

Chapter I

Executive Summary

This chapter summarizes the main parts of the report, using the study's seven research questions as a framework.

“We need a good long couple of decades where this community commits to having people have this conversation with each other and keep moving forward toward action out of the conversation.”

(European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

From September 1, 1998 through September 1, 2000, a team of four researchers brought together by Roberts & Kay, Inc. of Lexington, Kentucky conducted a study with two main purposes:

- ▶ To deepen understanding of what study circle programs contribute to community problem solving, particularly with regard to improving race relations and ending racism
- ▶ To identify and highlight the constellation of practices organizers have developed to organize and implement successful community-wide study circle programs

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation funded the study through a grant to the Topsfield Foundation, Inc., sponsor of the study and founder of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) in Pomfret, Connecticut. The study concentrated on the organizing work required to produce successful community-wide “rounds” of study circles (beginning with the initial idea and proceeding through dialogue to action). This focus on the community-wide model was somewhat distinct from analyzing the dialogue that took place among participants in individual study circle groups; even so, the dialogue component received some attention in the study because it was central both to the model and to the experience of the 290 participants, organizers, facilitators, and coalition members who took part in the study.

The study’s sponsors chose a “best practices” framework because they believed that programs had gained enough experience for researchers to be able to discover and describe the decisions and actions needed to produce effective, diverse study circles on all topics, with particular emphasis on race-related topics. The sponsors intended for the study to produce useful information for SCRC and for organizers in communities where the study circle model is in use or under consideration.

With the agreement of the sponsors, the researchers chose to use qualitative investigative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observation. These discovery-oriented methods fit well with the early stage of study circle experience in most communities and suited the evolving nature of the community-wide model itself.

SCRC staff identified 17 places where programs had demonstrated excellence in implementing the community-wide program model. These became the Best Practices learning sites. Two of the learning sites were states; the remaining sites were communities ranging in size from Alread, Arkansas (population around 400¹), to the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota (population around 640,618). Among the sites were 11 programs that had conducted at least one round of study circles on topics related to race or

Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community-Wide Study Circles

diversity; other topics addressed in the sites included education, violence prevention, neighborhood development, a state's correctional system, children, youth, state environmental priorities, substance abuse prevention, and more.

Seven research questions served as the framework for the study:

1. What are the most effective practices for creating a broad-based, diverse organizing coalition? Specifically, what are the most effective practices for creating a coalition that is racially and ethnically diverse?
2. What are the most effective practices for recruiting a diverse group of facilitators? For training and supporting facilitators so that they can do their work effectively?
3. What are the most promising practices for recruiting participants from all parts of the community? What strategies are most promising for recruiting for racial and ethnic diversity? What program elements besides recruitment strategies (such as the issue being considered, the up-front connection to change and action) are most important in recruiting for racial diversity?
4. What changes, outcomes, and results do organizers, facilitators, and participants ascribe to the study circle efforts in their communities? In what other ways do researchers observe study circles having an impact on communities? If on racism and race relations, what is the range of outcomes? If on another issue, how do the outcomes take into account the racial divisions and dynamics of the community?
5. What strategies, methods, or tactics do study circle organizers use to link study circles with change efforts in the community, and which are most effective? Specifically, how are programs linking to individual, collective, and institutional change initiatives on the issues of racism and race relations?
6. To what extent do organizers and participants consider study circles an effective tool for addressing racism?
7. What impact does the study circle topic have on (a) study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism, and (b) participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds?

Four of these research questions — 1, 2, 3, and 5 — led directly to the identification of best practices. Research Question 4 required documentation of changes and results people in the learning sites attributed to study circles. The final two questions, 6 and 7, were exploratory and aimed at first-stage effectiveness assessment rather than best practices.

Creating a broad-based, diverse organizing coalition

This study focused first on the best practices for creating broad-based, diverse organizing coalitions that paved the way for implementing the community-wide model effectively. Many coalitions evolved into structures reflecting three different levels of responsibility, operating much like three concentric circles. In the center circle were the key leaders of the effort, those with most responsibility. This circle included people who initiated the study circles, leaders with visible positions of power in the larger community, and emerging leaders or leaders with strong connections to specific communities of affiliation. The middle circle included the formal or informal decision-making body of the study circle program. In most places this included a somewhat formal steering committee or working group. The outer circle included a larger group of people and organizations playing specific roles as partners, sponsors, allies, or funders; some programs distinguished explicitly among these different roles; many did not. Typically, all coalition members helped with recruitment responsibilities. The responsibilities of those in the center circle were most complex and broad; responsibilities and contributions became more specific and discrete with each move out from the center. In most programs the three circles together made up the entire coalition.

