

STUDIES IN COMMUNICATION, MEDIA, AND PUBLIC OPINION

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# Talking about Race

*Community Dialogues and the Politics of Difference*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Race, Dialogue, and the Practice of Community Life

It is a sunny spring day in a midsized Midwestern city, and the parking lot of the police station is beginning to fill. Inside, in a stately conference room, a Latina woman is busy placing handouts and pamphlets at fifteen or so places around the table. She has already put out bottles of water, sugar cookies on paper napkins, and individually wrapped wintergreen LifeSavers on the table in front of each chair.

Gradually people filter in. An African-American man and woman enter and greet the woman warmly. Several white men in suits walk in and do the same. A white woman in a cozy sweater arrives, just in front of an African-American man. Then two East Asian men enter. Some people greet each other with smiles, handshakes, or jokes; others introduce themselves across the table. After several more white men and women (some in suits) and an African-American mother and daughter enter, the table is full. We begin.

"Good afternoon everyone. Welcome to this Diversity Circle. I am Maria<sup>1</sup> and I will be your facilitator." She says a bit more and then holds up a pamphlet.

This is the book that you will be bringing back with you [for the other three sessions.] We are here to do dialogue. This describes what that is, the role of the participant, listening carefully to others, etcetera. We need to make sure—this is extremely important, everyone—that we keep the discussion on track. The important part of my job is to keep things moving along, important that you speak freely, but don't monopolize. Address remarks to the group rather than to me. Important that all of us value your own experiences and opinion, ok? And that you engage in friendly disagreement. Remember it is dialogue, and not debate.

What is going on here? What I've just described is the actual start of a dialogue group that met in a central Wisconsin city. They were meeting to talk about race.<sup>2</sup> This city, like many others, had chosen to use interracial face-to-face conversations about race as a way of improving race relations and the life of their community. The people wearing suits were public officials—elected officials and city government department heads.

This is striking behavior for a variety of reasons. First, these folks were about to voluntarily take part in an interracial discussion, not a typical behavior for most Americans.<sup>3</sup> Second, they were not just engaging in interracial discussion; they were doing so *about race*. Bringing up the topic of race in interracial settings is generally treated as a potential for disaster by politicians and ordinary citizens alike.<sup>4</sup> Third, it is a rare thing in public life to see a group of residents of a community sitting down around the same table with their public officials. Typically, when residents and officials engage in talk in a group, the format is a hearing or a meeting in which officials sit empowered at the front and residents sit passively in the audience.

Finally, this talk is also somewhat odd because these people were not about to engage in decision-making. Instead, as the facilitator said, what they were aiming for is *dialogue*—discussion intended to focus on personal experiences, emotions, and storytelling. As therapeutic and recreational as that may sound, the city manager, city council members, and other city employees were doing this on taxpayer time.

What these folks were doing is known generally as intergroup dialogue. Although it involves some behaviors that are rare in everyday American life, this type of program is not unique to this particular city. Since the early 1990s, more than 400 cities across the United States,<sup>5</sup> and many cities throughout the world,<sup>6</sup> have implemented programs like this in which diverse groups of volunteers are recruited to come together over repeated sessions to talk about race.

The actions of the people in this particular Midwestern city, as well as in cities around the country, are worth some attention because of all of the ways in which they are surprising, noted above. But they are particularly worthy of study by a political scientist because they constitute deliberative democracy in action. This is actual public talk, or interpersonal talk organized to address public issues. It is an attempt by real people in actual communities to confront the difficult public issue of race, and an attempt to enhance civic life in a context of cultural heterogeneity.

We have much to learn from what these people are doing. First, social psychologists have long suggested that interaction between people of different racial backgrounds is precisely what is needed to reduce prejudice. But much of what we know about intergroup contact is based on contact

that has been manufactured by researchers. When, in contrast, do communities choose to foster interracial interaction—specifically about race? And what goes on when they do so?

