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11-2019


Strengthening Cross-Identity Collaborations and Relationships: A Critical Conversation

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Recommended Citation

Radd, Sharon; Generett, Gretchen G.; and Gooden, Mark A., "Strengthening Cross-Identity Collaborations and Relationships: A Critical Conversation" (2019). *Organizational Leadership Faculty Scholarship*. 8.
https://sophia.stkate.edu/maol_fac/8

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Strengthening Cross-Identity Collaborations and Relationships: A Critical Conversation

UCEA 2019

Background and Purpose

The central idea in the 2019 UCEA Convention theme is “*validating subaltern forms of leadership and learning*,” a notion that refers to “a broad array of knowledges, discourses, practices, experiences, epistemologies, and ways of knowing that historically have been marginalized, downplayed, and/or rendered invisible.” This theme challenges us to consider – at a practical and authentic level – how we might center and validate historically marginalized perspectives and knowledge when sharing space with historically centered, dominant, and dominating perspectives.

In order to productively examine this challenge, this proposal focuses on cross-identity collaboration among those who engage in the preparation of school leaders, and more specifically, those who prepare school leaders with a central focus on social justice. We use the term “cross-identity collaboration” to refer to relationships that meet the following conditions: (1) the parties are charged with the completion of a specific task, project or ; (2) there is shared risk and shared reward for the successful completion of the task; (3) collectively, the parties have multiple socio-cultural identities, at least some that differ among the parties; (4) both historically marginalized and historically dominating identities and perspectives are present; and (5) the level of quality and authenticity in the relationship influences the quality and impact of the task.

The impetus for this critical conversation stems from our experience over time with the development of our four-person author team. As activist scholars, we initially came together to address a need we identified in the field for practical resources and guidance about how to advance organizational change that advances social justice in schools and school districts. Through dialogue, we decided to co-author a book and so began our deep work together.

Through our multi-year process of developing content and writing together, we increasingly engaged in open and honest conversations about race, gender, dis/ability, and other aspects of identity. Our collaboration has required courage, commitment, persistence, humility, compassion, and honesty. We have experienced countless moments as individuals faced with the decision to withhold an opinion or perspective, or step in to more honesty and openness. These challenges were complicated and exacerbated by the realities of power and privilege, and lived experience that would caution against such honesty and risk. Through our persistent *leaning in*, we have been astounded, not by the ongoing need to address race and racism in our work for social justice, but by our own need to continue learning and talking about race and racism across

racialized identities. The authors of color on our team were skillful and compassionate teachers; the whites were grateful for new insights and learning but discouraged at times by the magnitude of their own knowledge gaps.

We believe our experience can be instructive for others who wish to develop authentic and productive cross-identity collaborations that decenter whiteness and other dominating perspectives; we also seek to learn from others about their similar and disparate experiences. As a result, the purpose of this critical conversation is to provide examples, and a means, to investigate how best we might engage in cross-identity collaborations where marginalized perspectives are valued and centered, partners develop authentic and trusting relationships, and long-standing challenges from these types of collaborations are effectively addressed. Key questions include:

1. Which of your socio-cultural identities are most central when collaborating across identities? How do your socio-cultural identities influence your participation in cross-identity collaborations, and with what impact?
2. What unique challenges and barriers arise when collaborating across identities, particularly when both historically privileged and chronically under-represented identities are involved?
3. How can you reduce barriers and increase trust in cross-identity collaborations?
4. How do you (1) decenter hegemonic perspectives and knowledge; and (2) bring attention and credibility to sub-altern perspectives and knowledge when engaged in cross-identity collaborations?

Upon exploring these questions, and of primary significance, we will collectively consider how these insights can inform and strengthen faculty preparedness and capacity for cross-identity collaboration.

Perspectives

The foundation for this critical conversation relies on an understanding of the presence and dominance of Whiteness, the practice of critical consciousness, and the discipline of critical dialogue. Each are explained here.

Whiteness

Though there is abundant literature addressing Whiteness, there is no one definition. For the purposes of this Critical Conversation, we employ Linday's (2007) definition of Whiteness as "a social practice, a normalizing category, and a key element of oppressive social relations" (p. 432).

These three categories are significant. By social practice, Lindsay is referring to the idea that Whiteness is active, serving to create certain social constructions that build, reinforce, and expand its privilege and dominance. Importantly, these actions are coupled with the “normalizing” aspect of Whiteness, which creates and perpetuates an ideology in which the ways of Whiteness are the ways of the world (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Donnor, 2013). Finally, as an oppressive function, Whiteness is a critical component of the system of racism. As Ferguson (2014) describes, Whiteness is “an identity with historical and cultural particularities, and. . .part of larger dramas of racial, gender, and sexual domination” (p. 1103). In short, Whiteness is an identity, a set of norms and rules, and a structural and systemic set of arrangements that perpetuate dominance, inequality, and oppression. (Author 1 & Other, 2018).

Cross-identity collaborations operate within the larger societal context of whiteness and other forms of domination. Thus, individual actors within cross-identity collaborations must navigate this context and their collaborations with consideration for the interpersonal/social, functional, material, and emotional risks and precautions. Given historical patterns of domination, exploitation, and oppression, caution is understandable and advised, yet can undermine forward progress.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is essential for social justice leadership, yet difficult to develop (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). Freire (1970) originally conceived of critical consciousness as a quality to be developed among those who are oppressed or marginalized; he saw it as the ability to recognize the myths, operations of power, and social relations that limit one’s freedom and full inclusion. More recently, Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) defined critical consciousness as “belief systems or values” that include “a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including white privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism” (p. 212). For the purposes of this session, we define critical consciousness as

...the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while [at the same time] disadvantaging others. Further, critical consciousness includes the process of transforming new insights into more socially just frames of reference. In other words, it is simultaneously an ongoing and growing awareness and knowledge of power, privilege and oppression combined with a habit of openness and learning in order to disrupt injustice and create more just action, processes, structures, and circumstances. (Author, 2016, p. #).

Critical consciousness is foundational to this session in that it offers a means to explore one's self in relation to others, set within a broader context of historic, systemic, and institutionalized privilege and oppression.

Critical Dialogue

Critical Dialogue (Author, 2015) is a method of interaction intended to surface underlying frames of reference and invite new insights. It stems from the reality that much of human behavior is habitual (Dewey, 1922) and thus people develop and sustain conversational habits that restrict their thinking and limit their learning. Structured protocols can disrupt these habits and offer alternative approaches to engage in dialogue (Ross & Roberts, 1994). Further, such protocols can be used to deepen and expand the critical nature of our gaze, in that they provide a means to engage with competing perspectives and alternative interpretations; these outcomes are highly relevant to and useful for this session.

Panelists, Session Format, and Participant Engagement

In preparation for the session, each individual on our author team will engage in personal critical reflection related to the four key questions. The session itself will consist of four distinct, but connected, parts. The first segment (5 minutes) will include a brief welcome, and an introduction to the background, key concepts, and methods that inform the session. In the second segment (30 minutes), the panel members will take turns sharing their prepared remarks, focusing on the insights they derived by reflecting on the key questions. The third segment will involve the audience, divided into dyads or small groups (depending on the size of the group) to reflect on and discuss the key questions using the critical dialogue methods introduced at the beginning of the session. Finally, the conclusion of the session (20 minutes) will allow a large group share-out that surfaces new insights to inform practice, as well as ideas for action and next steps individually and as a group. Throughout the session, attendees will be offered a sign-up to collect names and contact information for future efforts beyond the conversation, such as additional convenings and/or future collaborations.