Two major leverage points contributed to building a broad-based, diverse organizing coalition. First, when the initiators in the very earliest and most central working group included visible, active members who reflected the community's racial and ethnic diversity, the work of recruiting a diverse coalition received a boost. The second leverage point was the intentional inclusion of people who, among them, demonstrated four types of leadership characteristics:

- ▶ Leaders with vision who saw how study circles could benefit their community
- ▶ Leaders with resources and connections who helped amass the services, locations, materials, funds, and other necessary components for implementing study circles
- ▶ Leaders with administrative savvy who managed detailed implementation plans successfully
- ▶ Leaders with marketing and promotional skills who envisioned and carried out a variety of approaches to recruiting a diverse group of participants

Recruiting and training a diverse group of facilitators

Recruiting and training a diverse body of facilitators is a key component of the community-wide model. Programs in most learning sites set specific goals about the number of facilitators they intended to recruit and the racial or ethnic composition of the facilitator corps. All programs that expressed a commitment to developing a diverse group of facilitators took specific actions to boost facilitator diversity. Most often this occurred when coalition members from underrepresented groups — typically people of color and young

Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community-Wide Study Circles

people, and sometimes other groups as well — issued purposeful, personal invitations to their friends, allies, and communities of affiliation.

Organizers across the learning sites recruited volunteers to serve as facilitators. Although a few were professionals who volunteered their time, most were people with commitment, energy, and an interest in learning the fundamentals of facilitation. Organizers found that the pool of participants who had completed study circles was a good source of facilitators for future circles. In addition, in some larger cities, organizations and networks of facilitators that trained and used facilitators regularly for workplace initiatives like Total Quality Management sometimes included facilitators who wanted to contribute their skills to study circles.

Approaches to training facilitators varied. One program offered two hours of training for facilitators, while another requested that facilitators participate in the equivalent of two days of training spread over several different occasions before, during, and after a round of study circles. Most programs offered an average of four to six hours of facilitation training. Several programs provided additional coaching after the initial training or arranged for new facilitators to serve as apprentices or cofacilitators with more experienced facilitators. Most programs offered some kinds of supportive activities or structures after initial training to improve the quality of facilitation and some programs cultivated peer learning networks among facilitators. Some programs that addressed race-related topics also offered training for facilitators on how to conduct study circles with specific race-related content.

Many programs used a team of facilitators or a facilitator-recorder team, for several reasons. First, mixing facilitators by gender, race, ethnicity, or age appeared to improve the comfort and climate for conversations, because more participants could then see someone like themselves in a leadership role in the session. Second, the amount of skill, energy, and understanding of the study circle process available to groups increased as a result of having two trained people guiding a group rather than one.

Recruiting participants

When a coalition was diverse and strong, it made a particular difference in a program's ability to recruit participants who represented appropriate levels of racial and ethnic diversity and who came from all parts of the community. Several programs also used specific strategies to ensure diversity inside each individual circle. Every program used multiple recruitment strategies. In most programs, every member of the coalition had some specific responsibilities for participant recruitment. The main recruitment strategies varied, and coalitions typically combined them in different ways. Six strategies emerged as most used and most effective:

- ▶ ***Building on the base of a strong, diverse coalition.*** When the coalition had a diverse base and included people with many connections to groups and individuals, and when the coalition members were willing to take on recruiting work themselves, recruiting efforts produced good diversity and good numbers.

- ▶ **Featuring leaders.** When both traditional and community-based leaders vouched for study circles, people often responded by signing up to participate. This strategy had particular power when leaders of formerly unconnected parts of the community joined together to take a public, united stand for the value of study circles.
- ▶ **Benefitting from affiliation.** When organizers persuaded a group's decision makers to endorse and promote study circles, members affiliated with that group were more likely to participate. Similarly, organizers reported that when a person promoted study circles to friends, colleagues, or family members, the bonds of connection and affiliation aided in recruitment.
- ▶ **Cultivating and partnering with media.** Most programs in Best Practices learning sites established good working relationships with local media. Newspapers, particularly, drew community-wide attention to study circles and heightened their credibility. Newspapers in different communities played different roles, some of which included free advertising, advance coverage, detailed coverage as rounds proceeded, and, in at least one case, publication of study circle materials. Some newspapers became primary partners in producing study circles. These partnerships yielded profoundly positive results for study circle participation. All programs also developed and used other forms of media, such as written brochures, websites, or videos.
- ▶ **Producing highly visible kick-off events.** Kick-off events in many communities created attention and generated interest in study circles. Some kick-off events drew such large crowds that the sheer numbers added to the credibility of the effort and attracted additional participants.
- ▶ **Practicing careful administration.** Several factors in addition to direct recruiting affected programs' success in attracting a diverse group of participants. These additional factors included choosing the topic wisely so that it suited community interests, maintaining well-kept lists of participants and potential participants, making good decisions about location and amenities, and using languages in addition to English.

