction among diverse groups. This paper presents findings from a case study of a multicultural dialogue group. The dialogue group increased contact among diverse individuals, creating an opportunity for greater understanding and reduced prejudice among its members. Research examined the role of longitudinal intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998) in explaining the group's success.

Not a treatment group, intergroup dialogue presents a nontherapeutic group work model. It provides a structure through which social workers can impact the underlying prejudice and mistrust that contribute to segregation and inequality. In this case study, social workers were active members who helped sustain the group over time.

We first provide an overview of longitudinal intergroup contact theory, followed by a description of the methodology. Next we report

findings and conclude by discussing implications for social work with groups.

LONGITUDINAL INTERGROUP CONTACT THEORY

In his 1954 study *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport outlined reasons why prejudice is so hard to change. Among these is its irrational nature; it is not changed by rational discussion alone. Also, it may be deeply unconscious and in unrecognized conformity to larger social structures. Sometimes being prejudiced is simple and convenient. It may be easier to “stay with one’s own kind” than to suffer fear or confusion in seeking out others.

Allport (1954) postulated that contact between people perceived as different may be one way to reduce prejudice, but only if this contact occurs under certain conditions. Known as the “contact hypothesis,” Allport hypothesized that four conditions must be present for contact to reduce prejudice: equal status among members, common goals, accepted institutional auspices, and a “perception of common interests and common humanity between members” (Allport, 1954, p. 281). All four conditions were present in the dialogue group described here. They are not examined further in this paper. Instead, research focused on an expanded version of Allport’s (1954) original theory, the longitudinal intergroup contact theory proposed by Pettigrew in 1998.

Pettigrew’s (1998) theory suggests four factors that are addressed in this study. First, longitudinal intergroup contact theory hypothesizes that prejudice is reduced through a complex personal learning process completed during extended intergroup contact. Such extended contact is more easily maintained if participants exhibit “friendship potential” (Pettigrew, 1998). Second, the theory postulates that individual readiness contributes to the success of an intergroup contact experience. Third, because prejudice reduction is believed to occur sequentially within a group, sequential facilitation techniques can enhance success. Finally, after reviewing the literature Pettigrew (1998) also cited varied and repeated contact over multiple settings as useful in reducing prejudice. Findings from this study lend support to all four of these concepts.

During the past fifty years, Allport’s (1954) thesis has been tested often, receiving wide international support. Johnson and Johnson (2003) provide a brief review of the contact literature within the context of social work with groups. For a longer review see Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami (2003). Some examples of social work practice methods

related to contact theory include intergroup dialogue (Nagda, Spearmon, Holley, Harding, and De Mello, 1999; Miller and Donner, 2000; Schoem and Hurtado, 2001), multicultural education, and anti-racism training (Morelli and Spencer, 2000) or Study Circles (Study Circles Resource Center, 2004). Longitudinal contact theory does not appear to have been addressed within the social work literature.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected in spring, 2003, from an interracial, interethnic dialogue group in southwestern United States that had met for six years to share personal experience rooted in race, ethnicity, and culture. Two research questions were examined: Why had this group remained together for so long when others have not? Did group members feel their group was successful? The following section describes setting and participants, research access, data collection and analysis, and research considerations.

Setting and Participants

The Southwest Dialogue Group (SWG) was formed following an annual Martin Luther King prayer breakfast sponsored by a multi-race, interfaith committee in a southwestern US city. In 1998 organizers used the breakfast to launch fifteen interracial dialogue groups across the city. While some SWG members signed up at the breakfast, others answered a newspaper invitation to join an anti-racism dialogue group. Still others, who are African Americans, stated that they were recruited to “provide color” when too many Caucasian people attended the first meeting. Organizing letters stated that the purpose of the groups was to provide “healing through dialogue.” The SWG was the only group out of the original fifteen to have remained in sustained dialogue. At this writing it has been together for more than six years.

The SWG group meets monthly during the fall, winter, and spring, and occasionally during the summer. While the original contact included five structured, facilitated, and face-to-face dialogue sessions, the ongoing group is irregularly organized with various individuals assuming organizational and program responsibility at different times. Twenty-one participants were listed on the group’s roster at data collection and included one Latino man, one Asian American woman, one Middle Eastern American man, three African American men, five

African American women, two European American men, and eight European American women, one of whom co-facilitated the first five meetings. The other facilitator was a European American man who later moved from the area. Since data were collected, a European American man has died. This was an enormous loss for the group. Two European American men joined two early meetings but were unable to continue. Current ages range from the mid 30's to about 90. Attendance at meetings fluctuates, with between ten to fifteen participants at any one meeting.

