# Prologue to Chapters X and XI:

Chapters X and XI of this report address Research Questions 6 and 7. Research Question 6 asks: ***To what extent do organizers and participants consider study circles an effective tool for addressing racism?*** Research Question 7 asks: ***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?*** These final chapters differ from the rest of the report in some important ways.

- First, while previous chapters of this report presented data collected from all 17 Best Practices learning sites, these two chapters primarily reflect the views and opinions gleaned from six focus groups conducted in Syracuse and Hartford in February and March, 2000. (More detail about the focus groups can be found below.) These chapters also include information from two secondary sources: in-depth interviews conducted in Fayetteville in March, 2000 and a moderate amount of information from several other learning sites.

- Second, while previous sections of this report described concrete experiences and established efforts, Chapters X and XI are more reflective or speculative, presenting the perceptions, beliefs, and opinions that organizers and participants held about study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism.

- Third, the focus groups that formed the basis for these chapters constituted a focused look for at least 90 minutes at a small number of topics. By contrast, most of the findings presented in the preceding chapters were based on visits and conversations that addressed a wide range of topics simultaneously.

## *More about the focus groups:*

Our preliminary findings in response to Research Questions 6 and 7 derive from data collected through highly structured focus groups in two Best Practices learning sites, Syracuse and Hartford. We conducted three focus groups each in both of those cities: one group of organizers, one group of participants of color, and one group of European American/white participants. The recruitment process was as random as we could make it, given the constraints on the study circle coordinators' time and the amount of detail included in organizers' lists. While selection for every group involved sampling among those names available, in most cases the pool of names was not comprehensive. We chose Syracuse and Hartford for these reasons:

- These programs have an organizational structure in place.
- These are places that have either addressed more than one study circle topic (in addition to race) or are moving from race to another topic, and this topic change experience is central to Research Question 7.
- These programs have addressed race from different angles and have achieved different degrees of success.

While people in the organizer focus groups in both learning sites were mixed on all factors, those in the participant focus groups were racially homogeneous. We created racially homogeneous groups to provide a safe, open atmosphere for all participants, as well as to discover any perceptible differences in opinion between European American/white people and people of color. We based this approach on the 1997 focus group study in New Castle County, in which racially homogeneous focus groups revealed considerable differences in opinion about study circles.

The bottom line: We're excited about the glimpses the focus groups gave us on these exploratory topics, but consider them tentative and preliminary. We anticipate that an understanding of the research questions addressed in these two chapters will deepen with time, program experience, and further inquiry.

# Chapter X

## Assessing the Effectiveness of Study Circles as a Tool for Addressing Racism

This chapter addresses Research Question Six: To what extent do organizers and participants consider study circles an effective tool for addressing racism?

# Main points in this chapter:

1. In general, the participants and organizers in this part of the study viewed study circles as effective for addressing racism on a personal level, but less effective for addressing racism on an institutional level.

2. People assessed the effectiveness of the small group conversations and the effectiveness of the action component of study circles differently. Participants and organizers generally considered the small group conversations to be most effective for addressing racism on a personal level; some organizers considered the action component of study circles to be effective for addressing racism on an institutional level.

3. Some people of color — particularly young African American/ black males — appeared skeptical of study circles' capacity as an effective tool for addressing institutional racism.

As stated in the prologue to Chapters X and XI, this chapter presents findings based on the opinions, perceptions, and beliefs of a relatively small number of participants and organizers regarding the effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing racism. In this way, it differs from the reports and descriptions of specific practices on which all previous chapters have been based. Information related to this research question comes from three sources, listed here in order of prominence as sources for this chapter:

- Six focus groups in Hartford and Syracuse in February, 2000 conducted among study circle organizers, European American/white participants, and participants of color; during these focus groups, people responded to explicit questions about study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism.

- In-depth interviews which focused directly on this research question, conducted with organizers in Fayetteville.

- A small number of group or individual interviews with participants and organizers in other Best Practices learning sites where the study circle program focused on race or diversity. (In these communities, researchers typically gleaned insights about the effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing racism through analyzing people's responses to other questions or topics. In a few places that researchers visited later in the study, some study participants addressed this question more directly.)

## A. Introduction

Analysis of the wide variety of opinions and beliefs that surfaced during the focus groups, interviews, and other conversations suggested that a number of factors greatly influenced the extent to which people considered study circles an effective tool for addressing racism. These factors included:

- People's understanding of their community's starting point in addressing race and racism and their perceptions of the purpose of their community's study circle program

- People's views on the value of dialogue

- People's views on where study circles begin and end

We have to define what does success look like. Our expectations may be wrong. This country hasn't come to grips with what it is we want in race relations. If we could get race to go away, would there be differences in other factors? It's not enough yet and it's not far enough along yet here. Study circles are one piece of the puzzle, a significant piece, but the puzzle has to have lots of pieces.

*--European American/white organizer in Lima*

Participants' assessments of study circles' effectiveness appeared to be tied significantly to their understanding of their community's starting point in addressing race and racism, and to their perceptions of the intended purpose of their community's study circle program. People who lived in communities where race had never been a topic of public discussion — and where diverse groups of people seldom got together — tended to view the purpose of their study circle program differently from those who lived in communities where a lot of talk but little action had taken place. Those who understood the purpose of the study circle program as promoting awareness and developing relationships were more likely to view study circles as an effective way to get the conversation started. On the other hand, those who viewed study circles as a potential means to work on issues of race and power or economics often considered the program to be wide of the mark.

Participants' assessments of the effectiveness of study circles also seemed to be linked to their views on dialogue. For those who valued dialogue, study circles performed a critical service by providing a forum for both new and old voices in conversations about racism. Those who were less inclined to value this kind of dialogue, prizing action instead, were less inclined to endorse study circles as an effective tool for addressing racism.

In addition, participants had varying perceptions of whether study circles included only the small group conversations or instead encompassed five or six weeks of dialogue sessions and everything that resulted from those sessions. That is, some participants and organizers measured the effectiveness of study circles in addressing racism in terms of what happened within the small group conversations, while others focused more on the tangible changes that study circles contributed to the community. People often held one set of expectations for what happened within the sessions and another set for what happened as a result of study circles.

Analysis of conversations with organizers and participants — and consideration of the factors enumerated above — led to two general findings about the effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing racism:

- People suggested that the small group conversations were most effective for impacting racism on a personal level, while the actions that occurred after the study circle

sessions were the most effective platform for impacting racism on an institutional level.

- While most people considered study circles an effective tool for addressing racism on a personal level, they were less likely to consider study circles effective for addressing racism on an institutional or societal level.

The first part of the chapter examines specific elements of the small group conversations and the action component of study circles in terms of how these elements either contributed to or weakened study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism.

The second part of this chapter presents an overall assessment of the extent to which participants and organizers considered study circles an effective tool for addressing racism. This part of the chapter uses people's own terms and descriptions to distinguish between study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism on a personal level and their effectiveness in addressing racism on an institutional or societal level.

## B. Assessing the merits of different elements of the small group conversations

Participants and organizers in the focus groups and other interview settings spent a great deal of time talking about what happened within the small group conversations (or study circle sessions) themselves. People's perceptions and views of what happened within their small group conversations seemed to influence the extent to which they considered study circles an effective tool for addressing racism. In general, participants and organizers suggested that the small group conversations were most effective for addressing racism on a personal level. Many people, particularly participants of color, considered the small group conversations to be less effective for addressing institutional racism.

This section examines specific elements of the small group conversations cited by participants and organizers. It focuses first on the aspects of the conversations that people saw as contributing to study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism. The second part of this section describes elements of the small group conversations that people viewed as limiting study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism.

### 1. Participants and organizers identified several elements of the small group conversations that contributed to study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism, particularly on a personal level.

Focus group participants in Hartford and Syracuse, as well as participants and organizers in other Best Practices communities, offered a variety of reasons to explain why they considered the small group conversations to be effective for addressing racism on a personal level. When describing these features of the small group conversations, people spoke primarily about increasing racial awareness and improving relationships across racial and ethnic divisions. The aspects of the small group conversations that people viewed as contributing to study circles' effectiveness fell into four categories:

a. Structural elements of the study circle model

b. The quality of participation

c. The value of dialogue

d. Study circles as a community process

**a. Many people cited structural elements of the small group conversations as the key to study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism.**

Many people throughout the Best Practices learning sites praised specific elements of the small group conversations as the glue that held the whole effort together and made study circles an effective tool for addressing racism on a personal level, particularly in terms of increasing racial awareness and improving relationships across racial and ethnic differences. These structural elements included the study circle discussion guide, skilled facilitators, and ground rules.

***i. The study circle discussion guide***

Most focus group participants considered the study circle discussion guide to be one of the unique features of the model and one of the main ways the process helped set a climate that opened people up to a discussion of racism. [Note: Because the guide in Syracuse is unique to that community, comments about the guide there may not reflect the participant experience in other communities.] Several participants described how the guide's structure allowed people in their groups to talk about deeply personal things in a protected, supported way and created a space for them to build relationships across racial lines. An African American/black organizer in Syracuse said:

> I think that structure brings a deeper dialogue more quickly around the issues of prejudice reduction and I think it helps. (African American/ black organizer in Syracuse)

A European American/white participant in Syracuse also expressed her sense of how the discussion guide helped

draw people out and allowed the group to dig deeply into issues of race:

> I had hoped we'd each have a deeper understanding of the other people's feelings or beliefs, and the study guide helped us to get to some of that. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

According to other participants, although the study circle discussion guide provoked strong emotions, it did so in a way that led to frank, constructive conversations. Several participants also commented on the way the structure provided the means for having a discussion in the first place, without which it would have been difficult to convince people to come together.

In both Hartford and Syracuse, a number of people suggested ways to improve the study circle discussion guides used in their sessions, both those produced by SCRC and those developed locally. These participants described the need for flexibility in allowing the discussion to flow rather than sticking strictly to the guide. Others stated that the guides used in their sessions simply offered points of departure, and in this sense served as a good tool for opening up the conversation, especially around issues of racial awareness.

### *ii. Skilled facilitators*

According to some participants in Hartford and Syracuse, in addition to people in other communities, the presence of skilled facilitators enabled their groups to deal with the guide in a flexible way. Several participants praised the way their group's facilitator(s) steered conversations back to the issues at hand in a way that did not interrupt the flow. Participants also emphasized that such skilled facilitators were often able to transform the dialogue into something constructive through which racial awareness and understanding could unfold.

