Seeking to Understand: Small Group Dialogues about Race and Gender

AAPT Innovation in Teaching Grant Report

Abstract

It is no secret that we, as a society, struggle with having productive conversations about race and gender. Discussions about these issues are beset with obstacles, from the fear that participants feel about saying something insensitive to the inherent power dynamics between conversation partners. One practice that can help address these difficulties is intergroup dialogue – sustained, small group discussions with participants from a variety of social identities. In this paper, I detail how I incorporated intergroup dialogue into a course on the philosophy of race and gender, providing a blueprint for instructors who want to help their students develop the ability to have constructive conversations about these challenging topics. I provide strategies for how to design intergroup dialogues to avoid many of the common pitfalls of such conversations, strategies that ultimately helped my students become more likely to initiate and participate in worthwhile discussions of race and gender.[1]

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[1]All study questions and methods used in this paper were approved by the Institutional Resource Board at [institution name redacted for blind review].

Introduction

1 Voters in the United States are becoming increasingly polarized along politi-
2 cal lines. Americans strongly distrust those who vote for the other party (Pew
3 Research, 2019a), and this lack of trust is reflected in sharply divided opinions
4 on a number of important issues. Voter responses to the COVID-19 pandemic
5 revealed just how deeply these fissures run. In the summer of 2020, 76% of
6 Republicans thought that the U.S. government was doing a good job dealing
7 with the pandemic, while only 29% of Democrats agreed. Across the nations
8 surveyed, this was the largest such divide (Pew Research, 2020a). Even though
9 a number of Americans are concerned about increasing partisanship and dis-
10 trust, the crisis shows no sign of abating, as younger generations are even more
11 likely to harbor attitudes of distrust towards their fellow citizens (Pew Research,
12 2019b) and many doubt that Democrats and Republicans can even agree about
13 the basic facts (Pew Research, 2019a), much less about which policies are pru-
14 dent in the face of those facts.

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16 Two areas where this increasing polarization is particularly evident are attitudes
17 concerning race and gender. Liberals and conservatives have long disagreed
18 on these important issues, but that disagreement is becoming even more pro-
19 nounced. In 2016, 57% of Hilary Clinton supporters said that it is a lot more
20 difficult to be a black person in the United States than it is to be a white per-
21 son, with that number increasing to 74% of Joe Biden supporters in 2020. The
22 number of Donald Trump supporters, however, who thought that it was a lot
23 more difficult to be black, actually shrank from 11% in 2016 to 9% in 2020. A
24 similar dynamic has occurred with gender issues as well. Only 26% of Clinton
25 supporters agreed that the obstacles that once made it harder for women than
26 men to get ahead are now largely gone, a figure that then decreased to just 20%
27 of Biden supporters. For Trump supporters though, the percentage that agreed
28 such barriers were largely gone increased from 72% in 2016 to 79% in 2020,
29 making the issues of race and gender one of the most marked illustrations of the
30 increasing divide between liberals and conservatives (Pew Research, 2020b).

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32 Extreme polarization can have a number of deleterious effects on a political cul-
33 ture, decreasing the amount of trust that people have in those who support other
34 parties and increasing willingness on both sides of the aisle to subvert demo-
35 cratic processes. One of the most worrisome effects, however, is polarization's
36 impact on how citizens form their political opinions. Citizens of sharply divided
37 polities are less likely to engage with those on the other side of the aisle, looking
38 instead to partisan endorsement to form their political views. This, then, has
39 the effect of simultaneously making voters more ignorant of the evidence that
40 might support their favored policy while ironically also increasing their confi-
41 dence that policy is correct (Druckman, Petersen, and Slothuus, 2013). This is
42 especially concerning when it comes to the topics of race and gender, two areas
43 where there are already significant barriers to understanding the personal expe-
44 riences of those who claim a different social identity. Nestled within the larger

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crisis of political polarization is thus a crisis of dialogue and empathy on issues surrounding race and gender, a crisis that may present even bigger challenges than the polarization surrounding other political issues.

In order to combat this crisis of political polarization, I designed a course on "The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender" that incorporates intergroup dialogues – small, diverse discussion groups that students participated in for the duration of the semester. Intergroup dialogues have been shown to help students develop a number of skills crucial to democratic dialogue, including empathizing with others and resolving conflict (Nagda, Gurin, and Lopez, 2003), but they have rarely, if ever, been used in the philosophy classroom. With an Innovation in Teaching Grant from the *American Association of Philosophy Teachers*, I designed dialogue groups meant to bring all of these benefits to the philosophical context, helping students of various social identities overcome the typical fears and challenges that go along with conversations about race and gender.

In this article, I describe my approach to incorporating intergroup dialogue into the philosophy classroom, with the hope that this approach will lead to a wider adoption of intergroup dialogue across the discipline. I begin in Section 1 by discussing the many challenges to having fruitful conversations on topics related to social identity. I then lay out the benefits of intergroup dialogue in Section 2, arguing that these dialogues help students build the skills necessary to constructively explore the themes of race and gender and overcome the dynamics that can all too quickly lead to further polarization. I then describe in Section 3 how I constructed intergroup dialogues for the context of the philosophy classroom, presenting how incorporating dialogue affected my students in Section 4. In Section 5, I consider some possible concerns, ultimately arguing that intergroup dialogue can play a critical role in helping students overcome their reticence to connect with others on the issues of race and gender.

1   Challenges for Dialogues on Race and Gender

How would we expect an amateur to fare in a professional baseball game? Would she fare better or worse if we made her irate – say, if we convinced her that the other team had great disdain for her? Obviously, this would be a disaster, and the incendiary emotions would likely only make her worse in every respect – she would be less likely to achieve the aims of the game, less likely to improve, and less likely to ever play again. This, though, is analogous to the position that many young college students are put in when it comes to dialogue on race and gender. Several researchers have found that, in university settings, these difficult conversations spring up most often as a result of microaggressions or other more explicit conflict (Hurtado, 1992; Sue and Constantine, 2007; and Sue et al., 2010). In the typical case, comments are made that unintentionally trigger animosity. What follows can be anything from strained silence to disorganized and tearful argumentation. Students, then, are making their first efforts to artic-

ulate and defend their ideas regarding race and gender under emotional strain, and are likely utterly unprepared to successfully navigate these impromptu discussions. Productive conversation about any complex topic is difficult enough, and the addition of the emotions characteristic of conflict only make these conversations even more challenging.

The need for productive conversations about race and gender, then, is clear. The ability to talk coherently and constructively about these issues is required to alleviate the radical political impasse that is characteristic of our current socio-political climate. Considering race and gender in the philosophy classroom, however, comes with unique challenges. To begin with, students might be afraid to share their perspective, worried that they will either offend others or be criticized for holding views that other students deem unacceptable. Other students might worry that, by sharing their negative experiences with racism or sexism, they will only open themselves up to further abuse and ridicule. Students might also come into the classroom with very different understandings of race and gender, conceptual differences that can lead to talking past one another instead of fruitful dialogue. In order to design and facilitate successful dialogues on race and gender, it is first necessary to understand these challenges.