Previous work on public talk suggests that it quickly becomes intractable when conducted across cultural divides or conflicting interests.<sup>7</sup> Does that happen in these groups? Or given that people volunteer themselves for the programs, perhaps the participants are already in agreement that they ought to focus on racial identity when they first sit down together. Maybe the conversations merely “preach to the choir.” Perhaps these programs are the domain of left-leaning “multiculturalists,” focusing on racial group identities rather than things that unite the American people.<sup>8</sup> If these intergroup programs intentionally draw attention to race, why do public officials volunteer for this seemingly divisive talk?

We also have much to learn about deliberative democracy from these groups. Democratic theory has taken a deliberative turn in the past several decades.<sup>9</sup> Scholarship in political psychology,<sup>10</sup> political communication,<sup>11</sup> and public policy has followed suit.<sup>12</sup> We now have not only multiple theories of what ideal deliberation ought to look like and what it can produce, but we also have a growing number of empirical studies that test, question, and expand these claims.

Thanks to recent studies, we now know more about who participates in various forms of deliberative participation, and even a bit about how this has changed over time.<sup>13</sup> But we know very little about why community leaders choose to provide opportunities for public talk or why they turn to such a strategy to address pressing public problems such as race. Taking the time to notice how communities around the country are using dialogues on race can provide valuable insights into how deliberative democracy comes into being.

### Why Study This Aspect of the Deliberative System?

I take deliberative democracy to mean the range of acts of structured interpersonal discussion intended to address community problems. As the facilitator quoted at the start of this chapter asserts, the talk in these programs is “dialogue, not debate.” It is a form of public talk in which the emphasis is on listening to and understanding others, not on reaching a decision. Thus it is not deliberation. However, it is one form of talk in the overall *deliberative system*—the range of acts from informal conversation to formal debate that collectively comprise deliberative democracy.<sup>14</sup>

Such civic dialogue provides an opportunity to understand why communities choose to confront public problems with organized, interpersonal,

face-to-face talk. The insight we gain can not be generalized to all forms of public talk, but it can bring us closer to knowing the place that such communication plays in contemporary civic life.

This is all to say that these programs enable us to examine two pressing questions: How does public talk come into being? And what goes on within it?<sup>15</sup> We expect deliberation to achieve many things—better informed opinions, tolerance, efficacy, well-rounded decisions<sup>16</sup>—but before public talk can actually bring about these outcomes, people have to choose to pursue it. Because civic dialogue programs constitute a particularly difficult form of public talk within the deliberative system, understanding how this case comes into being can reveal more generally how deliberative democracy arises.<sup>17</sup>

Why are communities choosing dialogue as a means to address the issue of race relations? A skeptic might say that people cannot seriously expect this endeavor to improve race relations or to achieve any kind of social justice, because deliberative democracy is slow and likely to favor the status quo.<sup>18</sup> Even if the talk provides opportunities to question power-holders, doesn't it devolve into chaos? If it doesn't, isn't it too superficial or civil for anything productive to occur?<sup>19</sup> And in interracial forums, aren't the voices of marginalized racial groups ignored or silenced?<sup>20</sup> And doesn't the lack of interracial understanding simply cause the talk to collapse into disarray?<sup>21</sup> A skeptic might also question why public officials are involved. Aren't they just paying lip service to a deep problem that requires a much more proactive approach?<sup>22</sup> Finally, if this is really *dialogue* in which people actually listen to one another, rather than debate or make decisions, isn't it closer to a self-indulgent act of individual development rather than to political action?<sup>23</sup>