A few focus group participants stated that skilled facilitators were the key to any successful study circle. One European American/white participant in Hartford put it this way:

> Without the facilitator, the discussion and the conversation is essentially directionless. It can become animated, it can become engaging, it can become contentious, but it is directionless without the facilitator keeping us focused. And I think that, more than anything else, that's what's distinctive. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

In Woodridge, where study circles focused on the topic of diversity, several participants of color who took part in a group interview responded to questions of whether study circles were an effective tool for addressing racial inequity with a solid "yes." One participant in that interview added two conditions that drew a lot of support from other group members: "***If*** you have a very good facilitator in your study group and ***if*** your study group is made up of the right population that will accomplish your goals."

### *iii. Ground rules*

A large number of participants and organizers emphasized the critical importance of implementing ground rules during the small group conversations. They described this element of the model — coupled with a skilled facilitator — as one of the fundamental ways that study circles created a safe space in which participants could work to improve race relations and increase racial awareness. A multiracial participant in Syracuse stated:

> [The ground rules] really, I think, created that kind of a space, where people did feel safe, and I think people could begin to be honest or you could at least listen, could at least hear some stuff that they hadn't heard before. . . . I'm one of those people. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

The comments of many other people echoed this idea that ground rules provided a sense of safety that enabled people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to feel comfortable expressing their views and sharing their experiences. A European American/white organizer in Fayetteville explained this further, saying, "It was not so safe that people felt they had to conform or to be nice to

somebody; it was a very structured . . . it was structured, safe."

Other participants and organizers spoke of the way ground rules helped to maintain a sense of mutual respect within the study circle sessions. A European American/white organizer in Hartford said of the ground rules: "There's something about this model that gives people the freedom to say what they think without having to be right . . . " An African American/black organizer in Syracuse offered this perspective:

> The ground rules themselves are things that you can do to respect and appreciate human beings . . . if we do only the ground rules, it would be one major step toward dignity and respect for everyone. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

In Fayetteville, at least two organizers stressed the central role that ground rules played in creating a climate of safety and respect within which potentially explosive, confrontational situations were handled in a more thoughtful, informative way. These organizers explained that the implementation of ground rules by a skilled facilitator ensured that everyone in the study circle group felt free to say what he or she wanted to say, without fear of backlash from other group members. The organizers indicated that this was particularly important for conversations around the emotionally charged issue of racism.

- One African American/black organizer in Fayetteville described a situation that occurred in one of his study circle sessions when a participant expressed the opinion that African Americans/ blacks and European Americans/whites should not intermingle. According to this organizer, the study circle group relied on the preset ground rules when responding to this comment.

  > No one got angry because the facilitator set ground rules. We're going to respect each other and we may not agree with a person, but we had to listen to their ideas.

> And so this caused a lot of adults, I do believe, to grow up and to face reality. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

- A European American/white organizer in Fayetteville shared a similar story about how the ground rules helped prevent a potentially damaging confrontation in one of his study circle sessions. In that session, a European American/white man began to question the work ethic of African Americans/blacks without considering the issue of white privilege. Yet instead of leading to unresolved conflict or an altercation, the session resulted in greater understanding and an adjustment of attitudes on the part of all who took part in the discussion. The organizer attributed this positive resolution to both the ground rules and the skill of the group's facilitator, noting that adherence to the ground rules was critical to the outcome of the session. He said:

  > You could see the tenseness in the group and the facilitator walked up, walked around — anything could have happened there. But I think she touched the guidelines of respect for everybody's opinion. And everyone in that group that wanted to first attack him didn't. They talked to him and they guided him and said, "Well, things are a little bit different for us," or, "You have wrong information about jails." (European American/white organizer in Fayetteville)

### b. Several people attributed study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism to the quality of participation.

People who participated in the focus groups, in-depth interviews, or other conversations spent a great deal of time talking about how the quality of participation impacted on the success of individual study circle sessions. Above all, participants and organizers valued the way study circles brought together diverse groups of people, often for the first time; people saw this as one of the main contributions that study circles made toward

improving race relations and increasing racial awareness. Along with describing the benefits of diverse groups, people cited the value of face-to-face interaction as another reason study circles were an effective tool for addressing racism on a personal level. Focus group participants in Syracuse and, to a lesser extent, Hartford, also spoke of the voluntary nature of participation in study circles, indicating that this alone greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the program.

### *i. Diverse groups*

We have this longing to be together, but we just don't know how to do it.

*--Asian American participant in Syracuse*

In every focus group and in practically every Best Practices learning site, participants and organizers agreed that the opportunity to sit down and talk with people who were racially or ethnically different from themselves was one of the most attractive features of study circles and one of the main ways that study circles helped improve race relations. An East Indian facilitator in New Castle County explained the attraction of diverse groups this way:

> Our society as such doesn't give you opportunities to connect with people who are different from you. If you are a racist, then you are going to be with people of your race, and if you are a sexist, you are going to stay in those defined roles around gender. Study circles on racism gave me opportunities to meet people who are of Latino background, who are African Americans, who are Asians. We all connect, and ultimately, even though we have different experiences, the bottom line is that we all have experienced some oppression. So you're connected that way. We empathize with each other. So really, I feel study circles gives you an opportunity to get to know people who are different from you, who are not otherwise everyday a part of your life. And then instead of saying "they" or "those people," they become people you know; they become your friends. (East Indian facilitator in New Castle County)

Nearly all participants said that they greatly valued the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and opinions represented in their study circle groups and praised study

circles for bringing diverse people together in a way that few other programs or experiences could.

For many people, study circles seemed to fill a void by providing them with a forum to meet with and learn from different people, particularly those from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Through the formation of diverse groups, participants not only had the chance to talk with others about racism, but also had the opportunity to develop relationships and improve their own understanding of issues related to race. Even those people who doubted the overall effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing racism agreed that such diverse groups were enlightening and valuable.

When asked to compare study circles with mandatory programs that address issues of race, such as diversity training, one European American/white Syracuse organizer said:

> I think the difference there is certainly that it's about citizen participation in a conversation that they don't otherwise have. And it's citizen participation in ***our*** community deliberately among people of different ethnic backgrounds, which people don't often have. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

Several people commented that the interaction among participants was significantly richer when the group was diverse, especially since that allowed different issues and perspectives to emerge. Participants reported that when diversity was lacking, groups tended to be rather dry or boring. In the words of one European American/white participant in Hartford, "We needed somebody in our group to get the fire going."

A few participants and organizers also emphasized that "ordinary people" took part in study circles alongside traditional leaders. They expressed a sense that this enhanced the diversity of perspectives and experiences that were represented within the groups.

> But I think more than anything else that I've seen happen, I felt like this had the potential to genuinely do something because it was real people talking about real issues and giving feedback back.
>
> *--European American/white participant in Syracuse*

### *ii. Face-to-face interaction*

In addition to the high value they placed on diverse groups, both focus group participants and people in other Best Practices learning sites agreed that meeting and talking with people in small groups, face-to-face, had a tremendous impact on their own awareness of racial issues and their ability to develop relationships with people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

> I think before you resolve anything or make any attempts to come to any kind of resolution, I think you have to talk. So I think that's probably the main purpose for any meeting or any discussion, is . . . you have to come together and talk and try to find out where people are first . . . (African American/black participant in Hartford)

Several people explained that face-to-face interaction allowed participants to tackle their ignorance of each other directly. One African American/black organizer in Syracuse said:

> This activity, I think, goes to the heart of racial and ethnic disparities, which ultimately are based upon our ignorance of one another. Study circles provide a vehicle by which people can really in a structured way probe and seek understanding of one another, their various racial and ethnic [backgrounds]. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

Participants considered this face-to-face interaction to be qualitatively different from lectures on affirmative action or white privilege. One Latina/Hispanic organizer in Syracuse said:

> I truly believe if they can hear and see what other people have gone through and they can share, for instance, the reason for their actions or inactions, that will be so much more valuable instead of asking or making somebody go through diversity training. (Latina/Hispanic organizer in Syracuse)

Several participants in the focus groups also commented directly about the small size of study circle groups; they felt that this greatly enhanced the effectiveness of study circles in improving race relations. In the words of one European American/white participant in Syracuse:

> I liked the idea that a few people were going to sit around a table and talk about some things to each other, not in a meeting, a large meeting, not in some political arena, not over a hot issue that involves either the corrections people or something else, but just people sitting and getting to know each other . . . (European American/ white participant in Syracuse)

A European American/white participant in Hartford commented that he found the intensity and energy in the small groups to be far greater and far more effective for working on race relations and racial awareness than that generated by large public meetings.

A number of focus group participants also viewed the five or six weeks' worth of small group sessions as a significant part of study circles' effectiveness for improving race relations, saying it often took at least three sessions for their groups to establish a sense of trust and begin to develop relationships. Some people indicated that even more time would benefit participants. (Note: A number of participants across the 17 learning sites reported that their individual study circle group had continued to meet beyond the five or six weeks as a way to continue the conversation and deepen their relationships with each other.)

### *iii. Voluntary participation*

Focus group participants in Syracuse, as well as people who had taken part in community study circle groups rather than workplace study circle groups in Hartford, cited the voluntary nature of participation in study circles as another distinguishing feature of the program and a factor in its effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism.

In Syracuse, focus group participants noted that the people who became involved in study circles truly wanted

One of the best things about the circle is that the group has their own motivation, their own energy, and they're here because they want to be. I don't call people up and beg them to come . . .

*--European American/white facilitator in Fayetteville*

to be a part of the small group conversations and wanted to find out how they could affect issues of race in their community. Participants and organizers viewed this voluntary commitment as having a significant advantage over programs that employees are required to attend, which is often the case with diversity training. People also implied that those who came to study circles voluntarily were more likely to be open to the experience and derive more benefit from it, especially in terms of increasing their racial awareness. One European American/white organizer in Syracuse said, "I think the important thing around participation is that people see it in their self-interest to be part of the group."

In Hartford, some of the people who had been involved in community-based study circle sessions seemed to have had a different experience with study circles than participants in some of the workplace-based groups. Participants in community-based groups were more likely to report on the strong commitment of group members and talk about the opportunities they had to develop relationships in their study circle sessions. Some people observed that those who participated on their own time held a stronger commitment to study circles than those who participated as part of their work day.

