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# Social Justice Conversations: Using Critical Dialogue to Unpack Oppression

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# Social Justice Conversations: Using Critical Dialogue to Unpack Oppression

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## Abstract

Dialogues can bring people together across social divides to develop mutual understanding, generate empathy, and challenge oppression. Yet, all too often, these conversations derail and merely reinforce rather than challenge the social divides they are designed to bridge. We piloted a brief small group program aimed at fostering dialogue about racism and other forms of oppression with 100 undergraduates. A thematic analysis of the resulting 37 group transcripts found that the critical dialogue process helped participants unpack the nature and complexity of oppression, deepen their understanding of privilege, and begin to share and challenge the experience of oppression itself. Sharing thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences, participants used the critical dialogue process to work together to disrupt oppression in their lives.

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The last two years have marked a watershed moment, as Americans began to reckon anew with deep social divides highlighted by George Floyd's death, the pandemic, and the election. Even as these crises highlighted heartbreaking social inequities, we have seen a rise in poverty for and racialized violence toward traditionally marginalized communities (Guardian, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). There are urgent calls for collective reconciliation and healing, and for action toward racial and social justice (Wilkie, 2020). Creating the opportunity for dialogue has long been seen as a crucial step toward developing understanding and fostering collaboration in the face of social conflict and inequity.

Dialogues are a unique form of conversation. Structured to invite mutual respect, deep listening, and authentic engagement, dialogues interrupt the tendency to debate fixed positions, and move participants toward mutual understanding, influence, and rapprochement (Gurin et al., 2013; Maxwell & Chesler, 2021). In the context of racial and social oppression, dialogues can help people come together to break down stereotypes, build empathy, and appreciate their shared humanity while

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recognizing their distinctive experiences. Dialogue approaches are grounded in intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954). Allport suggests that intergroup contact is effective at reducing prejudice and building intergroup relationships when people join together as equals to work collaboratively toward a common goal and have the opportunity for meaningful contact with the support of the prevailing social institution. Indeed, interventions based on fostering positive contact in person, through extended social networks, and even in one's imagination are among the most robust mechanisms for reducing prejudice and improving intergroup relations we have available to date (Dovidio et al., 2011; Paluck et al., 2019).

Yet, improving intergroup relations is not in and of itself enough. Critical theorists and educators suggest that antiracism and social justice initiatives need to be grounded in a robust analysis of structural oppression, privilege, and intersectionality (Berila, 2015; hooks, 1994, 2000; Simon et al., 2021). Otherwise, we risk trying to improve intergroup relationships by convincing marginalized groups to accommodate the needs of dominant groups rather than by challenging existing inequities (Dixon et al., 2012). Oppression by its nature is normalized or elided by dominant social structures and narratives. Critical reflection on power in our daily experiences serves to raise consciousness about the ways we have internalized beliefs, stereotypes and biases, and are participating in replicating our own and one another's marginalization through the actions we take and the words we speak on a day-to-day basis (Freire, 2002/1970). Dialogues that invite critical reflection can disrupt oppression by deepening participants' understanding of oppression, fostering empathy toward marginalized groups, and opening the possibility of collaborating toward social change (Gurin et al., 2013; Miller & Garran, 2017). Although dialogue is not enough to create structural change, it may be a powerful step in the movement toward change.

Reviews of the small body of literature on dialogue have identified such positive outcomes as increased awareness of one's social identity and of oppression, intergroup understanding, empathy and collaboration, the development of friendships, joining together to address common social issues, increased civic engagement, social action, and support for policies that address social inequality (Dessel & Rogge, 2009; Frantell et al., 2019). Recent studies have largely focused on intergroup dialogue (IGD), which is the dominant paradigm in the field. Using a critical-dialogical model, IGD integrates traditional academic strategies (e.g., readings, papers) with experiential exercises (e.g., racial testimonials, fishbowls) to engage participants in a structured process of building relationships, exploring structural dynamics, and working collaboratively on social actions (Gurin et al., 2013; Maxwell & Chesler, 2021).

In a multisite trial, researchers found that IGDs centered on race and gender increased participants' ability to link oppression to structural issues, enhanced intergroup relations, and fostered action toward social change for both minoritized and majoritized participants (Gurin et al., 2013). In a mixed-methods study, Maxwell and Chesler (2021) similarly found that interracial dialogues can deepen white people's understanding of both privilege and oppression and foster empathy for the experience of oppression in minoritized communities. In a qualitative study, Ford and Malaney (2012) found that People of Color (POC) and multiracial people also benefit from interracial dialogues, gaining knowledge and pride in their identity, increasing awareness of their own biases toward others, and building confidence in their ability to confront racism. Factors that have been identified as facilitating dialogue include developing guidelines for the encounter, building relationships and developing trust, acknowledging both thoughts and feelings, exploring differential social experiences and positionalities, using structured exercises, focusing on superordinate goals, generating hope, and ensuring skilled facilitation (Gurin et al., 2013; Miller & Garran, 2017; Sue, 2013).

Despite these encouraging findings, research has also identified numerous challenges to constructive dialogue. When groups with majoritized and minoritized identities

come together to talk about race, class, and gender inequities, too often the dynamics of oppression play out, potentially solidifying existing divides. For example, Sue and colleagues (2010; Sue, 2013) found that white participants in interracial conversations may fear discussing race in mixed settings and may meet attempts to do so with silence, avoidance, or other defensive strategies. Participants who are Black, Indigenous or People of Color (BIPOC) may in turn become frustrated with whites for disengaging or withdrawing from the discussion, feel pressured to educate peers or represent their community, or fear being silenced, targeted, or not supported if they honestly share thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Sue, 2013; Sue et al., 2009). Alternatively, conversations can re-center dominant group needs, experiences, and defensiveness, leaving minoritized students on the sidelines or failing to provide a platform to explore their experiences (Liu et al., 2019; Sue, 2013; Sue et al., 2009). Thus, an opportunity for learning and collaboration is lost and dominant social patterns are reinforced.