There are many reasons to be skeptical of this form of public talk. And yet the fact remains that many people in many communities around the country are turning to it. Examining what they are actually doing with these dialogues on race brings us closer to understanding the nature of deliberative democracy. And it also sheds light on yet another pressing topic in contemporary civic life: how to create bonds across social divides. In recent years, this has been called the problem of creating bridging social capital. Social capital, the capacity of a social network to collectively address public problems,<sup>24</sup> is particularly valued when it is created by relationships that bridge divisions across social groups. Although this "bridging" social capital is notoriously difficult to create, many claim that it is crucial for heterogeneous democracies.<sup>25</sup> It is the kind of social capital that scholars expect will lead to generalized trust in other people.<sup>26</sup> Without connections between members of different social groups, cities are vulnerable to

intergroup violence,<sup>27</sup> and the lack of reciprocity and cooperation across social groups threatens to undermine the stability of democracy.<sup>28</sup>

These civic dialogue groups enable us to better understand how people go about building social capital across a particularly daunting social divide—race. We might expect that people would choose to build bridging social capital by focusing on what they have in common, or by working together on a common project, in a cooperative, not combative fashion.<sup>29</sup> Why do they choose instead to engage in dialogue that could focus on racial differences and interracial conflict? And what do they do with the opportunity when they choose to do so?

Because these programs are about race, they also allow us to study how people are dealing with this fundamental issue confronting American civic life. Although race is not a new issue in American cities, Hispanic and Latino immigration in the 1990s<sup>30</sup> and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have forced the issue of cultural diversity to the forefront in many smaller and medium-sized cities around the country. How are people of various racial backgrounds reconciling their identities as people of a particular race with their desire to bring the community as a whole together? How are people attempting to reconcile the desire to respect diversity with the desire to nevertheless come together as a community?

### The Nature of Intergroup Dialogue Programs on Race

Intergroup dialogue programs on race relations are volunteer programs that organize interracial conversations about race over repeated sessions. The programs arise organically within particular communities, and then program administrators typically advertise through local media for volunteers. These volunteers are sorted into racially diverse groups of about ten to fifteen people who then meet once a week for about five weeks. At their meetings one or two facilitators lead them in two-hour-long discussions. They follow guidebooks that encourage people to talk openly about their personal experiences with race, their perceptions of race relations in their community, and their ideas about how they might individually and collectively improve race relations. When the program ends, participants are encouraged to pursue some of these actions, but they are not obligated to do so.

In some cities, the programs are sponsored by city or county governments. In others, they are sponsored by an existing nonprofit organization such as the YWCA or the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ, formerly the National Conference on Christians and Jews), or an organization that has been created specifically to administer the program.

The programs have proliferated across the country since the 1990s, particularly around national events that highlighted existing racial tension such as the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson trials and the September 11 terrorist attacks.<sup>31</sup> Several national organizations have promoted the use of race dialogues, including the Study Circles Resource Center, the Hope in the Cities program, the YWCA, the NCCJ, the National League of Cities, the National Civic League, and President William Jefferson Clinton's Initiative on Race.<sup>32</sup>

Although the talk is not about policy decision-making per se, in most cases, public officials—elected and nonelected policymakers, and street-level bureaucrats<sup>33</sup>—participate in the programs alongside local residents. They participate as “equals” in the conversation—sitting in the same circle, following the same ground rules and taking turns like the other participants.

Although much of the emergence of intergroup dialogue programs can be attributed to national umbrella organizations, it is not the case that these organizations seek out communities that are fertile ground for a dialogue program and then try to sell them the program. Instead, people within particular cities hear about intergroup dialogue programs through acquaintances, mass media, or professional organizations and contact the national dialogue organizations for help. Also, national offices of organizations such as the YWCA, the League of Women Voters, the NCCJ and the National League of Cities encourage their affiliates or member cities to use intergroup dialogue as one of many of their strategies to enhance civic life. In some cities, administrators have transformed the dialogue program into its own organization.

Thus the emergence of civic dialogue programs has an organic nature. People involved mention similar problems when explaining why they chose to pursue it—intractable race relations, a desire to know their neighbors better, a desire to invigorate participation in civic life—and yet they explain the need as specific to their community. At this point in the history of race relations in the United States, people around the country are finding it necessary to dialogue in order to improve their civic life.