**c. A number of people emphasized the value of dialogue as part of study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism on a personal level.**

I don't know if people have had this conversation before. I'm still trying to determine that in my own mind. I think people have talked a lot about racism, but I don't know if they've had this conversation.

*--European American/white organizer in Syracuse*

A number of participants and organizers said they valued the quality of the conversations that took place within the study circle sessions and particularly appreciated how those conversations addressed racism. Several focus group participants emphasized that study circles created a forum for both ***a different kind of conversation*** around issues of race and ***new voices*** in that conversation.

***i. "A different kind of conversation"***

Organizers in both Hartford and Syracuse particularly stressed that people who said they were tired of "just talk" needed to understand that study circles involved a kind of conversation about race that was different from other efforts. Part of the distinction came from the

diverse groups and the structural elements of the conversations as described above. Yet another part of the distinction was a result of the dialogue itself, which involved an open, honest, and frank discussion of real experiences and opinions. Several participants used the words "refreshing" and "meaningful" to refer to this type of dialogue and said they found it to be an effective tool for increasing racial awareness, in particular. For one multiracial participant in Syracuse, study circles represented one of the only times he had heard people talk so directly with each other about race and racism. This participant appreciated the experience and the opportunity to deal with race head-on. Participants and organizers in a number of learning sites shared this view.

Several focus group participants indicated that one of the primary ways study circles addressed racial awareness was through the sharing of personal stories and personal feelings and experiences associated with one's racial or ethnic identity. Many people, especially European American/white participants, reported that the level of emotion and passion that came out as others told their stories deeply moved them and often led them to reexamine their own experiences and opinions.

> People started crying at the meeting, people started talking about their life experience and the pain that was kind of hidden, it was inside, started coming out and we started talking about it. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

One European American/white participant in Syracuse appreciated the level of intimacy that was achieved in her study circle group, saying that it was "just extraordinary." This same participant later stated that taking part in study circles was "a very behaviorally intimate experience" for her.

Several participants and organizers commented on the constructive quality of the conversations that took place in study circles, not only in terms of creating awareness instead of assigning blame, but also in terms of leading to tangible actions and personal growth. Here are some representative statements:

One of the things I have observed about it is that it is intensely personal without being personally threatening. . . . you know you're not there to grab a piece of the pie or a bigger piece of the pie than the person sitting next to you.

*--European American/white organizer in Maine*

I thought that was very enlightening, that people would get together like that, from total strangers, and able to let their emotions just go freely without any reservations at all. The negative side . . . I don't think our group was diversified enough to get a true meaning of it all.

*--European American/white participant in Woodridge*

> I think what it's provided for us is a way for people to have a conversation that actually moves toward action rather than an angry confrontation that just makes you feel good that you got to say what you wanted to say. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

> [Study circles'] whole focus is to be constructive, and I think that's why it was so rewarding for all of us here. . . . You grow because of being able to share the experience of another person, sometimes a very deeply personal and troubling experience. That's powerful stuff. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

In New Castle County, an East Indian facilitator said of study circle participants:

> They know that we are here to grow in some ways. We are not only here to express our views and not grow. So there is some give-and-take that happens. Somehow I do encourage that. Some growth needs to happen. It isn't just to come and vent. (East Indian facilitator in New Castle County)

In Syracuse, where a set of readings accompanied their unique discussion guide, a couple of participants emphasized that an ***informed*** conversation took place in study circles. They said that through the readings, study circle participants gained a better understanding of racial issues, which they could then discuss with the rest of their group.

### *ii. An "opportunity of empowerment"*

Participants in nearly every focus group described how study circles served as a new forum for expression, especially for people who had not traditionally felt comfortable sharing their personal stories or experiences. Here are some representative comments:

> I think this was an opportunity of empowerment because it broadened the circle of that empowerment, it didn't stand alone, or you didn't

> stand as that group. You had diversity. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

> I think the biggest value is that people who want to talk about . . . who want to encourage others to talk about it are freeing themselves to talk about it. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

> People see me as the person who's always bringing up the issue or something, but those persons have those same issues, but they won't express them. This dialogue gives them a way of expressing that. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

Several people indicated that the structure of the study circles created a space in which people felt safe for the first time expressing their true thoughts on race in front of people different from themselves.

> It was nice that people were willing to really discuss what bothered them and what their concerns were. And I don't think they would have had an opportunity if that forum wasn't provided for them to do that. (European American/white organizer in Hartford)

> I felt it was the first time some people got to express what was going on . . . (Asian American participant in Syracuse)

> I think, for me and [other] people of color, [it] is a good forum for getting stuff off your chest . . . (African American/black participant in Hartford)

One European American/white participant in Hartford offered a slightly different perspective on the idea that study circles provided a new forum for conversations about racism.

> I think the other thing Community Conversations does is . . . a lot of the efforts to bridge [racial] gaps that I'm aware of are usually faith-based, and if you don't go to church, which a lot of

One of the things that happens in study circles is people get to be heard. They get to have their say and sometimes within an organization or within even your family or community . . . people don't listen to you . . . That's one of the most important things you get at the personal level of the dialogue in study circles . . .

*--European American/white facilitator in New Castle County*

> people don't do, you're never going to have a shot at it. That's one thing that Community Conversations has done: it's opened up the workplaces, which I agree with you is a great way to try to reach regular people, and it's opened it up to people who aren't necessarily churchgoers and that's a good thing. (European American/ white participant in Hartford)

### d. Several people described the effectiveness of promoting study circles as a community process.

In addition to focusing on specific elements of the small group conversations, participants in several of the focus groups and a few people in other Best Practices communities offered a broader view of why study circles are an effective tool for addressing racism. This view focused on study circles as a community process, one that was often endorsed by people and/or organizations with high standing, power, or credibility in the community and one that symbolized the commitment of the community to improving race relations and working toward ending racism.

#### *i. A "safety zone" for public conversations about race*

In both Syracuse and Hartford, several focus group participants spoke of their study circle programs as creating a zone in which it was safe for people to talk directly about race. The fact that "higher-ups" in the community often endorsed study circles seems to have suggested to people that it was safe for their community group or workplace to take on study circles as a project or to address racism in particular.

- One Latina/Hispanic organizer in Hartford offered this example of how the community-wide focus of the study circle program and the support of a high-level government agency made her feel comfortable bringing study circles to her workplace:

  > I think that just by this organization existing, or the group that entitled this program as "Conversations on Race," it

> sort of made it okay for me to go to my commissioner and say, "Commissioner, can we have a study circle in our agency?" It's like, everybody else is doing this, it's okay, it's safe. Because you had a number of other people who had participated, [such as] the Secretary of State's Office . . . and the Secretary of State's Office is sending out a letter to another commissioner saying, "Look, we did this here. Why don't you consider . . . ?" It gave us a safety zone. Otherwise I could not approach my commissioner and propose that we bring in a discussion or we even discuss this issue of race. (Latina/ Hispanic organizer in Hartford)

- An African American/black participant in Hartford described how the study circle process made it safe for people on her college campus to talk about issues of race:

> As soon as you bring up the race word, people would just get totally paralyzed; they couldn't even talk. . . . as a result of the race study circles, people are now trying to talk about a very painful, complicated subject on campus. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

Participants and organizers in other Best Practices learning sites agreed that study circles had enabled them to hold conversations about race in other settings.

- In Colorado Springs, participants reported that the Community Conversations on Race seemed to make it legitimate for them to conduct conversations about race in the workplace.

- In Fayetteville, a number of organizers commented that employees in city government became more open to dialogue and programs regarding race and human relations as a result of study circles. City employees reported that study

They [study circles] provide a unique space for people to engage with each other. I feel that we need to really provide people opportunities to speak up and express their views, their experiences, sharing of life, and this gives them that opportunity around racism. So, I think that that is another very powerful benefit, one is that it opens up the topic for discussion. Second, it provides people an opportunity to be heard in a safe way.

*--East Indian facilitator in New Castle County*

circles led to more open dialogue in other settings and made it "okay" for people to talk about race.

### *ii. A community commitment*

Study circles are an environment that is safe. That's the beauty of having a model like this out there, that is taken on by all walks of the community and just doesn't come from on high.

*--European American/white facilitator in New Castle County*

Participants in both focus group sites also talked about the significance of study circles as a community commitment to addressing racism. According to these participants, community-wide study circle programs on race brought the issues out into the open instead of allowing them to remain hidden.

> I was at the kick-off breakfast and I thought this was just tremendous . . . it said that Syracuse was going to take this seriously . . . (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

At least one European American/white participant in Syracuse also suggested that the commitment from the community increased the responsibility of individuals to get involved with study circles:

> I think you need to acknowledge right from the get-go that individually you have responsibility for this issue and that if you want to be part of a competent community that addresses problems on a one-to-one basis, you've got to get involved in something like this. This community has enlightened leadership that recognizes an issue, found in this vehicle, the InterReligious Council, and got a lot of good people involved in this, and I think it was important work that was well-done, is well-done, and a lot of good things have come out of it. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

In Hartford, one European American/white organizer commented on the fact that people could see the impact of study circles and could imagine a role for themselves in the process.

> And because it's gotten, I think, the visibility within the greater Hartford area and, I gather, in greater New Haven as well, it's something tangible that communities and organizations can do, as

> opposed to just talking about it, come to a meeting and talking about it. (European American/white organizer in Hartford)

## 2. Participants and organizers cited several aspects of the small group conversations that diminished study circles' capacity to address racism, particularly on an institutional level.

Most focus group participants and people in other communities said they valued what had happened within their small group sessions and identified many positive ways that the dialogue contributed to study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism, particularly on a personal level. Yet many people also reported experiencing limitations within the small group conversations and conveyed a sense that because of these shortcomings, they considered study circles to be less effective for addressing racism on an institutional level.

Focus group participants, and people in other Best Practices communities, cited several things that did not happen in the small group conversations and offered some explanations for why the small group conversations were often less effective than they wished for addressing racism on an institutional or societal level. These limitations generally fell into two categories:

a. Shortcomings of the dialogue, which meant that "real" issues were not discussed in a satisfying way

b. Shortcomings of participation, or a sense that those who most needed to engage in dialogue around race did not become involved

### a. People suggested that shortcomings of the dialogue that took place in study circle sessions reduced study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism.

