



Still Unpacking the Backpack.... Relational-Cultural Theory and Racism: An Exploration by White RCT Practitioners

Lisa Eible, D.S.W., M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

ABSTRACT

This poster describes the experience and findings of a group of White Relational-Cultural educators and practitioners from the United States and Canada, who met over 1.5 years to explore, probe, and confront racism and race-related issues. Relational-Cultural Theory was the theoretical context for this experience.

CONTACT

Lisa Eible, DSW, MSW, LCSW
imeible@yahoo.com
267-243-0841
www.isaeible.com

BACKGROUND AND GOALS

Co-creation of theory and the application of personal and professional experiences have been hallmarks of Relational-Cultural Theory ("Our Work". Jean Baker Miller Training Institute). Initial RCT publications were called "works in progress" and were published through the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute (Wellesley Centers for Women Publications, 1997-2017). "Work in progress" aptly describes continuous nature of relational work and the documentation of such work. RCT has been at the forefront of including race, culture, and privilege in psychological theory (Tatum and Knaplund, 2004; Jordan, 1997; Ayvazian, A., Daniel Tatum, B., 1994; Walker, 2002, McIntosh, 1989). RCT recognizes the value of "good conflict" (Miller, 1976) and its value to human development and theoretical elaboration.

In this vein, in Fall 2015, a group of White Relational-Cultural educators and practitioners began meeting to further explore individual and collective racism. Grounded in Relational-Cultural Theory, the group has continued to meet through Spring 2017. This poster represents from our experience from Fall 2016.

The initial goals were to raise each person's individual awareness of their own privilege and to name how it impacted the lens through which they experienced the world. The RCT White Privilege Group seeks to contribute to the RCT literature through the documentation and communication of our experiences. We hope to inspire further work in this areas it relates to issues of race, diversity, and white privilege, and to develop an individual or collective social action agenda.

METHODS

- Group Structure**
 - Two groups started meeting in Fall 2015.
 - Folded into one group Spring 2016-Spring 2017.
 - The initial series of four meetings were structured by three facilitators; subsequent meetings had rotating facilitation.
- Meeting Structure**
 - First round had designated leaders with structured agenda.
 - Subsequent rounds had rotating leadership and a more fluid structure.
- Technology**
 - The group met via the internet.
 - Technology was sometimes a challenge.
- Group Participants**
 - Group members were from across the United States and Canada.
 - Group membership varied from one group series to another, but there were some consistent group members through all groups.
- Participant Demographics**
 - All group members broadly defined themselves as "white" but reflected a variety of religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, and life circumstances.
 - Professions of group members included educators, social workers, therapists.
- Date Collection**
 - Group experiences were collected via Survey Monkey.
 - Formal qualitative analysis was not completed.
 - Survey results were collected to begin efforts at data collection.

*"Love participating in this group. I'm forever changed."
(Fall 2016 Participant)*

