Chapter XI

Understanding the Impact of the Study Circle Topic

This chapter addresses Research Question Seven: 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?

Main points in this chapter:

1. The study circle topic has an impact on the overall effectiveness of a study circle program; participants and organizers have many different views of the nature of that topic, however.

2. Most people of color asserted that naming race as the topic is the most effective way for programs to address racism; some European Americans/whites agreed. Other people, predominantly European Americans/whites, maintained that other study circle topics, such as economic development, could address racism effectively.

3. Participants and organizers reported that the topic of race has both positive and negative impacts on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In general, people suggested that the topic of race attracts African Americans/blacks and community activists of all backgrounds, but may be less attractive to European Americans/whites, Latinos/Hispanics, and Asian Americans.

4. People suggested a variety of other topics as possible alternatives to the topic of race; they believed these alternative topics could achieve more racially and ethnically balanced participation in study circles.

The findings and views described here represent an early examination of the impact of the designated study circle topic on two important aspects of study circle programs. The first part of this chapter examines the way the study circle topic impacts on programs' effectiveness in addressing racism. The second part of the chapter explores people's perceptions of the way the topic of a round of study circles affects participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

As stated in the prologue to Chapters X and XI, this chapter presents the opinions, beliefs, and perceptions of participants and organizers regarding the impact of topic. Information related to this research question comes from three sources:

- The primary source of information is six in-depth focus groups conducted with European American/white participants, participants of color, and organizers in Hartford and Syracuse in February, 2000. These focus groups sought specific answers to questions about the impact of topic.

- A secondary source of information consists of in-depth interviews conducted with organizers in Fayetteville; these interviews also focused directly on the impact of topic.

- The third source of information is a combination of individual interviews and informal focus groups that took place during the original visits to a number of other Best Practices learning sites.

Because the 17 programs included in the Best Practices study addressed a number of different topics, this chapter reflects a ***wide*** variety of views and experiences related to the impact of the study circle topic; the particular emphasis, however, is on race-related topics. Specifically, this chapter incorporates information and ideas from the following kinds of study circle programs:

- Programs that have addressed only the topic of race (Fayetteville, Springfield, Aurora, New Castle County)

- Programs that have incorporated the topic of race into consideration of other issues in at least one round (Hartford)

- Programs that started with another topic and then focused on the topic of race (Syracuse)
- Programs that began with the topic of race and later addressed other topics (Lima)
- Programs that addressed the topic of diversity (Woodridge)
- Programs that have only addressed topics not related to race (Decatur, Inglewood)

While we made special efforts to use the in-depth focus groups and interviews to gain more insight into the impact of topic on different aspects of study circles, and while we have a good foundation from which to explore these questions more deeply, a number of factors constrain our understanding of the answers to the two parts of this research question:

- We did not focus on this question at great length with organizers or participants in the Best Practices learning sites that have only addressed topics other than race. As a result, with a few exceptions, we lack sufficient evidence to determine whether people in those learning sites talked about race to any extent during their study circle sessions if race was not the designated topic. [The exceptions are noted below on pages 332-333.]
- We have not spoken with people in any of the Best Practices communities who did ***not*** participate in study circles, and so we do not know if the topic influenced their decision not to become involved in the program.
- We have not spent time with enough people whose racial or ethnic background is something other than European American/white or African American/black to understand why people from those ethnic groups, such as Latinos/ Hispanics, do or do not participate in study circles.

Although this chapter does not offer concrete evidence of the impact of topic on either the effectiveness of study circles in addressing racism or participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, it does present the strong opinions and thoughtful consideration of study circle organizers and participants in a number of learning sites regarding which topics

are most likely to bring people to the table and the impact those topics then have on the conversations that unfold.

The first part of this chapter presents organizers' and participants' views on the impact of topic on study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism. The second section includes an initial assessment of the impact of the study circle topic on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

A. The impact of the study circle topic on study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism

Participants' and organizers' responses to this question suggest that topic can impact study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism in a variety of ways: through the content of the conversation, through perceptions of inclusivity, and through the formation of expectations. In their discussions of the impact of the study circle topic, most people first addressed the impact of the topic of race and then later offered views on other topics. For the most part, discussions centered around three main issues: whether naming race as the topic is most effective when seeking to address racism, whether the topic of race promotes inclusivity of all people in a community, and whether the way race-related topics are stated can lead to different expectations.