In addition, antiracism and social justice dialogues are inherently challenging. Members of dominant groups may feel the core of their identity or worth as a person is being challenged, creating stress that leads to avoidance or defensive responses (Sue, 2013; Sue et al., 2019). On the other hand, the conversations themselves tend to bring bias to the fore to be examined (Berila, 2015; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). Microaggressions may increase and participants from minoritized groups may feel the impact of both primary and secondary traumatic stress related to oppression in the moment, as well as being triggered to memories of past incidences of oppression. There is increasing acknowledgment of the significant impact of racialized traumatic stress and of the potential for dialogues that go awry to trigger or add to these experiences for BIPOC and other minoritized people (Liu et al., 2019; Sue et al., 2019). When dialogue fails, there is a very real risk that existing prejudices and harms are reinforced, and minoritized participants in particular may suffer as a result.

## Current Study

Although dialogue-based programs hold promise as an antiracism or social justice initiative, there are key gaps in our existing knowledge (Dessel & Rogge, 2009; Frantell et al., 2019). IGD, the dominant paradigm in the field, involves a highly structured program that usually takes place across an academic semester and requires equal numbers of participants from majoritized and minoritized groups (Gurin et al., 2013). There is a need to explore whether briefer, more flexible programs that are more easily adaptable to a variety of settings could achieve similar aims, complementing the IGD model (Frantell et al., 2019). Existing quantitative research is often pre-experimental in design and has largely been limited to exploring self-reported changes in intergroup knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, whereas qualitative reports have relied on analyzing participant reflections or postintervention interviews (Dessel & Rogge, 2009; Frantell et al., 2019). Few studies to date have examined the content of the dialogue that results from these programs, nor explored what it can reveal about the process of grappling with oppression. To address these questions, we developed a brief educational program aimed at fostering meaningful dialogue across differences, deepening the collective understanding of oppression, and helping participants identify and resist the ways that oppression may be playing out in their lives and in the world around them.

Social Justice Conversations (SJC) is a six session group program rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 2002/1970) and intergroup contact theories (Allport, 1954) that combines psychoeducation with a critical-dialogical learning model. The program introduces participants to the critical conversations (CC) model for dialoguing about power in daily social interactions (Figure 1; Kang & O'Neill, 2018). A facilitator sparks the dialogue by providing a brief scenario of a common potential or actual microaggression and participants are guided through a process of noticing, reflecting on, naming, and discussing how they see power at play in the scenario, in their
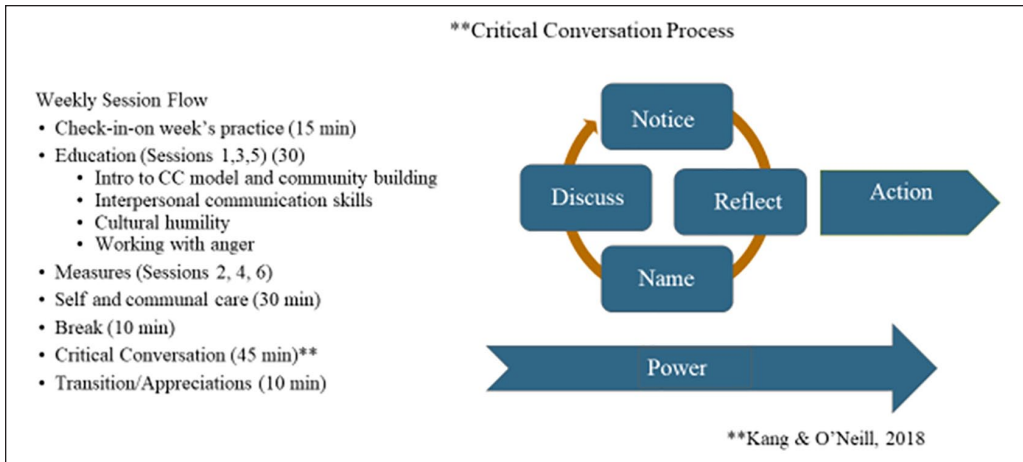
**Figure 1.** Social Justice Conversations curriculum.
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own reflection on and dialogue about the scenario, and in day-to-day interactions in their lives more broadly. Participants are introduced to the CC critical dialogue model in the first session and have an opportunity to practice the process by engaging in a 45-minute critical conversation in each subsequent session. Facilitators provide psychoeducation on dialogical learning, interpersonal communication skills, and cultural humility practices to support the CC process. Because dialogues about oppression are often challenging and can touch on current or past trauma related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of oppression, facilitators also introduce strategies for self and community care that participants are encouraged to practice between sessions along with their burgeoning CC skills.

The SJC program builds on established recommendations for dialogue programs. Sessions are led by facilitators who help the group create guidelines to promote a positive climate and develop trust, encourage personal reflection and sharing, deepen exploration of differential identities and social positionality related to oppression, and acknowledge and work with both thoughts and feelings (Gurin et al., 2013; Miller & Garran, 2017; Sue, 2013). The program also integrates the factors Allport (1954) delineated to optimize the opportunity for contact across differences by providing an institutionally supported setting

where participants can come together as equals to build skills and collaborate toward the superordinate goal of disrupting oppression through the CC process on an ongoing basis. The SJC program differs from IGD programs that aim to influence policy or engage participants directly in social action. Given its briefer format, the SJC program is intended to help participants develop a critical awareness of power in daily interactions, identify and examine oppression in their own lives, and build skills and motivation for personal and social change. Although the CC process ultimately aims at preparing participants to move toward social action, it does not explicitly teach these skills or focus on social action as an outcome.

