Stacy A. S. Williams
Nancy O'Donnell*

Becoming a Person of Dialogue

ABSTRACT

It is imperative that Social Sciences examine in depth the underlying issues in human relations that have contributed to divisions among persons, within families, institutions, between nations and religions. If we accept that dialogue is the main currency of statecraft, diplomacy, negotiation, mediation and peacebuilding (Rieker and Turn 2015), then we need to ask ourselves, what are the characteristics of a person capable of engaging in dialogue? Are they characteristics that can be taught? Are they characteristics that make us human?

In his book "Relational Being" Gergen (2009) warns of the dire consequences we face if we continue on the pathway of "rugged individualism". He explains how our relationships have become instruments for our own satisfaction. From Freud to Skinner, psychology has described human relationships as being primarily about seeking the greatest pleasure from others. But, the so-called "freedom" that we achieve gives us a satisfaction that is transitory at best. "Freedom contains an emptiness that only relationship can fill" (Gergen, 2009, p. 20). It is essential that we find the path to discovering the true meaning of relationship and more importantly cross-racial/ethnic relationships.

Jean Baker Miller described what she termed "growth-fostering relationships" (Miller, 1986), and Chodorow (2001) has developed a theory regarding development suggesting that women develop along a relational pathway where-

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* Correspondence regarding the paper should be sent to: Stacy A. S. Williams, NCSP, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, e-mail: stacy.williams @marist.edu or Nancy O'Donnell, MSN, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, n_odonnell49@hotmail.com

as men follow the developmental phases that move them toward autonomy. These theorists, and others, view the relational trait to be particularly characteristic of women. A more comprehensive understanding of the nature of the human person can be attained only by taking into consideration both autonomy and relational ability as equally important.

Capacity for dialogue, therefore, is an important contribution that women bring to the world stage. Women from traditionally marginalized groups offer an essential and unique perspective to this topic due to their understanding of the role of power in the dynamics of relationships. To foster cross-cultural dialogue it is important to examine the power dynamics of what it means to be honest, empathetic and collaborative across cultures.

In this discussion, the authors draw upon the fields of technology, child development, feminism, and the social justice literature in an attempt to articulate the benefits of dialogue. It is far from exhaustive and provides a cursory purview of this challenging topic. It is an example of how integration among different theories can help move our literature forward in understanding a challenging topic as dialogue. It also offers a perspective on how men and women can grow in their relationship building ability, and therefore ability to dialogue, by embracing characteristics like being vulnerable, cooperative, selfless, and nurturing, relating this to the teachings of Chiara Lubich.

INTRODUCTION

If we consider the current world situation, or take the most cursory glance at history, we can conclude that the capacity to engage in true dialogue, one characterized by reciprocity that could contribute to the building of a culture of unity, has been and remains elusive. Reciprocity by definition implies equality between those engaged in dialogue. It is a non-hierarchal relationship where individuals share without fear of blame or judgement. Dialogue among individuals of different cultures have been and continue to remain a challenging topic of study, given the shifts in migration stories and increased diversities in once homogenous cultures. The meeting of different cultures has almost inevitably

led to the domination of one over the other, and the concept that 'different means not as good' appears to be deeply ingrained in the psyche of the human person, in particular those in the dominant or majority position.

Sue (2015) notes that this dominant position creates a master narrative that negates the experiences of those in the subordinate position. This negation of a counter-narrative creates barriers to true dialogue. Recognition of and value added to the counter-narrative is thus one way in which true dialogue may occur among individuals of different cultures. How then does true dialogue flourish when social conditioning promotes inequity among its community members? Researchers from many fields have begun examining the benefits of dialogue. In this discussion, the authors draw upon the fields of technology, child development, feminism, and social justice in attempts to articulate the benefits of dialogue. The discussion is far from exhaustive and provides a cursory purview at best of this challenging but rewarding human experience. Our writing reflects how integration among different theories can help move the literature forward in understanding this concept. Creating the conditions for fruitful dialogue requires changes in social structures and the use of power. This alone, however, will produce lasting transformation only by probing deep within the nature of the human person and drawing forth those characteristics that render them capable of building relationships of true reciprocity.

TECHNOLOGY

There are factors in the recent history of the western world that are rendering dialogue even more of a challenge. As resources become scarce and societies find greater ease interacting with virtual realities than with real people, there is danger of losing sight of the human person and the capacity for dialogue built on mutual

respect. Polish philosopher Anders (1980) described the person of our times as obsolete. He believed that we have remained anchored to pre-technological ways of thinking and reasoning that render us incapable of managing a world ruled by technology.