The first obstacle to productive conversations about race and gender are the underlying anxieties of participants. Students have a fair amount of apprehension when discussing these topics, whether that is the fear of being misunderstood, saying something offensive, or being judged by their peers. One particularly pronounced fear is the concern that they will be labeled as racist or misogynist, a fear that most often manifests on the side of the historically dominant group. White students, for example, might be worried that they will say something that comes across as racist, affecting how others view them moving forward (Sue and Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2010; Sue, 2016; and Young, 2003). These students might even feel that, simply by acknowledging the topic of race, they will be seen as racist (Sue, 2013), even though shying away from discussing race can backfire by making them seem inauthentic and disingenuous (Shelton et al., 2005, and Vorauer and Turpie, 2004). These fears are not just limited to students. Faculty members who lead conversations on social identity also harbor fears of seeming biased (Howard, 2000, and Sue et al., 2009b), making them even less likely to introduce issues of race or gender into classroom discussions to begin with.

To illustrate, I will now consider how some of my students articulated this general concern. For the Spring 2020 academic semester, I taught a 120 student course called "The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender." My students began the course with many of the same anxieties, with many students fearing being misunderstood or accidentally saying the wrong thing. In a survey at the beginning of the course, students identified being misinterpreted as a major obstacle to productive conversations about race and gender, saying that "the most challenging thing is trying to state your opinions in a way that will not

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be misunderstood and offensive to someone" and that they were worried about "possibly offending other people." Chief among those concerns was that others would think they were racist or sexist based on their class contributions. When asked to report the most challenging aspect of discussing topics surrounding race and gender, students responded with all of the following worries:

What would you say is the most challenging aspect of discussing issues surrounding race, class, and gender?

- "I always feel as if I may say something wrong that may label me as a racist or misogynist"

- "People are afraid to share their opinions that could potentially hurt others or make them look a certain way, whether that could be sexist or racist"

- "The accidental slip up on either side of the conversation where words are used that sound racist but weren't intended to be racist"

- "The fear that if I say something that someone doesn't agree with that I'll get [...] labeled as a racist simply for holding opposing views"

As we can see, a number of my students felt concerned that, if they participated in discussions surrounding race and gender, they risked being seen as racist or sexist. Thus, this general obstacle to conversations about social identity was also a hurdle to productive dialogue in my class as well.

Student fears were not just limited to appearing biased or prejudiced. While this might have been the primary fear among students from groups that have historically been in positions of power, a number of students were also concerned about the possible power differentials that often express themselves in conversations about social identity. Discussions of race and gender are alike in that there are already-felt power dynamics between dialogue participants. A student does not enter most philosophy classrooms with a sense of what it might mean for them if dualism is coherent, agent-causation is possible, or utilitarianism is correct. They are, though, often painfully aware that they have a position in discussions on race or gender. This awareness can manifest in recalcitrance ("Why would I say anything? I know my perspective isn't welcome here," or "such-and-such a group will never understand, there is no point in talking to them."), pressure to be on one 'side' or another (qua one's perceived group membership), and disengagement ("These people are saying I am somehow invalid – how can I open up to that?"). The very situation that the group is endeavoring to understand is simultaneously manifested in the room by virtue of the relationships that they have to one another (Zúñiga et al., 2007, and Zúñiga, Lopez, and Ford., 2012). Some of the trappings of these dynamics are less immediately obvious than others, but even the most subtle traits are likely to come out in the course of sustained conversations. Put differently, the power dynamics may be more immediately apparent in the case of skin tone, but even something like gender can be projected (correctly or incorrectly) on the basis of perceptible

behavior. As a result, otherwise peripheral aspects of student social identity are reported as becoming suddenly all too salient during discussions of race and gender (Young and Davis-Russell, 2002).

Along with fears surrounding being misunderstood and being labeled as racist or sexist, my students were also concerned with the power dynamics that inevitably come to the fore when discussing race and gender. Students from underrepresented social identities were worried that they would not be listened to, that someone might say something offensive, or that their first-hand experiences would be undermined:

What would you say is the most challenging aspect of discussing issues surrounding race, class, and gender?

- "I think the most difficult thing about discussing issues surrounding race, gender, and class is when people disregard or don't validate my personal experiences as a member of a marginalized community and form opinions without listening to people who are hurt and face real consequences"

- "I've been in a conversation where my opinion was considered moot due to my race, sex, and perceived class standing"

- "As a Black woman, I have a unique perspective regarding this topic. It's something I feel very passionate about because it has always affected my life and, based on the current social conflict in this world, it always will. I feel like it's really easy for people who don't face repercussions of being a certain race to say it's 'biology' or race 'doesn't exist'"

- "As a person of color I'm always afraid someone might say something racist like a racial slur or stereotype that would deeply offend me or hurt my feelings. It also hurts when others don't understand that we can have conversations with disagreements but not when the opponent's disagreement is rooted in my oppression"

There were thus a number of students from underrepresented groups who came into my course with concerns about how they would be treated when covering topics related to race and gender. This comes as no surprise, as many of these students may have already been subject to microaggressions (Sue and Constantine, 2007, and Sue et al., 2011) or other negative instances of conflict over social identity on campus (Hurtado, 1992). For this reason, building a healthy environment for intergroup dialogue requires creating spaces where underrepresented students are assured that their voices, experiences, and concerns will be taken seriously.

A third pedagogical hurdle, and perhaps the most challenging obstacle to fruitful exchanges about social identity, is the presence of inarticulate and implicit conceptual schemas that make communication more challenging. I noted earlier that undergraduate students rarely recognize themselves as having a stake

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in philosophical conversations. On these topics, however, many students enter philosophical conversations with convictions about the truth, and even the righteousness, of their particular ways of understanding the issues. The closest parallel in this sense is perhaps religious dialogue, but conversations about religion often have the benefit of carefully articulated conceptual and theological paradigms. In the cases considered here, though, the frameworks do not have the benefit of a long history of clarifying discussion in the way theology has. Some students, for example, might think that the social world is best understood as structured by group hierarchies and systems of oppression, while others hold that we should think of our society in terms of individuals instead of reducing anyone to members of their kind. Both of these frameworks license inferences and assumptions that might seem puzzling to the other group, making mutual understanding harder to achieve than cases where there is a shared common ground. Making matters even more challenging, these are only two of the views that students might hold implicitly, making it necessary to unearth and articulate these frameworks before it is possible to discuss and evaluate them.

