

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

Abstract: Relational-Cultural Theory, since its inception, has focused on the quality of relationships and one's individual, family, group and societal connectedness. Race and cultural in RCT are not separate from one's relational development but are intricately tied to identity development and one's experience of the world. Continuing the RCT tradition of practice informing theory, the following describes the experiences of a group of Relational-Cultural Theory educators and practitioners who met over a two-year period with a focus on white privilege and racism. In a contribution to Relational-Cultural Theory, the group identifies eleven elements which articulate the relationship of RCT to examining issues of power and privilege.

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

Lisa M. Eible, DSW MSW LCSW

Introduction

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 Relational-Cultural Theory (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 Knaplund, 2004; Jordan, 1997; Ayvazian & Tatum,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, a group of White Relational-Cultural educators and practitioners began meeting to explore individual and collective racism. Grounded in Relational-Cultural Theory, the group met for two years, Fall 2015 through Fall 2017. In Fall 2016, we documented our work carefully, hoping to contribute to Relational-Cultural Theory. The following outlines some of our experiences.

Goals of Group

The initial goals of the group 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 Confronting White Privilege Group sought to contribute to the RCT literature through the documentation and communication of our experiences. We hoped to inspire further work in this area it relates to issues of race, diversity, and white privilege, and to develop an individual or collective social action agenda.

Please see Chart One for survey results related to individual goals for the group.

The Logistics

A group of RCT practioners and educators self-identified to participate in the “Confronting White Privilege” group process. In 2015, two groups started meeting. The initial groups were structured by three facilitators. After the initial round, the two groups folded into a single group with rotating facilitation responsibilities. Group membership varied from one group series to another, but a core group of consistent participants emerged. The structure for all groups typically included some pre-group work, typically readings or a video, and then a fluid agenda for the group meeting. Group meetings were held on line, with audio and video meeting technology. Technology issues were occasionally an issue but generally were worked out at the initiation of the group meeting. In addition to the formal group, an informal facebook page, called, “Confronting White Privilege: Reflection, Dialogue and Action” was created for group members as well as for other RCT practitioners.

Impact of External Events

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 outside the group) 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 & Schwartz, 2018) 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.

Contribution to Theory

One of the stated goals of the group in the Fall of 2016 was to articulate our learnings as RCT-informed theoretical contributions. The following outlines concepts identified throughout the group experience which were vetted by the group in 2016-2017.

Our Beliefs

1. We acknowledge and accept that we each have individual work to do related to our own racism.
2. We acknowledge our Western culture, and how we are acculturated to individualism and meritocracy.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. We believe in the power of relational healing.
6. We are committed to social action on issues of race and privilege, for ourselves and for our world.
7. We believe in an RCT lens for viewing racism – that isolation is a primary source 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.
8. 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.
9. 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”.

10. We acknowledge the challenges of becoming articulate re race-related issues and seek to become more fluent.
11. We recognize that all relational journeys are life-long, including those involving race-related issues.

Conclusion

Relational-Cultural Theory provides a valuable lens for examining issues of race, class, and privilege. While the goal of developing a collective social action agenda was not achieved, findings did reflect individual social action efforts. The group experience provided an important forum for the level of self-reflection that RCT demands. Further, the group found that RCT provided a solid theoretical framework for unpacking issues related to white privilege, and that in the unpacking, individual and collective growth can occur. Finally, group identification of eleven components related to the group experience articulate an important contribution to the Relational-Cultural literature.

Group Participants

Round One – Fall 2015

Christina Borel
Denise Dojka
Lisa Eible*
Shannon Finn*
Lisa Frey*
Catie Greene*
Lynne Lieberman
Betsy Nordell
Audra Sbarra*
Erica Seidel*
Harriet Schwartz*
Gail Walker*
Michele Walsh

Round Two – Spring 2016

Denise Dojka
Lisa Eible*
Shannon Finn*
Erica Seidel*
Audra Sbarra*
Gail Walker*
Michelle Walsh

Round Three – Fall 2016

Lisa M. Eible *
Shannon Finn*
Lisa Frey*
Tala LaManna
Betsy Nordell
Catie Greene *

