Interracial Dialogues in Dixie: Expressing Emotions to Promote Racial Reconciliation

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Abstract

Given the legacy of racial injustice and mistrust that continues to plague race relations in the United States, it is important that citizens of different racial backgrounds come together to share their feelings and thoughts about race issues in order to advance racial reconciliation in their own communities. Saunders (1999) asserts that such dialogues can transform interracial relationships that could inspire the larger community to change itself. This study presents the results of nine interracial focus groups from two dialogues on race relations events held in Dothan, Alabama in 2015 and 2016. Our findings illustrate that many Black respondents displayed both anger and sadness as they provided stories of the institutionalized racism (e.g., racial profiling, educational inequality, residential segregation, etc.) as well as the more personalized racism that they had experienced. White respondents too demonstrated anger and sadness when relating their own experiences of strained race relations. This mixed-methods study also employed API analysis to further strengthen our original qualitative exploration of emotions. We argue that interracial dialogues can hold the potential for racial reconciliation as participants' stories elucidate our most intransient race problems while also highlighting the emotions that connect discussants through the dialogic process.

Author Bio(s)

Dr. Brooks started at Troy University in 2010 and is an Associate Professor of Sociology. Her research examines how to build more peaceful and inclusive societies. Some of her recent projects have included examining peace movement mobilization through protest music and on-going work on race relations. She organizes Dialogues on Race Relations events which have brought together law enforcement, politicians, clergy, activists, and community members to discuss the growing concerns over the racial divide, both nationally and locally.

Dr. Everhardt joined the Troy faculty in 2014 and is an Associate Professor of Sociology as well as the Chair of the Department of Anthropology, Sociology, and Criminology. Her main research interests include the study of race, class, and gender, especially low-income populations of women of color. Currently, major projects concern poverty, food insecurity, social isolation, and community gardens in low-income areas of Alabama. Further areas of interest include housing, homeownership, self-sufficiency programs for low-income populations, and volunteerism.

Dr. Earnest joined the Troy faculty in 2010 and is a Lecturer of Geography. Her research interests include perceptions of the importance of historic places, contested sites of monumentation/memorialization and historic preservation, and the intersection of politics with these ideas.

Dr. Dinc joined the Troy faculty in 2016 and is an Assistant Professor in Computer Science. She received her Masters and PhD from the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She also received her BSc degree in Computer Engineering Department from Dokuz Eylul University, Turkey in 2012 with first rank in the department and an honors degree in the college. She has served as a reviewer for IEEE/ACM Transactions on Computational Biology and Bioinformatics, IEEE Southeast Conference, and the International Symposium Multimedia.

Interracial Dialogues in Dixie:

Expressing Emotions to Promote Racial Reconciliation

Jeneve R. Brooks, Sharon Everhardt, Samantha Earnest, and Imren Dinc

We organized two dialogues on race relations events in Dothan, AL in 2015 and 2016, in part, as a response to the increased awareness of the killings of unarmed Black boys and men at the hands of law enforcement. The initial spark was lit on February 26, 2012, when Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old African American, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, an overzealous neighborhood watch coordinator who was patrolling his gated community. Martin's high-profile death was later followed by a string of killings of unarmed Black males by the police in 2014: New York City police put 43-year-old Eric Garner into a chokehold for selling cigarettes from which he later died on July 17th; 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9th; and then on November 22nd, 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed in Cleveland, Ohio for pointing a toy gun (Lowery, 2017). Arguably, the immediate protests in Ferguson surrounding Brown's death attracted the most media attention when thousands of Black Lives Matter protestors from that area, as well as activists from all over the nation, descended on Ferguson to give voice to their palpable outrage and grief. The nation looked on in stunned amazement as projected images from Ferguson showed police in military style riot gear amidst burning buildings (Lowery, 2017).

Locally, a White community leader approached Dr. Charles Lewis, an African American minister known for his work on race relations and asked if Lewis thought that Ferguson style unrest and protest could ever happen in Dothan. Lewis responded that, of course, it could (Lewis, 2019). This admonition was repeated in numerous community meetings and in the local print media as city officials and community leaders grappled with the continuing complexities and strong emotions that surrounded race issues on both local and national levels.

As scholars who teach about race, we also found our classrooms full of lively discussions about race relations during this time period. We were well aware of the African American community's deeply rooted concerns about the local police

department, their grievances regarding the over-surveillance of Black communities, and their ongoing experiences of racial discrimination and racial distrust that still persisted, in spite of some of the tangible progress made towards improving race relations in this small city in Southeast Alabama. We also knew the conflicting and confusing feelings that White students faced, growing up in a society where institutionalized racism remained embedded. Within this context, we decided to organize two community-wide dialogues on race relations events to face these individual and collective issues directly.

We consulted with Reverend Audri Scott Williams, author and long-time peace and civil rights activist (of both African and Native American lineage). Williams's parents were both civil rights activists and she was later mentored by Amelia Boynton Robinson, the civil rights leader who was infamously beaten while attempting to cross the Pettus Bridge during the Selma March for Voting Rights in March 1965. Given Williams's strong track record in civil rights work, we believed that she would be an integral partner in strategizing about the structure for the dialogues on race relations events. In her book, *Awakening the Heart of the Beloved Community* (2015), Williams explains her own views on how to manifest Martin Luther King, Jr's concept of the Beloved Community, a form of inclusive brotherly and sisterly love that seeks the betterment of all in society:

> King suggested the Beloved Community exists in the here
> and now, and in the future…. And in order to be created,
> we must have a sense of its potential presence and act
> accordingly. Dr. King was very clear that the means (the
> protests, marches, sit-ins, and even the boycotts) were
> simply strategies enacted to bring us to the end, which is
> the creation of the Beloved Community—the movement
> from protest to reconciliation. (pp. x-xi)