### What Do We Hear?

What do these dialogues on race reveal? Listening closely, we hear talk that is neither tuned to unity nor fixed on cultural differences. Despite the self-selection that brings people to these programs, we see participants we might not expect—police officers, firefighters, self-labeled conservatives. The participants are ordinary people, not leftist intellectuals. They are

not uniformly wedded to the idea of placing racial identity before community or national identity. They approach the dialogues from a variety of perspectives and often convey that they prefer a politics of unity rather than a politics of difference. However, the format of the dialogues fosters listening and the telling of stories that insert attention to difference into the conversations. As people tell their stories and use these appeals to authenticity to exert power over the conversation, the groups struggle with a balance between unity and difference.

Rather than perpetuate a politics of unity or promote a politics of difference, these dialogues do something else: they engage in a practical politics. I call this a practical politics because it is conducted by people who are steeped in the idea that in order to deal with difference we have to focus on unity; and yet they are reminded in the course of the dialogues that race matters in their everyday lives, particularly in the lives of people of color in their communities. These reminders are not taken from the pages of multiculturalist theorists, however. They come from the real lives of neighbors, who are themselves wanting to see “people as people.”

This is a practical politics also because people use it to achieve something they perceive as necessary in their increasingly heterogeneous towns: improved communication and understanding across racial lines. In aggregate analyses of objective indicators and individual-level investigations of perspectives of this talk, we see evidence that this is not about individual self-fulfillment, but about concrete community change. Examining the characteristics of the cities in which these programs arise and listening to the explanations that program practitioners give for them, we learn that people use the dialogues as a step toward social justice. This kind of public talk shows up in poor communities as well as in wealthy ones. And it is most closely associated with conditions related to attempts to address racial inequality, rather than with a context in which the goal is primarily self-actualization. Also, governments pursue the programs under the same conditions as do nongovernmental organizations, which are often explicitly focused on social justice, suggesting that public officials are involved for more than symbolic reasons.

Yet other evidence that this is not “just talk” comes from listening to the way people who have implemented these programs explain their choice. They do not describe dialogue as a luxury or as a means of self-fulfillment. They tend to talk about it as a necessity, a complement to other forms of action, and a step toward significant change. They do not talk about the decision to promote dialogue as a choice. Instead, they treat it as an obvious, essential component of a healthy civic life in a racially

diverse city. They tend to be people who have pursued interracial dialogue throughout much of their lives.

Another reason why I say that these dialogues constitute a practical politics is that they are far from ideal. They are messy. In them, people attempt to be civil but find it necessary at times to disobey the mantra of "dialogue, not debate." Some aspects of difference, such as language differences, are treated as too threatening to the fabric of civic life to tolerate. Although the practice of listening lends authority to marginalized racial groups, some groups are perceived as more legitimate than others. As we listen to what goes on, we see people in real communities struggle to craft something positive from the racial tension that brought them to the group.

While these conversations are not devoid of domination and some of the downsides of deliberative democracy that critics lament, the practice of this form of public talk teaches us that people around the country are finding a way to engage in the struggle of balancing unity and difference. They do so in ways that opens the eyes of community members and public officials alike. When they confront race head-on, the discussions neither explode nor shift permanently to safer ground. Instead the participants compel each other to face the reality of different realities. As they listen to and scrutinize each other, they hear that everyday life in their city can vary starkly by race. Through this talk, residents and public officials build a practical politics informed by the struggles of their own particular community.

### Listening as a Methodological Approach

Listening is an integral part of these race dialogue programs. It is also at the heart of the methods I employ. Intergroup dialogues are new to political scientists' purview. While scholars in other fields have investigated such programs as instances of interpersonal and group communication, and also of intergroup contact, I sought to understand them as instances of civic engagement and policy choice. While previous studies of intergroup dialogues have investigated these programs in controlled or manufactured settings, I wanted to know how they work in settings chosen and structured by community members themselves. Also, while political scientists have observed civic deliberation directly, this is one of the first studies to examine intergroup dialogue programs initiated by community members.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, I sought methods that would enable me to learn from and structure the direction of my study around the behavior of people implementing and participating in this form of public talk.