Contributing to change

Successful organizing efforts typically yielded multiple changes, outcomes, and results. Many of the reported changes are subtle and complex, and cannot be attributed definitively only to the introduction of study circles into a community. Even so, people in every learning site reported that study circles — including an action component — contributed to significant changes. In this report, the changes are catalogued and presented in two different ways: first, the report describes overall changes in people, organizations, or communities and institutions. Second, it presents and documents changes associated with the topic of race.

Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community-Wide Study Circles

The first type of change took place among individuals. People got information about differences and became aware of their communities in new ways. Second, people gained courage that led them to take more direct stands for racial equity and against racist statements and actions. Third, people formed stronger attachments to their own community and became more willing to invest in it. Fourth, people formed new relationships across racial and other divides.

People also reported many ways study circles contributed to changes in organizations and in study circle programs themselves. The organizations most affected were the ones most directly involved in study circles either as members of the coalition or, more directly, as major sponsors. People reported these types of changes in organizations: new purposes; new allies; new ways of working; new capacity; new employees; new funding or resources; new credibility; and new opportunities to teach other communities and groups about study circles.

The most extensive group of reported changes was those affecting communities and institutions. People identified four types of change in these larger arenas. First, study circle programs produced large-scale events that had high visibility and symbolic importance in the community. In particular, communities created new celebrations and made changes in existing celebrations that made the inclusion of people from all racial and ethnic populations explicit and intentional.

Second, study circles contributed to changes that affected clusters or groups of people within the community. These included improvements in retail shopping for African American/black people and better relationships between governing bodies and specific groups of citizens.

Third, some changes had a “rippling out” quality that began with an impact on a limited cluster of people and then, over time, became more pervasive and reached others. These changes included improvements in the openness and inclusivity of systematic planning processes and other community-building efforts.

Fourth, people in many communities reported institutional or extensive changes that had a wide radius and affected large numbers of people in a community, including those who had not participated in study circles. Examples included impacts on elections, changes in newspaper coverage to make it more equitable and inclusive, and changes in state laws.

Many of the changes in the categories above appear as well in a typology of changes specifically related to race. These are changes that organizers, facilitators, and participants attributed either to the study circle sessions themselves or to the action components that followed the small group conversations in several communities. The report distinguishes between changes aimed at improving race relations and those intended to end racism. It also distinguishes between actions initiated by individuals and those initiated by organizations, communities, or institutions.

The largest number of changes that people reported relating to race were those produced by organizations, institutions, and communities that aimed either at improving race relations or at taking action to end racism. Examples of changes in the latter category included strengthening organizations that addressed equity in communities, improving police-community relations, increasing equity in nonprofit board membership, establishing new volunteer organizations or strengthening existing ones that address racism, and increasing equity in government hiring.

Linking study circles with change efforts

Understanding of the tools or methods study circle organizers used to produce changes such as those described above is in its infancy. This is true even though the community-wide model explicitly suggests some tools, such as action forums and action task forces or councils.

Organizers have experimented with two main types of tools. The first type is intended to help **initiate** action:

- ▶ **Action measurements:** Two programs experimented with explicit benchmark studies that help measure action and its impact over time.
- ▶ **Written action guides:** Four programs, all in larger cities, developed specific written guides on moving from dialogue to action; these guides were intended for people who were just completing the dialogue portion of study circles. Typically the guides offered information that helped participants consider whether to join existing action efforts or start a new action effort from scratch.
- ▶ **Action events:** Most programs used planned, widely promoted public occasions in connection with dialogue. Timing varied; programs chose among events that took place before, during, after, or in addition to rounds of study circles. Even kick-off events, primarily aimed at boosting recruitment, sometimes included a focus on creating an expectation of action among participants. Mid-stream events, action forums, and other events held in relation to study circles all helped generate energy and cultivate expectations that action and change would take place.
- ▶ **Action councils or task forces:** Participants in 11 learning sites launched specific small group efforts, typically short-term, in order to address an opportunity or problem they identified during dialogue.
- ▶ **Action moments:** Organizers sometimes used study circles as a way to make rapid progress on a situation that seemed ready to yield to change; in this way they used timing as an ally in moving action forward.

Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community-Wide Study Circles

The second type of action tool is intended to help *sustain* action across time. Typically, the programs that developed these “sustaining” tools expected long-term program continuation.

- ▶ **Permanent action generators:** At least two programs developed structures for generating action on specific topics when action was needed to respond to suggestions arising from study circles.
- ▶ **Permanent action groups:** In a few learning sites, programs supported action councils or task forces that addressed long-term change initiatives; typically the long-term councils had a mission of either working on particularly challenging problems or working on several related action efforts across time.
- ▶ **Permanent action staff:** Programs in at least three learning sites assigned to employees the responsibilities for the support of action efforts. Two of these programs added responsibilities for cultivating and supporting the efforts of action groups to the other responsibilities of existing staff; one program hired a full-time action coordinator.

Organizational structure — whether a program was an independent organization or a component of a sponsoring organization, for example — did not seem to influence a program’s choices about whether or how to initiate or sustain action. On the other hand, the presence of paid staff, regardless of organizational structure, seemed to be linked with deeper program investment in supporting action and change for the long term.

Ultimately, the greatest determinant of a program’s approach to linking study circle dialogue with action and change was local knowledge. Organizers used their understanding of local conditions, opportunities, needs, and resources — together with their understanding of the study circle model — to develop specific pathways to change appropriate for their own communities. Here are the seven pathways the researchers have identified so far. All of these pathways had a firm basis in the dialogue portion of study circles.

- ▶ **The critical mass pathway:** “If we can generate a ‘critical mass’ of people who have completed study circles, their new understandings, new connections, and new commitments will make them want to behave in more active, positive ways in lots of community settings; over time this will result in community improvement.”
- ▶ **The informed citizen pathway:** “If we develop a committed, informed body of citizens, they will bring about beneficial change.”
- ▶ **The highly visible event pathway:** “If we use study circles as the launchpad, we can create highly visible community events that will offer the larger public an opportunity to participate in bringing about change.”
- ▶ **The workplace pathway:** “If we want to accelerate change on issues related to race, then we need to organize study circles in workplaces.”

- ▶ **The leadership pathway:** “If we involve powerful leaders, then community change will be a lot more likely to occur.”
- ▶ **The governance and policy pathway:** “If we engage citizens in study circles on public issues, they will advocate before governance and policy-making bodies to make decisions that will cause change.”
- ▶ **The multilevel pathway toward ending institutional racism:** “If we want to end institutional racism, our program needs to support at least two levels of work: first, dialogue that engages participants directly in learning about institutional racism and what they can do about it, and second, a structure that links participants with our own experienced advocates, leaders, and decision makers who have a commitment to institutional change and some power to bring it about.”

Assessing the effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing racism

Toward the end of the Best Practices study, researchers conducted a total of six exploratory focus groups in two communities. The goal was to begin to understand how organizers and participants viewed the effectiveness of study circles as a means of addressing racism, how the study circle topic impacted on programs’ effectiveness in addressing racism, and how the topic affected participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. These focus groups, together with visits to all 17 learning sites, helped researchers form early, tentative hypotheses about topics that went beyond best practices and into the realm of effectiveness and evaluation.

For the part of the study that addressed study circles’ effectiveness for work on racism, focus groups with organizers and participants in Hartford and Syracuse, and interviews with organizers in Fayetteville, served as primary sources. Researchers learned that organizers and participants, regardless of race or ethnicity, widely viewed study circles as an effective tool for working on race relations and for fostering personal changes in individual attitudes and behaviors about race, developing new relationships, and setting the stage for further change. Researchers found far less agreement on whether study circles were effective as a tool for addressing institutional racism. While organizers seemed more likely to view study circles as one tool or a solid first step in addressing institutional racism, participants were less likely to hold this view; in particular, participants of color — and even more specifically, young African American/black males in the focus groups — viewed study circles as unlikely to bring about the kinds of institutional change they sought.

Participants seemed hungry for more information about actions addressing institutional racism. They reported wishing for more information in advance about how study circles intended to address action, institutional change, and linkages with other community issues. Similarly, after study circles were over, many participants wanted to have more information about action and change opportunities and successes. The gap between participants’ information and organizers’ knowledge seemed significant, and may have contributed to

Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community-Wide Study Circles

some of the differences in views members of these two groups had regarding study circles' effectiveness as a tool for tackling institutional racism.