With Williams's firm commitment to racial reconciliation guiding us, we first decided to organize panel discussions of community leaders to begin both dialogues on race relations events. The panelists would share their own reflections on race relations, both locally and nationally. We strategized that this would stimulate deeper reflection on race

related issues amongst the community participants in the audience. Williams also assisted in developing the focus group questions for the community participants that would follow these panel discussions. While drafting the questions, we discussed how to handle the unequal power relations that would exist between respondents, given the participants' varying racial and class backgrounds. Williams asserted that all respondents should be asked the same open-ended questions in order to highlight the common, on-going issues tied to structurally embedded, institutionalized racism, while also encouraging them to share their own personal stories that related to each question. She emphasized this was an important step in bringing people of diverse backgrounds together to create deeper understanding of each other's experiences. We also drafted questions for the focus groups to incorporate not only respondents' thinking about race relations but also their feelings. Ultimately, the main purpose of this focus group research was to understand how guided conversations between people of color and Whites could illuminate both individual and collective concerns about race as a step forward towards racial reconciliation.

As social scientists, we knew that much of the social science and race literature often examined the large-scale problems endemic to institutionalized racism in our society such as racial profiling by the police (Legewie, 2016); racial bias in mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Pager, 2013); racial discrimination in employment (Fryer et al., 2013), residential racial segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), wealth gaps between racial ethnic groups (Shapiro & Oliver, 1995), and color blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). However, we wanted to see what issues would have the most resonance in our community. Therefore, our first exploratory research question was: 1) Which race related issues are the most prevalent during these dialogues? We also wanted to know how respondents would actually relate their stories to one another in these interracial focus groups. Would they become emotionally defensive and hostile, creating an atmosphere of combativeness? Or, in contrast, would they be calm and civil while expressing themselves in the group discussions? We finally narrowed these inquiries into the second exploratory research question which then guided this study: 2) How do respondents relate their stories to one another in these small group settings?

Given that this research was initially developed as a qualitative exploratory study, we did not put forth formalized hypotheses of what we predicted these race conversations would elicit. We intended to keep the research purpose and questions broad enough to allow themes and observations to emerge from the data in a more inductive fashion. As time went on, however, this qualitative project evolved to become more of a mixed-methods study where we employed various research techniques: namely focus group interviewing, a mixture of qualitative/quantitative content analysis of the focus group transcripts and the utilization of an Application Programming Interface (API) by a computer science colleague in analyzing the transcripts further for emotional displays which ultimately focused on the two most commonly expressed emotions in these groups: anger and sadness. This will be explained in more depth in the methods section.

We also looked to various literatures to inform our study. We first examined peace and conflict resolution literature, particularly highlighting Boulding's (2000) work on "human peaceableness" and Saunders's (1999) writing on interracial dialogues. We particularly utilized Saunders's work in this study as a framework to follow towards racial reconciliation. In addition, we looked at other scholarly contributions on truth and reconciliation commissions and race relations dialogues. In reviewing these literatures, we sought to reflect on the role of emotions in the dialogic process when pertinent.

Ultimately, our study found that many Black respondents related emotions of both anger and sadness as they provided stories of the institutionalized racism (e.g., racial profiling, educational inequality, residential segregation, etc.) as well as the more personal aspects of racism that they had experienced. White respondents too displayed anger and sadness as they related their own experiences of troubled race relations. However, we also found that the respondents did not present these painful emotions in a combative fashion towards other respondents in the group. They shared these emotions openly and were offered compassionate support from other participants as they related and relived these painful stories. We argue that these forthright expressions of emotions, combined with bearing witness to each other's pain, can plant the seeds in moving us towards racial reconciliation.

Literature Review

Peace and Conflict Resolution Dialoguing: From Boulding to Saunders

Elise Boulding (2000) argues in her work on human peaceableness that a focus on actual face-to-face dialoguing to create heartfelt connections between real people helps create a more peaceful culture when working between aggrieved groups. The late sociologist was known for her work and writings in conflict resolution as well as the establishment of the academic discipline of peace studies (Weber, 2010), and she firmly recognized the importance of direct and personal interactions that would generate more understanding and feelings of compassion. She asserts that to achieve human peaceableness, face-to-face interactions will be needed across boundaries and categories of people. She states: "Solutions to the many problems we face do not lie in cyberspace but in the human heart, the listening ear, and the helping hand" (Boulding, 2000, p. 212).

This emphasis on face-to-face interactions that encourages emotional sharing and deeper understanding is also evident in the work of Harold Saunders. Saunders served as a U.S. diplomat under Henry Kissinger in the U.S. State Department from 1978-1981 and helped draft the Camp David Peace Accords between Israel and Egypt, as well as assisted in the negotiation of the release of the Iranian hostages (Roberts, 2016). Although some of Kissinger's actions as Secretary of State have come under closer scrutiny (Politico, 2015), Saunders distinguished himself as a skilled negotiator who factored in the psychological and moral dimensions of conflict situations (Roberts, 2016). Later, Saunders became the Director of International Affairs at the Kettering Foundation and started publishing his insights about conflict resolution work and promoting sustained dialogues between conflicted groups (Roberts, 2016).

Saunders asserts that dialogues between historically conflicted groups should encourage deep listening and an open sharing of emotions, stories and ideas that can forge a common understanding and ultimately change the relationships between the parties. In his (1999) book, *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts*, Saunders dedicates an entire chapter to a case study of sustained race relations dialogues between Blacks and Whites that took place in Baton

Rouge, Louisiana from 1995 to 1998. He notes that a key component to the success of these dialogues was allowing participants to show their true emotions which seemed to increase understanding between the races: "Tensions within the group were both direct and indirect. Intense emotion triggered discomfort among some of the women of both races…perhaps three-quarters of the participants broke through to probe the core of their personal racial concerns" (p. 175). He later continues: "What seems to have marked the transition visibly was the increase in participants' comfort level in sharing feelings with each other and in speaking frankly" (p. 190).