The result is that I use strategies that enabled me to listen directly to the content of dialogues and to attend to the perspectives of people engaging in them, as well as strategies that enabled me to step back from their first-hand accounts. At the earliest stages of this study, I conducted a pilot study of participant observation of one round of a city-sponsored dialogue program in Madison, Wisconsin. My purpose was to understand how people were using this type of civic program. At the same time, I worked with the local Urban League, which was administering the program on behalf of the city, to conduct an evaluation study via paper-and-pencil questionnaires. I continued to administer pre-test and post-test questionnaires to participants in Madison, as well as to adults and high school students in a similar program in Aurora, Illinois, over several years. These questionnaires provided insight into the attitudes and demographics associated with participants. They also provided insight into a large number of participants' perceptions about the nature of the communication within the dialogues and their aspirations for this talk. To expand my understanding of the perceptions held by people conducting dialogue beyond Madison and Aurora, I interviewed people throughout the broader Midwest, primarily through face-to-face interviews, and supplemented this with archival research and observation at local political events.

Much of this early work was inductive—I asked people to tell me why these programs were important, what went on within them, and what they hoped they would achieve. I drew conclusions about the types of communities that were pursuing such programs, and attempted to understand in particular when local governments sought to sponsor them.

Drawing on these insights as well as urban politics literature, I conducted a deductive study of the conditions under which communities pursue these programs. I collected data on the characteristics of cities with and without programs that various theories suggest we ought to observe coinciding with the choice to pursue these programs. These data allowed me to test, using objective indicators, different explanations for the existence of civic intergroup dialogue.

The analyses of city characteristics are suggestive and have the benefit of avoiding the biases of self-reports. But I am also a firm believer in the revelatory powers of narrative—that is, in the many things that people reveal when they explain themselves to you.<sup>35</sup> A large portion of the community-level data was drawn from the Census, but I and an energetic group of undergraduate research assistants obtained a good deal of it through calling city clerks, local activists, and newspaper editors. While doing this detective work, I talked and listened to the people I encountered. I used these in-depth interviews to understand the choice to pursue dialogue. Asking

these people to explain their choices revealed things that I, as the learner, would not otherwise have thought to ask about. It properly turned the tables on who had expertise in the research situation. And it revealed important things about how the people I talked to see themselves as well as their communities.

Obviously, there are problems with self-reports. Were people accurately recalling the past?<sup>36</sup> When accurate data about the past is what I needed, I was sure to collect corroborating evidence. But the particularities of how different people explained their choice to pursue dialogue were partly what I was after. Did public officials view dialogue differently than people administering dialogue through nonprofit organizations? Mindful that the responses I received could very well be influenced by the nature of the interview context, especially because we were talking about race relations,<sup>37</sup> I sought to learn from patterns across interviews. I proceeded on the premise that the way people perceive their alternatives and explain their motives constrains their behavior.<sup>38</sup> The ways people explained themselves to me served as indicators of their *perspectives* or *interpretations* of the choice. Capturing those perspectives was my goal.

Listening was a key method in this study in yet another way: I used participant observation. To understand what goes on in the process of civic intergroup dialogue programs, I needed to observe these discussions directly. I observed a variety of one-day dialogues on race in Madison, Wisconsin, including two YWCA lunchtime brown bag discussions and six screenings of PBS documentaries on race paired with community discussions afterward. More importantly, I conducted participant observation of six different intergroup dialogue groups in four different cities in Illinois and Wisconsin. Each of these groups met once a week for a month or more.