#### *i. Not enough time to make the transition from the personal to the institutional*

Some participants and organizers considered study circles to be less effective as a tool for addressing racism on an institutional or societal level because so much of the time spent in small group conversations focused on building

I've become much more aware that we need to take action and to encourage others to participate in the dialogue. It seemed as if we still had unfinished business at the end of the sessions. It wasn't enough. We still wanted to dialogue.
*--European American/white participant in Ft. Myers*

relationships and understanding others. This left very little time for people to discuss issues related to institutional racism. Participants in nearly all the focus groups, as well as organizers in many other Best Practices learning sites, commented that five or six small group sessions did not give people enough time to build personal relationships, develop trust, address broader societal issues, ***and*** create a plan of action aimed at ending institutional racism.

> I almost feel like it needs more time, because I think the first part of it is so much about building trust within the group, and everyone shares a lot of personal stories. And I think that that's significant; I think that's important to do, to sort of see where, especially with a diverse group of people sitting around a table as ours was, it was important for everyone to share their own experiences, and that took a long time. And we were already in, like, our third session and it was still . . . coming up and it was still important for people to talk about. And so by the time we actually got to coming up with this, an action agenda, I sort of felt like there was not enough time and there wasn't enough time to see it through or to really effectively plan, and we've tried to cram all the stuff in our last session . . . (Latina/Hispanic participant in Hartford)

> I think this is really a difficulty in this kind of work . . . I think the personal stuff is really important, that emotion, that passion, but it takes some real skill to be able to move that from the personal to institutions and to a broader societal situation, and I think that often didn't happen. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

Other focus group participants explained that by the end of the five or six weeks, people in their groups realized that they still had a lot to talk about and that many other issues needed to be raised and addressed. These participants said they needed another five weeks to make the transition from personal stories and experiences to

larger issues of institutional racism. In Syracuse, a multiracial participant said:

> The structure sometimes gets in the way because, only because, it's a very short time to do so much. And I felt that a lot of the stuff really needed more time. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

An African American/black participant in Hartford said:

> If we're going to have a true dialogue on race and we're going to really address the issue of race, then we need to create an atmosphere that's conducive to being able to openly share, and it takes longer than the two hours one day a week for five weeks to be able to do that . . . (African American/black participant in Hartford)

I think probably the most disappointing thing to me is that it's tough because of time. We haven't really had time to settle issues that we started.

*--African American/black participant in Woodridge*

Even programs that intended to focus on specific institutional issues from the outset had to confront participants' own needs to begin with building relationships and developing their own understanding. As a result, study circle groups often ran out of time before they had the chance to talk about more specific issues of racism. In Twin Cities, where the study circle program focused on race, housing, and education, several organizers agreed that it was a real challenge to work simultaneously on relationship building and concrete issues of institutional racism. One European American/white organizer said that "bigger" issues of racism often seemed overwhelming to participants, and that it was easier for them to address more personal issues in the short amount of time that was available to them.

### *ii. Not enough deep examination of complex issues related to racism*

Several participants of color in the focus groups indicated that in general, the small group conversations did not lead to a deep examination of complex issues related to institutional racism. Participants of color in both Hartford and Syracuse described their sense that study circles only scratched the surface of issues. As a result, some of the conversations in the study circle sessions felt superficial

We talked about some good stuff, but we never really got into the deep stuff that you needed to get into, that really makes what change is all about.

*--European American/white participant in Woodridge*

and too simplistic. Some participants of color also expressed a sense of frustration that the small group conversations did not reveal anything new to them and did not lead to a more fully developed understanding of the issues on the part of European American/white participants. One African American/black participant in Hartford said:

> I think that when I joined . . . that in fact we're talking about that it was going to be an open dialogue and that we were really, finally going to lay the issue of race to rest. And I didn't find that; I didn't get that. We just merely scratched the surface of the issue . . . (African American/black participant in Hartford)

A multiracial participant in Syracuse commented that he observed a lot of complacency in the small group conversations, in which other group members did not take the time to examine their own opinions and perceptions in depth, and instead seemed content to maintain a simplistic posture toward racism.

> What I think I saw some of the time was a lot of complacency. Not everybody, but those are the people who stand out in my head, people who came in with ideas and didn't seem to change . . . and they just, they would always personalize everything and they would always say, "Well, I like black people," or, "I like all colors of people," and it would be way too simple, and they didn't move from that point. Because it's much more difficult and complicated than that . . . (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

A Latina/Hispanic participant in Hartford offered another view of the superficiality of some of the small group conversations, expressing her fear that some group members may have learned a politically correct way of talking about race without actually examining their underlying attitudes or behaviors toward people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

> I think people can fool themselves that way, because if you start talking that way long enough,

> then you think, "Well, I don't have any biases. I talk a certain way and I say the right thing." But that really doesn't mean a lot if you're just talking the talk. (Latina/Hispanic participant in Hartford)

Several focus group participants in both Hartford and Syracuse said the discussion guides used in their sessions sometimes placed constraints on their group's ability to deeply examine complex issues. They resented it when the guide dominated the content of the session instead of allowing the conversation to flow naturally.

> It was sometimes we would want to be into whatever area it was we were talking about, but we had to move on because it was just . . . we were trying to get things done. Sometimes it seems like we would lose the purpose of why we were really here when that happened. (African American/black participant in Syracuse)

A few participants of color in Hartford expressed the sense that they have talked about racism with each other for years and did not need to participate in study circle sessions just to talk about race again with other members of the community. They implied that because the small group conversations generally did not involve an in-depth examination of institutional racism, study circles were not worth their time.

I think the wonderful thing about study groups, especially when people like me aren't present, is that everyone just kind of talks their opinion and then they go on home and watch TV and do whatever they're doing.
*--African American/black participant in Hartford*

### *iii. Not enough candor*

Some participants of color in the focus groups, predominantly those in Hartford, did not consider the level of candor in the small group conversations to be sufficient to address racism effectively on an institutional level. While a few participants in Hartford spoke about a lack of candor on the part of European Americans/ whites, most of the people who held this view expressed a sense that more people of color held back their true thoughts and feelings about issues related to racism. Some attributed this lack of candor to both time constraints on the study circle sessions and the low level of comfort in the group.

I think one of the ways that I can see . . . that people are being honest is that you'll have a lot of differences. . . . When people start to agree too often and you've just met someone, I'm a little suspect. So I'd like to see us just spend more time on some real issues, because now we have a lot of them.

*--African American/black participant in Hartford*

Several participants of color in Hartford commented that the environment in which their study circles occurred, notably the workplace, was not a place where people felt they could be candid about their experiences with racism. A number of those who participated in workplace study circles indicated that they themselves often held back in their sessions for fear of making someone else uncomfortable or being scrutinized by their colleagues. Many attributed this discomfort and sense of caution to a lack of trust and felt it greatly inhibited the ability of the group to discuss larger issues of institutional racism. Here are some typical comments:

> I was hoping that more of the relevant issues of today would be discussed in detail and that people would be more candid about their feelings, about how they're feeling about all the issues. And then after having that type of discussion, then talking about some form of implementation, how you could implement some of the ideas that have come from that discussion. I didn't see a lot of it, I think because I was only in one discussion. I think when . . . you have ten or eleven people who are new, and it's almost like a feel-out process, so you don't accomplish a whole lot. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

> You didn't want to make somebody else feel uncomfortable, you didn't want to make someone else feel like they were responsible for your discomfort. . . . You're so cautious, you don't want to make it sound like you're accusing a whole other group of people, or you don't want to have someone go back and sit there and think, "Oh, God! Did I ever say something to offend her?" (Latina/Hispanic participant in Hartford)

At least three focus group participants of color in Hartford described this inhibition about "speaking the truth" as a form of institutional racism itself, in which people of color did not participate at the same level as European Americans/whites for fear of something being taken away from them, such as their job or economic status.

> My purpose is to just come with it the way it is, because I've been, every one I've been to before today, when I express my opinion, scared Africans come up to me afterwards and say, "I'm glad you said that." Now when they say, "I'm glad you said that," that's a clear indication to me that this whole thing is a joke, because we've got Africans here who feel a certain way who won't express theirselves because of their fear of what white folks going to take from them. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

I don't feel that some of the people really expressed themselves truthfully, or openly. And I don't know necessarily that it was even encouraged.
*--African American/black participant in Woodridge*

> After you're unemployed for a period of time and you almost lost everything that you've ever acquired in life, you're, you tread lightly. So I didn't feel comfortable to really say the things that I really was feeling deep in my heart. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

Several organizers in Hartford shared the view that people who participated in the small group conversations often held back their true feelings. One European American/white organizer said, "I think that the groups sometimes stay a little too polite and a little too politically correct, and I'd like to see something in the material that kind of pushes people a little bit more."

I think there was that overwhelming [sense] of political correctness, so that I don't think most of the Caucasians, if they were harboring any, "That doesn't feel right to me," were really not willing to say that very much. And so a lot of listening got done, but I don't know about . . . breaking a particular threshold . . .
*--European American/white participant in Syracuse*

As an interesting contrast, a number of European American/white participants in Hartford stated specifically that they had been struck by the candor of the people of color in their groups. They reported, however, that exceptions to this candor occurred when the study circle groups lacked significant diversity. One participant suggested that a lack of diversity seemed to affect the level of participation by people of color:

> I found that when there's a predominance of whites in the group, that others tend to step back and wait before they will participate actively or before they'll take a risk to really reflect some of the strong feelings that they may have. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

Some people proposed racially homogeneous study circle groups as one way to deal with this lack of candor when it comes to conversations about institutional racism.

> I think I would have felt better having had the discussion among my people at the job before we went into the wider group, to have a discussion among some . . . amongst us, and then participated in the wider group. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

> I thought maybe it'd be something to start with, not have it mixed. Have a group like this [focus group] — all white. And, therefore, the topic would be express your . . . your racist feelings, what's in your head, not what you'd do. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

**b. A number of people considered the small group conversations to be limited in terms of who participated and who did not.**

A number of organizers and participants expressed a sense that study circle sessions often involved "preaching to the choir" — citizens who were already interested in issues of race and willing to work on them for the long haul. While some participants observed that the choir, too, often needed improvement and benefitted from study circles, most of those who took part in the focus groups or individual interviews expressed discouragement about the lack of participation by people who fell into one of two categories:

I think we have talked in study circles about institutional racism and how you get things done and how you make it work and whatnot. It needs to come from both ends, both from the bottom and the top, but if you have the top totally against it you're going to hit a brick wall at a certain point.