   Throughout his book, Saunders (1999) outlines a five-step process in conducting sustained dialogues between aggrieved groups: 1) deciding to engage; 2) mapping and naming problems and relationships; 3) probing problems and relationships to choose a direction; 4) scenario-building—experiencing a changing relationship; and 5) acting together to make change happen. He also notes that in order for each of these steps in sustained dialogues to be successful, "Each [person] must be willing to listen to others' views and feelings—not just pronounce her or his own position" (p. 102). Saunders's emphasis on feelings here is pertinent as emotional sharing can increase overall awareness of the individual and collective problematic of race in our society. In terms of group size, Saunders recommends that dialogue groups should be twelve or less, in order to elicit active listening. Ultimately, he argues that dialoguing face-to-face has the ability to improve interracial relationships and that those who participate can bring forth conflict resolution strategies that could encourage the larger community to transform itself in multiple ways.

   In this research project, we completed the first two steps of Saunders's five-step process in creating sustained dialogues in promoting racial reconciliation. In holding these interracial focus groups, community members have "decided to engage" and they have also started to "map and name" the race-related issues affecting the community. In addition, the groups have modeled Saunders's (as well as Boulding's) directives in creating face-to-face interactions where active listening and open emotional sharing occurred. This current study has laid the groundwork for our continuing research project

where we will facilitate on-going discussion groups dedicated to racial reconciliation over the next few years. In these future groups, we plan to complete Saunders's five-step process of sustained dialogues.

In the end, we assert that this study adds to the existing peace and conflict literature and furthers knowledge in two important ways: 1) It builds on the peace and conflict resolution literature that focuses specifically on race relations in the United States; 2) It highlights the significance of displayed emotions in U.S. race relations dialogues as sowing the seeds for racial reconciliation.

Racial Reconciliation Work: From TRCs to Interracial Dialogues

Although our study mainly draws upon the peace and reconciliation literature, specifically Saunders's five-step process, we include here other race reconciliation work that has enriched our thinking on how to eradicate racial inequalities and the unhealed wounds that are associated with them. Part of the scholarly work in racial reconciliation offers valuable contributions through examining truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) in different contexts such as the countries of South Africa and Australia and within the United States in Greenwood and Wilmington, North Carolina, and in Tulsa, Oklahoma (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2012; Greenwood, 2015; Inwood, 2012a; Inwood, 2012b). Some positive outcomes associated with TRCs are providing the public with more knowledge about previous human rights violations and also offering a more institutionalized public acknowledgment of said abuses. Yet, criticisms have been leveled towards TRCs given that the perpetrators are granted amnesty for "truth-telling" versus actually seeking justice for the victims who were wronged (Verwoerd, 1999). Another concern is the emotional distress and disempowerment that some victims feel given that the process is "filled with unmet expectations and promises" for them (Byrne, 2004, p. 237).

In further examining other efforts at racial reconciliation, scholars have focused on the role of interracial dialogues (Goshal, 2007; Hatch, 2006; Lavelle, 2007; Mulvey & Richards, 2007; Walsh, 2007). Again, certain scholars have foregrounded emotions in their work (Gresson, 2004; Hatch, 2006; Mulvey & Richards, 2007) while others have

focused more on the importance of narrative and racial identity in these exchanges (Goshal, 2007; Lavelle, 2007). Some of the most significant writing on the importance of race dialogues comes from John Hatch, representing a communications perspective. Hatch (2003) argues public intergroup dialogue holds potential for developing understanding of differing viewpoints on race relations and historical racial events. Hatch contends reconciliation is a complex, "rhetorical" process that works toward the release of emotion, namely, guilt, shame, blame, and resentment while attempting to build a unified whole (p.738). For Hatch, recognizing and understanding emotion is vital as emotions are the drivers of both complicity and denial of racial injustice and recognition of harmed relationships. The disclosure of truth through emotion and dialogue are the way to heal the racially harmed (Hatch, 2006).

Lavelle (2007) argues there are valuable lessons to be learned from such dialogues: 1) Memories are formed differently based on racial identity; 2) Memory sharing needs to be done with the goal of reconciliation as sharing is important for framing current racial divisions and for facilitating a common understanding of issues to move toward societal restructuring with the end goal of equality; and 3) Reconciliation through narrative sharing does not complete the reconciliation process; it is merely the first step as that does not allow structural inequalities to be addressed. Lavelle cautions individuals from simply "swapping race stories" because it results in easing White guilt about historical racialized injustice while also leaving White privilege in place and exposing people of color to additional psychological trauma (p. 2).

Regarding the importance of racial identity in race relations dialogue, Gresson (2004) offers critiques of multicultural pedagogies that neglect the emotional components of persistent White hegemony. He notes that efforts at multicultural understanding often fall short given that they do not fully address "the emotional underside of identity change" of the dominant group (p. 3). He asserts that in sincere efforts to promote multiculturalism, Whites' pain is often deemphasized given that there is a focus on Whites' social power. Yet, he argues that Whites' pain is real and that it is often an amalgamation of alienation, confusion, fears of "reverse racism," and feelings of loss.

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Within the sociological realm, Walsh (2007) describes the efforts of many U.S. communities that held interracial dialogue groups in the hopes of improving overall race relations. She notes that talking about race has become increasingly more pervasive in American society, with nearly 400 cities promoting interracial dialogues. Mulvey and Richards (2007) have arguably done some of the most extensive work on interracial dialogues in a U.S. college campus setting and have purposely emphasized the primacy of emotions in their work. After working with thousands of undergraduate students on race relations dialogues, Mulvey and Richards note that emotions are key in deepening understanding amongst group participants. They explain that when a student happens to express emotion in one of these groups, it enables the other participants to understand more deeply. They state: "because an emotion unveiled can often be worth hours of talk (e.g., 'If you cry, I get a clearer sense of how much somethings hurts')" (2007, p. 225). For our particular study, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of what our respondents stated and the emotions they expressed, we employed various methodologies. The following section explains the strategies we employed in designing and executing this research project.