1. People had mixed views on whether the study circle topic of race addresses racism most effectively.

In general, people of color — particularly African Americans/blacks — and some European Americans/whites expressed different views on whether it is more effective to name race explicitly as the study circle topic or to discuss race through the lens of other topics such as diversity, community relations, or economic development. While not all European American/white people agreed that study circles might be more effective in addressing racism if the topic were something other than race, European American/white organizers and participants were more likely than people of other racial or ethnic backgrounds to state this view. By contrast, nearly all African American/black organizers and participants appeared united in the opinion that it is time — and for some, past time — to get straight to the point by naming race as the topic. Participants of other ethnic backgrounds reflected mixed views in response to this question. The following two sections present opinions and views from a variety of sources on whether study circles address racism most effectively when they "get straight to it" or when they take another route.

a. Most people of color — and some European Americans/whites — asserted that study circle programs address racism most effectively when they "get straight to it."

In most of the focus groups and individual interviews, people of color — particularly African Americans/blacks — indicated that naming race as the topic was the most effective way to address racism. Several European Americans/whites agreed that study circles on the topic of race are most effective for this purpose. For many people, designating race as the topic was important simply because it is an issue that is not often discussed in a public, open way. People suggested that by selecting race as the study circle topic, program organizers acknowledged it as a community issue that needed to be dealt with in a constructive way. Many people in a number of different learning sites also commented that if race is the problem, whether because of recent incidents or long-standing community tensions, then race should be the topic that study circles address.

i. Study circles on the topic of race acknowledge the problem and address it directly.

- In Syracuse, where organizers entitled the program "Community Wide Dialogues on Ending Racism, Improving Race Relations, and Beginning Racial Healing," both participants of color and European American/white participants said they appreciated the explicit nature of the topic. These participants found it to be most effective to get "straight to the point" when addressing racism. [Note: Organizers in Syracuse decided to address race directly after study circles on children's issues involved repeated discussions of inequality and racism.] Here are some representative comments:

  > I know for me it [the topic] was very direct, it said what it was going to be or that the city was or the organizers were willing to call it what it was . . . The time is here for us to be talking about racism, it's long past, but at least it should be here now. If we're not doing it in 2000, shame. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

> I was thinking, using the metaphor of a fairly calm sea, yet this intense undertow, and I think that [the] racism issue -- for this city and urban area -- is this undertow that you can be sucked into and thrown someplace really unexpected, because it isn't clearly addressed and you can almost feel insulated.
>
> *--European American/white participant in Syracuse*

> The IRC [InterReligious Council] has had to prove itself as committed to this and I think that's where the 20-year commitment is a critical one because otherwise it's the issue of the year and the next year we go on to drugs and the year after that we go on to education and people feel ripped off.
>
> *--European American/white organizer in Syracuse*

> I'd go straight to the point. I think we've beat around the bush long enough. (Asian American participant in Syracuse)
>
> This is what we're here for, let's deal with it. . . . in everywhere else we avoid that, we deny it, we do whatever we do with it . . . Except in a classroom, I had never had people . . . I have never heard people talk so directly about race. I like that. I like it. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

- Syracuse organizers agreed that the way their program's topic is stated means that addressing racism is not a hidden agenda. An organizer explained the design team's decision to incorporate the three terms — racism, race relations, and racial healing — into the program's title this way:

> I mean, we couldn't just say "racism," you know? Everybody says, "So what?" Either, "It's been here all the time, why should we talk about it now," or other people would say, "I don't want to go near that stuff!" So we decided that we'd express ourselves in a way that we think it exists. We acknowledge in America, whether it's real or not, that race exists, and so we felt that for us to deny that race exists would be just that — denial. . . . And some of us felt strongly that if we don't lay out on the table what the real issue is at first, we may as well fold the door, 'cause we will be compromising the dignity of some by not using the term "racism." And that sort of satisfied each of us, you know, we don't escape the tough word "racism" . . . and we've got to go further than that to heal ourselves. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

- In Hartford, participants of color concurred that the most effective way for study circles to address racism is by naming race as the topic.

- An East Indian facilitator in New Castle County shared the view that because racism is an issue that is not normally addressed in public, it is important for study circles to deal with it straightforwardly:

  > Racism is a major problem. I think it is really like a cancer in this society. And for me at least, the main benefit of a study circle is the opening up of discussion of a topic which we generally don't talk about. So, it provides you an opportunity to dialogue about a critical issue or problem that we as Americans are facing . . . So I think the commitment is there. The need is there. (East Indian facilitator in New Castle County)

- In Lima, a key organizer underscored that because race and racism permeated every aspect of the community, these issues needed to be addressed directly through study circles.