*--European American/white facilitator in New Castle County*

- Those who were typically not active citizens (the economically or politically disenfranchised) but whose views on racism needed to be heard
- Those who were in positions of power and privilege who needed to listen to and understand these views

Several participants and organizers indicated that study circles were limited in their effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism because of this seeming inability to attract new people to the conversation, particularly those who were disenfranchised in some way. According to an Asian American participant in Syracuse:

> This is very nice for educated people, but what about the different races that are seeking the same job and everything? What are you going to do, have a study circle? I don't think that's going to work either. (Asian American participant in Syracuse)

A European American/white participant in Syracuse said:

> I wonder, in this experience, have you really gotten to those just salt-of-the-earth people who are just trying to do right by their kids and their families but have all these other pieces working against them, like maybe never graduating high school . . . (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

A study circle organizer in Fayetteville expressed a similar frustration that members of the working class had an important perspective on racism that needed to be heard, but were usually not represented in study circles. In Woodridge, one participant shared this view, saying:

If you don't own anything, how do you come to the table and talk about equality?
*--African American/black participant in Hartford*

> I'm still wondering if it's going to make a difference because, what tends to happen when you do this . . . the people that's really going to make a difference . . . they seem to be missing. . . . I think that the real question is, how do we get the people that we really need to participate, that we really need to hear from? And it's not that we don't need to hear from *us*, but I think we are the people that make up the body of what normally goes on in the school system, in the Village. (African American/black participant in Woodridge)

Many participants expressed frustration that the people who most needed to improve their understanding and awareness of racism, especially issues of institutional racism, were the least likely to participate in study circles. They observed that the people in traditional positions of power and privilege who did participate in study circles often did not seem to be actively involved in the dialogue and tended to stop coming to the sessions before the round was finished.

Several participants and organizers stressed that it was difficult to have a legitimate conversation about issues of institutional racism that could lead to actual changes when people in positions to bring about those changes were not at the table.

When we got to the real issues, the people that are going to be affected . . . leave the table real fast . . . So, that the people with the power and the money, they kind of disappear. And the people that don't have it aren't even invited.
*--African American/black participant in Woodridge*

One African American/black participant in Hartford said:

> My whole thing is we, as people of color, don't have this issue. The main person who should be addressing this issue is the white person, and they're not here. So our time is tied up while we discuss things that we already know. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

In Fayetteville, one African American/black organizer also commented that the absence of the elite, old-money, upper-class European American/white members of the community limited the effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing racism in Fayetteville. She said:

> The reality is that we don't think it's going to have a whole lot of effect. It's our hope that it would, and we're going to do what we can to make it so, but the people who need to be sitting and talking about this are not coming to the study circles . . . you don't have participation from that old Fayetteville guard. That's who you don't have. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

Another African American/black Fayetteville organizer said:

> I think in terms of changing this community, I think we're going to have to get more local government officials involved in the process as participants. . . . And the reason I think it would have been a great benefit is because individuals know that those are the individuals setting up, making decisions for the city, economical and otherwise. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

In general, people spoke positively about elements of the small group conversations that contributed to addressing racism on a personal level. People expressed more frustration and discouragement about how certain aspects of the small group conversations diminished study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism on an institutional or societal level. In the next section, which focuses on the action component of the study circle model, the views of participants and organizers often differed regarding study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism in the institutional realm.

## C. Assessing the effectiveness of actions linked with study circles

Participants in most of the focus groups not only spoke about what happened during the small group conversations, but also focused some of their attention on the action component of their community's study circle program. People's perceptions of what occurred (or did not occur) as a result of the small group conversations then influenced their assessment of study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism. In their conversations about the actions that came after the small group conversations, people primarily focused on actions aimed toward addressing institutional racism.

I think the study circle's going to have to continue on past the next topic. I think it's going to have to be a continuous thing. You're going to have to continue pushing it to see that type of change.
*--African American/black organizer in Fayetteville*

In making the distinction between what happened in the small group conversations and what came later, some people suggested that study circles could effectively address institutional racism through the actions or outcomes that occurred after the sessions. Participants and organizers who shared this view indicated that study circles could be effective for addressing racism on this level ***if*** groups or individuals followed through on the recommendations from participants, and ***if*** they aimed these actions at organizations and institutions. The participants and organizers who had not seen sufficient evidence of follow-through efforts or actions were much less likely to agree that study circles could be an effective tool for addressing racism on an institutional level if they functioned in these specific ways.

Views about study circles' effectiveness in the post-dialogue phase were typically split, with organizers more likely than participants to hold the view that what happened after the small group conversations could contribute to the model's overall effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism. Participants, particularly people of color, were more likely to cite reasons why post-circle activities still failed to address institutional racism in a meaningful way.

The discrepancy in responses to this issue suggested that people had many different notions about what constituted a successful action aimed at ending institutional racism, and that people's assessment of success in this area often depended on their understanding of the original goals or intentions of their community's study circle program. The discrepancy between participants' views and organizers' views also suggested that

participants were often much less aware of or connected to outcomes or actions that study circle programs were taking to address institutional racism.

The first part of this section presents organizers' and participants' views on what happened after the small group conversations that enhanced study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing institutional racism. The second part offers ideas about why some participants still considered study circles to be an ineffective tool for addressing racism in this follow-up stage of work.

## 1. Some people — typically organizers — suggested that study circles could address racism effectively through the actions and changes that occurred after the small group conversations.

Organizers — and, on a few occasions, participants — in a small number of Best Practices communities asserted that study circles could be an effective tool for work on ending institutional racism, but only if certain conditions existed:

- If study circles had a strong participant input/ recommendations component
- If organizers or others committed to this work followed through on the recommendations by taking actions aimed explicitly at organizations and institutions

In addition to analyzing the several unique sources for findings in Chapters X and XI, this section draws on actions or outcomes reported in some additional Best Practices learning sites. [Note: Chapters VIII and IX fully describe outcomes that have occurred on an institutional level and programs' mechanisms for achieving those outcomes. This section does not intend to repeat what people did and how they did it but rather to emphasize that some programs took concrete steps towards ending institutional racism, and that study circles could be effective in this arena.]

### a. Study circle programs must include a strong participant input/recommendations component.

Organizers in a small number of Best Practices communities emphasized the participant input/recommendations component of their programs as the key to study circles' effectiveness in addressing institutional racism. In communities such as Springfield, Fayetteville, Decatur, Hartford, and Syracuse, organizers explicitly established study circles as a program that moves "from deliberation to action," promising participants the opportunity to contribute both their own personal experiences *and* their ideas for community change.

Organizers in these and other communities referred to time in the final study circle sessions, or the action forums at the conclusion of a study circle round, as opportunities for people to make recommendations aimed at ending institutional racism.

- In Syracuse, one European American/white organizer described the design team's decision to embed a strong participant recommendation component in the final study circle sessions this way:

  > And many of us on the design team felt that talk is a part of action, having people sit together, having the dialogue is action. But it is not action that impacts on the institutional racism and our design team was very clear on the difference between personal bigotry and institutional racism. And we felt that the last three sessions, as you can see, really start to move people . . . Session 4, where we talk about allies, and then Sessions 5 and 6, where we come up with recommendations to the community for change, is the place where we begin to move things towards action. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

- In Fayetteville, a European American/white organizer explained why it was crucial that the model lead participants to make recommendations to government bodies:

  > I know that getting people together to just talk and vent about it doesn't do a darn thing unless you have some kind of constructive follow-up . . .

> The bottom line was we wanted to hold the city accountable for this stuff that they were initiating, the study circles, hold them accountable, bring out information, and we spent time thinking about what we were going to present to them so that they could give us some feedback on it. And we expected feedback.
>
> *--European American/white participant in Fayetteville*

> I think study circles is a really wonderful model for citizens to step forward and work together to develop some constructive solutions and it's probably the best way to develop and then present those suggestions to government officials, in such a way that they're going to be open and willing to implement them. (European American/ white organizer in Fayetteville)

- A Latina/Hispanic organizer in Fayetteville shared this sentiment, saying that study circles are a vehicle for change:

> To begin with your own experiences, it does create a sense that you're talking about your own experiences, and then you can give recommendations to change what happened. You can talk about what happened, and talk about what happened, and talk about what happened, but if you never give any recommendation about what can change, or what you can do in order for next year this not to happen again, you don't have any changes. But it's the type of recommendations that they ask to be made, and the process of presenting this into a community — that's what made a change. This is a group of 300 people that went through this process for six weeks, discussed the problems, discussed the issue, and then at the end they gave recommendations to the institutions, to the individuals, and to the business community. (Latina/Hispanic organizer in Fayetteville)

### b. Organizers and/or other committed citizens must follow through on recommendations aimed at institutions.

We don't want just a statue, we want somebody to be involved. We want them to respond to what we're saying.
*--European American/white participant in Fayetteville*

People stressed that study circle participants' recommendations must be tied to follow-through efforts on the part of organizers or others committed to action. They stated that if these actions were aimed explicitly at institutions and organizations — and were received positively — then study circles had the potential to be an effective tool for addressing institutional racism. Again, this was more likely to happen if organizers stated their commitment to follow through in their study circle program's goals and intentions. As one African American/black organizer

in Fayetteville said, "We have to stick to our game plan . . . we've got to do that. If not, then we will be just some more hot air."

In some communities, the study circle programs themselves followed through on participants' recommendations aimed at ending institutional racism. In other communities, participants took it upon themselves to connect with action on this level. Here are some examples of each.

### *i. Actions taken by study circle programs*

- In Springfield, study circle organizers made a commitment to address key recommendations from study circle participants. As an example of one of the main institutional changes that resulted from those recommendations, city government made hiring policies and practices more equitable in the police and fire departments. An African American/black organizer in Springfield explained the way changes such as this could potentially impact on other institutions:

  > I think that what we do is we begin to bide our time, too, and we begin to find that the institutions that have changed will be able to turn around and show the benefit that has been associated with those changes, and other organizations will only have to change in order to . . . keep up or compete. (African American/black organizer in Springfield)

- In Decatur, study circle organizers and volunteers created a strategic planning committee to make sure all people knew about the city's planning process and had opportunities to become involved.