Methods

Participant Recruitment

Both panel discussions for the dialogues on race relations which took place in 2015 and 2016 were advertised in the local newspaper, in church bulletins, and on Facebook. The advertisements in print media and through churches explained that these events would occur at a local university on a Saturday and would provide the opportunity to hear a panel of White and Black community leaders and law enforcement officials discussing race relations. The advertisements also stated that discussion groups would be held so that audience members could strategize about how to improve race relations in their community.

Before the panel discussions began, the lead researcher explained the research component of the interracial focus groups to audience members and invited them to stay after the panel discussion to participate in them. The lead researcher also notified the

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audience members that the focus groups would be videorecorded for research purposes and their confidentiality would be protected. It was further outlined how those wishing to participate in the research would need to sign Informed Consent forms. Audience members, however, were also offered a chance to participate in a focus group that would not be used for research. At both events, a non-research discussion group was held.

In terms of preserving participants' safety, the lead researcher stressed the importance of protecting all respondents' confidentiality (i.e., emphasizing that participants should not share what was divulged in their groups) and this specification was included in the Informed Consent that all participants signed. In addition, the lead researcher explained that if any participants felt emotionally upset or unsafe during the discussions, then they should request a group leader to call the mental health experts who were on call to handle these concerns. Lastly, the lead researcher noted that if anyone felt physically unsafe, then they should let a group leader know immediately in order to contact security.

Participant Demographics

For both race relations events, 63 individuals participated in the nine research-delegated interracial focus groups and these groups averaged 7 respondents each. In terms of the demographic breakdown, 26 African Americans participated in the groups (15 women and 11 men); 36 Whites (23 women and 13 men); and one Hispanic female. Participants ranged in age from 20s to 70s; however, most were in their 40s and 50s.

Data Collection

The first dialogue event was held on February 21, 2015 and seemed timely in light of the growing national Black Lives Matter movement that was responding to the high-profile murder cases of African Americans. The second dialogue on race relations event took place on May 21, 2016 and was also co-organized with Precious Freeman, an African American community leader who was in charge of the Dothan Community Relations Group, a local effort to improve race relations in the Dothan area. This second dialogue was also held in response to the continuing high-profile deaths of unarmed African Americans, nationally, but also an emerging local protest movement against

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reported bias within the local police department. This included concerns about the local police chief's past participation in the Sons of Confederate Veterans. Like the first event, the second event featured a panel of Black and White community leaders, as well as law enforcement officials to comment on the state of both local and national race relations.

Discussion group leaders who conducted the focus group interviews were community leaders or professors from various fields within the social sciences, humanities, or human services at the local university. All groups were designed to have one Black discussion group leader and one White discussion group leader in order to encourage participation amongst all respondents. The lead researcher constructed the focus group questions in consultation with Reverend Audri Scott Williams. The main questions were constructed to focus not only on respondents' thoughts on race and race relations but also to encourage emotional sharing. For example, the first question cluster was worded as follows: *For most people, their feelings about race and culture are rooted in our family history. Let's discuss your family's feelings about race and other cultures throughout the generations. Consider your grandparents, parents, and your children. Do you feel that things are changing?* Likewise, one of the last question clusters of the focus group discussion also highlighted emotions: *If we had real integration in our community, what kinds of things would we see in the community? Hear in the community? Feel in the community?*

The lead researcher and Williams also considered the provocative potential of focusing on emotions in discussing race and race relations. Before the events, the lead researcher provided the discussion group leaders a script with all the questions for the groups and instructions on who to call if any respondent became emotionally distraught or if there was any concern over safety.

Research Questions Informing Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, the central purpose of this research was to understand how directed conversations between people of color and Whites could highlight both individual and collective concerns about race as a step forward towards racial reconciliation. Two specific questions informed this research: 1) Which race related

issues are the most prevalent during these dialogues? and 2) How do respondents relate their stories to one another in these small group settings? To answer these questions, various methodologies were employed which we discuss in more depth below.

To answer the first question, we had to first analyze the transcripts to see which race-related issues were the most common themes in the groups. After the focus group interviews were completed, the researchers watched the videos of the focus groups and created verbatim transcripts from the videos. We changed names of all respondents to protect confidentiality. The researchers also utilized a mixture of qualitative/quantitative content analysis of the focus group transcripts. The content analysis of the focus groups was first approached qualitatively with three coders. Drawing upon Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations for developing codes and finalizing a codebook for a qualitative study, the researchers first went through a process of "reading and memoing emergent ideas" within the focus group transcripts (p. 187). This involved "taking notes while reading and sketching reflecting thinking" from the focus group transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 187). The researchers repeated this process and originally identified over 50 codes. After multiple deliberations, the researchers identified 32 discrete codes. Then the researchers focused on the most frequently recurring codes which reflected common themes (i.e., racial profiling; reflections on the similarities and differences of the races; challenging the problematic of race; on-going racial segregation; racial (mis) representation in the media; racial discrimination, prejudice, and racial fear).

