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Theological Education in Action: A Study of Racial Perspective Change among Participants in the Student Interracial Ministry of Union Theological Seminary (1960-1968)

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Keywords: transformative learning, racial attitudes, racism, civil rights movement

Abstract: This qualitative research study investigated the role played by white theological seminary student participation in the Student Interracial Ministry (1960-1968) in the transformation of the participants’ racial perspectives. The central theoretical framework was transformative learning. The role of racism as a disorienting dilemma; interpersonal, affective, and spiritual/religious factors, and transformative learning across the lifespan were explored.

One of the most important developments of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was the lunch-counter sit-in movement led by African American college students, starting in February 1960. This development brought a powerful new stimulus to the ongoing movement through the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and by engaging young people throughout the nation in civil rights protests - including thousands of local protest actions, as well as events with national impact, such as the March on Washington during August, 1963, and the Mississippi Summer Project, known as Freedom Summer in 1964. Graduate theological students at Union Theological Seminary in New York, with its long history of social activism, formed the Student Interracial Ministry (1960-1968) as a vehicle for their participation in the movement. From a pilot project of four students in the summer of 1960, it grew into an ecumenical program, drawing a total of 234 students from some 50 protestant seminaries. This interracial program placed white students to live and work in African American communities in the south, and African American seminarians to work in northern, mid-western, and western communities, serving as assistant pastors for entire summers or full-year internships. It also sent students to work in direct action civil rights organizations, with the largest site being the Southwest Georgia Project led by SNCC leader Charles Sherrod.

This study examined the way in which participation in the Student Interracial Ministry (SIM) affected the racial attitudes of the young adults (typically in their mid to late 20s) who participated in it. The purpose of this research was to study the learning experiences of participants in the SIM. It provided the seminarians with an intense learning environment in which they crossed borders including race, gender, class, and culture. For many participants, this offered rich opportunities for transformative learning. This study investigated the ways in which participation in SIM affected the racial perspectives of the participants, with special attention to the interplay between religious background, theological education, and faith development.

Theoretical Framework

The central theoretical framework of this study is transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000, 2003; see also Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2007). Although many studies have critiqued the classic model of transformative learning, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal relationships and other affective factors (Baumgartner, 2002; Carter, 2002; Eisen, 2001; King, 2004; McDonald et al., 1999; Taylor, 1994), only a few
scholars have used transformative learning theory to investigate racial attitude change (Boyd, 2008; D’Andrea, 1999; Dass-Brailsford, 2007; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Manglitz, Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2005; Tisdell, 2003).

Therefore, the study also used intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Miller, 2002; Pettigrew, 1998, 2008), the major social psychological theory concerned with the reduction of prejudice. Intergroup contact theory hypothesizes that under certain conditions (equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support of authorities, law or custom) intergroup contact will reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954). Subsequent research has developed this hypothesis into a full-blown theoretical model. This model involves a group of interrelated processes that mediates intergroup contact’s effects on prejudice. These processes include: learning about the outgroup, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal (Pettigrew, 1998). Since the participants in the Student Interracial Ministry were graduate students in theology, an examination of the spiritual and religious context for learning was needed as well. While scholarly interest in this aspect of transformative learning is growing (Dirkx, 1997, 2001a, 2001b; Healy, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2001; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006), a third theoretical perspective was added called Faith Development Theory (Fowler, 1981, 2000; Streib, 2001, 2003; see also Parks, 1986, 1991, 2003; Tisdell, 2003). Fowler created a model of faith based on a constructive developmental perspective, drawing heavily on both Piaget and Kohlberg’s structural development paradigm, while extending these models to include faith development. Faith is understood as a comprehensive frame of meaning; not a separate category, but one that is integrated into an understanding of human development. Because SIM students may well use faith as a major component of their meaning making, it is important to be aware of the types of predictable patterns of development that research on faith development has uncovered (Fowler, 2003).

Methodology
Since this study is a combination of an historical and qualitative research study, oral history was selected as the methodology. This research project combined elements of subject-oriented oral history projects, with its investigation of the activities of the Student Interracial Ministry; and life histories, through its examination of the role of participants’ experiences in SIM in relation to their religious background and development. In-depth oral history interviews were conducted with twelve participants who were students at Union Theological Seminary in New York and participated in SIM from 1960 to 1967. Oral history also enabled participants to describe their SIM experiences in their life setting.

Significant historical and archival research was also carried out, using the extensive archives of SIM housed in the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University Libraries, which include organizational reports and correspondence, participant reports, and a wealth of other documentation. Extensive use was made of weekly issues of the Union student newspaper, The Grain of Salt, as well as personal records, notes, memorabilia, photographs and news clippings which were lent to the researcher by participants.

