

# Balancing Social Power in Dialogue:

## What it means to be a multi-partial facilitator in intergroup dialogues

### **So, what is multipartiality?**

Multipartiality, as opposed to impartiality, is a practice in intergroup dialogue facilitation that focuses on balancing social power, *independent of* and *in contrast to* dominant norms in society. Equal participation is facilitated and equal attention is given to the multiple identities and experiences of all group members, target and agent, so that no one group is being exploited for the benefit of another.



The purpose of multipartiality is to equalize the structural and social forms of oppression that are present in an intergroup dialogue and share social power equally between group members so that a new reality can be created.

This means that Intergroup dialogue facilitators:

- (a) Affirm contributions from all group members while challenging some contributions more than others depending on how they uphold the dominant norms and narrative in society
- (b) Are partial to identities and perspectives not represented among the dialogue participants.

<http://www.peacockstudios.com/images/Portfolio/LDarling/balance.JPG>

### **Social power can be acted out in a dialogue in several ways:**

- Influence: highly involved in social networks (it's not what you know, it's who you know)
  - personal strength and conviction,
  - the sharing of airtime--both in who is speaking, how they are speaking (verbal acuity, English proficiency, asking questions vs. sharing personal stories),
  - how often they are speaking and for how long
- Control: formal authority through identities (age, race, gender, etc.) or roles (such as facilitator or instructor)
- Capacity: access to resources, such as knowledge of social systems, money, time for thoughtful reflection, etc.
- What other ways can you think of?

## Why do we need to be multipartial?

The group membership identities we belong to (such as race, class, gender identity, religion, national citizenship, and sexual orientation, etc.) influence our daily social interactions as a result of social stratification our membership groups experience in society. These group membership identities have great impact in intergroup dialogues, particularly in ways that can support the dominant oppressive norms of our society because of how we are socialized. Oppressive dynamics can have an impact on every social interaction and dispute, and can manifest themselves in intergroup dialogues in ways that can exploit and be particularly harmful to target groups.

### Examples:

**(1) The group with privilege is driving the dialogue to learn from and about the subordinate group.**

Multipartial Facilitator Challenge: have both groups learn from each other by challenging each group to share personal stories at the same level and intensity as the other so that both the group with privilege and the group with less privilege can learn from one another's experiences, socialization, internal and emotional responses...

**(2) An identity is being discussed in terms of a binary**

Multipartial Facilitator Challenge: interrupt the narrative(s) and behavior(s) to identify that thinking of the identity in terms of a binary disregards the experiences of other less recognized groups of the identity spectrum and the unique ways they experience oppression and discrimination. Challenge the group to identify how they have experienced discriminatory slurs or acts for groups beyond the dominant binary already discussed.

**(3) The group or group members with privilege talking over and interrupting members in the oppressed group.**

Multipartial Facilitator Challenge: surface the underlying issues of social power that are happening in the group so that the oppressed group does not have to, and challenge the group with privilege to talk about what was happening for them as they interrupted and what made that behavior seem acceptable.

**(4) Experiences of group members with less privilege are called "unusual", "isolated incidents", or even "unbelievable" by members of the privileged group**

Multipartial Facilitator Challenge: push the privileged members to share a personal story and engage in self-disclosure then ask them how it would feel to be questioned on the reality of that experience, then help them see how this relates to their privilege and social power.

## How can we be multipartial facilitators?

- Look at who is speaking in the group, who isn't, and facilitate sharing of the verbal space.

Analyzing the verbal space includes:

- the aggregate minutes each group has had during the dialogue
- which group is controlling by being silent
- who is initiating and who is reacting
- who's concerns or ideas are being treated more centrally



<http://www.olivetones.com/images/mines/give.gif>

- Use storytelling or 1st person narratives to further the dialogue and the sharing of verbal space. Help participants (1) speak in a way where they are the subject (as opposed to the object) of a meaningful story (with a beginning, middle, and conclusion) and (2) speak in true forms of self disclosure and experience--not in a way that is emotionally detached, lofty, purely theoretical or factual.
  - Ask how the agent identities impact participants' life. Their family? Their job or other activities? How would this be different for someone from a target group? Ask how they think their agent identities have influenced their statements. Ask what is missing.
- Suspend judgment of privileged groups or agent groups, but rather encourage the experiences and perspectives of all participants--supporting the dominant narrative and the target narrative--inviting the target and agent group's experience to be a participatory element
- Be emotionally invested in your facilitation, being open to step outside your comfort zone and sharing your personal experiences, modeling vulnerability, authenticity, deep personal engagement, and productive communication through conflict
- Evaluate participant ideas for how they relate to, promote, or challenge the dominant ideology. Consider what power issues are at play, how the identities of the people involved intersect, and how your own social identities will impact your intervention.
- Look for the patterns of oppression around you: in the dialogue, in yourself, in others, in daily actions made based on power and privilege. Make yourself aware of issues different target groups face and actions that continually oppress them. Be sensitive to their perspectives.
- Don't expect members of target groups to always be able or willing to educate everyone, be the experts, or challenge oppressive statements in the dialogue. Challenge (mis)conceptions and confront oppressive behaviors: Take risks and take responsibility, take your position as the facilitator as part of the solution to injustice. Level the playing field and lead by action.

- ☞ Acknowledge discrepancies between values and statements made in the dialogue and ask for clarification. Explore the linkages between these and the oppressive behavior or statements that are occurring.
- ☞ Consider where you and the people in the dialogue fall on the Racial Identity Development Theory (below). Use this to inform your approach to responding and challenging oppressive behaviors and dominant ideologies.
- ☞ Reach out to other facilitators for support – share your challenges and stories with to increase your learning.

### **Racial Identity Development Theory**

#### Stage 1: Naïve/No Social Consciousness

- Person is unaware of the rewards and sanctions associated with membership in a racial group and with breaking the rules of one's racial group. Learn to accept the framework that Whites are superior to people of color.

#### Stage 2: Passive stage of Acceptance

- Person is unaware that they have the outlook that Whites are superior to people of color. In Active Acceptance, the person consciously accepts these beliefs and perpetuates racial stratification.

#### Stage 3: Resistance

- Person focuses on understanding and resisting the existence of racism and its manifestations. By doing this the person questions the dominant group's definition of acceptable reality—the status quo.
- A person in Passive Resistance only engages in relatively safe confrontations or seeks to avoid them entirely. They still may experience internal conflict between their past views and values and their new view of oppression as a problem.
- A person in Active Resistance actively engages with others against racism beyond safe confrontations.

#### Stage 4: Redefinition

- People focus on redefining their own racial group's history and culture. Conflict often emerges during this stage.

#### Stage 5: Internalization

- People look to internalize a new sense of racial identity not based on or in reaction to the assumptions and functions of racism. These people have raised their consciousness about their own relationship to racism, often having an increased appreciation for the experience of targets of all forms of oppression.

*Source: Wing, L. and Rijken, J. (2001). Racial Identity Development and the Mediation of Conflicts. In Wijeyesinghe, C.L. & Jackson, B.W. (Eds.), New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development (pp. 182-207). New York, NY: New York University Press.*