In answering the second question of how respondents related to one another in telling their stories, all three coders noted that the expression of various emotions was evident in the transcripts. This created difficulty in coding given the vastness of words used to describe human emotion, combined with the researchers' goal of narrowing the original codebook to around 30 codes or less as Creswell and Poth (2018) suggests. Given these issues, Saldaña (2009) suggests that in emotion coding, researchers should avoid coding every, singular nuanced expression of emotion, and instead recommends coding for the primary emotion that underlies the emotional state. For example, varied but related emotional states such as frustrated, incensed, displeased, and irritated can all be coded to

the primary emotion of anger. Likewise, for the primary emotion of sadness, there can be multiple emotional states found (i.e., depressed, despairing, unhappy, regretful, sorrowful, etc.). Utilizing this process, the researchers narrowed the related emotion codes evident in the transcripts to the two primary emotions of anger and sadness.

To be clear, in coding for anger and sadness, it did not appear from reading the transcripts as though participants were personally upset with their fellow participants and this assumption was also verified by watching the videos made of the groups. Instead, respondents seemed to be re-experiencing the painful emotions that they had felt in their own lives as they related their personal race stories.

The three coders remained skeptical that the codes for anger and sadness would score high on the interrater reliability test, given that emotions are often considered too subjective to be identified objectively and consistently. A standard definition of emotion emphasizes this subjective component:

> an emotion is a complex psychological event that involves a
> mixture of reactions: (1) a *physiological response* (usually
> arousal), (2) an *expressive reaction* (distinctive facial expression,
> body posture, or vocalization), and (3) some kind
> of *subjective experience* (internal thoughts and feelings).
> (Nairne, 2000, p. 444)

The lead researcher then checked the completed coding for interrater reliability between the three coders (Freelon, 2017). Given that the Krippendorff's alpha test is considered to be one of the most rigorous interrater reliability tests to be applied in content analysis, that was the standard used in this coding process (Freelon, 2017). Surprisingly, of all the 32 codes that were identified for this study's codebook, the codes that yielded the highest interrater reliability were for the two emotion states—anger and sadness—which achieved Krippendorff scores of 1. Krippendorff suggests the following for interpreting his coefficient: "[I]t is customary to require $\alpha \geq .800$. Where tentative conclusions are still acceptable, $\alpha \geq .667$ is the lowest conceivable limit" (2004, p. 241).

In addition, this project was enhanced by collaborating with a computer science colleague who ran the focus group transcripts through a special Application Programming Interface (API) to flag emotions through sentiment mining/emotion analysis, which corroborated our more traditional qualitative analysis. This computational method is increasingly being used by social scientists to further strengthen their analysis beyond relying on conventional coding techniques. As digital sociologists Rogers and Robinson (2014) assert: "…sentiment mining techniques allow researchers to identify underlying structures or regularities within a corpus of text data…to seek out and classify potentially significant sentence fragments for affect and emotion terms" (p. 299). This computational method is described more in depth below.

Computational Method for Emotion Analysis

Sentiment analysis or opinion mining is the process of identifying whether a piece of text can be identified as positive or negative towards an entity (Medhat et al., 2014). Emotion analysis is a sub-component of sentiment analysis, where emotion analysis goes further than identifying positive or negative attributes and actually associates a text with various levels of emotions such as joy, anger, fear, sadness, and surprise. Several machine learning methods (Mohammad et al., 2015; Mohammad & Bravo-Marquez, 2017) have been applied in analyzing different domains such as social media, product reviews, brand monitoring, and text categorization.. Commercial or research related APIs, which provide an already trained model, is preferred to perform emotion or sentiment analysis. APIs provide a set of instructions to access web-based software application.

In this paper, we used a recurrent neural network model-based API provided by Indico (www.indico.io) to identify emotions associated with the transcript data (Sivaraj, 2015). Although we were specifically interested in expressions of anger and sadness in our study, the API was set up to retrieve results on five emotions: anger, joy, fear, sadness, and surprise. Our data consists of responses to open-ended questions, and the participants at times exhibited more than one emotion in longer responses. This issue makes the emotion analysis more difficult using automated computational tools. To increase the reliability of the API results, we partitioned the responses of our data into ~80-95 word long meaningful

phrases. Then, we wrote a Python script to read and clean up the data, and to make API calls. An API call refers to send a query to a web service and receive the result of the query using a special user key code.

As mentioned above, the emotions that were compared in this API were anger, joy, fear, sadness, and surprise. For each 80-95-word long phrase from the focus group transcripts, the scoring for the emotions was calculated to equal 1. For instance, if a phrase exhibited equal strength amongst the five emotions, we would expect that the results would be calculated at .20 for all five emotions. For the API analysis, we report here the stories from the transcript which scored high on anger and sadness (score was .50 or above) that also corroborated the original coding work completed by the three coders.

Limitations

One limitation is relying on the computational analysis of 80-95-word chunks of the transcripts in that it may not have captured the full range of emotions. Through the coding process, the three coders noted that often displays of emotion were more readily found when taking into consideration the whole context of respondents' stories – which often would result in a long paragraph of text versus taking smaller segments of text. Another limitation was that the API analysis oversimplifies emotional responses into five categories. Human beings can experience a plethora of emotions, certainly more than five emotional states, and they can simultaneously experience a range of related and even conflicting emotions. However, with this particular computational API analysis, we were constrained by both word limits and the range of emotions to be tested.

Findings

This research answered two specific research questions: 1) Which race-related issues are the most prevalent during these dialogues? and 2) How do respondents relate their stories to one another in these small group settings?

In answering the first question, we found that many Black respondents still cited the prevalence of race-related issues found in the literature (e.g., racial profiling in the criminal justice system, educational inequality, and residential segregation). In addition, some Black respondents noted their individual desire to confront racism in everyday life

by communicating more openly with both Blacks and Whites. Some White respondents also commented that societal institutions should emphasize similarities between racial groups instead of trying to accentuate their differences. Furthermore, Whites relayed their concerns of trying to grapple with a history of racial oppression in this country and admitting to themselves and others that they would never fully understand what people of color have experienced of racism.