- In Hartford, the study circle program hired a full-time action coordinator to link participants' recommendations with community change efforts.

- In Fayetteville, the Human Relations Commission in particular was committed to following through

> We have a long, long way [to go], but I truly believe that we have to recognize even if they are baby steps, because otherwise we don't finish the journey when we don't start dealing with baby steps.
>
> *--African American/black organizer in Syracuse*

on participants' recommendations to create a joint city-county Commission. Organizers believed that the successful creation of such a Commission would demonstrate to participants that something tangible — and something that had a community-wide impact — came out of the study circles.

- In Syracuse, one European American/white organizer spoke specifically about how the Advisory Committee took on the role of following through on recommendations concerning institutions such as banks, trade unions, and retail shopping centers. She said:

> There's action that has to be taken by the community at large and on the institutions. And we feel that the Advisory Committee has the responsibility for tapping into those institutional settings, and, you know, pushing something there. We call it, "Shining the Spotlight on . . . " the mall, for example — which we've done for a couple of years. In fact, we're going to have the heads of both of the major malls here to talk about how people of color are disproportionally followed, disproportionally treated as suspect, etc., and disproportionally not hired for positions in the mall, and so forth. So, we're going to continue to have that conversation. We feel our role is to shine the spotlight on these kinds of situations. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

### *ii. Actions taken by participants and/or other groups*

Some people suggested that study circles could also address institutional racism effectively through the follow-up actions of individuals and other community groups working together. In some cases, participants followed up on recommendations from their own study circle groups. In other cases, people got together at action

forums and formed committees to take action on specific issues.

- In Fayetteville, one organizer said he believed study circles served as a platform to move other efforts in the community forward. Other Fayetteville organizers described many such efforts that supported this claim, including an increase in corporate support for the Human Relations Commission Banquet, more sensitivity on the part of the local newspaper in terms of racial diversity and how it covered news about the minority community, efforts of the Chamber of Commerce to engage more minority-owned businesses, and a forum sponsored by Fayetteville United and other organizations that brought all constituency groups together to talk with the president of the National Civic League about civic engagement and their own roles and responsibilities within the community.

- In Hartford, participants in the first round of study circles formed a group that developed a guide for nonprofit organizations seeking to increase the diversity of their boards.

- In Ft. Myers, Lee County Pulling Together and other study circle volunteers worked with others in the community to restart the stalled process of bringing a shopping center to the predominantly African American/black Dunbar community.

- In Syracuse, study circle participants also worked to bring a quality grocery store to a minority neighborhood.

## 2. Some people suggested that even the action-oriented component of study circles did not sufficiently address racism on an institutional level.

While some organizers supported the idea that study circles could effectively address institutional racism through the actions that took place after the small group conversations, a number of

people — predominantly those who took part in the focus groups in Hartford and Syracuse — considered study circles to be an ineffective tool in this regard. Although many focus group participants, both European Americans/whites and people of color, spoke about the disconnect that seemed to exist between the small group conversations and tangible, institutional outcomes, young African American/black males were typically the most vocal in their criticism of this aspect of study circles. These participants offered several reasons for their criticism:

- The link between dialogue and action was not clear.
- The pace and scale of actions did not go far enough toward addressing racism on an institutional level.
- There was a gap between participants' and organizers' awareness of actions that study circles produced.

### a. Most participants wanted their study circle program to make the link between dialogue and action clearer.

We get people energized, we reawaken that concern about what's going on in the community with race and racism, and we don't take them to the next step. And that, to me, is the most critical missing link right now.

*--African American organizer in Hartford*

Participants in all of the focus groups agreed that study circles would continue to be less than optimally effective as a tool for addressing racism on an institutional level if the small group conversations did not lead to visible changes or become connected with a program for action. Nearly every participant in the focus groups expressed a desire for organizers to develop more explicit linkages from dialogue to action in order to capture and sustain the energy of study circle participants. Focus group participants stated that many people had good intentions at the end of the sessions and even wanted to join together with others to work on issues related to racism, but did not have an outlet for their intentions and energy.

Several participants stated that the study circle programs must give people a place to go with their expectations. They faulted their community's study circle program for not clearly explaining what participants could expect at the end of their sessions. They viewed programs' inability to establish appropriate expectations as limiting study circles' effectiveness as a tool. One African American/black participant in Syracuse described this as leaving "a bad taste." In Hartford, an African American/black participant said:

> The way it was brought to me, claiming that they were looking for steps towards dealing with racism . . . this is just a thing of just bringing some folks together just to talk. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

Many study circle participants in other Best Practices learning sites shared this desire for more explicit connections between dialogue and actions aimed at institutions. In Woodridge, one participant of color said:

> But, we're just still talking. You know, we're talking about how we feel. And that's great. But what is that going to change for somebody that lives in an apartment? What's that going to change for somebody that's dealing with an issue of being stopped by police because he's black in a white neighborhood, or he's Indian in a black neighborhood, or you know he's white and he's . . . he doesn't look white? So, I mean, when we start talking this diversity, well, you know, I think that the study group has shown us that we're just talking, still. (African American/black participant in Woodridge)

If you want something lasting out of this whole experience, I don't think the study circles alone are enough. I think they can be a good experience, an eye-opening experience; for some people it can change the way they look at the world, and that's good. But if you don't follow up with something . . . the benefit of that might not ever be seen or felt.
*--European American/white participant in Hartford*

### b. Some people expressed impatience and skepticism with the pace and scale of institutional changes study circles produced.

Some of the participants of color — both those in the focus groups and in other communities — who noticed outcomes from the study circles commented that these actions constituted a beginning, or "small steps," that might have some impact but were still not enough to address issues of institutional racism effectively. Other participants expressed frustration that changes produced by study circles did not fulfill their ideas of what constituted meaningful institutional actions.

A few participants expressed the opinion that study circles functioned as a "feel-good" process for European American/white people, through which they attended the sessions and extolled the benefits of a dialogue on race without ever internalizing the issues or working to change important institutional policies and practices. The participants who held this view declared that they would know study circles were having an impact when they saw changes in hiring practices, for example, or other changes in behaviors on the part of those who held power.

> You have a lot of energy there and a lot of skill there and a lot of power. But it seems like that's not being tapped. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

To me, real progress is when the lip service is gone and actions happen. That's my measuring stick.
*--African American/black facilitator in Lima*

> So to me, when I see white folks out there on the front line with the same energy to end racism and white supremacy, then I'll know they mean it. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

> I didn't see actual tangible things that came out of it where folks said, "Okay, we made a difference beyond just talking about it . . ." At the end of the day you got to be able to tally this stuff and say, "I was here, now it's done." (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

In other communities, participants were often unable to discern any actions being taken on an institutional level by the organizers of the study circle effort. One participant of color in Woodridge said:

> I think the Village was able to walk away and pat themselves on the back, saying that, "We did address it." We haven't resolved anything, we haven't solved anything, but we can pat ourselves on the back . . . I didn't see any major changes, actually . . . (African American/black participant in Woodridge)

In a similar vein, an African American/black organizer in Fayetteville said, "Talk about institutions or organizations that have a large impact on what goes on in the community, I don't think that change has been effective yet." This organizer held out the hope, though, that such change would occur as study circles continued.

### c. In some communities, a gap existed between participants' and organizers' awareness of institutional changes that study circles produced.

In several cases, even when organizers reported progress on institutional outcomes or actions, focus group participants said they did not know about them. This lack of awareness may be related to such factors as:

- The amount of time elapsed since individual participants completed study circles
- Participants' own degree of involvement in action-oriented efforts
- The logistical challenges of keeping people informed of actions

Regardless of the reason, participants' lack of awareness of institutional outcomes (where they existed) or connection to action efforts undoubtedly contributed to their negative assessments of study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism.

Overall, European American/white focus group participants seemed more aware of and/or connected to action opportunities that had emerged from the study circles. Participants of color appeared considerably less aware of tangible outcomes or changes, other than those that occurred on a personal level. Participants of color also appeared less aware of existing mechanisms for further work on issues of race. For example, several focus group participants of color in Syracuse were not familiar with the action committees created by the Advisory Committee. They indicated that these small steps were not visible enough to those outside the study circle loop and that program organizers had not kept them informed of the outcomes study circles had produced. Here is an exchange that occurred in the Syracuse participant of color focus group:

> There seems to be a disconnect, because they [organizers] are privy to a bunch of information I didn't know about. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)
>
> The little speck they saw, we didn't see, or something else. (Asian American participant in Syracuse)
>
> Or it could be that genuine things are happening, that they're connected to them and we're not. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

According to some participants and organizers, the action-oriented phase of study circles holds more potential than the small group conversations for effectively addressing racism on an institutional level. Study circle programs have yet to realize

their full potential in this arena, however, and may have to overcome several challenges in order to demonstrate their effectiveness to some people of color.

# D. Assessing the overall effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing racism

The researchers did not present participants and organizers with definitions of racism, but rather sought to understand how people defined racism themselves or talked about it using their own terms or their own language. The researchers also sought to understand how participants and organizers perceived study circles as a tool for addressing race and racism effectively. Through the focus group conversations and other interviews, it became clear that people held different perceptions of and expectations for the small group conversations and the action component of study circles. It was also clear that many study circle participants and organizers assessed the effectiveness of the small group conversations differently from the way they assessed aspects of the action-oriented phase of study circle work. This section presents an overall assessment of the extent to which participants and organizers in the experimental focus groups considered study circles to be an effective tool for addressing racism. It seeks to describe the overarching themes and implications that emerged from people's conversations about features of the small group sessions and the action-oriented phase of study circles. This section does not represent a final assessment, however, but rather an early understanding of this complex and multinuanced question.

I find in my sessions that . . . we're planting a seed, and it may take another six months, maybe a year, for it to crop up. So I have not seen immediate effects, but I think there's some things underneath that are working.

*--European American/white organizer in Hartford*

## 1. The majority of people considered study circles to be most effective as a tool for addressing racism on a personal level.

Participants and organizers suggested that study circles effectively addressed racism on a personal level in at least three different ways: by increasing racial awareness and exposure to different views and experiences; by improving relationships across racial and ethnic differences; and, to a lesser degree, by beginning racial healing.