> "The extraordinary complexity generated by technology inhibits not only our imagination; it also interferes in a powerful way with our human perception. In fact, as technical organization becomes more complicated, the more it impacts other organizational systems. As a result, we lack the ability to perceive and interpret those processes to which we have become passive partners. We are consequently unable to foresee the ultimate outcome of these processes" (as cited in Molinari, 2015, p.6).

In the post September 11th world (i.e., attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, Belgium and Paris attacks), where differences breed fear, the fact that technology has brought the world, and its disasters, into our lives with an immediacy that negates any possibility for perspective or analysis, fuels our mistrust of other people and cultures.

Recently in the United States of America (USA), the killing of Alton Sterling, Philando Castle, and Erick Gardner (i.e., African-American men) was shared via social media with such voracity, that some have labeled this sharing public hanging by technology. In viewing the clips, the non-verbals of both participants and bystanders and responses to the killing (i.e., via online forums, where anonymity is used as a weapon) is eerily familiar to the images captured during America's sordid slavery and civil rights past. This over-sharing labeled public execution has done more to fuel distrust and animosity between people of color and the dominant society. In this world of immediacy, it appears that battle lines are drawn between the competing worldviews of 'Black Lives Matter' (i.e., counter-narrative) and All Lives Mat-

ters or Blue Lives Matter (i.e., the master narrative) movement. America's response to these recent events reflects different racial realities experienced by community members. This over-sharing has increased distrust between groups and increased violence against the state represented by the police.

In response to media over-sharing of violence perpetrated against people of color, scholars have coined the term 'racial trauma' to describe bystander effects of viewing these images via social platforms (Administrator, 2016). Racial trauma may not only result from viewing events online, but from systematic institutional racism, racial harassment, or being the beneficiary of racial micro-aggression (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006; Comas-Díaz, 2016; Sue, 2015). Individuals who experience racial trauma are said to experience symptoms of "depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, feeling of humiliation, poor concentration, or irritability" (Administrator, 2016, para 3). The effects of racial trauma on communities of color in the USA increases vigilance and suspicion, sensitivity to threat, psychological and physiological symptoms, alcohol and drug use, aggression, and narrowing sense of time (Administrator).

Due to continued unrest, whether in the USA or Europe, the need for safety and safe relationships as defined by the master narrative takes priority, resulting in walls separating us from one another. When these walls are allowed to persist, it is less surprising to find ourselves faced with the growth of walls between nations: keep out all that is different! We see this narrative in political discourse in such countries as Poland, England, and the United States. In his book Relational Being, Gergen (2009) warns of the dire consequences faced if we continue on the pathway of rugged individualism. Distrust of others grows out of living as bounded beings. His writing is an attempt "...to generate a vision of a world in which relationship takes precedence over bounded units" (Gergen, 2009, p. 27). He explains how our relationships have become instruments for our own satisfaction. From Freud to

Skinner, psychology has described human relationships as being primarily about seeking the greatest pleasure from others. The freedom that is achieved by creating boundaries is transitory at best. "Freedom contains an emptiness that only relationship can fill" (Gergen, 2009, p. 20). It is essential that we find the path to discovering the true meaning of relationship and more importantly cross-racial/ethnic/national relationships. Hence, over-sharing of sensitive materials via social platforms does more harm in creating mistrust among inhabitants in a community.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The United States of America's history of contact with different racial/ethnic groups has informed numerous studies on the benefits and challenges to cross-racial and ethnic interactions. Milem, Chang, and Lising (2005) argue that learning in diverse environments improves leadership and critical thinking skills. Additionally, they note that homogenous communities that reproduce the social life and expectations of said communities impede personal and intellectual development. Thus, freedom from the other that is craved in societies wanting to build walls is limited, fleeting, and may not only impede personal growth but also creativity. Personal growth, creativity, and the ability to think critically are the by-products of engagement rather than disengagement. Thus, disengagement is likely to lead to stagnation and impede growth, which is the purpose of living.

In the USA, the history of contact between various ethnic and religious groups with the dominant culture (i.e., White Anglo Saxon Protestant) has produced a rich and varied research base to understand this concept of power in negotiating relationships. Negotiating relationships among racial, religious, and ethnic groups has introduced such concepts as multiculturalism, cross-cultural competence, and social justice to the research literature (Shriberg,

Song, Miranda, & Radliff (2013). Currently, examining relationships across cultural lines is being explored through the concept of social justice. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) define social justice as "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shared to meet their needs. It includes a vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure" (as cited by Wall, 2016). In this realm, power dynamics are understood from two contrasting positions (i.e., privileged and marginalized groups).