Findings
The principal findings were: (a) In-person exposure to the reality and effects of segregation and racism acted as a powerful disorienting dilemma for SIM participants leading to changed perspectives on race. As SIM participants travelled south and became immersed in the African American community, they were confronted with the stark reality of the absurd system

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of segregation, with its separate bathrooms and service counters - a system which disrespected African Americans at every turn. This became a disorienting dilemma for them which would serve as a catalyst for their learning about race. This experience of segregation and racism deepened as they heard people tell their stories and as the SIM participants themselves experienced the suspicious looks and scorn of white southerners, as well as the pervasive climate of intimidation and fear. From this disorienting dilemma flowed new types of understanding about the nature of racial identity, the complex set of assumptions that they brought with them as white people trying to understand this segregated system, and the role of class issues.

(b) The African American community was the primary context for the transformative learning that took place. SIM participants were welcomed with a radical quality of hospitality. In this gracious environment, participants grew in gratitude and respect toward members of the community, and strong empathetic bonds grew as they developed relationships and heard people’s stories of racism and segregation. A strong sense of mutuality and shared purpose also grew, leading to changed behaviors and a commitment to the shared purpose of working for civil rights and to integrate these new perspectives into their sense of vocation. This included the willingness to act from their new perspective, even in the face of a growing sense of conflict concerning white participation in, and potential exclusion from, the civil rights movement.

(c) The religious-spiritual dimension was an important factor in facilitating transformative learning around race. A key element in participants’ faith development was the integration of progressive views about race that challenge the status quo acceptance of racism. Many participants connected their progressive learning about race with core elements of their religious upbringing. Most participants had a sense of religious calling or sense of doing the right thing in their SIM participation. They also found strength and comfort in their faith during times of fear and anxiety. The religious-spiritual-symbolic dimension was also enriched and strengthened through their involvement with the African American church. SIM participants were deeply impressed by the depth of commitment to faith; the ways in which the down-to-earth faith of African Americans supported them throughout their daily struggles with segregation; and the rich musical tradition which bound the community together, giving them strength in unity.

(d) Transformative learning about race among SIM participants was part of a transformative process which extended over a long period of time, connected to learning in their upbringing and later careers. For many SIM participants, a growing sense of vocation was a key element in their SIM experience. Their learning about race was connected with their own faith development and their understanding of ministry. Throughout their careers, at least nine of the twelve participants would make deep connections in their work between vocation and activism. This sense of vocation was deeply connected to their faith development as they moved from the faith that they had grown up with to a sense of their own faith. Greater awareness of racial and social issues was a key factor in the development of their own faith, as they moved away from an institutionally focused or grounded faith to a more dynamic perspective. In SIM and other activist experiences, participants would identify activism and activist values as core elements of their faith and sense of vocation. Seven participants would begin their ministries in positions outside the local church, as they sought to unite their commitments to ministry and activism in meaningful ways.

(e) Key to this transformative process concerning race was an in-depth immersion experience in a setting that was either racially different or in a different culture. These immersion experiences bring together three factors which the three aspects of the theoretical framework
help to understand. From a faith development perspective, these young adults were developmentally ready for a transition from inherited faith to individual faith. They had been prepared for this transition by various broadening experiences during college. The immersion setting provided the young adults with intense exposure to a broad nexus of racial issues, which, from a transformative learning perspective, served as disorienting dilemmas, which in turn stimulated the transformative process. These settings also provided them with experiences of community and rich interpersonal, interracial relations, which Intergroup Contact Theory identifies as critical to the process of prejudice reduction.

**Discussion**

The following are the major conclusions and implications for theory: Transformative learning theory – the transformative learning in this study can be categorized as praxis or learning in action (Freire, 2000); it needs to be understood as dynamically connected to the life of the African American community in which it took place and the affective factors that played central roles in it; for participants like those in SIM, spiritual-religious factors can be seen as important mediating factors in the transformative process; it needs to be understood as part of a longer developmental process, and needs a broader definition that can be used throughout the lifespan (Merriam, 2004). Faith development theory – for people like SIM participants, it is important to examine the way in which the two developmental processes, transformative learning and faith development, may work in an integrated fashion over the lifespan. Intergroup contact theory – SIM participants were largely able continue learning in a positive fashion about race, in spite of experiencing conflict and approaches that would exclude whites from participation – some factors supporting this were good preparation, long-term immersion experience, and flexibility to keep learning.

The following are some potential implications for practice: (a) Activist experience can play an important role in adult learning; (b) Learning through activist practice and the classroom should be complementary modes of learning, with each informing the other; (c) The types of learning and interracial experience in this study seem to be needed today as much as ever.

**References**