The SWG discusses topics related to race, ethnicity, culture, discrimination, prejudice, social action, and social equity. For example, affirmative action was the topic of one session. Another focused on institutional discrimination. One "homework" assignment asked members to note diversity in their daily lives. Members recently concluded a series of meetings during which individuals shared their personal stories through facilitated narrative. Films and articles have been used to prompt dialogue, and the group has participated together in community celebrations. Some members helped start or facilitate other dialogue groups. Others led diversity programming in their churches. The SWG was officially honored by the city for its diversity work.

Research Access

Permission to pursue this research was gained through the lead author's prior membership in the group. The authors made initial email contact with two SWG members who were asked to explore possible research with the entire group and followed this with a formal letter of invitation outlining the research. Group members met and agreed to participate. Data collection complied with the human subjects review process.

Data Collection and Analysis

For logistical reasons, data collection was limited to a single weekend when most SWG members were available. Eight members participated in audio-taped individual, semi-structured interviews. In addition, we conducted a focus group interview with nine members, five of whom also participated in individual interviews. We triangulated the data by including archival information documenting the group's history that had been maintained by one of the facilitators.

Data analysis included interview tape transcription, review of transcripts, coding, and analysis. During summer 2003 we reviewed transcripts, entered margin notes, and coded themes in conjunction with ongoing literature review. We completed a series of joint and individual data analysis sessions and compared observations. The second author created a visual data chart. A “‘loose’, inductively oriented design” was used, which is appropriate for an exploratory case study (Huberman and Miles, 1994, p. 431). Evidence in support of the longitudinal intergroup contact hypothesis emerged in the process of analysis and grounded the lead author’s second analysis in summer 2004. Finally, we shared the draft manuscript with SWG members by mail with an invitation to correct or expand findings.

Research Considerations

As with all qualitative research, this study was not value free (Janesick, 1994). The first author, a European American woman in her 50s, had developed relationships of trust with group members, and we conducted research within the context of these relationships. Thus, we chose to focus on group strengths, and designed questions to affirm the ongoing group process. We did not avoid interpersonal conflict if it was mentioned, but neither did we choose to pursue this avenue of questioning. The second researcher, a first generation Vietnamese American woman in her 20s, had no prior relationship with the group.

FINDINGS

Friendship potential, individual readiness for group experience, and sequential facilitation strategies were aspects of longitudinal intergroup contact theory that appeared to impact the SWG’s longevity and success. In addition, varied and repeated contact across multiple settings appeared helpful.

Friendship Potential

Along with Allport’s (1954) four conditions, Pettigrew (1998) hypothesized that “friendship potential” is a fifth factor essential for successful intergroup contact. It is viewed as pivotal to the emotional connection needed to overcome differences.

Study members recognized their wide and enduring friendship. In total, four of the eight individual interviewees named friendship as a key to group longevity, while two others used words akin to friendship: “love” or “very close to each other . . . (like) you know the person for a long time.” The role of friendship was also emphasized in the focus group.

“There was this heart connection,” noted one group member. Another stated, “It changed in the motivation to attend . . . What makes (this group unique) is that we were able to build friendships, (that) . . . really tied it together.” Another member described friendship in stronger terms. “The longer we are together, the more we know about each other and it has developed into a group of people that love each other. It has been an important part of my life . . .” The friendship occurred relatively quickly in the group process. “. . . After a few weeks you felt like you could say they’re your friend . . .” One member recognized the role of friendship in overcoming racial and ethnic barriers. “We became friends and that makes all the difference in the world when it comes to racial issues . . .”

Friendship motivated some members to join in the first place since they were invited by a friend. “I’m much more likely to go if I can get somebody to go with me,” commented one member who came because of a personal invitation. Another said that without an invitation she wouldn’t have “bothered to come. I wasn’t particularly excited about it.” For some, friendship crossed racial lines to motivate attending. An African American woman stated, “We had gone over and over and over (this) again. We gotta go spend time with some white folks (who are) trying to figure out what’s going on. I just wasn’t really in the mood. But because I know (a European American friend) and have a real respect for (her), I would do that. I would go because (she) mentioned it.” Other members mentioned that friendship was a motivation to continue in the group over time.