We had an opportunity to pilot the SJC program as part of a broader study investigating meditation in working with social challenges.[1] The first question we wanted to explore was simply: What happens when we bring people together in the SJC format? Can the resulting dialogue actually help participants begin to explore and challenge oppression as we hope? We chose a qualitative methodology to allow us to explore the content and process of the dialogues generated by these critical conversations.

## Method

We piloted the curriculum at two private women's colleges and one large state university

in the Northeastern United States between September 2018 and December 2019. As part of a commitment to centering antiracism within social justice work, we oriented the program to address racism, in particular, in intersection with other forms of oppression related to issues of class, gender, and sexual orientation in our implementation. We developed brief one to two paragraph scenarios describing potential or actual microaggressions that BIPOC students and students with other traditionally minoritized identities commonly report on campus to spark the critical conversation. Starter scenarios were synthesized from examples in media and campus climate surveys to capture issues immediately relevant to students' experiences on campus and were refined based on feedback from informants familiar with each institution. Examples include being excluded from group discussions, overhearing comments critiquing groups/programs for students with their identities, and being discouraged from pursuing particular classes or majors.

Because we were conducting the study in predominantly white institutions, where BIPOC students may find themselves isolated, with relatively few peers or professors of color during conversations about social inequity, we specifically recruited BIPOC facilitators as part of the intervention model (Castellanos et al., 2020). Criteria for facilitators included holding a graduate degree in social work or a related field, experience with and a commitment to doing antiracism and social justice work within higher education, and skill and experience facilitating groups. Three facilitators identified as Black or African American, one as multiracial Latinx and white, one as multiracial Indigenous and white, and one as multiracial Black and Latinx. Five facilitators had an MSW and one a PhD with training in antiracism or social justice praxis. Facilitators received specific training in the CC model and formed a peer training and debriefing group with researchers to provide feedback on the program throughout implementation. Facilitators completed a checklist after each session to track their delivery of each component of the program, including guiding participants in practicing the steps of the CC model, and researchers listened to weekly conversations and met with facilitators individually to plan or debrief sessions.

After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval, we created a website describing the program where participants could fill out a brief screening questionnaire to ensure they qualified. We solicited participation via on-campus fliers, social media postings, peer recruiters, and in-class presentations where possible. We specifically directed our outreach toward BIPOC students to come as close as possible to an equal representation of BIPOC and white participants across the program without actually mandating particular numbers of students to each group based on racial identity. Undergraduates who met screening criteria attended group information sessions to learn about and register for the study. Those who attended one or more group program sessions were paid an honorarium of up to US$80, prorated according to their completion of program tasks. Participants were able to substitute a standard number of research credits for a portion of the honorarium at one of the program sites.

## Participants

Women undergraduate students, who were at least 18 years of age, and able to speak and understand English were eligible to participate. Because the pilot was offered as part of a broader study investigating meditation, we excluded students who practiced meditation for more than 30 minutes per week to meet the inclusion criteria of the broader study. Participants were blinded to this inclusion criteria and to hypotheses related to meditation as part of the design of the broader study. Participants registered for a study to investigate different formats of the SJC program and agreed to participate in a range of possible self-care activities, including meditation, as part of their experience in the program. A total of 148 participants initially registered for the study. Participants were assigned to program groups on Wednesday and Thursday evening based on

availability. In keeping with the design of the broader study, participants were randomized to an SJC group or a control condition where possible once availability was accounted for. A total of 100 undergraduate women followed through on their initial registration to participate in one or more sessions of the SJC program. Fifty-eight percent of participants were BIPOC and 42% were white. BIPOC participants identified as Asian (28%), bi- or multiracial (13%), Black or African American (8%), Latinx (7%), and Native American (1%) or South Asian (1%). The average age of participants was 20.4 years. Thirty-three percent reported a family income below US$45,000 per year, 41% between US$45,000 and US$119,999, and 26% above US$120,000.

The conversations themselves varied in size from three to 16 participants depending on the day. Each program group followed the same curriculum, format, and themes, varying only in the nature of the self-care activities explored and the extent to which participants were encouraged to practice specific activities between sessions. After introducing the program and the model in Session 1, the center point of Sessions 2 through 6 was the 45-minute critical conversation that allowed participants to practice exploring how structural power may be shaping their experiences. We conducted three additional single-session groups, where participants were introduced to the model and participated in a critical conversation but did not receive the entire program as part of a control for data gathered in the broader study. In this article, we drew on transcripts from CC across all groups to investigate what takes place in the process of these conversations.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Participants completed a demographic survey when they registered for the program and a variety of outcome surveys before, during, and after the program, which will be reported elsewhere.[2] Facilitators also completed a fidelity checklist with each session, which demonstrated that they adhered to the curriculum model 91% of the time, with minor variations or omissions largely as the result of reaching session time limits for the remaining 9% of the time. Program sessions were digitally recorded and research assistants transcribed the 45-minute CC verbatim. One recording was lost to a failure of the recording device. The resulting 37 transcripts of group dialogues were loaded onto Dedoose (Version 9.0.17, 2021) software, double-checked against the recording, and segmented for analysis.

We drew on thematic analysis as a flexible yet systematic method for organizing and interpreting themes across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our epistemological stance in this analysis charts a middle course between essentialism in that we acknowledge the existence of an external reality that can be known, if only partially, and constructivism in that we posit that the apprehension of this reality is inherently shaped by social context and individual and collective experience. Acknowledging the subjective nature of experience highlights the need for multiple perspectives on the data. Accordingly, we created a diverse analytic team with two active investigators and two to three research assistants at any point in time. The two principal investigators were white and of European descent along with two research assistants, whereas the remaining five members of the analytic team were BIPOC, who variously identified as Asian, biracial, Hispanic, Latina/x, and Syrian. We ranged in age from our 20s to 60s. Five of us identified as first- or second-generation immigrants, three as queer or gay, three as bilingual, four as having a working-class background, and four as being first-generation college graduates.