Individuals belonging to privileged positions tend to have greater access to power and resources; make rules; define what is normal, right or the truth; be assumed a leader, smarter, and competent; be given the benefit of doubt; be often unaware of privileged group membership and privileges they receive; be more comfortable with members of marginalized groups who share similar behaviors, appearance, and values to them; or focus on "how far we've come" (Wall, 2016). Individuals from marginalized groups have less access to power and resources; are often seen as less than, inferior, deficient; often assimilate, collude, abide by the rules; tend to be aware of oppression; have their truth and experiences questioned and often invalidated; know more about members of privileged groups than privileged groups know about them; or focus on "how far we need to go" (Wall, 2016).

As is evident from the attributes listed, cross-racial/ethnic dialogue may be difficult if these positions are not highlighted, discussed, processed, and acted upon. Historically, in the USA, members from marginalized groups have been tasked with educating members in privileged groups about marginalized experiences. However, current trends in academia encourage members of the privileged to examine their position of power and its impact on promoting dialogue. This requirement is challenging because it has the possibility to create cognitive dissonance among those in the privileged groups (Anderson, 2016; Irving, 2014; Wise 2011, 2012). It requires those in power to engage in

prolonged self-reflection, which is advantageous when there is unlimited access to resources. However this self-reflection becomes problematic when resources become scarce and unrest between different groups is wantonly shared via technology.

Regardless of resource availability, the world as we know it will require cross race/ethnic interactions. Contact with individuals different than we are allows us to develop in ways that encourage us to explore our full potential. Singleton and Hays (2005) recognize that these conversations or interactions can be difficult and recommend the following ground rules: stay engaged, expect to experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept a lack of closure. In other words, Singleton and Hays (2005) note that this encounter is better understood and experienced as a process instead of a product. Additionally, Sue (2015) highlights that "encountering diverse racial points of view, being able to engage in racial conversations, and successfully acknowledging and integrating differing perspectives leads to an expansion of critical consciousness" (p. 17). Sue further notes that successful race talks "improve communication and learning, enhance racial harmony, increase racial literacy, and expand critical consciousness of one's racial/cultural identity" (p. 21).

Sue (2015, pp. 235 - 236) recommends the following in facilitating healthy and productive cross-racial dialogue: understanding the dynamics and characteristics of race talk; being knowledgeable of the ground rules that hinder open discussion of topics on race, racism, Whiteness, and Whiteprivilege; anticipating and being able to deconstruct the clash of racial realities between different groups; being cognizant of how race talk is embedded in the larger sociopolitical system and influenced by it; being aware and nonjudgmental about communication style differences; understanding White and people-of- color fears about engaging in racial conversations; and having knowledge of racial/cultural identity development.

These recommendations, although highlighting the challenges in engaging in honest dialogue, provide practical suggestions in facilitating and supporting cross/racial and cross/ethnic dialogue.

THE HUMAN PERSON IN DIALOGUE

As recent research on infant social development (Stern, 1977) demonstrates, relatedness lies at the core of our being, of our identity. "The infant comes into the world bringing formidable capabilities to establish human relatedness" (Stern, 1997, p. 33). From the beginning, the infant is, so to say, a full-fledged partner in the relationships he establishes with his caregivers. There is evidence that this capacity for relationship building is characteristically feminine. Miller (1986) and Chodorow (2001) have developed theories regarding development, suggesting that women develop more along a relational pathway, whereas men follow the developmental phases that move them toward autonomy. These theorists, and others, view the relational trait to be particularly characteristic of women.

This concept has been taken one step further through research on leadership qualities (Gerzema, 2013). Surveys and interviews from 11 countries from Great Britain to Bhutan indicate that the majority of people believe that leaders of the world today need to possess qualities that are, by a significant majority of people, considered to be feminine. According to Gerzema (2013), "...the skills required to thrive in today's world – such as honesty, empathy, communication, and collaboration – come more naturally to women" (p. 2).

Capacity for dialogue, therefore, would appear to be an important contribution that women, and those who think like them, bring to the world stage. Women from traditionally marginalized groups bring an essential and unique perspective to this topic

due to their understanding of the role of power in fostering relationships. Thus to foster cross-cultural dialogue it is important to examine the power dynamics of what it means to be honest, empathetic, and collaborative across cultures.

Chiara Lubich, one of the founders of the Focolare movement, was honored at the recent International Interdisciplinary Congress, held in Lublin, Poland. Her charism and writings reflect her conviction that unity in diversity is not only possible; it is the destiny of humanity. Her writings contain many concepts related to the discussion of dialogue.

> Human beings are (...) all equal but also distinct. To each person [God] gave his or her own beauty so that they would be desirable and lovable by others; and so that in love (the common substance in which they recognize themselves as one and see themselves in each other) they would be recomposed into the One who had created them with his Light, which is Himself (Lubich, 2001, p. 29).