### a. Study circles increased participants' racial awareness and exposure to the views and experiences of people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In many of the focus groups and individual interviews, participants and organizers indicated that study circles increased people's exposure to and understanding of the views and

I grew up in a racist household, and you don't know you're a racist until you get out into the real world and find that the cocoon in which you have lived is rather narrow and myopic and ignorant.
*--European American/white participant in Hartford*

experiences of people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. The participants and organizers said that study circles also increased people's understanding of how people different from themselves were affected by racism. Most people, particularly European Americans/whites, seemed to value this minimum outcome and the way that study circles exposed people to different views, attitudes, and experiences. Here are some representative comments:

> I wouldn't discount the amount of good that we do by just exposing people to each other's viewpoints. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

> I think maybe there was a general feeling that if people get together and talked about it and meet and exchange ideas, that something good will come of it that might then speak to, well, not reform, but improvement and change. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

Several participants also spoke of the way study circles led to self-examination by exposing people to different views, opinions, and experiences. A multiracial participant in Syracuse said:

> I think one of the things that the groups helped me understand is that the first thing you've got to change is your head. And a lot of people who talk about this stuff talk about changing consciousness, and that's what's going to happen. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

In general, European Americans/whites spoke primarily about the increase in their awareness of how African Americans/blacks think and feel about issues related to racism. These participants and organizers reported that, as European American/white people, they became aware not only of African American/black people's lives and experiences, but also of how everyday issues affected them.

Many European Americans/whites in particular described study circles as an "eye-opening experience," both for people with a long-standing interest in issues of race and for those who may have been reluctant to recognize elements of racism in themselves or the environments in which they lived and worked. In Hartford, where the majority of the small group conversations occurred in the workplace, a European American/white

organizer reported that before the study circle sessions, quite a few people at a senior management level in her workplace did not think there was a problem with racism at their company. By the end of the conversations, however, "[They] began to recognize and vocalize that, 'Yes, this is a problem and we need to seriously think about how we're going to deal with it in our organization.'" Other participants and organizers in Hartford shared these views:

> The whole experience of it, from sharing and from listening to others, I found it to be deeply moving and has made me more aware and conscious about relationships and what people experience than I would have anyway . . . than I would have under other circumstances, and it has certainly been priceless in that regard. (European American/white organizer in Hartford)

> The subject came up at our workplace and we thought, among several of us, that it would be a very useful tool, because, you know, we have tension in our workplace. . . . And talking is, I think, exactly the right way to bring some sort of understanding, talking, communicating, sharing experiences, and having an opportunity to listen. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

People in both the European American/white and participant of color focus groups also spoke specifically about the ways study circles developed awareness around such controversial issues as white privilege and affirmative action. A multiracial participant in Syracuse said:

> For example, that's something that stands out in my head, that that conversation and those readings really pinpointed some stuff about white privilege. Not institutional racism but white privilege. That conversation was really meaningful to me and those readings were very meaningful to me. And I think it was just good to have people try to just be exposed to that, white people in particular. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

A European American/white participant in Syracuse also spoke of the value of gaining new awareness around the issue of white privilege:

What our major task is in these community groups is to begin to raise awareness about how social injustice and how racial and ethnic hatreds, or hatreds of any kind, promote exploitation and play a part in the effect of our social fiber.

*--European American/white organizer in Aurora*

> I did not expect to be hit with a phrase that I already knew — white privilege — and have to internalize it in a way that I hadn't before. That was good. It was good. Because I felt like I was really in the swim when I had to swallow hard and experience some, "Yuck! I don't like that on me." (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

I think study circles is a good opportunity to educate, to inform. I mean you are talking to small groups which eventually become more and more and they can share that with other people. So there's a groundswell effect to it . . .

*--African American/black supporter in New Castle County*

In Fayetteville, an African American/black organizer offered an example of a discussion that took place in one of his study circle sessions — during which the European American/white participants learned about how the issue of life insurance affects African Americans/blacks. The organizer offered this story as testimony that study circles effectively increased racial awareness, saying, "It was just a matter of we do not think of things. We do not realize things because we do not live that."

Many African Americans/blacks, on the other hand, reported a newfound awareness of the extent to which European Americans/whites remain uninformed and unknowledgeable about how issues affect people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. At least one European American/white participant agreed that study circles are perhaps more beneficial for increasing the awareness of European Americans/whites:

> I felt everything was on the table and I learned a lot about how other people do things and . . . and they got mine too. But I think I got more out of it than . . . as a white person I got a lot more out of it, I think, than maybe they did, because there's a lot of stuff they already knew. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

African American/black participants and organizers did not talk about an increase in their understanding and awareness of European American/white people's lives and experiences, but rather described an increase in their understanding of other minorities, such as the treatment of Native Americans or the views of recent immigrants to the United States. An African American/black participant in Syracuse offered this example:

> There was one Native American girl, and every time the black kids would start saying about how they get treated bad and all this stuff, she would always, every time say, "Well, the Native Americans, we get treated the same way." And every time it would happen, I would be like,

> "Okay, she really feels this way," but nobody ever realized — well, I don't know if anybody every realized it, but I never realized that Native Americans were treated that bad, and that she would even feel this way about that. So that really opened me up to other people and their feelings about these topics. (African American/ black participant in Syracuse)

People of all racial and ethnic backgrounds said that through a frank, open, honest, and sometimes even painful exchange, they developed a new sense of respect and empathy for those different from themselves. Participants and organizers spoke of this increase in racial awareness not as a conversion or epiphany, but rather as a first step toward changes in understanding of or attitudes toward people of different races or ethnicities. Some participants explained that this newfound respect could help build a sense of community and trust between groups. One Latina/Hispanic participant in Hartford said:

> I saw people of different backgrounds coming together and developing empathy for one another, understanding somebody else's experience and developing some kind of respect. . . . and I think that that's really good. That's a good starting point in the world. (Latina/Hispanic participant in Hartford)

In Hartford, a European American/white participant said:

> We can get some things done, but they're not going to be huge things. The biggest thing is trying to change people's attitudes and get them to apply that in their own daily life in ways that could be useful in the long term. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

Participants' and organizers' statements in the focus groups and other individual interviews suggested the possibility that European American/white people's experience in study circles involved becoming aware of how issues affected people of color, while people of color's experience in study circles was more of promoting others' understanding and awareness of these issues. Statements made during the focus groups tentatively suggested that people of color may have served in an informing or observing role during study circles on race, while European Americans/whites may have served as the targets for new information and understanding.

What has been very important in the success of our work has been the willingness of African American people in particular, and Indian, Pakistani, Iranian people, to be willing to go to many study circles to achieve diversity. Most of the learning is on the part of white participants because everybody else has been living it.

*--European American/white organizer in New Castle County*

I felt that eliminating racism, it would take a long, long time, but it could at least improve race relations. I felt that deserved a try.

*--Latina/Hispanic organizer in Syracuse*

### b. Study circles helped improve relationships across racial and ethnic divisions.

The majority of organizers and participants agreed that study circles were an effective tool for improving relationships across racial and ethnic differences. When asked to reflect on their study circle experiences, participants in each focus group stated again and again that study circles gave them a unique opportunity to meet new people — specifically those from different racial or ethnic backgrounds — who brought a variety of perspectives and experiences to the table. European Americans/whites in particular seemed to value the opportunity to develop relationships with people different from themselves and talk with them about racism.

> Well, certainly one part of our model is the relationship building and the understanding that gets built in the first three sessions. . . . I mean, our design committee based a lot of its work on the assumption that a big part of racism is the result of people simply not knowing each other and seeing people who are outside their identified racial group as the "other," you know, in quotation marks. And that one of the ways to break down racism and to do prejudice reduction work is for people to know each other. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

Both European Americans/whites and people of color reported that a real bond developed among participants over the course of their study circle sessions, leading to the formation of new friendships that have sometimes outlasted the five or six weeks during which their groups met. In a number of learning sites, participants reported that their study circle group continued to meet long after the conclusion of the sessions; these informal groups of former study circle participants typically met in social settings for at least a year after becoming acquainted through study circles. Here are some representative comments:

> In my own family, we have made some friends that we didn't have before. In my work I have friends who are African American, but socially we actually are, we're having some exchange. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

> Relationship, familiar faces, so that those folk that have been involved in these tables do become familiar faces, and that prevents that first wall from coming up. And the more that happens, the more positively infectious I think that can be. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

> I think it brought people closer together, not to the state that it hopefully would have, but really based on those that participated, I think they're a closer group. In respect to the diversity that was there, I think those people understand each other better and the needs of each other better and their viewpoints. I just noticed in the groups that I had the fortunate opportunity to facilitate, they become like a family. (African American/ black organizer in Fayetteville)

I think the bottom line is that when we start to talk about diversity, we really do have to talk about relationships.
*--African American/black participant in Woodridge*

Several focus group participants viewed these personal exchanges and new relationships as a way of creating common ground and understanding across racial lines. They underscored the importance of this common ground as the basis for any future social or collective action.

> So our dialogue model is based on creating those kinds of understandings and those kinds of relationships first before you move to the next stage of deciding what the community ought to do about racism "out there." I mean it's more about what do we do with racism "in here" before we move on to [the rest of the community]. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

Participants reported that through communicating and listening to others, they gained a new appreciation for both the commonalities and differences among all people. Some people described the experience as "transforming" and one that led to significant personal growth. As an East Indian facilitator in New Castle County said:

> And once you build these relationships, though it's only five sessions, it's not any kind of in-depth opportunity for a dialogue, but even those five sessions I would say that a lot of that commitment . . . there are people who are on this path or who believe in growth. Our first study circle still meets, you know two years, and many good

> things came out of it. (East Indian facilitator in New Castle County)

In Hartford, some people presented real-life examples of the way study circles led to improved relationships among people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in both the workplace and the community. One European American/white organizer described a visible change in interactions between people of different races in her workplace since the conclusion of the study circles:

> In the people that did go through the group, I see a change in the way that they interact with people that are different from them. I see a real change in that, a marked change. And I don't think the people I'm thinking of even realize that their interactions are different. I really don't. But I see them in the hallways and talking to people that they normally would not talk to. I see them open . . . holding the elevator for someone; they normally would just let the elevator go. And these are things I've witnessed myself. (European American/white organizer in Hartford)

An African American/black participant in Hartford reported that on her college campus, study circles helped to break down the barriers of communication between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds who previously had no interest in talking with each other:

> When we finished that session, in that session people who kind of hated each other, wouldn't talk to each other, wouldn't give each other the time of day, it broke down those barriers and people started talking again. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

In Fayetteville, an African American/black organizer also reported that more people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds were speaking to each other as a result of study circles, and that people were holding the door open for each other now, both literally and figuratively.