In line with the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), two investigators and two research assistants independently read and reread transcripts from the first critical conversation across all groups familiarizing themselves with the data. Taking an inductive approach, where we stayed close to participants' words and experiences, we developed codes for the data and compared and contrasted our codings with one another

to come to consensus on an initial codebook. Subsequent research assistants received specific training and practice in working with the codebook and created memos with significant questions, insights, and reflections throughout the process of coding. The research team met weekly to explore questions, propose new codes, or suggest changes to existing codes as we coded transcripts from each subsequent conversation across all groups in an organic fashion. Each transcript was independently coded by two members of the research team and discrepancies were reconciled by a third auditor, who also ensured that any changes to coding were consistently applied throughout the transcripts. Next, we developed and then reviewed initial themes, ensuring their fit across the data set. Finally, we named and described each theme, identified representative excerpts to illustrate each theme, and developed the narrative to explain central themes. The practice of analytic triangulation, employing independent coders and a final auditor to reconcile discrepancies, and the use of weekly peer debriefing ensured that the interpretative process was systematic, engaged multiple perspectives, and remained faithful to the data (Padgett, 2008).

## Results

The most significant theme identified across all transcripts centers on the process of unpacking oppression. Participants consistently approached the conversations by trying to figure out what was happening in the scenario used to spark the conversation. Particularly near the beginning, they worked toward identifying whether racism, classism, or another ism was being enacted, and gradually moved toward deepening their understanding of the individual and social forces at play in the scenario. In tracking the development of the conversation, we noticed key elements of this process of unpacking oppression that repeated reliably across the conversations, albeit not always in the same order. We describe the general flow that we observed in the process of unpacking oppression across these dialogues in Figure 2.

One important element of the process of unpacking oppression involved relating to the scenario. We noted instances, in each and every transcript, where participants talked about how the scenario was familiar and used their personal experiences as a jumping off point for their comments. Often, participants shared their experience early in the dialogue sparking the conversation in earnest or their comments marked an inflection point that deepened the analysis taking place and created a felt sense of connection to the issues as the conversation turned to an experience someone in the room had had. In trying to understand what might be occurring, participants explored psychological factors such as the intent of a potentially offensive comment, or the way in which structural oppression may be internalized and the barriers it could pose for the individual. They equally considered social factors such as the impact of a microaggression in an interaction, the consequences it may have for those affected, and the broader role the microaggression may serve in maintaining an existing social hierarchy. In Table 1, we selected a series of quotations from a single group dialogue to provide an example of some of the key individual elements we identify in the process of unpacking oppression. The excerpts are presented in the order they occurred, but drawn from across the conversation, to demonstrate how each dialogue typically progressed toward a deepening understanding and analysis of the way oppression unfolds in day-to-day experiences. Participants are responding to a scenario where a college-age woman, who recently immigrated from Nigeria, is targeted for her accent.

In the conversation excerpted in Table 1, participants are describing and working to name how a variety of intersecting social factors such as national origin, immigrant status, English fluency, and race come together to influence how accents are read. For example, they critique the way that American, British, or European accents are variously interpreted as signaling status, intelligence, or as evoking romanticism, conferring acceptance on their holders, whereas Haitian or Guatemalan accents are more likely to be read as markers
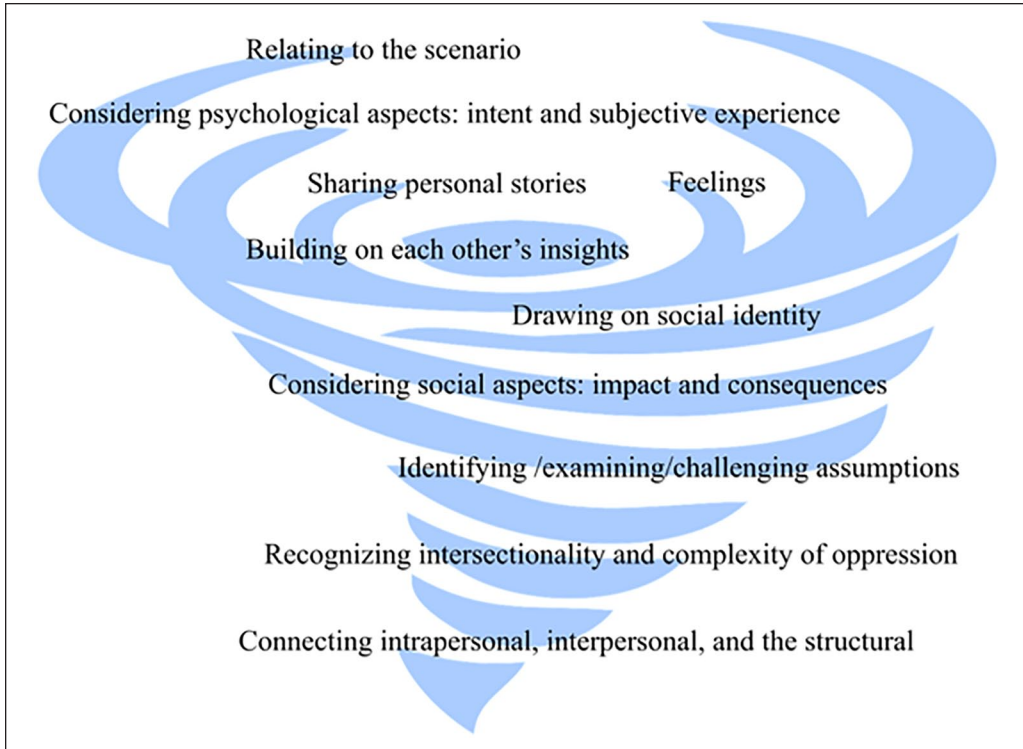
**Figure 2.** The process of unpacking oppression.