In addition to being afraid of being misunderstood or mistreated, my students were also concerned that intergroup dialogues would not be productive due to their own ignorance. Even though differences in conceptual schemas often go unacknowledged, a number of my students anticipated that their own lack of understanding might make conversations about social identity more challenging, expressing doubts that they would be an effective interlocutor because they were "not an expert on these topics" or did not "have enough education on the issues." Other concerns in the same vein were as follows:

What would you say is the most challenging aspect of discussing issues surrounding race, class, and gender?

- "For me, the most challenging aspect of having a good discussion on these important issues was my own lack of knowledge."

- "I think inherent ignorance, whether it be my own or whoever I am discussing an issue with, may warp our perceptions of what we are talking about."

- "I feel like I am not yet educated enough on some of these topics to speak on them."

- "The most challenging would be not knowing enough about a topic to discuss it and or explain it."

In addition to being worried that ignorance would be a significant obstacle to having productive discussions, a number of students explicitly said that they thought such ignorance was due to not being able to understand the perspectives of others:

- "The most challenging aspect of discussing issues surrounding race, class, and gender is not understanding the problem fully or seeing it from a place of privilege that would allow me to fully understand the problem which would lead me to offend others"

- "I think understanding [...] the viewpoints that my classmates have on [race, class, and gender] is the hardest part because sometimes the opinions are so different it is hard to see the other side."

- "Being white, it is hard for me to accurately describe and fully understand the struggles that many other races face."

Not only must productive discussions of race and gender manage student fears and expectations, but they must also find strategies to bridge the differences in perspective that students bring to the conversation. In order to avoid simply talking past one another, students must be aware of how different conceptual frameworks make sense of race and gender and be able to formulate their own perspectives in the midst of these frameworks.

2 Intergroup Dialogue as a Strategy for Discussing Race and Gender

When faced with conversations about race and gender, students are often anxious that they might offend others or be harmed themselves. Despite these obstacles, the importance of having difficult conversations about race and gender provides reason to not be satisfied with the status quo. While challenging, having productive discussions about these issues is vital for repairing the divisions that come with increasing polarization, making the potential benefits of a well-executed course on these topics worth pursuing. One potential route to overcoming these dialectical hurdles is intergroup dialogue, a methodology developed for discussing issues related to social identity. In this section, I will summarize the benefits of intergroup dialogue, including how it can help to address the problems detailed in the previous section.

One promising method for fruitful dialogue on race and gender is the practice of intergroup dialogue. In 2008, a group of nine universities set out to explore whether intergroup dialogue could help students have conversations across various social identities, a project known as the Multi-University Intergroup Dialogue Research Project.[2] According to the project, "intergroup dialogues bring together students from two or more social identity groups that sometimes have had contentious relationships with each other, or at the very least have lacked

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[2]Participating institutions included Arizona State University, Occidental College, Syracuse University, the University of California, San Diego, the University of Maryland, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the University of Texas, Austin, and the University of Washington, Seattle, enrolling approximately 1,500 students in intergroup dialogues during the course of their respective academic years (Sorensen et al., 2009).

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opportunities to talk in non-superficial ways" (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008). In particular, the project focused on differences in social identity, including differences of race and gender, that have led to historical inequalities. The dialogue groups used in the study were small (including between twelve to sixteen students), diverse (made up of men and women of varied ethnicities), and sustained (meeting for a period of ten to twelve weeks), allowing participants to interact with those of different social identities over the length of an entire semester (Sorensen et al., 2009).

Through the multi-university project, as well as through trials of intergroup dialogues at a number of other universities, several benefits of intergroup dialogue have begun to become apparent. Even when dealing with controversial issues like race and gender, such groups have been shown to help students improve their communication skills, grow in empathy and understanding, and take action outside the classroom:

Improved Communication Skills – Intergroup dialogue participation helps students build the sorts of communication skills that are necessary to tackle potentially divisive issues. Sustained engagement with peers who differ along a number of social and ideological dimensions creates an environment ideal for learning in the midst of, and even through, various forms of disagreement. Not only do intergroup dialogues help students form more positive views of conflict (Gurin et al., 1999, and Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003), but Wayne (2008) reports that intergroup dialogue increases student willingness to hear other's views, share their own views, and respectfully disagree, while Nagda et al. (2003) shows that intergroup dialogues help students learn strategies for conflict management and resolution. Intergroup dialogues are designed in order to help facilitate the formation of these crucial communication skills (Nagda, 2006), increasing the trust amongst participants over the course of the discussions (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013, Ch. 7).

Increased Empathy and Understanding – Along with providing students an opportunity to develop communication skills that can help them navigate difficult conversations, intergroup dialogues also allow students to learn to better empathize with those from different backgrounds. Intergroup dialogue participants also show measurable increases in empathy (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013, Ch. 5), a rise in positive intergroup relationships (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013), increased awareness of social identities (Alimo, Kelly, and Clark, 2002, and Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003), and a greater openness to learning about those from different social groups (Gurin, Nagda, and Sorensen, 2011, and Nagda, Kim, and Truelove, 2004). Dialogue groups support this growth in intergroup understanding particularly because hearing stories from students of other social identities is an effective way to teach about issues surrounding race and gender (Keehn, 2015, and Nagda et al., 2009).

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Elevated Desire to Take Action – Increases in intergroup understand-
ing and empathy are also accompanied by a stronger willingness to engage
with these controversial issues moving forward. Dialogue participants are
more likely to become advocates against racism (Alimo, 2012), demon-
strating an increased willingness to raise issues of race and gender outside
the classroom (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012, and Nagda et al., 2009), to de-
fend others against inappropriate remarks (Nagda, Kim, and Truelove,
2004), and to be civically engaged after graduating (Gurin, Nagda, and
Sorensen, 2011, and Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013). These effects are
not just limited to dialogue participants, as dialogue facilitators are also
more likely to engage with issues related to social identity in both their
personal and professional lives (Clark, 2005; Ford, 2017; Ford and Lipkin,
2019; and Maxwell et al., 2011)

All of these benefits of intergroup dialogue are enough to independently rec-
ommend the practice, but these student outcomes are especially encouraging in
the face of the challenges we saw in Section 2. As students form close relation-
ships in their intergroup dialogues, their fears of being misunderstood decrease.
When a small group meets consistently over the course of a semester with the
explicit aim of better understanding the issues, they build a trust and rapport
that cannot be achieved in an exclusively lecture-based setting. These results
likely come from the increase in empathy that students have for one another
along with their improving communication skills – students are less likely to be
misconstrued when they are better at articulating their position and are sur-
rounded by an empathetic audience. Unsurprisingly, we are more eager to act
when we are confident in our abilities - more likely to swing when we know we
can hit the ball - and this is particularly true when we think that our contribu-
tions will be well received.