After about three years, the group began to share stories of their lives which helped deepen friendships and “painted quite a tapestry in terms of human experience.” The stories allowed members to . . . learn about the individuals in a very deep sense . . . to express themselves and really give an honest picture of their personal life. When somebody does that with you, he almost becomes a close, close friend.” Story telling helped create a sense of community. “. . . People become community because . . . they learn about the person and through the learning about the person they learn about the culture, not the other way around.”

In summary, friendship seems to have been pivotal in bringing the SWG together initially, maintaining it over the longer term, and deepening relationships to explore issues of race, ethnicity, and identity.

Individual Readiness for Intergroup Experience

Contact theory primarily explores the impact of intergroup experience on individual attitudes. However, Pettigrew (1998) also examined its reversal—the impact of individual attitudes on the overall group experience. Individuals without prior experience with those perceived as “different” are more likely to be anxious. Individuals with overtly negative experiences may be strongly biased. Either way, the intergroup contact required to lower prejudice will be longer; individuals with less experience will require more time and attention than those with more.

Findings in the current study supported this notion, since many members exhibited a high degree of skill and comfort in interracial, interethnic relationships that was gained through prior experience. For example, one member shared an eloquent story of personal development that began with unawareness: “. . . as I was growing up, discrimination did not register,” to growing consciousness: “I joined an organization . . . and became aware that things were not right . . . (which) at the time seemed normal. But (the organization) opened my eyes. It wasn’t fair what happened to people from minority groups and different races.” Another member was European born from missionary parents. They schooled their child in the importance of social justice as a reflection of religious teaching. A European American woman commented that she had helped her father as a small child in his civil rights work as a minister. Another noted an extensive family community service background. Most members had notable prior intercultural experience.

Several members also had graduate or professional degrees in human service fields (library science, education, ministry, counseling, child development) as well as business and science. Four members had professional social work training at the graduate level. The high educational training undoubtedly contributed to the group’s communication skill level. “I don’t hear anyone talking negatively,” noted one. A second listed “the quality of communication” as a reason the group remained together. Formal education, similar professions, and rich family and community experiences were part of the collective experience brought by individual members. This collective individual experience appeared to increase members’ communication skills, provide shared language and understanding, and contribute to greater group longevity.

Sequential Facilitation Strategies

Pettigrew (1998) conceptualized a three-stage facilitation strategy to encourage positive intergroup contact. The SWG appeared to complete the first two stages with formal facilitation. During later meetings members completed the third stage independently.

Stage 1: Recognizing similarities. Both facilitators and members took steps to provide emotional safety and establish shared human experience. For example, in the first two sessions members agreed to group rules (e.g., confidentiality, interruption guidelines), honored diversity beyond race and ethnicity, and explored understandings of American culture. When conversations about privilege and discrimination became difficult, members relied on these shared rules.

This stage was also important for identifying and increasing “friendship potential,” and facilitators led activities meant to uncover the types of experiences friends might share. These similarities transcended culture. For example, facilitators invited members to share religious affiliation, educational experiences, geographic region of birth, and other points of personal information. Some light hearted preferences were shared (e.g., favorite food). Some members shared more significant aspects of their identities that elicited common bonds of experience. For example, widows and widowers were invited to identify themselves if they chose. All activities were aimed at building the group’s sense of common humanity and its friendship potential apart from race, ethnicity, and culture. Participants were offered light refreshments at the first five meetings; eating together is an important part of most friendships.

Stage 2: Emphasizing differences. Early in the process members shared their unique cultural identities through formal exercises and informal conversation. For example, one exercise used the metaphor of a tree, asking members to identify their culturally based “roots” and “leaves.” The initial parts of this stage focused on aspects of cultural identity such as values or familial practices. SWG facilitators utilized exercises to identify family rituals that commonly differ among culture groups. Facilitation sought to frame cultural differences as important and valuable to members. The goal seemed to be to honor and share culture, not explain or rate it.

Facilitators at this stage also initiated discussion of privilege and discrimination. For example, a list of short vignettes describing the effects of racism on individual lives was distributed for discussion, as well as an exercise designed to illustrate white privilege. Members reflected on the degree of intergroup contact in their daily lives, shared their own

experiences of discrimination and prejudice, and explored the meaning and effects of racism in their lives. The informal conversation often overtook the formally facilitated exercises. Focus group members commented that conversation flowed quickly and easily, sometimes delving more deeply into issues than had been planned. Dialogue was sometimes painful.