  > We started this in 1992. I said then that the most important, serious, un-talked-about issue is race. Now, six years later, the most serious, important issue — though it's talked about — is still race. It affects everything: it affects the school district. It affects development — what is and isn't developing. It affects tax base considerations. . . . I would hope in 20 years that race isn't at the top of the list. That it would have been honestly approached and dealt with in a way that works. (European American/white organizer in Lima)

- In New Castle County, organizers struggled with the decision of whether to choose race or violence as their topic. After the working group participated in a round of study circles on each topic, organizers decided to focus on race, since it permeates all other issues.

> I think it's very brave of us to take race as the issue, because that's underlying many of the economic and school problems, so instead of taking these other study circle curriculums and working through those and finding out that race is a part of it, we've taken the race and seen how it's affected in the various ones. . . . we know that we have so far to go and that we haven't really hit the bottom of where we are now.
>
> *--European American/white organizer in Aurora*

Naming race as the topic can be particularly important when the community is confronting a specific racial problem or issue. Organizers and participants in several communities suggested that when racism is the most urgent issue facing citizens, study circle programs must address it directly. Otherwise, the effort may appear to be dishonoring or denying the real problem.

- In Fayetteville, where study circles began in response to increasing racial tensions, driven by several high-profile racial incidents, a number of organizers emphasized that selecting race as the topic was important because it made it clear that the community intended to confront the issue. One organizer explained the decision to address race this way:

  > Well, believe it or not, in America for some reason that is the toughest topic to talk about. We felt that we were going to be damned if we did and damned if we didn't so we said, "Let's go for it." So we just sat down and figured out that you may not necessarily like me as a person, but you must like me as a human being and as a creature here on this earth. And when one race suffers in America, all races suffer. And race being something that has divided us so long until it just stood out, and then too, coming off this police situation . . . and then, every time you pick the paper up that is a headline of certain tragedies that are being committed and it seems as though it has a direct root to race. And so it just stood out on the wall at us, so we attacked. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

  Another organizer in Fayetteville said:

  > I think if you . . . started with crime or economic development or something along those lines, you'd find more common ground across racial lines a little more quickly. But I'm not sorry that we

> started with race. . . . I think maybe this community might have been at a place where that's where we needed to start. (European American/white organizer in Fayetteville)

In Woodridge, where the study circle program named diversity rather than race as the topic, partly on the recommendation of an African American/black resident, some participants indicated their preference for naming race directly over using a "less heated" topic to discuss the same issues.

- Several participants of color in Woodridge suggested that if race relations or racism is the intended focus, it should be named as such. These participants said they thought that diversity was simply a diluted way to describe racism, and said that their study circle program would have been more effective in addressing the issues if it had named race directly. An African American/black participant said:

  > Well, I think diversity is a very soft word, it was a soft pedal. And really what Woodridge should be looking at is race relations as we go into the next millennium. And that really is what it is. We don't want to say it, but that's what it is. (African American/black participant in Woodridge)

  An East Indian participant in Woodridge said, "I don't know what we called it, but we talked race relations."

- Several Woodridge participants presumed correctly that organizers chose the topic of diversity because they believed it would be less intimidating than race. One African American/black participant responded to this presumption by stating that in order to address racism forthrightly in study circles, it is necessary to deal with the initial discomfort of talking about race.

> I think that it [diversity] gets people in the door, it is a softer sell. I do think that at times it shook out, coming down to race. But strangely enough, even though that we can call it cultural diversity, we were somehow led to race. And yet . . . I heard from many of the groups, that was where they were stopped in their tracks. That's where the layers were not being pulled back . . .
>
> *--European American/white participant in Woodridge*

> So, I think what we need to do is . . . peel back and really expose what it is that we really need to be looking at. And call it what it is. It's not going to be comfortable. It's not going to be that warm, fuzzy feeling . . . it's going to be that prickly pickle that we really have to address. (African American/black participant in Woodridge)

ii. Study circles on race fulfill an emotional and personal need.

In a couple of Best Practices learning sites, people spoke about how study circles on the topic of race fulfill an emotional or personal need in ways that a focus on other topics cannot. They commented that this positively affected their programs' ability to address racism.

- In Aurora, one facilitator suggested that their study circle program's consistent focus on the topic of race contributed to its effectiveness in addressing racism.