As students get to know one another, not only do they have less fear that they
will be misconstrued, but they also become more confident that their contribu-
tions will be seen as valuable. The groups engage in a dialogue that, unlike a
lecture, elevates the contributions of all participants. When the groups are com-
posed of members from diverse social identities, regularly hearing from a range
of perspectives demonstrates to students that all voices are welcome. Increases
in empathy also facilitate more productive conversation, as power dynamics
become less pronounced as relationships form within the dialogue group. Inter-
group dialogues thus seem apt for confronting a number of challenges that come
along with discussions on race and gender.

3   Structuring Intergroup Dialogues

Based on past research on intergroup dialogues, there is reason to be optimistic
that they can help overcome some of the obstacles to productive conversations

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about race and gender. Not only do intergroup dialogues decrease the amount of anxiety that students feel in discussing these topics, but the groups also level the conversational playing field, making room for contributions from members of all social identities. In order to try and reap these benefits, I incorporated intergroup dialogues into my Spring 2020 course entitled "The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender," a class that came with all the previously mentioned concerns. Not only were students afraid to share their thoughts about these controversial topics, but even when they did contribute to the discussion, their ability to communicate was undermined by the power dynamics found in the traditional classroom. Typical lecture-style classrooms authorize certain voices in a way that diminishes the significance of other contributions, preventing all perspectives from being considered equally. The difficulty with communicating across these power differentials is only exacerbated by the fact that many students have differing conceptual schemes, leading to moments of merely speaking past one another rather than engaging in productive discussion. In this section, I will outline how I designed intergroup dialogues in order to help students overcome their fears of in-depth conversations on these issues. I will also detail how philosophy is particularly well-positioned to address the third challenge, that of the potentially radical and inarticulate differences in conceptual framework. Intergroup dialogues alone do not necessarily address this issue, but combining dialogues with philosophical instruction provides a promising route for overcoming this difficulty.

In order to try and confront the challenges associated with conversations on race and gender, I created a course that, along with discussing a number of philosophical theories, incorporated intergroup dialogues. Lectures were held on Mondays and Wednesdays, and all students were assigned to one of six dialogue groups that met either on Thursday or Friday. Dialogue groups held twelve sessions over the course of the semester and attendance was required, though students had the option of using one unexcused absence and a number of excused absences as needed. Each dialogue group had between nineteen and twenty-two members along with a primary dialogue facilitator. Four accomplished students – one white female undergraduate, one hispanic female undergraduate, one white female graduate student, and one white male graduate student, none of whom were enrolled in the course – served as the primary dialogue facilitators. Both undergraduate dialogue facilitators were funded through an Innovation in Teaching Grant from the *American Association of Philosophy Teachers*. Students also took turns serving as co-facilitators, helping to lead the dialogue sessions along with their primary facilitators.

One way in which my dialogue groups differed from those created by the multi-university project is how students were assigned to their particular dialogue groups. The project attempted to create groups that each had at least four white men, four white women, four men of color, and four women of color (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008), whereas the students in my groups were assigned randomly based on their availability. This was for a couple of reasons.

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First of all, I did not have access to the demographic information of individual students, preventing us from sorting them according to race and gender. Secondly, my student population is already fairly diverse, giving us confidence that randomly assigning students would still create viable intergroup dialogue despite my lack of access to information about their various social identities. According to demographic data collected in 2020 about the entire student body, approximately 42% of students identified as male and 58% of students identified as female, while approximately 58% of students identified as white and 42% did not identify as white.[3] Thus, even though I did not have access to demographic information on the students enrolled in my course, random assignments were still a viable option for creating dialogues with a mix of students from various social identities.

The rest of the steps I took in structuring the course and my intergroup dialogues were in direct response to the difficulties inherent in conversations surrounding race and gender. The most obvious step I took to combat the fear that students often feel in discussing these issues was the creation of sustained, small group dialogues itself. Instead of utilizing only large, lecture-style course sessions, or having one-off small group dialogues, students were enrolled in the same intergroup dialogue for the duration of the semester. Moving from superficial conversations to more in-depth, meaningful dialogue takes a comfort level that is not possible to create over just one or two sessions (Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig, 2002). Sustained dialogue communication supports the relationship building required for deeper reflection (Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003, and Pettigrew, 1998), making long-term dialogue engagement essential for optimal results in a dialogue format. By incorporating intergroup dialogues into my course, I was hoping to reap the general benefits that come along with such groups that we discussed in Section 2.

Another step that I took to decrease student anxiety surrounding the controversial subject matter was a focus on creating structured dialogue sessions with clear expectations. Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig (2002) advise creating a set of guidelines for structuring conversations, while Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga (2013) suggest having dialogue participants themselves collectively create these guidelines, ensuring that students will be able to create conversational norms that will make them more comfortable engaging their peers. In order to incorporate conversation guidelines like these into my intergroup dialogues, facilitators began the dialogue groups by leading participants through the process of creating their own set of group norms. Some popular norms included those in Figure 1:

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[3]Of the students who did not identify as White, approximately 19.9% identified as Hispanic, 9.3% identified as Black, 2.9% identified as Asian, 0.2% identified as American Indian, 0.1% identified as Native Hawaiian, 4% identified as multi-race, 4.6% simply reported that they were non-resident aliens, and a final 1.3% did not respond. For full demographic data, see [redacted for blind review].

Dialogue Norm	Description	Impact
Confidentiality	Nothing shared during dialogue will be repeated outside the group	Students were more honest sharing their perspectives, knowing that they would stay with the group
Charitable Listening	Always assume that group members mean well when sharing, and allow them to clarify if misconstrued	Speakers were willing to contribute even their preliminary thoughts because they knew that they could always elaborate if necessary
Argument Focused	All responses should focus on the arguments made and the reasons given, not the person who contributed them	Participants felt free to share without fear of personal attacks
No Interruptions	Never interrupt the speaker	Students felt equal respect from the group, with all able to share their complete thoughts
No Generalizing	No reasoning about others using generalizations, either positive or negative	Each member of the group was viewed and respected as an individual, with their own unique experiences and perspectives
Follow the Queue	The dialogue facilitator will manage the queue by calling on participants in the order their hands were raised	The conventions for contributing to the conversation were transparent and clear, preventing any bias for comments from certain participants

Figure 1: Sample Intergroup Dialogue Norms

Once the original norms were set, dialogue facilitators and co-facilitators would then gently remind participants about the norms, providing chances to add new norms if necessary and making sure that the group abided by the guidelines created to promote healthy dialogue.

Along with the structure created by a set of shared group norms, each small group meeting also incorporated a pre-planned dialogue activity. These activities both created engaged dialogues through the use of active learning (Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig, 2002, p. 14) as well as provided students with a shared basis for reflection (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga (2013), pp. 57-58). During the first few dialogue sessions, activities often focused on icebreaker-type activities, allowing the students to build trust and familiarity with one another before moving to more challenging conversations in later meetings. More in-depth activities included disclosing hopes and fears related to dialogue conversations, completing poll questions about common group experiences, and centering discussion on a particular current event. All of these activities added structure to activities and gave students a common jumping off point for productive dialogue sessions.