of recent immigration, lower status, less education and/or intelligence, exposing their holders to ridicule or discrimination. In line 211, a BIPOC participant expresses outrage at witnessing her Haitian father literally be dismissed and ignored as soon as he begins to speak in white spaces, identifying silence and exclusion as one of the many social impacts of oppression. The next speaker goes further in linking exclusion based on the intersections of English fluency and national origin explicitly with race as she contrasts a prior speaker's example of witnessing students dismiss her Latinx professor for his accent with the warm reception afforded white, French tourists at her workplace. She further juxtaposes the approbation of being from France, a wealthy, traditionally white-dominant former colonial power, with the perceived undesirability of being from Guatemala, a poor, formerly colonized, and traditionally BIPOC-identified nation. The choice of Guatemala sharpens the contrast given Trump's alarmism, frequently reported in the news at the time, over the

uptick in BIPOC migrants fleeing poverty and endemic structural violence from Northern Triangle countries such as Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Through each contribution to the group dialogue, collective reflection and analysis deepens, and the intersecting aspects of structural oppression are identified, explored, and reflected upon.

Two complementary subthemes emerged in relation to the broader theme of unpacking oppression. Each subtheme serves to illuminate a distinct aspect of how oppression functions. On one hand, participants consistently sought to help one another identify and challenge privilege. As participants tried to determine whether and how a microaggression occurred in the starter scenario, they often initially focused on what motivated the behavior. Participants consistently named both ignorance of privilege and a lack of awareness or care about privilege as central drivers of microaggressions. Participants also called out actions being taken to intentionally assert or reinforce

**Table 1.** Example of Unpacking Oppression: The Flow of the Text Illustrates the Process.

**Relating to the scenario, sharing personal stories and naming the social impact**

22: Line 211 . . . the times we are in white spaces, like I've just seen white people like literally like shut off like NOT listen to what he's saying (claps 3 times while speaking for emphasis) . . . like my dad [Haitian immigrant] is trilingual like, . . . he's like a smart man, but they like just undermine him. . . —I don't like really think it's like a-oh I can't understand him-I really don't think that, like you just have to listen and I think people really do block it off, like they really do and they don't have like an American English or these romanticized accents like all the European ones or whatever, or uhm like the Eastern European ones whatever, and uhm, if they don't have that, they literally block it off, like they block it off so, yeah. . . (4-s pause)

**Connecting the individual to the structural, and recognizing intersectionality**

Line 458 I was gonna say like yeah it's racism because my other job is. . . I was a lifeguard at a really ex-expensive pool. . . and there would be like tourists. . . who would like come for a week. And there was like this French couple who like didn't speak any English at all, like barely, and like, everyone was so nice to them, like waiting on them and like maybe like- they didn't know the word for towels so they would just point and they'd be like oh do you need a towel? And yeah. Uhm but I feel like if, like why is it okay to come from, to be from France but not like Guatemala? Uhm whereas-um-yeah and I feel like it does have to do with racism because the French people like they are white.

**Bringing in the psychological aspects and recognizing internalized oppression**

Line 522 I feel like there could be a lot of actual like internal uhm racism between us [participant and family members]. I feel like also I remember just growing up uhm, I went to a lot of predominantly white schools, so I remember a lot of my friends would be white uhm, and I remember like if we ever just hung out like let's say we were going to the mall and my mom drove us. There were times, like especially in elementary school where I would just try to seem like the cool kid, so if my mom would say anything, I obviously would understand cause I'm with her 24/7 but if she said something a certain way like let's say popcorns, I would make fun of her for it, . . . kind of like bring it up. And that's because I knew that the other people were already thinking it-

**Taking a new perspective and identifying steps she can take to disrupt oppression**

Line 659 I'm getting kind of emotional now. . . But, I shouldn't be the one to feel embarrassed for thinking that, uh they should say—cause like just because white people say something a certain way why should that be the right way to say it (snaps and desk pounding from participants), you know what I mean? Why should that be the standard? Like why is that not okay? You know what I mean, like I should just let my parents speak it the way that they, that they speak it instead of trying to make them assimilate into how everyone else is saying it. Uhm, so, like the—just thinking about that like I'm just cringing right now. And I just wanna be like, I'm never gonna do that again.

*Note.* (transcript number: line number). Line notations above indicate a shift in speaker in the group dialogue.

dominance in the scenarios. We noticed an interplay between these two sometimes competing analyses across conversations where participants sometimes wanted to give the potential microaggressor "the benefit of the doubt" (4: 673[3]) and discussion ensued about the underlying nature and motivators of the aggression. Table 2 provides a typical example of such a discussion. Participants are responding to a scenario where a group of BIPOC students in the cafeteria hear a group of white students complaining about the growth of affinity groups for minoritized students on campus.

A second prominent subtheme that emerged in the conversations involved exploring the experience and dynamics of oppression itself. Participants were consistently interested in naming and challenging the effects of oppression in their own lives. A key element of surfacing their experiences of oppression was identifying the additional burdens that BIPOC students, low-income students, and sexual and gender minority students experience on campus. In the following excerpts from three distinct transcripts, BIPOC students identify increasingly complex aspects of experiencing the burden of oppression:

**Table 2.** Example of Identifying and Challenging Privilege: The Flow of the Text Illustrates the Process.

**Relating to the scenario**

3: Line 71 Uh my first reaction is that I've heard this before, like in real life. I've seen it happen, so while I kind of think it sounds kind of contrived, when just hearing it, I'm reflecting, like wow that's a real situation that has happened around me. . .

**Considering psychological aspects and intention**

Line 77 I was first trying to see if the first person who was making the observation had any malicious intent or had any negative feelings, because sometimes, cause, you know could've just been an observation, . . . but then you're trying to find like the tone and like the . . . what people mean to kind of get across . . . um how they're saying it . . . um . . . and the way you said it kind of made me feel like it was supposed to sound mean, but also if I heard it in real life I felt like it could come off as mean, but also felt like there wasn't actually anything behind it . . . but . . . it's complicated.