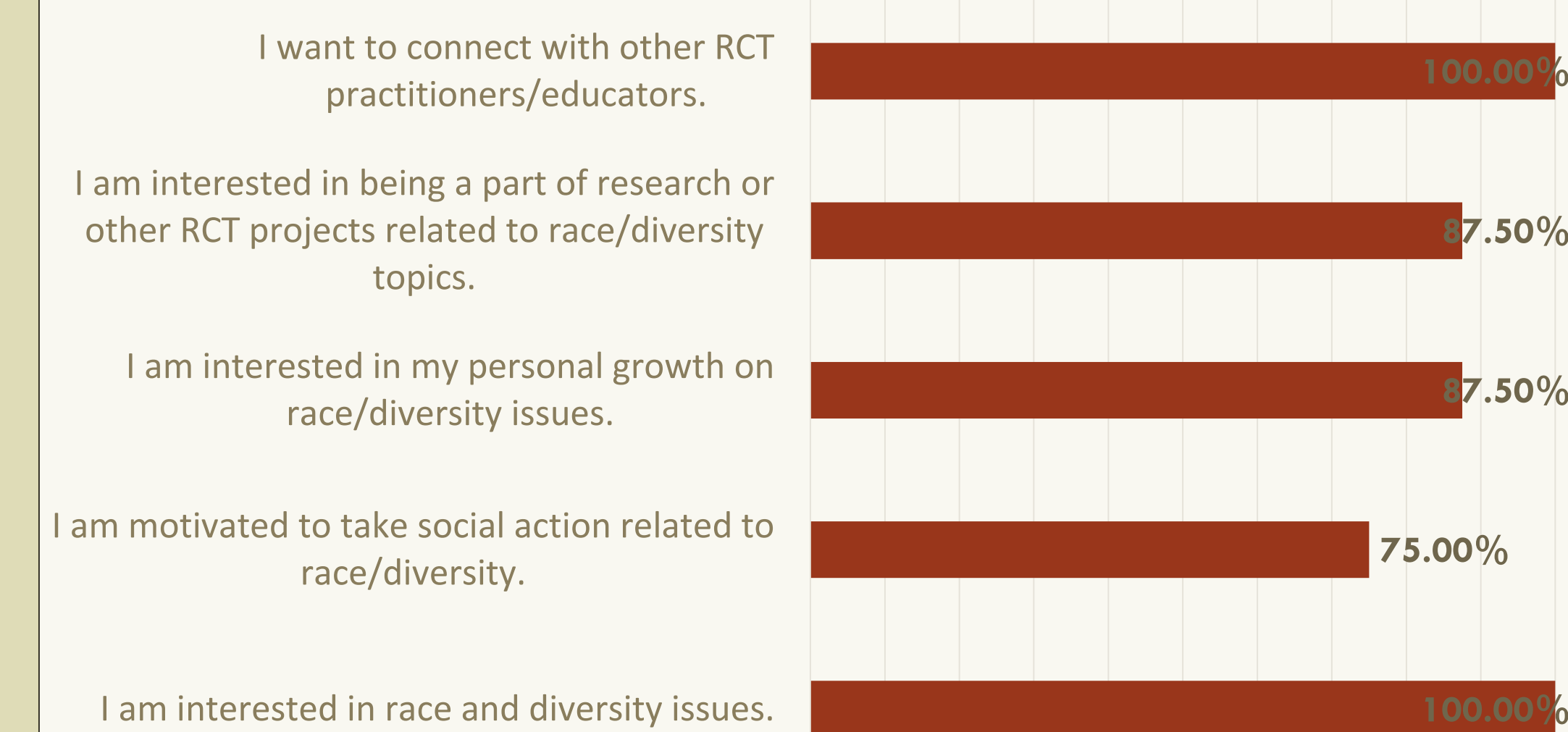
AND THEN THE ELECTION HAPPENED...

The 2016 Presidential election was a difficult time for group members. The blatant racism during and after the election gave the group "new issues" to work on together. Some group members experienced difficulty in staying connected in relationships with those who had not only political differences, but differences which felt to most group members to undermine core RCT values.

Group members experienced differences in their individual and community lives, in their ability to recover from the election, and the time in which one was able to "move on" to more of a social action agenda. The tone and priorities of the newly elected regime had many group members struggling with what is really meant by "radical empathy" (Jordan, J.V. & Schwartz, H.L. (2017) and for some, it was the first time RCT may not have been able to offer an adequate explanation or support for remaining connected to our collective humanity. At the same time, the group, after a period of trauma and grief recovery, did seem to move toward a more social action agenda. Through this post election period, numerous group members noted that the group provided a solid base to which to return for further exploration and growth.