> I think just the topic of racism itself is so emotional . . . and it's not like, well, we could talk about education and economics and schools and community, somehow those don't have the emotional impact. Maybe you can talk violence, but even still, this is not . . . violence is involved, but the underlying root is our understanding how to work together. I think that one of the reasons we're successful is because of the focus that we've chosen. (European American/white facilitator in Aurora)

- Similarly, a chief architect of study circles in Lima explained during an interview that the topic of race addresses racism effectively because anyone can contribute his or her experiences to the conversation. In addition, this European American/white organizer said that study circles on race can lead to personal changes in ways that topics requiring substantial new technical information cannot.

iii. In some programs, the study circle topic of race could be stated more explicitly.

Nearly all African American/black participants and organizers in the communities that looked directly at the impact of topic agreed that the best way to address racism is to name race as the topic. Some went further, however, and said that study circle topics related to race could be even more explicit. These participants and organizers suggested that if a study circle topic focused on more specific facets of racism such as affirmative action or economic power, it would go even further toward addressing racism.

- For some participants of color in Hartford, "race" does not state the focus of the conversation clearly enough. Even during the focus group conducted as part of the Best Practices study, participants of color repeatedly asked, "What is the purpose of study circles?" These participants asserted that the topic should state the intentions of the program more explicitly. That is, if the program intends to focus on improving race relations, the topic should state that directly. On the other hand, if the program intends to address "real" issues of institutional racism, organizers need to state the topic in a way that makes that clear. Otherwise, study circles may have a considerably weaker impact on addressing racism.

- At least one participant in this same focus group asserted that race as a topic was not close enough to the real problem in terms of addressing racism.

  > If they were sincere about what the problem is, the problem is white power and American structure, plain and simple as that. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

- While participants of color in Syracuse emphasized that racism was the focus throughout their study circle sessions, they also suggested that the topic was somewhat broad and that it might

> We felt that the term "race relations" really encompassed more of what we were in need of focusing on here in our community. And also in relating it to this particular department and its mission, that we are seeking to foster positive interactions between all the citizens of Springfield. And this particular study circles program, these happen to be focused on differences in race. And so when we utilize the term "race relations," we're talking about people getting to know one another and deal and interact more positively together regardless of differences in race.
>
> *--African American/black organizer in Springfield*

be useful to conduct an in-depth examination of some specific issues of racism, rather than attempt to cover everything.

- In New Castle County, some organizers agreed that they may want to move their program on to other, more specific race-related topics in the future.

> I don't want to take away from the focal issue being race, but I think at some point certain groups may want to go to related topics, for example, affirmative action — ones that have more refined focus rather than generic racism and race relations topics. (Latina/Hispanic organizer in New Castle County)

b. Some people, predominantly European Americans/whites, suggested that study circles could take another route toward addressing racism effectively.

Some participants and organizers, particularly European Americans/whites, suggested that study circle programs could effectively address racism even when the topic was something other than race. Those who advocated taking another route toward addressing racism offered a number of different reasons for their views.

i. Race permeates other, more tangible community issues.

- In Hartford, where study circles have focused on race and economic development for at least one round, several European American/white participants expressed the opinion that a study circle program that names something other than race as the topic could be just as effective in addressing racism. These participants suggested that such topics as education, economics, and community relations could serve as alternatives for programs that seek to address racism.

> You could even do something on transportation and . . . bring [in] the issue

> of racism. It seems to underlie all of the problems that society has to deal with. (European American/white participant in Hartford)
>
> I don't mean to make this sound flip . . . but it almost doesn't matter what your topic is, if you talk about community, if you talk about public safety — which is just an extraordinarily hot topic right now — community, public safety, economic development, it doesn't matter, race is going to permeate it. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

- One European American/white participant in Hartford particularly stressed that the topic of economics is a more pragmatic way to get at issues of institutional racism than a topic that implies a focus on race relations or racial awareness:

> Not that what's right in our heart isn't important, but I think economics is what drives you. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

The race model was not adequate enough to deal with the day-to-day economic realities and concerns of building and growing wealth.

--Jamaican American coordinator in Hartford

- In Syracuse, where the study circle program originally focused on children's issues before directly addressing race, a European American/white organizer offered a similar view of how study circle topics other than race can incorporate racism into the conversation effectively:

> I don't think you have any conversation in the community that has to do with anything related to justice like "What kind of a community do we want for our children?" or "What should we do with education?" without having a conversation about race. I mean, I don't think it happens in America, because any time you're talking about equality or justice, you're talking about poverty, you're talking about race.