**Considering social aspects and impact, challenging assumptions**

Line 110 Like to me it sounds like just a lot of ignorant people, um who are like unaware of their privilege and are hearing what, like the media is also saying. What they mean about this conversation today, um . . . and this new idea that like white people—it's not that new, it's been happening forever, but like a resurfacing of um this idea that white people are a targeted ethnic group? Um, or racial group, um . . . which like has no backing, like there's no white hate crimes or like systematic oppression that white people face, it's the opposite . . . Um, but by not saying anything, you're like allowing like, something that doesn't sound like hate to the speaker, but hate to continue.

**Building on each other, connecting the personal, interpersonal and the structural**

Line 135 Um one part that really bothered me was at the end when the group of (white) students looked up and saw the students (of Color) . . . And that seemed very specifically aimed at them, and a really awful environment and atmosphere for everyone in that community. And um also that the conversation wasn't balanced at all, um I agree with [other participant] about like the danger of being a bystander because if you never like really have these deep conversations and discuss why there are so many um clubs, um, you never understand the importance and you never get that perspective, and so then you can't see your own privilege.

Line 299 I also think that this scenario speaks to white people's um our desire to like maintain dominance and preeminence in America. And what this made me think of is how white people will take up like a space, like some field, and will have um will give like minor like concessions to like minority groups and then say okay we gave you a few groups, now I expect you to like move on, and like revert back to kind of like a self-centered view of themselves.

*Note.* (transcript number: line number). Line notations above indicate a shift in speaker in the group dialogue.

I do think there is like a, um, like a certain responsibility that falls on a lot of the minority people here to kind of represent their race or represent minority people as a whole or minority people at [university], and I think that can easily become a really big burden which I think is like a facet of the fact that the [university] community is so white. (4:746)

You-you brought up this whole concept of sort of like, the internalized oppression that she feels and all I could think of was imposter syndrome. Um, as a Black person, the stereotypes that come with being a Black person—that you're not intelligent, that you're not supposed to be in STEM fields, that we're supposed to be

entertainers—we're supposed to be, you know, in these soft-core things in order to give literature, to appease the people, but when you see Black people you don't see them as scientists, you don't see them—that's not our portrayal in society. Our portrayal is the hard worker, the entertainer, and that we should stay within that box. Um, so therefore there is a lot of imposter syndrome coming from society because this is—what is being fed to us and it's being fed also by her roommate that, "maybe you should stay in your box" um, as well. (35:237)

I would look at the white people at my school, cause my school was like very welcoming and stuff and was a great place for me to start

figuring everything out. But I would look at the white people who, were just like deciding one day like I'm bisexual. Just kidding, I'm gender fluid. Just kidding, I'm nothing. Oh wait, I'm actually this. And I'm like, I support you on whatever your path is to figuring out who you are, but I'm looking at them like if I did this, I would be dead. Like my parents would kill me- or take me out of school, or like not pay for my life anymore and like- like I don't know I wouldn't have a phone (group chatter and laughter) like I don't know. Like they would do that shit. And so I would just look at them almost with like envy of like you have all this freedom and opportunity to play around with your id- your identity, because no other part of you is under attack by society . . . And I feel like I've always and I still do like, even talking about this my heart rate is going up a little bit (laughter from group). Uhm, I've always had like a certain amount of anger towards people who aren't People of Color who are queer and have the freedom and opportunity that I feel like a lot of people don't. (36:102)

The excerpts demonstrate that the conversations were often emotional, even passionate, as participants took the risk of identifying and exploring challenging experiences of oppression and/or complicity. Participants frequently drew on their social positionality to contextualize their comments, for example, drawing on their BIPOC identity to situate their knowledge of oppression in relation to a particular targeted group with whom they identified. Similarly, white participants sometimes explicitly named their whiteness to contextualize comments such as the reflection on strategies used by white people to maintain structural power noted at the end of Table 2. In the excerpts above, the reader can witness participants exploring how social and psychological factors are interwoven in the experience of oppression, for example, through connecting imposter syndrome with racist social stereotypes of Black people. An exploration of intersectionality is another key aspect of probing the nuances of oppression across the dialogues, as is particularly reflected in the final excerpt above where the speaker gives voice to her frustration over the additional and distinct social challenges involved in navigating queerness as a Person of Color. Exploring the experience and dynamics of oppression complemented participants' efforts to identify and challenge privilege, further expanding the conversation beyond individual-level phenomena and supporting a more robust analysis of the broader structural processes and consequences of oppression as a social phenomenon.

The conversations also provided a potential liberatory space. Participants were able to name, reflect upon, and be affirmed in calling out experiences of oppression that are often marginalized or dismissed, particularly outside of the communities directly targeted by those oppressions. Participants affirmed one another by building on one another's comments calling out oppression (Table 2, line 135), laughing in recognition of common experiences (Excerpt 3 above), and through brief verbal and nonverbal expressions or gestures such as pounding the desk and finger snapping to support a minoritized participant's declaration that she will no longer correct her parent's speech or accent (Table 1, line 659). At times, participants talked about being able to surface and feel met in experiences that they were previously unable to share with or find understanding for even with friends or family. Coming together in the SJC format sparked a collective process of unpacking oppression that allowed participants to deepen their understanding of how oppression works and gain critical insights on their own experiences. By inviting traditionally marginalized experiences to the fore, the dialogue helped participants unpack experiences of oppression and/or complicity, draw strength and learn from one another's perspectives and encouragement, and identify steps that they could take to disrupt oppression in their own lives.