When describing improvements in relationships between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, some African American/black people again implied that they served more in an observing role than in a participating role. Their examples

suggested the possibility that they witnessed more external improvements in relationships than they actually experienced themselves. It is also possible, however, that those who served as organizers naturally gravitated toward an observing role.

### c. Study circles provided some participants with a way to begin racial healing.

A few participants and organizers, predominantly people of color, suggested that study circles were also an effective way to begin racial healing. This was particularly true in Syracuse, where organizers explicitly named racial healing as one of the main components of the study circle program. A consultant to the Syracuse design team explained the team's view of racial healing this way:

> I think our group really felt like if we're going to really do this in this community, and we're really going to heal it, because we put the word healing in the title — it took us I don't know how many sessions for us to come to that — but if we were really going to heal, it meant that people had to talk about their own experiences and who they were and how they had come to be the adult person that they were in the world now around race issues. . . . When you're working at ending racism, which is very much of an emotional issue and very much of an issue that is in our mind grounded in old hurts, you need a process that helps people to work on those old hurts as well as to reduce the prejudice that keeps those hurts in place. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

When asked to distinguish between the three components of that study circle program — racism, race relations, and racial healing — a multiracial participant said:

> I guess I would connect more with the racial healing. I think the experience for me was like a . . . continuation of doing it, of putting myself in situations where I try to force myself to deal in some way, and that seems to me to be part of that healing process, which doesn't . . . mean it's cured, it just means healing, which is a different thing. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

An African American/black organizer in Syracuse offered this view of how study circles could lead to racial healing:

If I hadn't been involved with study circles, I would have never known actually a lot of the historical factors involved with Wilmington with the racial divide . . . that caused so much animosity and hurt feelings. It took a long time to heal from that. . . . I think people were just waiting for something to come along, some kind of initiative, some kind of something to let them work some of these issues through.

*--European American/white facilitator in New Castle County*

We all have to forgive ourselves and move forward and get past the pain, get past this misunderstanding, and then recognize that we have to respect each other and that your story is as important as mine.

*--Latino/Hispanic organizer in Aurora*

> I would hope that the dialogue circles will be as Morris Massey said, I hope it will be a "S.E.E." — a "Significant Emotional Event" in a person's life, that they would learn ways to act themselves and ways to help others in ways that healing is possible and not just combative relations, or talk will mean action and not just talk. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

This same organizer also said:

> It makes my commitment stronger at that level because I believe that's one of the barriers to America healing, is that we all are just acting without understanding, without depth of knowing, without appreciating ***my*** value, without accepting ***my*** difference. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

In New Castle County, an East Indian facilitator agreed that study circles could begin racial healing. She said:

> What I see with study circles is opening up these dialogues and in the process to build relationships which will help us deal with those deeper hurts, and guilts, and shame in a safe way. (East Indian facilitator in New Castle County)

If we have a picture of healing then we need to go after those values that would allow us to heal. I think that we need to really look at that. But I see work around issues like racism needs many-pronged attacks.

*--East Indian facilitator in New Castle County*

In Aurora, a Latino/Hispanic organizer expressed this view of study circles as an effective tool for beginning racial healing:

> I think Hispanic and African American people understand that our Anglo friends don't understand. But I think by the end of the study circles, the Anglo-Americans have a deeper understanding of the issues. They now understand the pain on a person-to-person basis. They'll hear stories that they never heard of, and they can't help but feel emotional about them. "My friend's in pain. What can I do?" And that is the question that ultimately comes out at the end: "What can I do? What do we need to do to address this issue? What can I do to alleviate the pain that my friend is in?" (Latino/Hispanic organizer in Aurora)

## 2. With some noteworthy exceptions, most people considered study circles to be less effective as a tool for addressing racism on an institutional or societal level.

The views expressed by some of the people who took part in the focus groups regarding the effectiveness of study circles as a tool for addressing institutional racism seemed to differ widely from the views of organizers in other Best Practices learning sites. In communities such as Decatur, Springfield, Fayetteville, Hartford, and Syracuse, organizers made explicit efforts to link study circles with work on ending institutional racism. Organizers in these and other communities offered a number of examples of the ways organizations or institutions then took action to end racism. They described a strong participant recommendations component and a commitment to follow through as the key ways that study circles could be effective for addressing institutional racism.

We're just sitting here perched, though, you know soon as we see anything that's moving we're going to join right in, but at this point . . .
*--African American/black participant in Fayetteville*

In contrast to the views of a number of organizers in other communities, the majority of focus group participants agreed that study circles were less effective, or even ineffective, as a tool for addressing racism on an institutional or societal level. While this view was widely shared among people of all racial or ethnic backgrounds, participants of color — particularly young African American/black males — expressed the most skepticism about study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism on an institutional level. The number of people in this category was quite small compared with the total number of study participants. Their views hold particular significance, however, because they represent a demographic segment that was generally underrepresented in the study (and in study circle efforts in the learning sites).

A number of focus group participants, particularly those in Hartford, suggested that study circles did not address larger societal issues of power and economic opportunity. Some participants indicated that study circles may have been a "feel-good" process for European American/white people through which they talked about issues of race without actually changing their daily practices or behaviors in any meaningful way. Some people also faulted study circles for not providing a way for participants to make the transition from talking about deeply

personal, emotional issues to addressing institutions and the broader societal situation.

> Race relations, to me, seems to be kind of . . . it happens on an individual level, but it also seems to happen on a more structural level, and so if it's only going to . . . it seems to me that stuff only happened in the group. So it seems to me that really improving race relations happened in the group, but it didn't go beyond that. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

African American/black males in particular expressed a sense of frustration that study circles did not easily lend themselves to a discussion of the "real issues" of institutional racism. These participants said they wanted to talk about topics such as oppression, ownership, economic control, integration, resources, money, and power as they related to race, but such topics never surfaced in any meaningful way during the small group conversations. Even if these topics did surface, they did not appear to be internalized by those who had the power to make real changes.

We kind of feel like overall, not the community but the part of the community that controls most of it is in denial, which affects everybody else.

*--African American/black participant in Fayetteville*

> So we can sit here all day and discuss definitions of how I'm treated, this, that and the other, but once we get to our day-to-day daily lives, it's back to the same mode, that rich, white male viewpoint is what's running things behind the scenes. So I don't see these study circles as far as addressing that . . . I don't know whether it's ignorance or if it's just the issue of folks just not wanting to know. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

When asked whether study circles addressed institutional racism at all, participants of color in Hartford responded in the following ways:

> I don't think it does at all. I think the main thing that it does — that I see — is to bring an understanding to people that are at the table as to what goes on. And, as I said, between the black and white, but I don't think it brings an understanding to the other issues. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

> If Caucasians do not think there is anything such as institutionalized racism, then to me it's besides the whole point in their mind. They run everything, they control

> everything, "We're the boss, there's no such thing as institutional racism." They're not going to see it. So as long as that attitude is in place, I'm saying there's going to come a time that dialogue has to cease. We can talk all day; we've been doing this for over 30 years, and . . . it boils down to the same conclusion every single time. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

> Let's talk, let's be real, and let's be up front with the real issues. And I just don't see it, with the study circles I don't see it . . . (African American/black participant in Hartford)

Several of these participants focused specifically on the idea of economic ownership and control and stated that it was difficult for people of color to talk about equality when those at the table are not perceived as capable or equitable:

> If you don't own anything, how do you come to the table and talk about equality? (African American/black participant in Hartford)

The discrepancies between organizers' views and focus group participants' views (particularly the views of people of color) suggest that study circles have potential as a tool for effectively addressing racism on an institutional level. In some places, study circles have even taken some first steps to realize that potential. In other communities, however, study circles at present do not meet participants' expectations or needs for action aimed at ending institutional racism. Participants' and organizers' responses suggest that study circle programs that seek to address institutional racism will have to do more in the future to make the connection between dialogue and action clear to participants and must keep participants more informed and involved in actions aimed at institutions.

## E. Conclusion

I think in the short run it was good, but unless we continue this kind of dialogue within the community, it may fall away as other things have in the past.
*--European American/white participant in Syracuse*

The majority of organizers and participants agreed that study circles were an effective way to ***start*** addressing racism, but were not enough on their own and must lead to or be connected to action in order to create community change on the scale they desired. Responses to this research question indicated that people considered study circles to be most effective as a tool for addressing racism on a personal or interpersonal level. People described in detail the ways study circles could address racism on a personal level by increasing racial awareness and exposure to the experiences and views of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, by improving relationships across racial and ethnic differences, and by beginning racial healing. Participants and organizers identified several features of the small group conversations that created a sense of safety, comfort, and respect that people valued. These features created a space where people could share deeply intimate, deeply personal stories about their own experiences with racism and the way everyday issues affected them.

Many people suggested that study circles' effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism on a personal level was a good and necessary starting point. When talking about the way study circles served as a first step in a long, long process, people described the model in such terms or phrases as "a foundation," "planting a seed," "[they] get the ball rolling," "a tangible starting point," "one good tool," "a beginning that isn't happening anywhere else," "[they] open the door," and "a beginning step that can become pervasive."

It can't be viewed as just a single event in people's lives.
*--European American/white facilitator trainer in Springfield*

Most participants and organizers — with some exceptions — viewed study circles as less effective for addressing racism on an institutional or societal level. While a small number of participants, particularly people of color, expressed skepticism about the possibility that study circles could become more effective as a tool for addressing institutional racism, other organizers indicated that as programs expand — as more people participate and as programs become more skilled at linking the small group conversations to actions that impact the community as a whole — study circles could become an effective tool for addressing racism on that level, too.

This early assessment suggests that most participants and organizers recognize and appreciate the effectiveness of study circles at present. Although a few participants viewed the potential of study circles with skepticism, most expected more from the tool in the future as their experience with it unfolds.

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