Stage 3: Adopting a new identification. In this stage, differences are overcome. Groups begin to see themselves as part of a specific inclusive group. Pettigrew (1998) noted that most contact experiences do not reach this last stage of adopting a new identification, and the literature addresses primarily short-term experience. In a recent compilation of intergroup dialogue case studies, only one example described contact longer than a few weeks (Schoem and Hurtado, 2001). The SWG experience supports a longer conceptualization of the intergroup process since members did not reach the last stage until later in the process. Begun in the spring of 1998, the group grappled with its identity into early 2000. Discussion at this stage focused on the group's purpose, name, and focus.

The decision to attempt a longer-term group arose at a critical moment. The group had completed its facilitated sessions and a sense of not wanting to quit emerged. One member wondered if the group could simply keep meeting. "It seemed weird that it was ending . . . I suggested that if we really want to get to know each other, we needed to move it out of formal structures like this and move it into our homes." Discussion during that meeting included mention of the things friends normally do: eat together, look at photos and art work on each others' walls, share stories about each others' families, or just visit. The group decided to try these friendship activities and see what happened. "Friendship potential" deepened.

A second critical juncture occurred after meeting about three years. The group decided to open its membership to newcomers and one of the new members had experience facilitating story telling. Members took turns sharing either short vignettes from their lives or volunteered to share longer personal narratives. Six of the eight individual interviewees noted the importance of story telling. A focus group participant described story telling as a "stroke of genius." Stories helped to "see the richness that is in the group" appearing to deepen the group's common identity. Friends tell each other stories from their lives. It appeared that the group naturally adopted this means of further deepening "friendship potential."

In reflecting on the long-term nature of the group, one person commented that members were “willing to form the habit of meeting again.” As with any habit, time is needed for it to develop. The group felt its continuance significant. One member noted, “For long range impact, you will find that groups like this are few and far between.” She added that it is important for cultures to figure out how to live and work together. “We are (one example of a group) that has said ‘this is how you might approach it’.” Another wrote, “All of this exemplifies community building at its finest, as it involves facing challenging and often painful issues that are deeply ingrained in our society and therefore in all of us.”

Varied and Repeated Contact Across Multiple Settings

An intergroup experience that improves relationships with unique individuals is personally meaningful. But, an experience generalized to other individuals and groups is important to society at large. In a review of the contact literature, Pettigrew (1998) found that generalization was more likely if individuals had varied and repeated contact across multiple situations. We were unable to determine the extent to which repeated and varied contact helped members generalize learning beyond the specific SWG context. But, it was clear that such contact occurred and appeared to contribute to group longevity. Five interviewees noted that multi-layered relationships existed among members outside the group, occurring in community, religious, and professional contexts. Focus group members also highlighted this factor.

One person commented, “I did notice that many people in the group . . . had a relationship with someone else who was there. There were not many people who came alone. . . there were some married couples, friendship couples, some faith-based friendships. . . .” A few members were seen as pivotal to this web of relationships, forming a “hub” through which other relationships intersected. One person noted, “. . . Some people are more catalysts than other people (who) are more spokes off of them.”

Six interviewees noted that many members were unusually active in the community and that outside relationships were developed during community service activities. A number of members held leadership positions in professional, religious, or volunteer organizations. Several members were active in civil rights issues. One member described a “backbone” of people who worked together on a human relations board. Even though some members knew each other in other contexts,

the relationships that developed within SWG were seen as qualitatively different.

In summary, SWG members saw their group as comprised of people whose lives intersected in varied and repeated ways inside and outside the group. Many of the outside-group relationships evolved in the context of community service activities. It is unknown whether varied and repeated contacts impacted learning generalization, but they appeared to help maintain the group over time, increasing “friendship potential” and the likelihood for prejudice reduction.

Success

We asked SWG members if their group was a “success” without providing criteria by which success should be measured. No one stated that the group was unsuccessful. Seven interviewees stated that it was, as did the focus group in general.

Many measures of success are possible. One measure is if contact leads to social action and positive change in social systems. Social action was important to SWG members, and in the second year they repeatedly discussed the issue. But, over time, the group seemed to most clearly develop as a personal support to members in their individual social change efforts. “Most of the members of this group . . . make individual contributions to schools, churches, banks, nursery-aged children’s daycare, businesses, functions of the (city) and non-profits. . . . Crucial to (its success) is the care each member has given to supporting his or her commitment . . .” Members “have gone out from the group and made individual impacts and came back to the group to be restored. . . .”