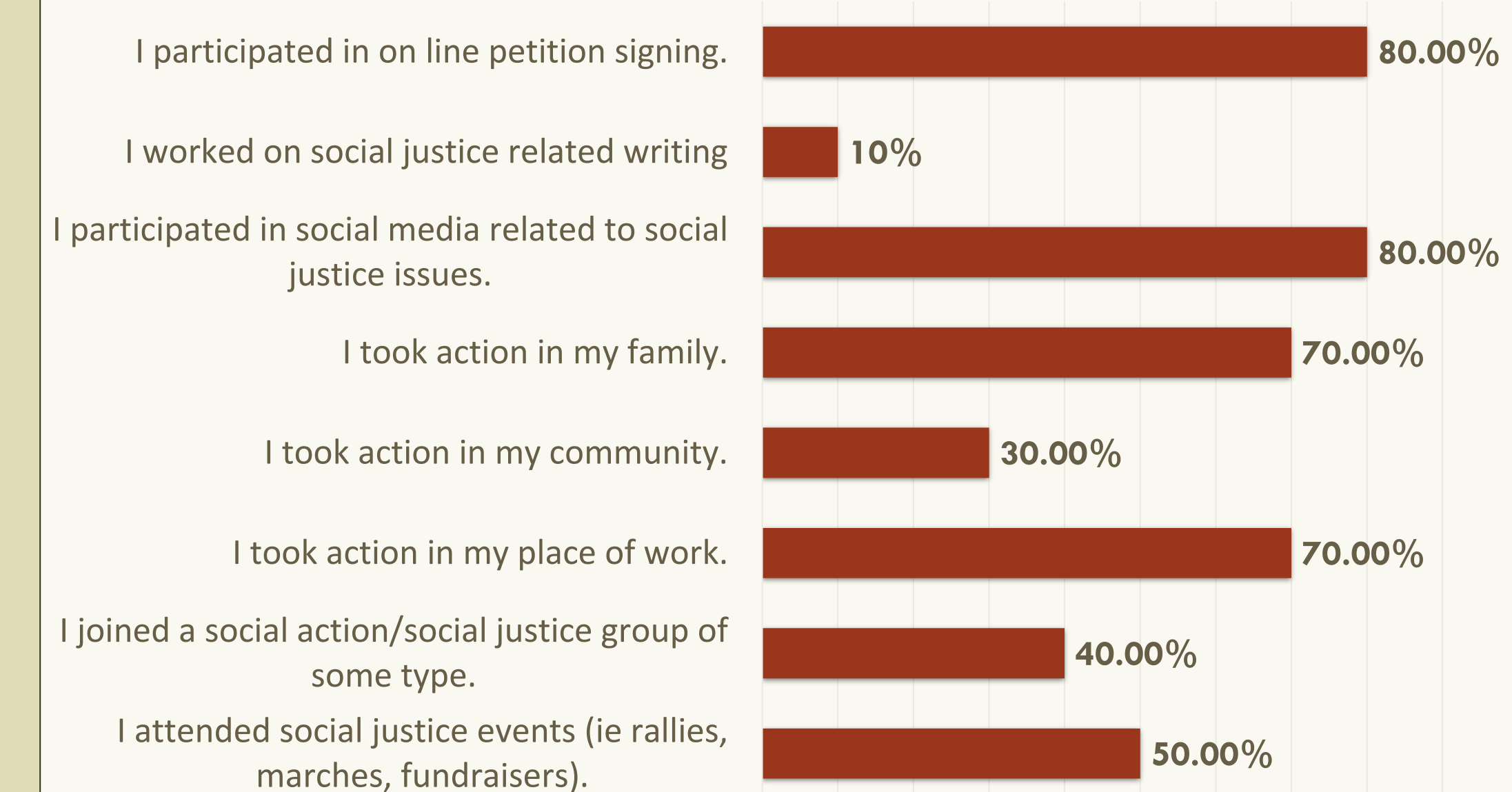
*"It was so good to connect with other RCT practitioners who are passionate about this work, particularly in this current political and racialized climate."
(Fall 2016 Group Participant)*

What are your goals in participating in this group? (Fall 2016)



*"This group session helped me recognize how much power I have to challenge racism in my daily interactions if I can bring courage to sit in the discomfort of speaking out and be more vulnerable to make mistakes."
(Fall 2016 Participant)*

Please describe any social action efforts you may have taken during the time of the Fall 2016 sessions.



*"This is one of the most important things I've done all year but we can't keep this work to ourselves. We must be out in the world."
(Fall 2016 Participant)*

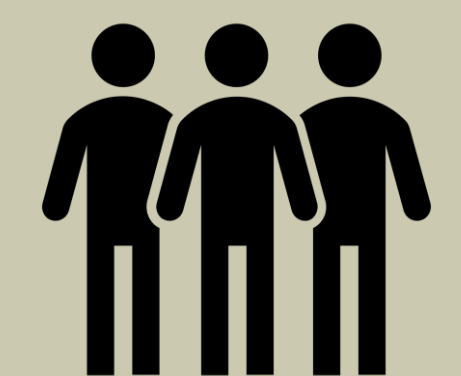
CONCLUSIONS/THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Our Beliefs