In answering the second question, we found that the open expression of emotions of anger and sadness amongst respondents was the most prominent and surprising finding of this research. However, as was noted before in the methods section, respondents' emotional expressions were not directed towards their fellow focus group participants. Participants seemed to be comfortable in openly expressing their feelings of past racial hurts in these small group settings, especially given the warm and compassionate feedback that they appeared to receive from other group members.

Given that the emotions of anger and sadness were the most salient and significant codes during our analysis, we organize the remainder of this section by highlighting expressions of these two emotions. Below we provide examples of how respondents related feelings of anger and sadness that were identified both by coders and scored .50 or higher on the API results. These emotion-laden stories also simultaneously highlight the aforementioned issues stemming from institutionalized racism that were discussed in answering the first question.

Expressions of Anger. The first two excerpts relate to the issue of racial profiling in the criminal justice system. We start with Johnny, a Black college student who shared his experience with racial profiling:

> Johnny – African American male in his 20s (Focus Group 2) – *…a lot of White kids who walk through the mall all the time with skateboards and wear their hoodies and they are never harassed about it. But, on this particular day, as soon as I walk in, I have the hoodie on…I still remember this officer's name—Officer Sanchez. He approached me and said, "Take the hoodie off!" I said, "Why?" He said take the hoodie off or leave the premises….So – I turned around and I'm*

leaving the premises. He walks out behind me with a cop accompanying him and he says, "Show me your ID." I said, "For what?" He says, "Show me your ID." I said, "You told me to leave the premises, so I'm leaving the premises." [Officer:] "You're under arrest." Put handcuffs on me. I'm like, "What am I under arrest for?" He said, "Disorderly conduct." So –I went to jail. I [have] it listed on my record right now….That to me, is just totally unacceptable. Because I still go to the mall and I see kids with hoodies on all the time. you know. They're just not—I hate to say it—they're not my color. ANGER = 0.652734

Judging from the reactions viewed on video, various participants shook their heads in recognition of the injustice that Johnny had experienced. A White woman in her 50s seemed to voice the group's disgust by suddenly blurting out: "Inequality."

The reporting of racial profiling incidents took place in every group and the next excerpt relates the story of Tony, a Black community organizer in his 50s, who discusses his anger about racial profiling within the criminal justice system.

Tony – African American male in his 50s (Focus Group 5) – *'Cause when you look at institutions you have to look…at the institution of the criminal justice system. It's a known fact statistically that White people use drugs 15 to 20 times more than Blacks. But Blacks get locked up, arrested and sent to prison 15 to 20 times more than Whites. Why? Because the system is designed and the police are taught to target those poverty-stricken areas and not the areas where the drugs are really coming from. So -the institution sets up these kinds of barriers as well.* ANGER = 0.5010954738

This was met by the collective understanding of the group and later Robert, a White man in his 40s, related his frustration that we focus on difference when it comes to race instead of looking at our commonalities as human beings. He explained his life in the military and how the military ethos stresses commonalities amongst the ranks.

Robert, White male in his 40s (Focus Group 5) – *The differences are ancillary if we get to know individuals. That's one thing - you don't build strength in the military by looking at our differences. We look at our similarities. The differences*

are just something you figure it out later. And that has been my biggest pet peeve. And I have had people tell me I am wrong. And I said, "No, no, no, no, no! Think about it; think about it." ANGER= 0.52377784

Challenging this notion of commonality, however, was brought up in another focus group. Celia, a White woman in her 30s, expressed anger at herself for pretending to understand what her friends of color have gone through in experiencing racism.

Celia, White female in her 30s (Focus Group 8) – *I don't understand what you've been through. And I think that acknowledging that I don't get it and that I am not going to get it unless you tell me. And being open to that instead of doing this whole sidestep thing that I do sometimes…I think would really go a long way. It's almost like I avoid the most uncomfortable conversations even with the people I really care about. And uh…I would like to stop doing that.* ANGER = 0.680936873

As Celia's comment indicates, participants were able to freely process their own internal contradictions around race relations in these focus groups. This sharing seemed to create a sense of solidarity and "we-ness" in addressing the continuing problematic of race relations in our society.

In the same focus group, when answering a question about how real integration could be achieved in our community, Leah, an African American woman in her 20s, turned the question around to challenge the group to move past their own comfort zones.

Leah, African American female in her 20s (Focus Group 8) – *Can I answer the question backwards? I think what it would take to get there... is for us to get out of our comfort zones….Parents have grown up in the mindset and just passed [it] down to my generation. And so - because they get uncomfortable with talking about it—nobody wants to talk about it. So -it's not a problem. We won't talk about.* ANGER = 0.56003

From viewing the video, Leah's anger was palpable. She was giving a clear directive to the group members that in ignoring issues of racism and not addressing it directly, real integration was not possible. Her comments were not isolated. Other participants in various

focus groups related the importance of talking with each other and insisted that these dialogues on race relations were "not just talk."

As we see from these excerpts, participants listened intently and supportively, bearing witness to the painful stories expressed by the other group members. Our respondents seemed to be "processing" the ongoing issues of race relations in an open manner. This atmosphere of candor was also demonstrated in respondents' shared expressions of sadness.

Expressions of Sadness. Like the expressions of anger, we highlight here the selected excerpts of sadness that were not only noted by the three coders but also achieved significance (>.50) with the API results. The first two excerpts relate to the more macro issues of racial segregation in schools and racial representation in the mass media. In the first excerpt, Belinda, an African American woman in her 40s, discusses how some wealthier White children attend the local magnet schools whereas the poorer children of color are in the under-performing, public schools.