In addition to building a structured environment in order to help students feel more comfortable in their intergroup dialogues, I also took a number of

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steps to erase the problematic power dynamics that often arise both in the classroom and in conversations surrounding race and gender. The dialogue format itself was a good first step – instead of creating a class that is always conducted in the lecture format, small group dialogues allow all students the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences. Another best practice for countering problematic power dynamics that might arise even within the dialogue format is promoting diverse leadership of the intergroup dialogue. This can be accomplished in a number of ways: In the multi-university project, co-facilitators were chosen from different social identity groups (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008), while in another study, peers from distinct social identity groups were trained to co-facilitate the dialogue groups (Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003).

For my intergroup dialogues, I incorporated diverse leadership both by hiring primary dialogue facilitators from underrepresented groups within philosophy and by having all dialogue participants serve as co-facilitators of their intergroup dialogue. Each meeting of the intergroup dialogue was co-facilitated by two students from that group, and each of these co-facilitators received training from their primary dialogue facilitator prior to leading discussion. Primary dialogue facilitators trained co-facilitators in promoting a lively and in-depth discussion, reinforcing group norms, and creating structured dialogue activities, giving each student an active role in building the culture of their individual dialogue groups and flattening any problematic power dynamics that might have emerged at the level of the dialogue groups. The complete structure of how intergroup dialogue leadership was built into the course is displayed in Figure 2.
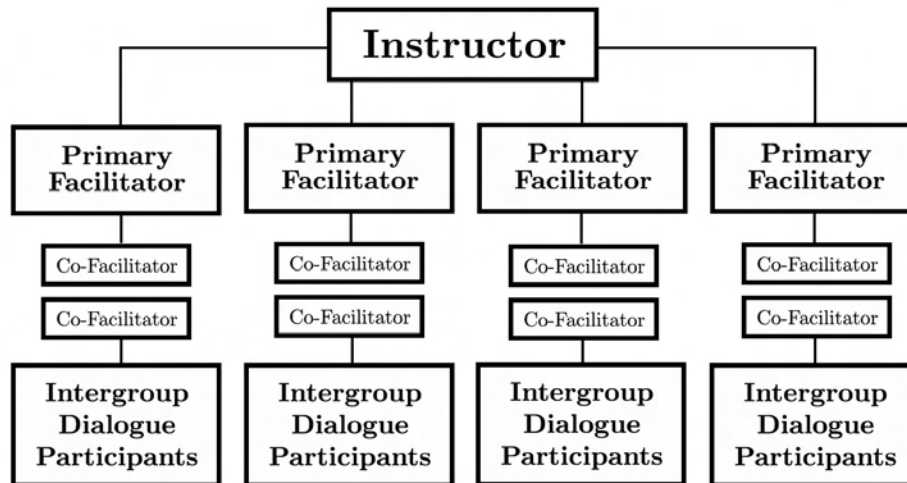

Figure 2: Intergroup Dialogue Structure

The final challenge that I attempted to address in designing my intergroup dialogues were the deep differences in conceptual understanding when it comes to issues of race and gender. Dialogue groups, in and of themselves, do not

519 always reveal the distinct ways that students are thinking about these issues.
520 Fortunately, philosophy is well-positioned to bring out conceptual tensions and
521 conflicts across a range of subject matters, allowing us to bridge the gaps in con-
522 ceptual understanding with a focus on the philosophical literature surrounding
523 race and gender. Supplementing the dialogue groups with philosophical read-
524 ings provided students with common terminology and a set of conceptual tools
525 to discuss their perspectives and experiences, giving them a jumping off point
526 for further discussion. For example, when we were preparing to discuss race in
527 intergroup dialogues, I introduced students to biological, social, and elimina-
528 tivist views on the metaphysics of race, equipping them with a shared language
529 for discussing their own experiences of race. For those looking to include issues
530 surrounding race and gender in their own courses, including issues in epistemol-
531 ogy, ethics, and political philosophy, possible topics along with a few helpful
532 readings can be found in Figure 3.

Topic	Possible Readings
Metaphysics of Race	• Ney, Alyssa and Allan Hazlett. "The Metaphysics of Race." In *Metaphysics: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2014. • Haslanger, Sally. "A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race." In *Revisiting Race in a Genomic Age*. Rutgers UP, 2008. • Mallon, Ron. "'Race': Normative, Not Metaphysical or Semantic." *Ethics* 116.3, 2006.
Metaphysics of Gender	• Stoljar, Natalie. "The Metaphysics of Gender." In *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. • Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. • Witt, Charlotte. *The Metaphysics of Gender*. OUP, 2011.
Epistemic Injustice	• Mills, Charles. "White Ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. SUNY Press, 2007. • Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. OUP 2007. • Anderson, Elizabeth. "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions." *Social Epistemology* 26:2, 2012.
Racism	• Atkin, Albert. *The Philosophy of Race*. Routledge, 2012. • Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Racisms." In *Anatomy of Racism*. University of Minnesota Press, 1990. • Kelly, Daniel, and Erica Roedder. "Racial Cognition and the Ethics of Implicit Bias." *Philosophy Compass* 3.3, 2008.
Affirmative Action	• Pojman, Louis. "The Case Against Affirmative Action." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 12.1, 1998. • Boonin, David. "Two Cheers for Affirmative Action." In *Should Race Matter?* Cambridge UP, 2011. • George Hull, "Affirmative Action and the Choice of Amends." *Philosophia*, 43.1, 2015.

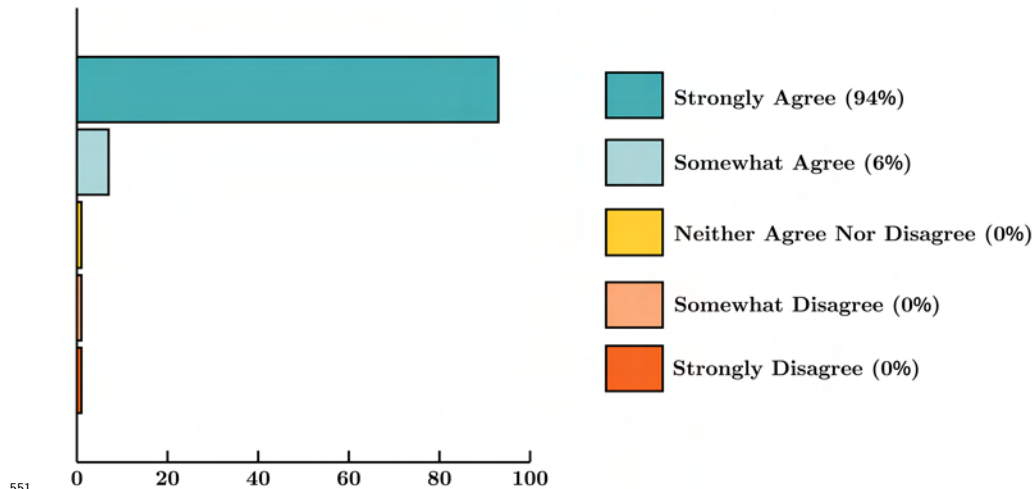533 Figure 3: Sample Topic Readings

534 These readings are obviously not the only valuable readings on these topics.
535 Many of these readings are popular choices on a number of philosophy of race
536 and philosophy of gender syllabi, and I offer them here simply as a starting point
537 for those who might be interested in discussing some of these topics in their own

classes. For further syllabi on issues related to the philosophy of race and the philosophy of gender, see the *American Philosophical Association*'s diverse and inclusive syllabus collection.[4]