Members did pursue a few social action efforts within the group context. For example, some members spoke to youth at area churches about interracial and intercultural contact. Another used the group to proof-read a letter to a radio station about racist language. The group hosted an educational community forum. While not necessarily social action, some members also formed and facilitated additional dialogue groups.

But, the predominant impact of the group appears to have been on the lives of its members and indirectly through those lives to the lives of others. “Each of the families has been impacted. All of us probably had a certain focus with our kids anyways, but they got a bigger impact because of the group. We certainly made a difference in the ripple.” Another member saw her children’s strong interracial friendships as result of SWG membership which occurred at a pivotal time in their

development. At least two European American members reported greater skills in interracial settings.

One member who was formally educated as a social worker commented on the SWG's impact on his work as a therapist. He improved in his ability to recognize the effects of race and ethnicity and to help clients identify systemic discrimination and prejudice. "I've known (racial and ethnic) differences were there but now (they are) explicitly open for discussion. It hadn't been discussed before. In therapy, (the group) opened absolutely the doors to be totally comfortable going into ethnic issues without any hesitation."

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Social workers practice in a society that remains segregated and unequal by race and ethnicity. As professionals, we grapple with the effects of ongoing discrimination and prejudice both interpersonally and institutionally. The SWG suggests a group work model to reduce prejudice and increase understanding among people.

In the *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (NASW, 2001), professional social workers are urged to fulfill their responsibility as cross-cultural leaders in society, using "diversity skills" in all areas of practice. Longitudinal intergroup contact theory provides a conceptual framework for group work focusing on diversity. The theory complements general group work skills and is applicable to a variety of practice arenas, such as community settings, workplaces, or education. The emphasis on sequential facilitation stages provides particular guidance to social work educators who must include information not only about cultures and diverse populations, but also about inequity, injustice, and oppression (Van Soest and Garcia, 2001). Material on cultural and diverse populations can be conceptualized as Stage 1 and material on inequity, injustice, and oppression as Stage 2. Both can be addressed in small group format. Specific implications from each study finding are listed below.

Friendship potential. Friendship potential presents a useful concept for nontherapeutic social work with groups. Bellah (1996) defines friendship as consisting of three components: enjoyment of each other's company, mutual usefulness, and a shared commitment to a larger good. The SWG illustrated aspects of all three friendship components. In organizing dialogue groups, social workers should consider whether prospective members are likely to form friendship relationships of

mutual enjoyment, usefulness, and a shared commitment to a common good. If not, the group is less likely to remain together long enough to decrease prejudice and improve intercultural understanding.

Friendship potential is also important for social capital (Putnam, 2000), a concept referring to positive social connections that are hypothesized to decrease crime and increase community social and economic health. To the extent that intergroup dialogue increases friendship among diverse individuals, social capital is also increased, an important facet of community development efforts.

Varied and repeated contact. As reviewed by Pettigrew (1998), research suggests that varied and repeated contact over multiple settings may help participants to generalize learning beyond the immediate people involved. Findings in this study suggested that varied and repeated contact contributed to group longevity.

More research is needed to determine the role of outside group contact on dialogue group success, and group workers are advised to include measures on this aspect in the evaluation of the groups they lead. When forming groups, social workers might consider ways to enhance already existing relationships such that varied and repeated contact occurs among group members. For example, organizers of community-based dialogue groups such as the SWG could invite multiple participants from the same organization, church, or civic group. Members will interact in routine ways outside the dialogue context and reinforce learning. Dialogue groups formed in the classroom setting, such as those described by Nagda, Spearmon, Holley, Harding, and De Mello (1999), can include homework that requires contact in non-classroom contexts. Organizers of workplace dialogue groups, such as those described by Ramos and Mitchell (2001), should be mindful of how members will interact outside the dialogue context.

Individual readiness. Individuals bring their personal experience to any dialogue group, impacting its outcome. In this study, no SWG member was attempting contact across racial, ethnic, or cultural barriers for the first time, and members had considerable prior experience, education, and knowledge. Even so, members reported new learning through dialogue that could not have been obtained individually. This learning occurred in a group that did not establish its own identity until well into its time together. Thus, longer contact was important.

However, it is not clear that longer contact should always be the goal. Pettigrew (1998) contends that "intergroup contact and its effects are cumulative—we live what we learn" (p. 7), and multiple shorter contacts may contribute to significant attitude change over time. Organizers of

short-term dialogue groups may be “planting a seed” for more significant prejudice reduction over time.