(European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

This organizer emphasized that both indirect and direct conversations about race are valuable, especially when they occur at the same time:

> Sometimes I think it's better to talk about what we want for the community, and out of that emerges the conversation around what's getting in the way — and racism certainly is getting in the way. [That] sends a message through the community in a way that having a conversation that's covertly about racism would not do. So I think it's good that it's happening kind of simultaneously. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

- A European American/white organizer in Fayetteville described other civic engagement efforts that can bring people together under another topic but still work to improve race relations.

> And what we're trying to do is bring the citizens together, bring people together in this community around issues other than specifically around race. To be able to bring them together to talk about issues where race is a component, and where we can talk about race as a component of those discussions, but where we can bring people of all races and ethnicities together to talk about these things, to work on the shape of this community. And that, those kinds of efforts will in fact enhance race relations. (European American/white organizer in Fayetteville)

- An African American/black organizer in Fayetteville commented that it may be more effective to use a broader topic to build relationships and identify community issues before getting straight to the "sensitive challenge" of

racism. He suggested that in Fayetteville, the decision to address the topic of race directly was reactionary, and that a study circle program might be able to address racism more productively if it selected another topic first.

> I'm a proponent of us addressing the situation in a proactive manner and using a broader topic such as human relations, establishing collaboration, establishing partnerships in our community, and then coming out of that, we identify opportunities to do that. We identify the challenges that we have along the lines of race, education, equity, economic disparities, and then we can focus in on those issues . . . (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

- A European American/white study circle organizer who works for the Lima Police Department suggested that the topic of race does not appeal to him or other people in the police department as much as topics that are more concrete or perhaps have more community practicality and applicability and that embed race as a theme.

> There are some weaknesses I saw in the race component: what do you do after you talk about it? How do you promote doing things differently? And what kinds of things can you do day-to-day to change how people interact? Race is tough. In a way we kind of "back-door" the race issue. I'm not saying it's not important. There are tangible things we can do to address the quality of life, and in the process we will address race as a by-product. I don't mean that a by-product isn't the most important thing. I just am talking about not addressing it directly. . . . We need something that is realistic and meaningful. Study circles is a practical step. The police will be more interested in participating in

> the Building Strong Neighborhoods approach, with race as one of the themes. It's not that it's not important. It's that we have to be strategic about how to change thinking. (European American/white organizer in Lima)

ii. Race has been discussed in programs that focused on other topics; the impact on addressing racism is still undetermined, however.

Most of those who advocated taking another route did not offer specific insight into how racism would be addressed through conversations about these alternative topics. Here are a few examples, though, of where study circles on topics other than race have included conversations about racism or race relations.

- In Inglewood, the mostly Latino/Hispanic and African American/black participants reported that they talked about culture during study circles on education. Participants there also reported several race-related outcomes, such as improved relations and more positive interactions among parents from different racial and ethnic groups.

- In Syracuse, the initial study circles on children's issues involved repeated discussions of race and inequality, so much so that organizers decided to change topics and address race directly.

- In Decatur, organizers reported that the theme of race was addressed in every session, even though the study circle topic was neighborhoods.

- In Fayetteville, a couple of organizers speculated about how other topics could effectively address racism. An African American/black organizer suggested the possible ways that study circles on the topic of education could effectively address racism:

> I think that's the next area that we need to explore, because there are some issues in the school system that need to be

> discussed in terms of equity and how educators treat people of race. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

iii. The content of study circle programs that intend to address racism should be centered on race, even when race is not explicitly named as the topic.

Several people who advocated taking another route towards addressing racism cautioned that whatever the given study circle topic, a focus on race should remain the foundation for any program that seeks to address racism effectively.

- In Syracuse, one European American/white organizer said:

> I would say that that's [race] got to be at the bedrock of so many of our conversations, even if, exclusively, the conversation isn't about race. That's what we found with the children's dialogue. When we kept asking what we want for our children, issues of equality came up, over, and over, and over, and over again. (European American/white organizer in Syracuse)

- Several European American/white participants in Hartford echoed this view by stating that study circle programs that name a topic other than race should still mention the inclusion of race in the conversation in order to ensure that race is addressed. These participants suggested that it is better to alert people up front that the conversation will incorporate race so that participants know what to expect.