## Discussion

Dialogue has the potential to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to interrupt racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. In its essence, oppression serves to dehumanize people. Institutional policies create structural segregation and inequitable experiences that contribute to bias and stereotypes that all too often play out in daily interactions,

which then reinforce the existing social divides. This process ends in making us relative strangers to people on the other side of those social divides (Miller & Garran, 2017; Sue, 2013). Intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) suggests that creating opportunities for repeated positive contact toward shared goals in an egalitarian setting can serve to bridge social divides, reduce prejudice, and lead to intergroup collaboration.

Dialogue, in particular, provides an opportunity to challenge stereotypes, build empathy, and discover our shared humanity, so we might begin to collaborate to take action to end the oppression that divides us (Gurin et al., 2013; Miller & Garran, 2017). Building on intergroup contact theory, the SJC program creates an institutionally supported opportunity for participants from different backgrounds to join forces as equals toward the broader goal of disrupting oppression through critical reflection and dialogue. The SJC program also integrates key recommendations from existing research to create a facilitative environment for dialogue. These recommendations include taking time to build community and establish trust, exploring participants' thoughts and feelings, using structured exercises, establishing ground rules for the dialogue, and focusing on common goals while attending to differential experiences (Gurin et al., 2013; Miller & Garran, 2017; Sue, 2013). By engaging BIPOC facilitators with specific experience in antiracism or social justice praxis, we sought to create a welcoming environment for BIPOC participants, in particular, in white-dominant institutional settings (Castellanos et al., 2020).

The results of the thematic analysis demonstrate that participants were able to make contact and build the relationships necessary to engage in meaningful dialogue in the SJC program. An important aspect of successful dialogue is creating enough trust to enable participants to take the risk of openly sharing and reflecting on thoughts and feelings they may otherwise hold back in mixed settings (Gurin et al., 2013; Maxwell & Chesler, 2021; Miller & Garran, 2017). In each and every dialogue, participants reported that they related to the starter scenario in some way,

which quickly moved the discussion from being an intellectual exercise to exploring how the scenario captured aspects of their own experiences. The results reveal that participants were able to build enough trust in the process to freely share thoughts and feelings about racism and other forms of oppression. They also demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable enough to share deeply personal stories they may not have previously shared with others. The results show that participants were able to come together in dialogue to deepen their understanding of one another across a variety of intersectional experiences.

Yet, it is not simply enough to come together as individuals across differences. Critical theorists underline the need to analyze how social power shapes our day-to-day experiences to truly understand and begin to challenge systemic oppression (Freire, 2002/1970; hooks, 1994, 2000; Liu et al., 2019). The CC format invited participants to practice critical reflection through consciously noticing, reflecting upon, naming, and discussing how power was at play in the starter scenario and in their own related experiences. The results of the thematic analysis demonstrate that the dialogues centered on deconstructing power both in the scenario, but more importantly in the day-to-day interactions participants themselves experienced. For example, the conversation in Table 1 moves from naming discrimination based on an accent, to underlining how this discrimination is specifically racialized, to examining how the underlying bias may be internalized and play out between family members in the light of the pressure to assimilate to a white-dominant context. Participants typically build on one another's observations to name increasingly complex and intersecting aspects of oppression. In the example from Table 1, they explore oppression related to race in intersection with ethnicity and immigration and move from considering external experiences of racism to identifying how internalized racism affects them in day-to-day interactions. These results demonstrate that participants develop an increasingly complex and nuanced understanding of oppression through their engagement in critical dialogue.

There are many challenges to creating effective dialogue across social divides. Prior researchers have found that a primary risk is that those with majoritized identities may feel threatened by the exploration and deny, deflect, or shut down the conversation about oppression (DiAngelo, 2011; Sue, 2013; Sue et al., 2010). Our results show that participants did sometimes seek to give the potential aggressor the "benefit of the doubt," at times downplaying the potential impact of the action. Although this occurred most frequently with majoritized participants, it also occurred with minoritized participants when the microaggression under discussion occurred between participants with minoritized identities. The CC process invites participants to stay engaged in critical reflection throughout the dialogue generating a variety of perspectives rather than foreclosing the discussion to identify an answer. As the conversations unfolded, participants were able to explore or challenge their own or one another's assumptions or offer new perspectives, which ultimately supported the group in identifying and exploring rather than deflecting oppression as is evident in the example in Table 2. SJC's ongoing emphasis on the process of critical reflection helped participants overcome this particular challenge to dialogue.

Another key challenge to dialogue is the tendency for the group to focus on the experience of the majoritized members. In interracial groups, this can mean that the focus goes to white participants' defensiveness, distress, or shock at having racialized norms challenged (DiAngelo, 2011; Sue, 2013). BIPOC participants may grow frustrated, angry, or discouraged at having to justify their experiences, educate their white peers, or at having their experiences overlooked yet again (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Sue, 2013; Sue et al., 2009). Results from the thematic analysis show that participants in the SJC program were able to explore both majoritized and minoritized experiences and perspectives. Far from denying the reality of oppression, the CC process helped participants begin to explore and challenge privilege, for example, by naming some key strategies through which white dominance is maintained in the example provided in Table 2. In a complementary fashion, minoritized participants were able to name oppression and its effects. The example in Table 1 in particular illustrates the way that groups witnessed and affirmed the experiences and realizations of minoritized group members, contributing to the collective process of disrupting oppression. Thus, the SJC program helped participants evade this second barrier to effective dialogue.

Research demonstrates that interventions based on providing opportunities for positive intergroup contact and collaboration have been shown to reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Dovidio et al., 2011; Paluck et al., 2019). Although there is limited research on dialogue as an intervention (Dessel & Rogge, 2009; Frantell et al., 2019), dialogue-based programs such as IGD have demonstrated efficacy in developing participants' understanding of oppression, enhancing intergroup relations, and increasing confidence and action toward social change (Gurin et al., 2013). Qualitative analysis has shown that interracial dialogues have helped majoritized students better understand their social identity and the nature of oppression, and build empathy for the experience of minoritized participants (Maxwell & Chesler, 2021). Similarly, minoritized students have benefited from increased pride in their identity, increased awareness of bias, and increased confidence in challenging oppression (Ford & Malaney, 2012).