Thus, organizers of dialogue groups should consider the likely experience level of their participants and set goals accordingly. For example, young or inexperienced members require more time to gain insight, and an initial dialogue experience may provide only a stepping stone in the process. To enhance learning from prior experience, facilitators can include activities designed to encourage reflection on family values, prior intercultural contact, and experiences of discrimination and privilege. In the SWG, initial sessions included such reflection.

Facilitation. Findings support the use of three sequential facilitation stages for positive intergroup experience: sharing similarities, emphasizing differences, and adopting a shared group identity. These stages are similar to those proposed by Nagda, Spearmon, Holley, Harding, Moiseswanson, and DeMello (1999) in their work with dialogue groups in education, and resemble group work skills practiced by social workers in other contexts. For example, initial establishment of group norms, a process important to most group work models (Toseland and Rivas, 2001), was important in Stage 1. Rules already familiar to social work, such as confidentiality and respectful conversation, are also appropriate for dialogue groups. Activities designed to discover similarities among group members are initiated. For example, SWG members were invited to stand up if they belonged to certain groups and to note others who were also standing (e.g., born in the Southwest, raised on a farm, member of particular faith group).

In Stage 2 (emphasizing differences) facilitation supports members in sharing their cultural heritage. Facilitation tasks are familiar to social workers: setting the agenda, providing exercises and activities designed to elicit conversation, modeling and monitoring respectful communication, and providing ongoing evaluation. When difficult conversations emerge, the facilitator’s role is to model and support honest, respectful, and non-blaming dialogue. Earlier activities in Stage 2 focus on members’ cultural heritage, sharing values, rituals and beliefs that are often associated with culture. As trust develops discussion focuses on experiences of discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping, and privilege.

Stage 3 (adopting a shared group identity) may be less often achieved (Pettigrew, 1998). In the SWG, facilitation tasks at this stage were informal and shared, and included setting the agenda, notifying members of meeting times and places, planning events, and bringing resources to prompt communication, such as films or books. Facilitators also organized the potluck meal and helped arrange rides for members without

transportation. Facilitation activities at this stage were aimed at group maintenance. Responsibility for continued respectful and honest communication was shared among members.

Sometimes the best social work role is informal rather than formal. In the SWG social workers were not the initial organizers or formal facilitators. However, along with others they provided key informal leadership. For example, the suggestion to attempt a longer-term group was initiated by a member with formal social work training. Her idea to become friends, to deepen "friendship potential," was a spontaneous act of informal leadership. It illustrates the important role social workers can play as informal facilitators in community-based groups.

However, in community-based dialogue groups an important social work role may be to refrain from excessive intervention. Toseland and Rivas (2001) note the importance of not inhibiting a naturally occurring group process. Knowing when and where to exert leadership is a sophisticated group work skill that should be a part of social work education. Social workers can be active in organizing groups and formally facilitating Stages 1 and 2. However, once a group is organized and Stages 1 and 2 largely underway, it may need to ". . . break loose and create its own glories," as one member described the SWG's decision to stay together over time. At this point, the most helpful social work role may be informal.

SUMMARY

Intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) provides a useful framework for understanding how contact among groups that see each other as "different" can help reduce prejudice and improve understanding. Longitudinal intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998) expands this theory to emphasize the importance of time, friendship potential, individual readiness, and sequential facilitation strategies to improve contact outcomes. In addition, varied and repeated contact over multiple settings is likely to increase understanding.

This paper examined a longstanding dialogue group in the Southwestern United States that suggests longitudinal contact theory as useful in conceptualizing and organizing intergroup contact experiences. The theory provides conceptual guidance to social workers with groups as they seek ways to reduce prejudice and increase understanding among diverse groups.

Findings particularly support the use of “friendship potential” as a unifying concept for intergroup efforts. Friendship potential suggests combining people who share common interests, enjoy each others’ company, and support similar life goals. Friendship helps maintain a dialogue group during difficult discussion about culture, discrimination, prejudice, and privilege. Group workers may help reduce persistent segregation and inequality by bringing diverse groups together in friendship. Although timeless and deceptively simple friendships across culture and race elude many. Such friendships can be initiated and nurtured through intergroup dialogue. Longitudinal intergroup contact theory suggests a way to help maintain them over time.

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MANUSCRIPT RECEIVED: 12/28/04

MANUSCRIPT REVISED: 01/31/05

MANUSCRIPT ACCEPTED: 06/18/05