

Comparative Analysis across Approaches

Is there a set process to follow in going into a new situation?

Three of the groups (Race Relations 2020, Action Evaluation, and Appreciative Inquiry) bring a template to a new situation. For Race Relations 2020 this involves forming a group and taking them through a flexible curriculum that results in an action plan. In the case of Action Evaluation, the team reaches out to key stakeholder groups and invites them to complete a survey, which serves as the basis for analysis and action. In Appreciative Inquiry, the 5-D cycle serves as the backbone of an engagement process that is highly flexible but almost always includes face-to-face interviews between participants and results in a shared vision and action plan.

In the case of Search for Common Ground, the work is less based on a predetermined process, but emerges from a set of principles and a toolbox of techniques from the field. The principles ensure that certain elements are included in any intervention, such as building the capacity of local leaders or creating highly visible activities.

Are they closed or open groups?

Race Relations 2020 intentionally recruits participants to join a closed group for a set duration. This increases trust and builds the capacity of the group to traverse the tough terrain of dialogue around race.

In the other approaches, the facilitators seek out significant participation from identified stakeholder groups with an expectation that a core number will stay with the process. New people, however, are incorporated throughout the process.

How do they talk about race? What is the role of prejudice reduction or anti-racism work?

Interestingly, three of the groups do not explicitly include in their designs a conversation about race. Race Relations 2020 moves over a period of weeks deeper into an exploration of race, interjecting diversity awareness and prejudice reduction as the opportunity arises. For the other groups, attention is placed away from a dialogue on race to a number of other concrete issues. For Action Evaluation, the dialogue centers on each identity group's passion, values and goals. For Search for Common Ground, the conversation explores common ground and opportunities that can transform the conflict cycle. In Appreciative Inquiry, the dialogue explicitly focuses on positive experiences, times when racial tensions were not present. For the groups that do not include it, dialogue on race can produce resistance and defensiveness, which inhibits the ability to move toward shared goals and joint action.

How long do the processes take?

The shortest process is Race Relations 2020, which involves a 9-session curriculum followed by a self-determined period to carry out agreed upon action.

The Action Evaluation process took 15 months in Cincinnati, which reflected the length of time required to go through all three phases of the process for such a complex, large-scale conflict. The signed agreement at the end of the 15-month period ushered in many months of action steps that would follow.

Search for Common Ground's approach built upon the Action Evaluation work in Cincinnati and did not have a specified time frame. Each initiative took a different length of time to design and implement. Using shuttle diplomacy to address the economic boycott, for example, was a more intensive time-limited initiative, while the youth component involved program development that was ongoing.

The Appreciative Inquiry process initially took 15 months but by design is an iterative process that continues through the 5-D cycle. As the project evolved, the AI pairings between dissimilar groups is a shorter process, often only requiring 4-6 weeks to recruit and prepare groups for the process, hold the pairing, and develop specific action steps. The BDP Steering Committee continues to attract new members but has a core group that has participated for over three years.

Does the process include an educational component?

None of the approaches had a stand alone educational component to their process, but all the approaches recognize the need for educating participants along the way. The education can simply be to increase participants' awareness of process, such as training people to conduct the appreciative interviews, or more content oriented, such as different theories on race during a Race Relations 2020 session. In a less traditional sense, all of the approaches are educational as they employ informal adult educational methods.

What role does storytelling or narrative play in the process?

Race Relations 2020 and Appreciative Inquiry build around stories told by participants. These personal narratives have the capacity to build personal connections and empathy between people as well as serve as educational tools. When these stories are told they also show honor and respect to the participant involved. Simply put, stories are transformative for the teller and listener. While the other approaches might be less intentional about cultivating opportunities for stories to come out, there is ample evidence that stories serve them in a similar way.

Appreciative Inquiry and Search for Common Ground work deliberately to also transform the grand narrative of the community. The stories that are told not only reflect the nature of relations in the community but also influence and create future race relations. By lifting up powerful stories through the media and high visibility public events, new stories are told and the narrative begins to change.