4 Student Responses to Intergroup Dialogue

My goal in designing a course including intergroup dialogues was to provide students a safe and predictable setting where they could begin to build the skills necessary to talk about race and gender in everyday life. Even though such national dialogue is more important than ever, my students are rarely in an environment that will allow them to grow in the ways required to fruitfully participate in this society-wide conversation. Despite increasing polarization, at the outset of my course, the vast majority of my students reported strongly agreeing that it is important to be able to discuss the issues of race and gender with others (see Figure 4).

Rate your agreement with the following statement:
It is important to be able to discuss issues surrounding race, class, and gender

- Strongly Agree (94%)
- Somewhat Agree (6%)
- Neither Agree Nor Disagree (0%)
- Somewhat Disagree (0%)
- Strongly Disagree (0%)
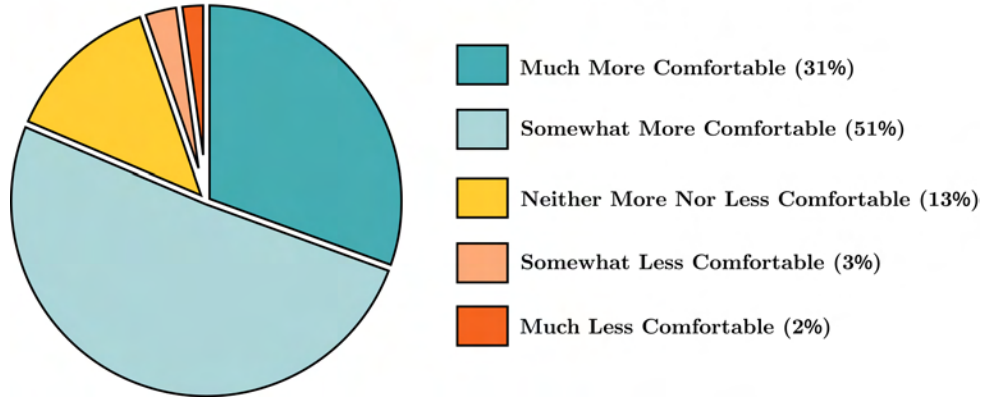
Figure 4: How Important are Dialogues about Social Identity?

I designed my course and intergroup dialogues so as to provide students both the tools and the opportunity to discuss these important issues. In this section, I summarize the results of the course, showing that students both reported being more likely to initiate conversations around race and gender, more comfortable having such conversations, and more willing to listen to those with opposing viewpoints.

In order to judge how well my class equipped students to have such conversations, all intergroup dialogue participants completed a survey at the end of the

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[4]The entire syllabus collection can be found online at `https://www.apaonline.org/members/group_content_view.asp?group=110430&id=380970`.

562 course. An important first step to decreasing the current stalemate on issues
563 related to race and gender is simply increasing the willingness of citizens to
564 discuss these important topics. Encouragingly, one of the primary effects that
565 students reported is that they were both more comfortable having conversations
566 about race and gender and more likely to initiate such conversations. Over 80%
567 of students agreed that they were more comfortable having these discussions,
568 while over 70% said that they are now more likely to initiate a similar discussion
569 outside of class. Full survey results are displayed in Figures 5 and 6:
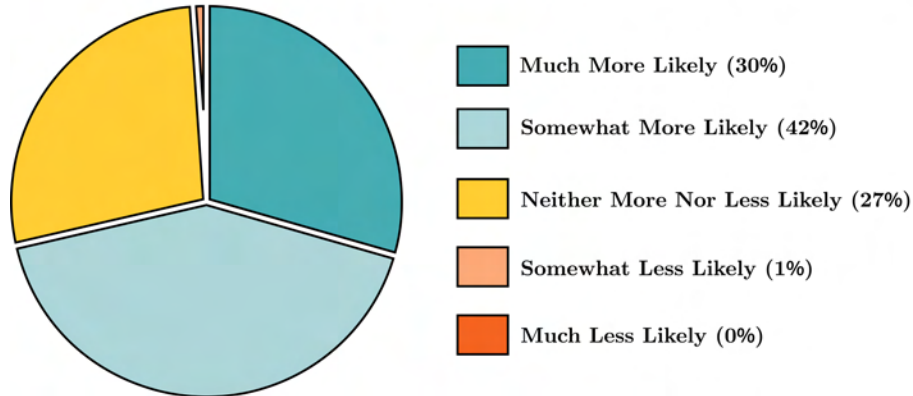
**After taking this class, are you more or less comfortable
discussing issues surrounding race, class, and gender with your classmates?**

- Much More Comfortable (31%)
- Somewhat More Comfortable (51%)
- Neither More Nor Less Comfortable (13%)
- Somewhat Less Comfortable (3%)
- Much Less Comfortable (2%)

570
571 Figure 5: Student Comfort Levels

**After taking this class, are you more or less likely to initiate a conversation
on issues surrounding race, class, or gender outside of class?**

- Much More Likely (30%)
- Somewhat More Likely (42%)
- Neither More Nor Less Likely (27%)
- Somewhat Less Likely (1%)
- Much Less Likely (0%)

572
Figure 6: Initiating Conversation

573 One of the factors driving the increased willingness to talk about these issues
574 were the experiences that students had in their intergroup dialogues. Not only
575 did students feel more comfortable having conversations about race and gender,
576 but a number of students attributed this newfound confidence to their interac-
577 tions in their dialogues groups:

16

In your own words, how would you say this class has impacted your ability or willingness to discuss issues surrounding race, class, and gender?

- "I think the dialogue groups especially have made class discussion more comfortable. I am not afraid to state my opinion [...] because of the norms we have to go over. I feel like the class being emphasized as an open, safe place for opinion has been very helpful."