One of my goals was to characterize the content of these deliberations, but I wanted to do more than count how much each participant spoke and whether or not they disagreed with one another. In order to understand the role of intergroup dialogue in civic life, I needed to confront claims that public talk silences certain *perspectives*. Thus I needed to know not only who spoke, but the frame in which they said it, and how, collectively, the group understood the issues it confronted. In the interviews, I wanted to know how people understood this experience—how they perceived it, how they understood the role of dialogue in their attempts to make sense of civic life in contexts of difference, and how collectively, they made sense of good citizenship together. In other words, I analyzed my observation and interview data largely using what researchers call an interpretivist

approach. I tried to understand the frameworks and perspectives through which people were understanding and conducting dialogue.<sup>39</sup>

I observed these dialogues as a participant, interacting with the other participants, attending other events with them, and spending time in their communities.<sup>40</sup> Participating as a member of the groups, albeit a relatively quiet one, enabled me to pay attention to aspects of the rooms and buildings in which they met, seating arrangements, body language and facial expressions, and the tone in which people contributed to the conversation. It also allowed me to interact with the participants—to probe, pose questions, and in turn, answer theirs. In this way, my method and my project were one and the same. The individuals I was studying were trying to use dialogue to understand “others.” This dialogue involved listening and exchange. I followed their lead. I listened and I also opened myself to their questions and the relationships that they, and I, expected would further understanding.

I am not the first to listen in on actual civic deliberation or civic dialogue for the purposes of analyzing its content.<sup>41</sup> But this study is unique in its intensive attention to intergroup dialogues on race in particular, in the questions it asks, and in its combination of large-N aggregate level analyses with intensive methodologies. My purpose in relying on an original multi-city data set as well as the intensive methods of interviews and observation was to combine the strengths of deductive and inductive approaches. In addition, I wanted to make use of the knowledge that political scientists, communications scholars, and social psychologists had already accumulated but also wanted to enable myself to learn from the expertise gathered by the people actually doing dialogue around the country. Using a multi-method approach that incorporated listening allowed me to do so.

One final note for the moment on my approach: I focus primarily on medium-sized cities across the United States, in other words cities with populations between 50,000 and 250,000. I chose to do so in order to limit the scope of the study, to control for the different nature of political processes that may occur in cities of different size, and because the struggle with intergroup conflict is relatively new in cities of this size. Most of these places have been home to people of a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds for nearly a century or more. But recent immigration has brought these conflicts to the fore. As these communities choose to innovate (or not) to address this public issue, they represent an important laboratory for the rest of the nation. Even though the observations and multi-city study are conducted on medium-sized cities, I interviewed people conducting

dialogue in larger cities as well, in order to estimate how my conclusions extrapolate to these places.

### Outline of This Book

In the following chapter, I visit the ways in which democratic theorists argue that the existence of public talk constitutes healthy democracy. Within that general argument, however, there are two main ways of characterizing what we hope this talk sounds like. In short, one focuses on unity, the other on difference. I examine these arguments in detail, drawing on scholarship on democratic theory, political behavior, and intergroup conflict. I use these arguments to set up expectations about the conditions under which these programs come into being, how people explain these programs, and what takes place within them.

In chapter 3, I compare the contours of civic intergroup dialogue programs to the more general class of civic deliberative programs. Using interviews with national organizations that promote these programs and analyses of program literature, I show that civic dialogue programs on race are promoted as difference-focused communication that nevertheless focuses on the common good. I discuss how this form of communication resembles "dialogue" as described by communications scholars, and yet emphasize that it remains an empirical question whether dialogue (i.e., difference-focused communication) actually occurs in these programs.

Chapter 4 investigates when these programs arise, using aggregate-level analyses of a nationally representative sample of medium-sized cities. Using the original data set of community characteristics and the incidence of dialogue programs on race, I test various explanations for these programs derived from urban politics literature. In particular, I examine whether the programs are consistent with an emphasis on postmaterialist concerns, in other words arise in contexts oriented toward lifestyle and consumption concerns, or whether they arise in conditions that suggest they are used to pursue social justice. I find weak support for the post-materialist model but strong support for the social justice model. I also find that the conditions that give rise to government-sponsored versus merely government-endorsed programs are nearly identical. Taken together, these results suggest that communities are using dialogue about race not as a leisure-time activity, but as an earnest step toward improved race relations.