> Belinda, African American female in her 40s (Focus Group 3) – *And then the poor kids—per se—they put them in different, particular schools…. And when you look at that ratio and when you look at what is happening in the school system – to me it's very sad. Because the poor children—so to speak—wind up being the Black kids and some of the White kids you know—they consider as being poor— which is also a small percentage….* SADNESS = 0.756947

Besides the words expressed here, Belinda's demeanor indicated sadness; she seemed defeated as she related this observation. Belinda's example was immediately validated by a follow up comment from a White woman in her 70s, a retired educator from the local school system, who discussed how school administrators often promote "ability grouping" but that most educators knew the inherent bias in standardized testing that seeks to track students according to ability.

Continuing with issues of segregation, Patrick, an African American male in his late 30s, relates his sadness and concern with ongoing residential segregation and the

disparities in home ownership between Whites and Blacks. He offered a story about his children coming to visit the home he owns, in his mostly White neighborhood.

Patrick, African American male in his late 30s (Focus Group 1) – *And it's so different, because I have children from a previous marriage, that live across town. And it was so sad, you know, to hear my daughter say, "Daddy, it's so quiet here. I feel safe. You know; I feel you know that this is nice. This is a White person's community; White people live here. You are the only Black person that lives here."* SADNESS = 0.650916

Another large-scale issue that came up in many focus groups was that of racial representation in the media. In the following excerpt, we hear from Mark, a White man in his 50s, who communicates his sadness at the suggestive nature of media representations of race which often foster racial fear and misunderstanding.

Mark, White male in his 50s (Focus Group 6) – *A big part that goes along with what you are saying…race infiltrates the media. That's something that children...mostly consume. So - if movies always have it—Chicano [or] Black guy—bad guy…as the criminals and all these other White cops as the heroes, then that's what they're going to grow up thinking. And every time they see a Black person at night, they're going to be worried because they have this image…that's really sad, very sad.* SADNESS = 0.518848

Based on the videotapes, Mark's comments were met with nods of affirmation from the group and led to a discussion about issues of language construction and how Black, just as a color and a word, has been tied to characteristics of evil and dirtiness whereas White has been associated with qualities of goodness and purity.

John, another White male in his 50s, described his hurt in witnessing racial discrimination within the in-group of his college fraternity. He explains how this experience caused deep disillusionment within him.

John, White male in his 50s (Focus Group 2) – *The first time I really confronted it [racial discrimination]—I was in a fraternity and we had a Black fellow. He wanted to join the fraternity. And the fraternity was split—you know—like most of the people that were like in my class…all wanted the guy to join. He was a really*

cool fellow; there was no reason for him not to join…. SADNESS = 0.70707... *we didn't admit the Black guy. And I almost dropped out…because of it. Because it really upset me.* SADNESS = 0.669158

John's story seemed to resonate with the group and it created a moment of shared revelation, acknowledging the sadness and shame that comes with being associated with a dominant, White group that acts unjustly towards people of color. In this next excerpt, Sarah, a White woman in her 40s discusses how disturbing it was for her to confront racial prejudice within her own family. She first described her wish to have some Black girlfriends sleep over when she was in elementary school and how her father prohibited it. She then relates the confusion and sadness she felt that was later exacerbated by watching the television mini-series, *The North and South,* with her family. This series more fully revealed the systemic nature of our country's history of racial injustice to her.

> Sarah, White female in her 40s (Focus Group 6) – *My dad definitely grew up in the era when there was much distinction and he wouldn't allow it [Black girlfriends sleeping over]. And I remember I didn't understand why…I had always viewed my daddy as…a kind person, so I felt very confused. And as I got older, I remember distinctly…watching…the mini-series, The North and the South…. I remember watching that as a family together…. I was mortified. It was the first time I think I ever really…understood everything that had happened…. I was mortified and I remember my daddy and I argued about it.* SADNESS = 0.531179

Sarah's painful story was immediately followed up by another White male participant in his 50s, discussing his first comprehension of the South's racist history and the pain and confusion of being born into a society where such hatred was normalized.

Another story that was particularly poignant was that of Michael, an African American businessman in his mid 40s, who related how long-standing fear and mistrust could lead to potential violence. Living out of town on country roads, he described how one day he had to turn his truck around at the outskirts of a neighbor's yard/driveway, because he had forgotten something at home. He explained that this house typically

remained unoccupied throughout the entire year, although the yard was always maintained. Michael said he was turning his truck around quickly and somewhat unconsciously when he happened to look up the long driveway and saw an older White man on the porch, eyeing him suspiciously. As he started to pull away and down the road, he heard three gunshots ring out. As a Desert Storm veteran, he knew what gunfire sounded like. Michael said he looked in the rearview mirror and saw a middle-aged White woman, in a pink shirt, standing on the porch, firing rounds in his direction. He said he quickly stepped on the gas and called 911 to report the incident. Once the police cars arrived, he was requested to return to the home where the shots were fired.

Michael, African American male in his mid-40s (Focus Group 4) – *So—they [the police] asked her, "Why did you shoot? If you felt he was on your property taking something, why didn't you just call us?" So—I was profiled that day and I think it only happened, because I was Black. And…I felt a certain way and I think all the young Black men [do]—that are… that are innocent, not the guilty ones, not the ones that have done wrong.* SADNESS = 0.6152456403

The first time he told this story, Michael wept openly and it obviously moved others in the group. They were demonstrably horrified by this violence and expressed their consternation that it had ever happened. Michael continued his story, saying that initially he was deeply troubled after the incident and wanted to be angry at all White people. After all, he was profiled and judged as dangerous and menacing when he had done nothing wrong. The fact that this woman could have seriously hurt or killed him also seemed senseless given the fact that there was no real danger posed; she was seemingly reacting with fear.

Yet, Michael noted that he started to think of a White pastor at his church and how much he cared for and respected him. He also started to think of a White elderly woman neighbor who told him that she now considered him as a son, given his kindness to her. He also discussed the White bankers that helped him in launching his business.