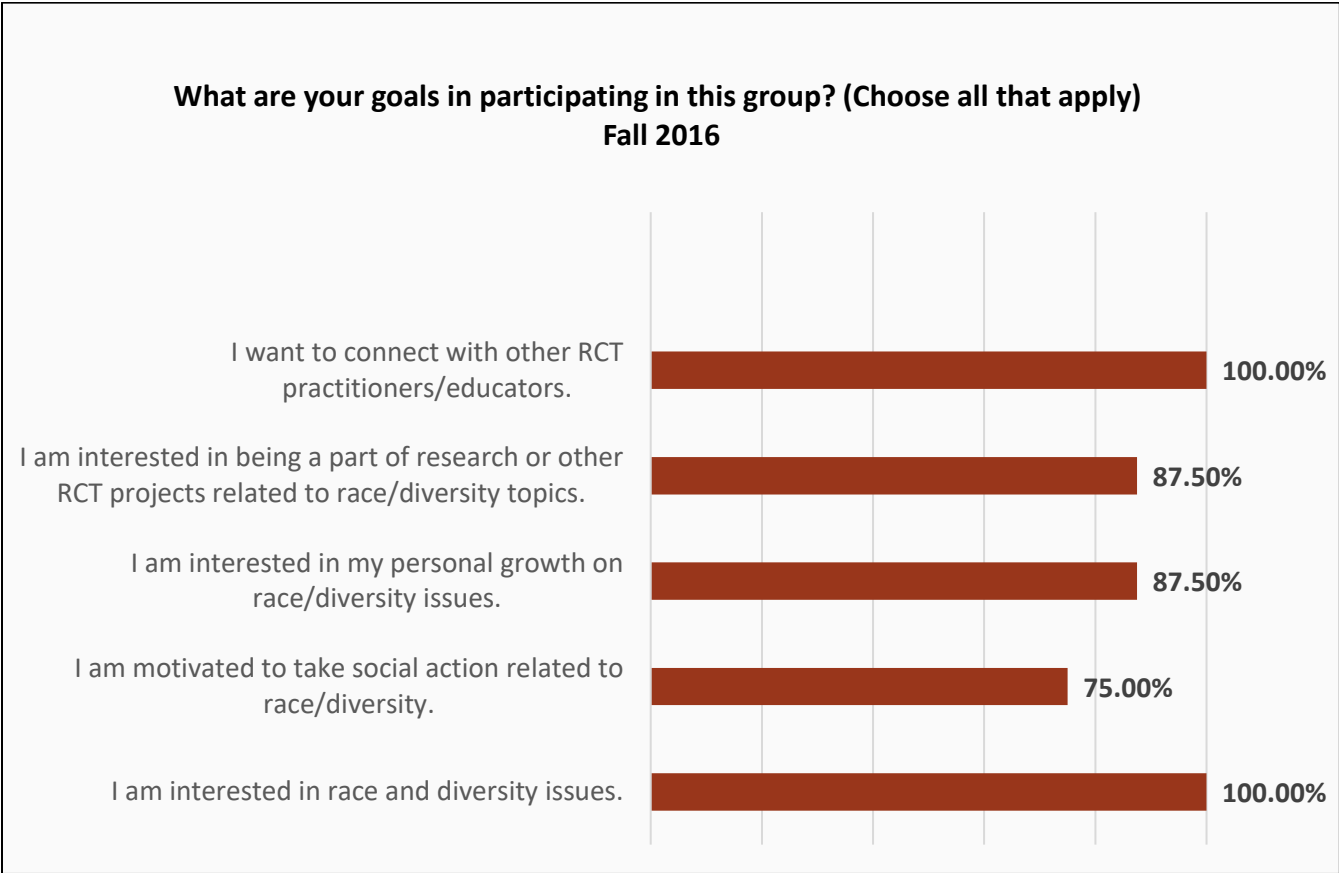
Audra Sbarra *
Harriet Schwartz*
Erica Seidel *
Gail Walker *

Round Four – Spring 2017

Lisa Eible*
Shannon Finn*
Lisa Frey*
Catie Greene*
Betsy Nordell
Harriet Schwartz *
Erica Seidel*
Gail Walker*

***Contributor to this article**

Chart One – Group Goals



Please describe any social action efforts you may have taken during the time of the Fall 2016 sessions. (Choose all that apply)



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. (2018). Radical Empathy in Teaching. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2018(153), 25-35.

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.

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.

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=77&SINGLESTORE=true.