- "This class has introduced me to new philosophies and ways of thinking about issues that I was already aware of, but didn't quite know how to talk about. I feel a lot more comfortable talking about it now because of that new knowledge. Also, having practice discussing these issues is something that has helped me, especially in the dialogue group."

- "I talk about this class a lot with friends and my roommates; these aren't generally topics that I'd normally discuss. I do genuinely believe this class has given me more confidence in being able to speak my mind, while also listening to what others have to say as well."

- "It has made me more comfortable with engaging in these difficult conversations. I used to refrain from these conversations because I did not want to accidentally offend anyone. I am not always good at articulating my thoughts during these conversations, but this class, especially the dialogue groups, have helped."

Along with being more comfortable raising and discussing issues of race and gender, students also reported being more likely to listen to those with opposing views, an important second factor in reducing political polarization. Even if citizens are more willing to engage in conversations about race and gender, it is also necessary that they are open to listening to those who hold different views. Unless citizens hear opinions that are different from their own, they risk becoming siloed in an echo chamber of similar viewpoints. As we can see in Figure 7, my course was also effective in combating this tendency, as over 70% of my students reported being more likely to listen to someone who held an opposing viewpoint on race or gender:

After taking this class, are you more or less likely to hear someone out who holds an opposing viewpoint on an issue related to race, class, or gender?

- Much More Likely (27%)
- Somewhat More Likely (46%)
- Neither More Nor Less Likely (23%)
- Somewhat Less Likely(1%)
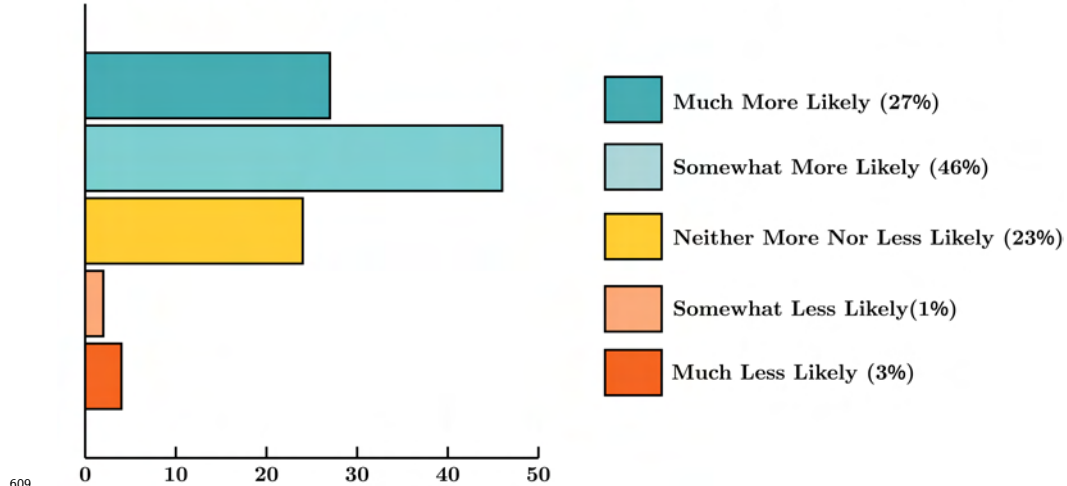- Much Less Likely (3%)

Figure 7: Intergroup Dialogue Structure

One of the reasons that students cited for being more willing to engage with those with differing viewpoints was because of the ways it challenged their own perspective. Several students mentioned that disagreements led to a deeper understanding and appreciation of viewpoints they had not previously considered:

In your own words, how would you say this class has impacted your ability or willingness to discuss issues surrounding race, class, and gender?

- "I think that, for a while, I have been pretty outspoken on my beliefs surrounding race, class, and gender, particularly in high school when I was president of the feminism club. What I struggled with most throughout this time was understanding other viewpoints and having the maturity to discuss them without being insulting or dismissive. After taking this class, my appreciation for other viewpoints does not come from a place of agreeing with them by any stretch; in fact, I feel even more strongly about my opinions. However, I am more intrigued by the possibility of other viewpoints–their validity, morality, basis, and most importantly, why they aren't sound to me and the potential flaws they present in my own arguments. Overall, this class has encouraged me to think deeper about why people believe what they do and why opinions can differ so greatly."

- "This class has allowed me to understand different viewpoints for many arguments I had never previously considered. I am more equipped for conversations with people who have opposing views."

- "I think by hearing so many different opinions on topics I not only learned more about other people's perspectives, I was also able to adjust my own.

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⁶³⁵   This class allowed me to see other people's struggles and their reasoning
⁶³⁶   for thinking the way they do."

⁶³⁷ The way that students began to recognize the value of conversations with those
⁶³⁸ with other perspectives offers perhaps the most promising reason to think that
⁶³⁹ students will be better equipped to deal with political polarization moving for-
⁶⁴⁰ ward. Instead of engaging with other viewpoints simply to defend their own,
⁶⁴¹ students not only learned to respect the views of others, but also came to think
⁶⁴² that they might also have something to learn from their ideological opponents
⁶⁴³ as well. There were thus a number of areas where students showed a significant
⁶⁴⁴ amount of growth, both in their willingness to have conversations about race
⁶⁴⁵ and gender and in their openness to listen to those with conflicting viewpoints.

5   Objections and Concerns

⁶⁴⁷ The results of this post-course survey are promising. Students reported being
⁶⁴⁸ more willing to engage with others on these difficult topics, even in the face
⁶⁴⁹ of disagreement. Despite the difficult and emotional nature of the material,
⁶⁵⁰ carefully planned conversations among peers (conversations sometimes full of
⁶⁵¹ disagreement) led to more confidence and willingness to engage. I recognize,
⁶⁵² though, that even with these results, there remain some potential concerns. In
⁶⁵³ this section, I will consider some natural worries that are likely to arise about
⁶⁵⁴ implementing a small group dialogue practice. I will begin by responding
⁶⁵⁵ to the concern that spending a substantial portion of class time on dialogue
⁶⁵⁶ groups will ultimately decrease student comprehension of the course content,
⁶⁵⁷ considering then whether the growth that my students experienced could be
⁶⁵⁸ had without incorporating intergroup dialogues. I will also respond to the
⁶⁵⁹ objection that, insofar as philosophical dialogue is rigorous and truth-oriented,
⁶⁶⁰ it will be more like debate and less like dialogue. Lastly, I will consider the
⁶⁶¹ worry that allowing students to have a larger role within dialogue groups will
⁶⁶² grant legitimacy to potentially problematic views.