In chapter 5, I move away from this objective data to the explanations of dialogue practitioners themselves. Using semi-structured interviews, I listen to the explanations people in cities around the country give for

implementing dialogue programs and probe what their reasons suggest about the functions and uses of such groups. Despite the many reasons that could lead us not to expect social justice activists to use interracial dialogue, people who do tend to explain it as a necessity. They do not talk about it as a fallback or compromise strategy, but as an integral part of striving for social justice.

Chapter 6 begins the examination of what takes place within these dialogue programs. I demonstrate that listening to difference does indeed go on. But this is only part of the story. I show that these dialogues consist of a constant struggle with the desire to find common ground and yet respect difference. It is through the acts of members of marginalized racial groups pulling the whites in their groups back from unity that this negotiation of unity and difference takes place. The results suggest that the deliberative system can and does include listening to difference. At the same time, the manner in which this difference-focused talk is intertwined with attention to unity suggests that it may not be the threat to unity that theorists and social psychologists assume that a recognition of difference poses. The results help us rethink what people are using public talk for. They demonstrate that organized community forums can function to address public problems and also serve as sites in which people struggle to define citizenship and community identity.

Chapter 7 builds on these analyses to probe the types of communication that are at work in these dialogues. Storytelling plays a central role in the conversations, and yet its function differs from what previous studies lead us to expect. When people engage in storytelling, the result is not necessarily greater unity but instead greater attention to difference. Also, we see a challenge to expectations that listening, as opposed to debate or combative speech, helps reconcile inequalities that plague many forms of civic deliberation. It is participants' use of debate as well as dialogue, despite facilitators' injunctions, that allows them to demonstrate greater respect for each other.

Chapter 8 uses the observations of civic dialogue to address how people negotiate power in these groups. I focus on discussions on four issues, reparations, affirmative action, immigration, and language policy, and probe how people negotiate consensus and disagreement on them. I demonstrate how people make appeals to racial identity to confer legitimacy on their comments and to assert authority over the conversation. I show that even in these forums that are fertile ground for listening, people avoid the most controversial issues and do not pay attention to all differences equally. However, people do bring difficult issues to the fore, despite resistance, partly through the use of personal stories related to the issue. An analysis



of who speaks, and of who asks for and is asked for justification, shows that alternative perspectives and experiences are represented and that people of color as well as whites exert power in these conversations.

Chapter 9 examines the nature of the interaction between residents and public officials in these dialogues. I find that the nature of the conversations involving public officials is much akin to the nature of dialogues when officials are not present. Instead of deference to public officials, officials treat residents' stories as expertise. The analyses question our notions of expertise in the deliberative system, and the assumption that citizens will either defer to or lash out at officials when presented with the opportunity to confront them directly. They also suggest that government-resident communication that involves listening, on the part of both residents as well as officials, can ease the job of local government actors.

In the final chapter, I revisit these results and argue that they call into question common assumptions about public talk, the best way to build bridging social capital, characterizations of the public's stance toward multiculturalism, and the role of the government in the public sphere. We see that in contrast to calls for appealing to overarching identities as the way to build a stronger civic life, many communities—low- and high-income, university and blue-collar—are intentionally taking a different route. At the heart of their strategy is an emphasis on listening rooted in the practical need to learn to communicate across lines of difference. We see government actors creating the opportunity for people of different perspectives to come together, enabling this aspect of the public sphere to arise. I conclude that people implementing and participating in civic dialogues around the country are pursuing a practical politics that balances unity and diversity, listening and scrutiny, and dialogue and debate. The results suggest a rethinking of the place of conflict in deliberative democracy and an acknowledgement that it is the ongoing struggle with difference that provides unity in contemporary civic life.