What role does personal relationship building play in the process?

While all four approaches recognize the importance of building personal relationships among those involved, they might be best seen on a continuum from lowest to highest emphasis on personal relationships. Action Evaluation was used for addressing an extremely volatile conflict, in which trust was low and building relationships very difficult. Search for Common Ground seeks to build relationships among common grounders and around specific actions. These two approaches also worked at a much larger scale (entire city), making relationship building a more challenging task.

Appreciative Inquiry seeks to foster connections between individuals through one-on-one interviews that focus on personal stories. The process builds trust as dissimilar people recognize shared values and celebrate life-giving experiences. Race Relations 2020 brings a manageable number of people together for nine weeks and creates opportunity for self-disclosure, storytelling, and dialogue in a safe environment. In both of these approaches, shared experience over food builds relationships among the group. Both of these approaches see the personal transformation that occurs through these relationships as the gateway into social transformation.

What preparation is needed for facilitators?

In all four approaches, highly skilled facilitators are necessary. The processes in themselves require a level of sophistication to facilitate, where one exercise or activity builds upon another to eventually lead to action. The facilitation skills are also advanced, as one needs to seize upon opportunities and craft questions that move the group in the desired direction. In the case of Race Relations 2020, co-facilitators with complementary expertise in conflict management and diversity awareness provided an ideal set of skills and knowledge to draw upon.

All of the programs recognize that the process facilitator role requires extensive training. Although challenging, they are devising training programs to bring on new, less experienced facilitators. Action Evaluation has prepared a CD on their process for training purposes. Race Relations 2020 developed a facilitator's manual and is developing a new training program to bring on new facilitators. Appreciative Inquiry developed a 4-day training course (modified from a typical AI Foundations course) through which professional staff, residents and community organizers have participated.

These programs demonstrate effectiveness, in part because they involve extensive processes and are led by highly skilled facilitators. While this might be overwhelming to some, it reflects the intractable nature of conflicts involving race. A shorter and simpler process would be suspect, and likely not capable of addressing the complex issues and years of mistrust associated with these situations.

What are the outcomes of the processes?

All four approaches share the same primary outcome—a self-determined plan of action. In every case, the action that resulted took on a life of its own and continues after the formal process concludes. The goals identified by each program point toward additional intended outcomes—trusting relationships, transformed identity, increased capacity, increased participation by those on the margins, and a shared vision. Different programs use different language but there appears to be a great convergence of desired outcomes across all four approaches.

How is social and structural change approached?

Search for Common Ground works at multiple levels of the system, recognizing the need for changes in power relationships as well as the narrative or perception which influences reality. The approach seeks to increase the role and participation of those on the margins. Social change occurs through a synergistic process, as Roger Conner stated, “Dialogue alone can build understanding, but only working together builds trust. And trust is a precursor to cooperation. Where trust is present, cooperation becomes normal and requires less effort.”

Appreciative Inquiry seeks transform the identity of a community through changing the narrative among its members. Personal stories connect people to each other and to the best they have been in the past. These relationships and stories serve as the basis for creating a new theory of what gives life, what builds comfortable diverse relationships. This theory then inspires people to create a shared vision of the future that they then live into through developing a specific action plan. At the design phase, group members’ work on programmatic and structural change (social architecture) that then is implemented.

Action Evaluation worked under the authority of the court, creating the necessary linkages to policy changes. The process used becomes a vehicle for giving voice to each internal identity group, an empowering process that balanced power across groups. The final agreement included policy changes backed by court authority.

Race Relations 2020 believes that race is a political and social construct. The goal is to break down the barriers that keep people from realizing their human potential, empower people to look beyond race to appreciate their heritage. Individual transformation does not necessarily result in social change, but by asking participants to represent a community organization or group, social change is also promoted as they engage their constituent groups in the envisioning and action planning stage. Ultimately, we are about undoing racism through this individual transformation, where people gain insights and new attitudes that they take back with new behaviors in their spheres of influence.