⁶⁶⁴ The first worry about the format of my class is that students did not have
⁶⁶⁵ enough time to learn the material. Intergroup dialogues took up approximately
⁶⁶⁶ a third of my class sessions, and instructors who already feel like they cannot
⁶⁶⁷ cover all the course content might worry that committing this much time
⁶⁶⁸ to dialogue discussions will further undermine how much of the material
⁶⁶⁹ students are able to grasp. The preliminary research that has been done thus
⁶⁷⁰ far, however, suggests that dialogue group participation actually enhances
⁶⁷¹ academic outcomes. Far from simply replacing the typical content knowledge
⁶⁷² with more of an emphasis on student communication, intergroup dialogues
⁶⁷³ also contribute to the mastery of the relevant concepts. Keehn (2015) argues
⁶⁷⁴ that personal stories (in the context of intergroup dialogue) facilitate student
⁶⁷⁵ learning about a variety of aspects of race and ethnicity, while Weinzimmer and
⁶⁷⁶ Bergdahl (2018) note that, when compared to large lecture courses, intergroup
⁶⁷⁷ dialogues help students more effectively master concepts associated with the

sociology of race and ethnicity. There are further benefits as well. One of the struggles of teaching large classes is the insufficient time to field and address all student questions. With intergroup dialogues, the weekly meeting provides an opportunity for each student to clarify any misunderstandings with the help of their peers and the facilitators. Taking some time out of lecture for dialogue groups, therefore, should not be viewed as a trade-off with comprehending course content, but as a way of facilitating its uptake.

Another concern is that the growth students experienced in my course is mainly due to the course content rather than the dialogue group practice itself. Throughout the class, students were exposed to a large amount of material that they have likely never encountered before, making it possible that this content, and not the intergroup dialogue, is the primary contributor to the favored outcomes referred to throughout the paper. Here again, there is evidence to suggest that intergroup dialogues themselves play an essential role in the desired student outcomes. Nagda et al., (2009), and Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga (2013), for example, directly compared the outcomes of students who completed a non-dialogue social science course on race or gender to students who covered the same content accompanied by an intergroup dialogue. Dialogue group participants showed larger increases in intergroup openness and empathy as well as a greater understanding of structural inequalities than students in the control groups (Nagda et al., 2009, and Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013). While this research is suggestive, there is still more work to be done when it comes to teaching philosophical content. It would be useful, for example, to study whether the differences between the control groups and the dialogue groups manifest in philosophy courses as well as social science courses, but the preliminary empirical evidence in favor of the added value of dialogue groups is impressive enough to recommend initial implementation along with further research.

A third objection to consider is that my dialogue groups, due to their philosophical nature, might be more like debates instead of intergroup dialogues. The creators of the multi-university project are clear that their intention is for participants to "learn how to dialogue, a style of communication that facilitates understanding, rather than debate!" (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008, p. 4), as participants might be more likely to withdraw from conversations that feel more like heated arguments than productive discussions. Take, for example, this student comment about when they felt most uncomfortable in their intergroup dialogue: "The only time I really felt uncomfortable and I did stop talking was the affirmative action [dialogue session] because [...] I felt it was turning into an argument or a discussion debate and that's when I quieted down because I didn't like the whole confrontation [sic]" (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008, p. 64). One might worry that the rational argumentation characteristic of philosophy plumps too close to debate when compared to other intergroup dialogues, negating the positive benefits that might be had through such dialogue.

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When we look closely, however, at the types of engagement that intergroup dialogues are meant to avoid, there is reason to think that the groups I designed can avoid this worry. Here are the characteristics of debate that intergroup dialogues are meant to exclude: (1) Participants trying to convince each other so one side 'wins' (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008, p. 4), (2) Students simply waiting for their chance to monologue (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008, p. 4), and (3) Participants treating the conversation as an exercise in rhetoric or one-upmanship (Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig, 2002). To what degree did these behaviors exist in my intergroup dialogues? In regards to (1), it was a part of my dialogue practices that substantive points had to be rationally defended, and objections engaged with (as is the case in most philosophy classes) but this is distinct from the worries the author expresses. There were no winners or losers determined by my dialogue group structure, and students were encouraged to discuss all parts of an issue instead of just focusing on the most strongly defended positions. In the course of their dialogue group experience, students may have changed their mind about particular issues, but this was not the primary aim of the group or its structure. (2) and (3) can be handled together. Insofar as a philosophical dialogue has devolved into one-upmanship or a procession of monologues, things have clearly gone awry. Instead, philosophical dialogue shares many features with what the authors praise about their sort of dialogue. The goal of the conversations is precisely to facilitate understanding, both of the positions of our interlocutors and of the relevant concepts involved. Even if disagreement is the result, there will have been progress if these two goals are met. In sum, the philosophical dialogue defended here lacks the negative elements that dialogue groups would do well to avoid and possesses all of the beneficial characteristics associated with intergroup dialogue.

The last objection is that a dialogue group, in inviting more contributions from students, may grant legitimacy to problematic views. Because dialogue facilitators are less domineering than a lecturer, merely keeping the conversation flowing instead of dictating everything that is discussed, a damaging view could be presented and discussed for longer than during a typical lecture discussion. Furthermore, if the view is presented as just one option among many, this might seem to validate it. In order to decrease the risk that dialogue groups serve to legitimize harmful views, my primary facilitators played an important role in keeping conversations civil and managing any such issues as they arose. Even though they did not have as pervasive a role as a lecturer would, they were encouraged to manage potentially worrisome situations and report any issues to the course instructor. Naturally, there was some discretion involved on the part of primary facilitators – it is not always necessary to forbid particular topics simply because they are potentially unethical (after all, many utilitarians find Kantianism deeply unethical, and vice versa), but entertaining certain views can be especially dehumanizing. This risk was also lessened by participants creating their own conversational norms - the sense of ownership and guidance that this imbued into the conversation helped stem any sort of harmful commentary, especially because the stated goal was to learn to better understand

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other students as equals. Even once these steps were taken, there was still a small risk that problematic views would arise, but these safeguards were enough to allow the instructor to deal with any issues that came up on a case-by-case basis. In my case, these measures were enough to prevent any notable problems from emerging in any of my six dialogue groups.

Conclusion

If our culture is not yet in crisis, it is uncomfortably close. There is a decreasing willingness to dialogue across differences, and when that dialogue does occur, it is often characterized by anger and misunderstanding. This is the case across a number of different issues, but race and gender have often taken center stage. Philosophy courses have always been remarkable in their ability to facilitate conversation about challenging issues, but even they are affected by the deeply polarized American political climate. Here, I have presented both theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that the introduction of intergroup dialogues into philosophy courses on race and gender can contribute to overcoming these broader societal issues as well as supporting the pedagogical aims of philosophy courses. Starting with the model provided by the multi-university project, I incorporated intergroup dialogues into my course on the philosophy of race and gender, a course that the vast majority of students reported made them more comfortable talking about race and gender as well as engaging with those with differing views. I hope that this course can serve as a model to others who hope to include intergroup dialogues in their classes, providing further insights about the benefits and challenges of dialogue groups in the philosophy classroom.

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