

Principles of Practice for Transforming Race Relations

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Introduction

Despite progress made through the civil rights movement, affirmative action, and community development, tense race relations persist in the United States. Together, the persistent nature of these tensions can be classified as an intractable conflict. While typically recognized as a problem affecting almost every urban area, these tensions are no longer limited to urban areas with the increasing mobility of people of color and increasing diversity of exurban communities, small towns, and even rural communities. Unfortunately, many communities are ill prepared to address inter-ethnic and racial tensions, whether they be simmering problems or overt conflict that have boiled over.

A number of promising strategies have been developed to transform racial conflict into sustainable collaborative relations across races. The Study Circles model, Search for Common Ground, Appreciative Inquiry, and Action Evaluation are four strategies that have been applied in numerous communities. Each of these strategies operates from a unique theoretical foundation and clear methodology. There has not been, however, a comparative analysis of the theory and principles that guide each of these strategies and their relation to intractable conflict theory. While each strategy or approach represents a well-developed methodology, the principles that guide the practice are not always explicit and may not be shared across strategies. Nor have these strategies been examined to see what they share in common.

This research project attempts to fill this void in the knowledge base by examining each approach and the underlying principles of practice for transforming race relations. The primary research consisted of examination of program documents and semi-structured audiotaped interviews with program practitioners. In analyzing this data I identified principles of practice from each strategy. After incorporating feedback on the written summary of each approach I developed a comparison of approaches, which took the form of a comparative matrix and an essay that addresses pertinent questions. The summary of each approach includes a methodological note specifying how the research was conducted in that particular study.

Principles of practice are specific process principles that reflect theory and guide how practitioners go about their work. Many principles of practice are embedded in program literature and training materials; some principles only emerged through reflection and dialogue with the practitioners.

The research project began in the summer of 2003 with an identification of different approaches to transform race relations in the United States. The research focused on interventions that involved a specific community and had a beginning and end point. I then selected four promising strategies or approaches for the study. These four approaches do not represent all promising strategies but represent a variety and were selected in part because they each build on the conflict resolution theory. The practitioners who developed these strategies came from conflict resolution field. Strategies that work through the arts to transform race relations, for example, were not

selected even though these are also effective. More traditional prejudice reduction or anti-racism training programs were also not selected. Examining these approaches through a similar process would be useful in future research.

Contact Information for the Four Approaches

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