- We acknowledge and accept that we each have individual work to do related to our own racism.
- We acknowledge our Western culture, and how we are acculturated to individualism and meritocracy.
- We believe there is value in group work related to racism, as it allows exploration of ideas, gentle confrontation of bias and "healthy conflict" with supported vulnerability, and collective intellectual and emotional growth. We can use, in a group focused on racism and privilege, our individual and collective stories to learn from one another. Further, we recognize relational "co-responsibility" and that the commitment to the group keeps us sensitive and focused on racial issues.
- We recognize the damage of racism in our individual and collective lives, included the hurt caused to our sisters and brothers of color, in institutions, societal, economic and interpersonal spheres.
- We believe in the power of relational healing.
- We are committed to social action on issues of race and privilege, for ourselves and for our world.
- We believe in an RCT lens for viewing racism – that isolation is a primary sources of emotional pain, that privilege is real, that traditional cultural norms contain bias which privileges certain groups, and disadvantages others., that shame and its sources are a part of working through issues.
- We believe that RCT offers an effective language to relational existence, and to continued growth on the journey to eradicate racism. We believe in "going deeper" and approaching racism and privilege fearlessly.
- We believe in the relationship of racism to neuroscience, and continue to explore the impact of racism on the brain, and the opportunities for "rewiring".
- We acknowledge the challenges of becoming articulate re race-related issues, and seek to become more fluent.
- We recognize that all relational journeys are life-long, including those involving race-related issues.

PARTICIPANTS

- | Round One – Fall 2015 | Round Two – Spring 2016 | Round Four – Spring 2017 |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Christina Borel | Denise Dojka | Lisa M. Eible* |
| Denise Dojka | Shannon Finn* | shannon Finn* |
| Lisa Eible* | Erica Seidel* | Lisa Frey* |
| Shannon Finn* | Audra Sbarra* | Catie Greene* |
| Lisa Frey* | Gail Walker* | Betsy Nordell |
| Catie Greene* | Michelle Walsh | Harriet Schwartz * |
| Lynne Lieberman | | Erica Seidel* |
| Betsy Nordell | | Gail Walker* |
| Audra Sbarra* | | |
| Erica Seidel* | Round Three – Fall 2016 | |
| Harriet Schwartz* | Lisa M. Eible * | |
| Gail Walker* | Shannon Finn* | |
| Michele Walsh | Lisa Frey* | |
| | Tala LaManna | |
| | Betsy Nordell | |
| | Catie Greene * | |
| | Audra Sbarra * | |
| | Harriet Schwartz* | |
| | Erica Seidel * | |
| | Gail Walker * | |



*Poster Contributors

REFERENCES

- Ayvazian, A., Daniel Tatum, B., (1994). Wellesley Centers for Women Publications. 2004WP68, Women, Race and Racism: A Dialogue in Black and White, Jordan, J.V. & Schwartz, H.L. (2017). Radical Empathy in Teaching. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Jordan, J. (Ed). Women's growth in diversity: More writings from the Stone Center. New York, NY: US: Guilford Press. (1997). viii 342 pp.
- "Our Work". Jean Baker Miller Training Institute. Retrieved March 25, 2017 from: <https://www.jbmti.org/Our-Work/the-development-of-relational-cultural-theory>
- McIntosh, P (1989). "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" in Peace and Freedom Magazine, July/August, 1989, pp. 10-12, a publication of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Philadelphia, PA.
- Miller, Jean Baker. (1976). Toward a new psychology of women. Boston : Beacon Press Daniel Tatum, B. (2004). Wellesley Centers for Women Publications. WP63, Racial Identity Development and Relational Theory: The Case of Black Women in White Communities, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Ph.D.
- Tatum, B and Garrick Knaplund, E., (2004). Wellesley Centers for Women Publications. 2004WP78, Outside the Circle? The Relational Implication for White Women Working Against Racism, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Ph.D., Elizabeth Garrick Knaplund, M.A.
- Walker, M. (2002). Wellesley Centers for Women Publications. WP 95. How Therapy Helps when Culture Hurts.
- Wellesley Centers for Women Publications. 1997-2017. Retrieved March 25, 2017 from: https://secure.touchnet.net/C21764_ustores/web/STORE_cat.jsp?STOREID=1&CATID=778&SINGLESTORE=true.