This is the true freedom of human beings, a freedom rooted in a love that becomes reciprocal. When individuals are able to consider differences as gifts for one another, and thus capable of discovering the beauty of the other person, individuals can become bridges not only among people, but also with the transcendent.

Chiara Lubich has been described by many as a "person of dialogue." Her life's work was building unity through dialogue. In fact, already in the 60's she founded a center for ecumenical dialogue in Germany (still active today). That was followed by one in the Philippines for dialogue with the World Religions and another in Kenya that has as its focus inculturation. In 1998 she founded a school for Education in Dialogue at Mariapolis Luminosa in New York. In one of her final public appearances before becoming ill in 2004 she addressed a crowd in London with a talk

entitled: What future for a multicultural, multiethnic, multi-faith society?" There she spoke of fraternity as offering surprising possibilities because it allows us to bring together and value needs that otherwise lead to conflict (Lubich, 2004). Throughout her life, she engaged in dialogue and it has become a cornerstone of the Focolare Movement and its members throughout the world.

Gandhi once said that 'I cannot hurt you without hurting myself' (Fischer, 2002). We are profoundly connected to one another, and we have the power to make these connections something vital and growth-producing. Therefore, we are *all* potentially people of dialogue, no one excluded. Tapping into this enormous treasure within each one of us and helping those around us to draw it forth within them is a starting point. It takes courage to be open to honest discussion, vulnerability to examine biases, determination and perseverance to be social change agents.

INTEGRATION OF LITERATURE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is next to impossible to remain indifferent to the consequences of the absence of dialogue in a world where the media through technology informs us in 'real-time' of events in every corner of the globe. This absence has created walls between nations; mistrust between individuals in diverse communities; promulgates the status quo; and perpetuates a deficit model to understanding differences. True dialogue requires non-hierarchical participation. To contribute to the building of a world of dialogue, we need to understand the dynamics of oppression in the face of diversity. In addition, master and counter-narratives need to be acknowledged and validated, given the difference in racial and cultural socialization (Sue, 2015).

True dialogue requires constant self-reflection, vigilance in identifying systems of oppression, the ability to empathize with individuals from non-privileged communities, and the willing-

ness to use a privileged position to be an advocate and ally for those in non-dominant positions. Being an ally requires understanding the influence of power, knowing when and how to use one's voice to protect or support individuals from marginalized communities. True dialogue begins with the individual. Understanding who one is allows one to engage in dialogue that is grounded in reciprocity and mutual respect.

Becoming a person of dialogue means being aware of biases, both personal and professional, that are likely to hamper true communication (Williams & Conyers, 2016). In practical terms, it means evaluating the biases held towards members of immediate communities. Once biases are identified, the individual is encouraged to begin learning about members of the immediate community from various sources (i.e., literature, media). For example, in Poughkeepsie, New York, there is a group known as the 'Race Unity Circle of the Hudson Valley' that works within an urban community, bringing diverse individuals (i.e., class, race, and ethnicity) together for healing. The organization uses many different forums to facilitate this process. Group members engage in book clubs, participate in race-related activities at local colleges, and advocate at the city level for individuals who don't have a voice. On their Facebook page, the group notes the following as their mission statement:

> The Race Unity Circle grew out of an urgent call to action felt by a few members of the Baha'i Faith in response to the news coming out of Ferguson, Missouri. Though started by Baha'is, the Circle quickly became multi-cultural and multi-faith. We believe that all people are members of one race: the Human Race. The elimination of racism from our communities is not just an aspiration; it is a spiritual imperative that requires sustained, persistent action (Race Unity Circle of Hudson Valley).

Recently, the organization held a "Black Women Speak: Healing and Transformation Through Story-Telling" event in the community. The act of storytelling was a powerful and cathartic experience for both presenters and attendees. During small group reflections, individuals shared how moved they were by the stories and how the narratives allowed them to further understand Black women's experiences with race in the USA. One of the participants shared that the topic of race was more complicated than she thought. Events that use storytelling (i.e., the telling of our stories) can further facilitate true dialogue between diverse individuals. True dialogue across ethnic and cultural lines needs to be perceived as a process and not a product. Each individual engaged in communication is likely to be at different levels of the racial-socialization process. It is important to both trust and respect the process and validate each experience along the way. The benefits of true dialogue outweigh the cost of engaging in this relationship. Becoming a person of dialogue helps us to all live lives beyond the margins. In summary, at the core lies the belief that all individuals are fundamentally by nature, made for connection with others. This connection although perceived as feminine, have implications for facilitating non-hierarchical dialogue. Without relationships of reciprocity, individuals are less human and unable to reach fulfillment. With this conviction we are better equipped to overcome the daunting challenges to dialogue in diversity that we find within and around us.

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