To the best of our knowledge, we conducted one of the first studies that explores the content of dialogue itself and what it can reveal about the process of grappling with oppression. In piloting the SJC program, our primary goal was to understand whether we could overcome some of the critical challenges to intergroup encounters to foster a meaningful exchange, deepen the collective understanding of oppression, and help participants identify and begin to resist the ways that oppression may be playing out in their lives and in the world around them. The results of our thematic analysis demonstrates

that participants actively invested in the CC process sharing thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences; relating the content to their own lives and experiences; and identifying meaningful insights as a result. The core process we uncovered across SJC groups was one of working to identify, explore, name, and begin to unpack oppression through the process of critical reflection in dialogue with one another. We describe key aspects of the process of unpacking oppression such as the interplay between giving the oppressor the benefit of the doubt and calling out oppression, challenging privilege and exploring experiences of oppression, and considering psychological and social aspects of the experience, that recurred across dialogues, which may shed light on the process involved in unpacking oppression at an individual and a group level. The realizations evoked through the process of collective critical reflection in the SJC program helped participants begin or continue to disrupt oppression in their day-to-day lives.

## Limitations

This study aims to capture participants' experiences at a moment in time. A strength of the study is that it directly investigates the content and process of the conversations that take place in a critical dialogue program. A key limitation of the study is that we audiotaped the dialogues to be less intrusive. Without visual cues, it was difficult to consistently link responses to specific individuals, which would have enhanced our understanding of the dialogues. Videotaping future dialogues will allow us to better follow individual experiences in the group. Because this is our first examination of the SJC process, we focused on identifying themes across the dialogues as a whole. Analyses of how the dialogues evolved over the course of each particular group may provide additional insights in the future. Quantitative research is needed to test whether the SJC program can shift participants' attitudes and behavior toward marginalized groups and enhance skills to work against oppression over time. In addition, the study was limited to undergraduate women,

participants who were relatively naive to meditation but open to trying it as a strategy for self-care, and participants who elected to participate in a social justice education program. The utility of using the SJC model with other populations is unknown.

*Implications for Social Work Practice and Research.* Since we gathered the data for this study, George Floyd's death moved protesters across the nation and the globe to call for an end to state-sanctioned violence against BIPOC citizens, igniting a new movement toward racial justice. The global pandemic continues to reveal the impact of ingrained inequities across employment, housing, and health care that are inevitably reflected in the disproportionate number of deaths in BIPOC communities. There is a growing public recognition and even urgency around addressing racism and structural inequity as a contemporary social issue, creating an opportunity for social change unparalleled since the 1960s. With this recognition has come the renewal of a public conversation on racism and social inequity. The dialogues we studied would undoubtedly have had a much different starting point and trajectory if held in the current context. At the same time, the election of 2020 highlighted the stark realities of political polarization across the electorate. This renewed conversation on racism and inequity therefore remains fraught with controversy and liable to the pitfalls outlined in the literature that are likely to waylay meaningful exchange and reinscribe oppression. The opportunities of the current moment underscore the relevance of this study. Now more than ever, mechanisms for bringing people together to recognize, understand, and begin to disrupt the ways that we participate in oppression on a daily basis are needed. Dialogue can play an important role in supporting a developing critical consciousness and building momentum for social change toward equity and justice in the public sphere.

Social workers have a key role to play in this process of change. Whether through research documenting social inequities and their impact, community organizing and

policy development, or through integrating practices that empower clients in clinical settings, social workers have long been at the forefront of movements toward social justice. At the same time, the profession is increasingly acknowledging that social workers have often unwittingly played central roles in implementing state and federal policies and programs that have created harm for communities of color and other traditionally minoritized groups. The growing movement to decolonize social work seeks to help us recognize and shift the ways that systemic oppression lives on in what we do. The SJC program offers a vehicle to support the process of decolonizing our practices across social work education, training, practice, and research.

The SJC program provides a brief, structured process to help diverse participants reflect together on the ways that power structures their daily social interactions. This process is broadly applicable to a variety of social work settings. For example, the CC process at the heart of the SJC program was developed to respond to emergent conversations about oppression in educational settings. It provides social work instructors with a vehicle for facilitating conversations about race and other forms of inequity in the classroom. Implementing the SJC program as part of a course provides an ongoing opportunity for students to acquire critical reflection skills and to deepen their understanding of and ability to challenge oppression through learning from group perspectives. The SJC program can provide clinical teams with a process for exploring how structural power and agency policies shape their work with clients, fostering the development of individual clinical skills, as well as the evolution of agency-based practices. The SJC program may be directly applicable to generating ideas, surfacing marginalized perspectives, addressing barriers, and building consensus among stakeholders in community organizing and policy development processes. Finally, research teams can use the SJC model to examine power in the research process. Such a dialogue could help researchers generate questions that respond to diverse perspectives and problems, develop more equitable or inclusive methods, and better contextualize applicable findings.

## Conclusion

The events of the past few years have revealed the extent of ongoing race, class, and gender disparities and created a renewed movement toward justice and equity. This is a crucial time to address existing social divides and political polarization. Dialogue programs can play an important role in bridging the gap and building momentum for change. Yet, existing literature documents all of the ways that dialogues commonly derail. The SJC program provides a brief and flexible framework for dialogue that may be adapted to a variety of settings. The results of this initial study on the SJC program suggest that it provides a vehicle for avoiding the most common pitfalls of conversations about racism and other forms of inequity and helps participants of diverse identities and experiences come together to explore and challenge oppression in their daily lives.

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## Notes

1. The broader study will be reported on in another publication.
2. The quantitative measures mentioned are part of the broader study, which will be reported elsewhere.
3. Transcript number, line number.

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