Stories of intentionally shifting the focus away from the more painful, negative stories about race, to focus on creating more positive race relations going forward, was

related by other Black participants. They discussed their sadness in hearing the stereotypical characterizations of all White people as evil or racist within their own personal circles. Norma, an African American woman in her 50s, related how she challenged these totalizing assumptions amongst her friends and noted that all of us have a responsibility to speak up when witnessing such language.

> Norma, African American woman in her 50s (Focus Group 4) – *I can be the difference. I don't tolerate my own personal circle of friends speaking ill or negative. I don't like it and I have something to say about it. If not, I don't want to hear that. I let them know; I'm very disappointed in how you're speaking. I don't think that's a good model for our children or even our friends our age to see.*
> SADNESS = 0.6332927346

Norma demonstrated her sadness and disappointment with dealing with the problematic of troubled race relations and her narrative was received with nods of affirmation from the other group participants. There seemed to be a collective recognition amongst most participants in these interracial discussion groups that it was important to focus on the humanity of those traditionally considered the Other. Certainly, the sharing of these emotions of sadness and anger demonstrated how increased interaction, in an emotionally supportive environment, offers a critical step in working towards racial reconciliation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our research enhances the peace and conflict resolution literature that focuses specifically on U.S. race relations. Building upon Saunders's model of conflict resolution dialoguing, we brought community members to engage in face-to-face dialogues and they began the process of mapping and naming the problems around race that they encountered. This study also contributes to this literature by demonstrating that the open expression of emotions within interracial dialogues is especially important as racial ethnic groups seek to move towards racial reconciliation. Far from providing only a forum that critics maintain is to swap race stories that assuage White guilt and further the emotional trauma of people of color, interracial dialogues actually provide a means to identify American society's most

intransient race problems while also creating a space where empathetic bonds amongst racial/ethnic groups can be forged through open emotional sharing. We argue that such an open dialogic process can be an important step in promoting racial reconciliation. As we noted in our findings, the dialogues answered both of our original research questions, but the larger story was the significance of emotions in how respondents related their stories.

This study shows that respondents expressed emotions like anger and sadness freely and were subsequently offered compassionate support and understanding from other participants. It should also be noted that in a majority of the focus groups, at least one respondent cried at some point, as we found in viewing the focus group videos. The researchers did not know the significance of these emotional displays before the coding process led to the finding that codes for emotions were, in fact, arising as the most identifiable/salient and significant themes within the entire research process. As was mentioned in the methods section, we strategically included questions that sought to uncover both respondents' thoughts and feelings around the problematic of race in our society. However, this technique was employed more as a "discussion starter" (i.e., to make respondents feel more comfortable so they would begin to talk). We were unaware of the dynamic role that emotions would eventually play in this study and how important it is to create interracial dialogues that enable free emotional exchanges amongst respondents in a safe environment. Yet, this finding corroborates one of Saunders's observations from the interracial dialogues that were conducted in Baton Rouge. He noted that candid exchanges of emotions amongst respondents seemed to mark a turning point towards gaining deeper interracial understanding. Certainly, scholars involved in organizing future interracial dialogues, should keep this in mind when constructing discussion guides.

Up until a couple of decades ago, one could not imagine these types of interracial forums happening where different racial/ethnic groups felt free to be as transparent and emotional with each other as they were in our study. This is particularly significant in Alabama, where a history of racial injustice has created deep divides and a deafening silence on racial history. Yet, the deafening silence around racial pain is not just related to

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the unhealed wounds of the Deep South, it is related to the fraught racial history of the entire United States.

At the time of writing this conclusion, U.S. race relations have arguably worsened from when this research study first started in 2015 and 2016. Most dramatically, the nation was transfixed as we watched the trial of Derek Chauvin, a White police officer who was accused of the May 25, 2020 killing of George Floyd, an African American man. Floyd was reported to have used a counterfeit $20 bill at a convenience store in Minneapolis, Minnesota (BBC, 2020). Placing Floyd on his stomach during the arrest, Chauvin kneeled and placed much of his body weight on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes and cellphone video footage released by concerned bystanders showed that other officers were kneeling on Floyd's torso as well (Murphy, 2020). An hour after the incident, Floyd was taken to a medical center and pronounced dead (BBC, 2020). The United States experienced waves of unprecedented protests in dozens of cities, immediately after George Floyd's death (Murphy, 2020).

Although the jury ultimately found Chauvin guilty of two counts of murder and manslaughter, Chauvin's trial reportedly retraumatized Americans, especially African Americans, with its recounting of police brutality that has characterized much of our nation's history (Cineas, 2021). In this light, interracial dialoguing, which would seek to create a safe space for Black and White participants to come together and express their raw and honest emotions of anger and sadness in the hopes of moving our society towards racial healing, may strike some as passé and ineffective. However, Georgia lawyer, politician, and voting rights activist, Stacey Abrams, when interviewed by *The New York Times* upon Floyd's death, emphasized that American Democratic leaders and our society, in general, need to listen to and understand people's anger, in order to validate their pain. Abrams noted, "We have to start by saying what you feel and you fear is real" (Herndon, 2020).

This sentiment is echoed in the words of the late peace scholar, Elise Boulding, whose work on developing human peaceableness was touched on before. Boulding asserted that face-to-face dialogues between aggrieved groups—where deep emotions can be shared openly in a spirit of brotherly goodwill—can ultimately transform peace-making efforts in

the most hopeless of conflict situations. And certainly, we could argue that American race relations is still in need of transformative healing at this specific historical moment. Yet, Boulding (2000) boldly stated her vision for the restoration of wounded societies through the commitment of practicing open dialogues: "In the speaking, listening, reflection, and the various practices developed for social healing for wounded societies lies hope for new images of the future, the possibility of strengthening human peaceableness" (p. 211).

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