In addition to assessing the overall effectiveness of study circles as a means of working on racism, people in this part of the study identified specific aspects of the small group conversations that contributed to study circles' overall effectiveness in addressing racism. These are the four main contributions:

- ▶ Structural elements such as the discussion guide, trained facilitators, and ground rules
- ▶ The quality of participation that took place when a study circle included participants who reflected significant racial or ethnic diversity
- ▶ The value of dialogue itself
- ▶ The power of study circles as a visible process that demonstrated a community's commitment to work on issues relating to race

In addition to citing the features of the small group conversations that contributed to study circles' capacity to address racism, people identified these attributes that constrained or diminished that capacity:

- ▶ Lack of time, depth, or candor in the conversations
- ▶ Limited participation by people other than those already interested in the topic

For some people, the shortcomings of study circles as a stand-alone tool for addressing racism can be mitigated by a concentration on the actions that take place after the small group conversations. Organizers were more likely than participants to hold this view.

Understanding the impact of topic

There was some convergence of views regarding the impact of topic on study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism. Most people of color, as well as some European Americans/whites, asserted that study circle programs are both more likely to attract people like them as participants and to address racism effectively when they "get straight to it" by naming race, racism, or race relations in the study circle topic.

Some participants suggested that topics that explicitly name racism may be attractive to African American/black participants and active citizens of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, but may also be off-putting to some groups. People said the groups that may find a straightforward topic less appealing include young people, European Americans/whites, powerful community leaders, and members of racial and ethnic groups such as Latinos/Hispanics and Asian Americans, who may not feel personally connected to the issue of race.

Some participants suggested that topics that include a focus on racism but are not limited to it may be more likely to attract these groups as participants and may also be more likely to serve as the basis for effective work to end racism. For example, people suggested that topics related to education, transportation, or economic development, with race as an explicit component, might be compelling and effective alternatives for those groups that are less attracted to working on racism as a stand-alone topic. In general, however, people agreed strongly that the study circle topic needs to express clearly what the conversations will address, so that citizens can make thoughtful decisions about their willingness to participate.

In conclusion, this study asserts that study circle program organizers adopted the SCRC process for creating small group dialogues, adapted the community-wide model for organizing study circles by relying on local knowledge and local conditions, and experimented with strategies for linking dialogue with action. Organizers, facilitators, and participants identified a large number of changes to which study circles in their communities contributed. Wide agreement existed that study circles served as an effective way to foster changes in individuals' understanding of and approach to race and racism, and helped build positive relationships among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds who participated together in study circles.

Far less agreement existed about the effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing institutional racism. Organizers were more likely than participants — particularly participants of color — to consider study circles (and their action components) to be a good way to begin work on institutional racism. The exact way the topic was stated for study circles on race seemed to have an impact on participation and effectiveness in addressing racism, but no agreement existed on the nature of that impact.

The lack of agreement about several aspects of study circles as a tool for addressing institutional racism contributed to a fair amount of variety in the nature of the findings in this report. While it was possible to be quite clear in identifying best practices with regard to some aspects of the community-wide model, it was impossible to do more than begin describing the views different groups held with regard to the application of study circles to issues involving institutional racism in the learning sites. Perhaps more program experience, coupled with more reflection and investigation, will make it possible to develop a firmer grasp of best practices in this important area in the future.



¹All population figures in this report are drawn from the 1990 U.S. Census.

LINKS TO THE REST OF THIS DOCUMENT

Cover, Acknowledgments, and Table of Contents

Chapter I: Executive Summary

Chapter II: Key Findings

Chapter III: Background and Introduction to this Study

Chapter IV: Summary of Program Characteristics and Strategies

Chapter V: Creating a Broad-Based, Diverse Organizing Coalition

Chapter VI: Recruiting, Training, and Support a Diverse Group of Facilitators

Chapter VII: Recruiting Participants

Chapter VIII: Contributing to Change

Chapter IX: Linking Study Circles with Community Change Efforts

Chapter X: Assessing the Effectiveness of Study Circles as a Tool for Addressing Racism

Chapter XI: Understanding the Impact of the Study Circle Topic

Appendix A: About Best Practices Team Members

Appendix B: Methodology

Appendix C: Demographics

Appendix D: Information about Research and Interview Questions

Appendix E: Site Analysis Charts

Appendix F: Bibliography

Index