> Even if we say it's economics or it's education or it's police brutality, we should say that there'll be a strong racial component in any discussion that we have. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

My impression was that people got together for no particular topic, that they had this . . . *strong* sense that something is wrong in our community and continues to be wrong, and we ought to get together and talk about it and see what action, if there is any action, to be taken.

--European American/white participant in Syracuse

iv. The study circle topic may not significantly impact programs' effectiveness in addressing racism.

On a couple of occasions, focus group participants and other community organizers spoke dismissively about the importance of topic altogether. Those who held this view indicated that the diversity of the participants has a more significant impact on a program's effectiveness in addressing racism.

- At least one person in the Hartford European American/white participant focus group emphasized that the topic does not matter as much as who participates.

  > I don't think it's going to matter what topic you bring, because it's all going to come out anyway. What's the most important thing is who you bring to the table. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

- In Decatur, where the study circle program focused on building strong neighborhoods, an organizer expressed a similar belief that the sessions addressed racism through the participation of diverse community members rather than through a direct focus on the topic of race. He said:

  > I don't know that we did anything in particular to promote change on the issues of race relations; it seemed to come from having diverse groups at the table. (European American/white organizer in Decatur)

From the focus groups and individual interviews, it is clear that people held many different views as to whether it was most effective to address racism by naming race as the study circle topic, or whether it was possible to address racism effectively through other topics. While most people of color agreed that getting straight to the point was the most effective way to address racism, other people, predominantly European

Americans/whites, supported different approaches. In the next section — which focuses specifically on the impact of the topic of race — people did not fall into such clear patterns.

2. People often disagreed on whether the topic of race includes people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds or instead focuses exclusively on European Americans/whites and African Americans/blacks.

In a couple of the focus groups, as well as in some of the individual interviews, participants and organizers discussed the extent to which the study circle topic of race addresses racism in all its forms or just in the form of an African American/black-European American/white issue. Those who expressed the opinion that study circles on race focused only on African Americans/blacks and European Americans/whites were also more likely to state that study circles on the topic of race were limited in their effectiveness as a tool for addressing racism. People who viewed study circles on race as including everyone were generally more positive in their assessment of study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism. Participants often starkly disagreed with each other on this question and offered a ***wide*** variety of perspectives; in general, these perspectives cut across racial and ethnic identity.

a. Some people asserted that study circles which name race as the topic focus only on African American/black-European American/white issues.

The participants and organizers who viewed study circles on race as focusing solely on African American/black-European American/white issues offered at least two main reasons for their views. Some people, particularly people of color, cited the history of race relations in the United States, explaining that the main focus of public attention has been on relations between African Americans/blacks and European Americans/whites. A small number of participants cited flaws in the study circle discussion guide itself. [Note: In some cases, participants may be referring to an older version of the race guide than the one presently in use.]

- In Hartford, several participants of color took the position that study circles on race focused strictly on the

relationship between European Americans/whites and African Americans/blacks. One participant said:

> It was a totally black-white issue from what I received. The reason I say that is because race relations meetings didn't come about because of the relationship of Asians with white people, or Native Americans with white people, or Latinos with white people. Race relations meetings came about because of the relationship of African people and white people. And the other reason why I saw it as being a black-white issue is because Africans in this country are the only people, historically, who haven't migrated here. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

This model about racism . . . you know when you hear about study circles on racism, the picture you get is a group of white and African American . . . And even though we are people of color, we do not want to identify ourselves as African American. So I think that model definitely needs something else.

--East Indian facilitator in New Castle County

- An Asian American participant in Syracuse said that study circle programs which named race as the topic generally focused on African American/black-European American/white relations, a focus she supported. She said she thought study circles were not an appropriate place for her to bring up issues of her own cultural background, since the dynamics and energy of the group centered around racism from a European American/white or African American/black perspective.

- A Latino/Hispanic organizer in Aurora expressed his sense that many people in the Latino/Hispanic community did not feel included in discussions of race for this same reason. He said:

> This [race] is not something that the Hispanic community really talks about. . . . And I think the Hispanic community . . . some of it has to do with our perception that when the question of race comes up, they see it as a black and white issue . . . (Latino/Hispanic organizer in Aurora)

- A few people in the European American/white participant focus group in Hartford suggested that the study circle guide itself may have promoted race as an African American/black-European American/white issue, and, in the process, failed to address racism effectively in all its forms.

> I also heard some comments, too, saying also, "It's very black and white." It comes across that way and it's leaving out a lot of the other groups . . . especially since we have a huge Latino population, there's hardly any mention of any of their culture in the book. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

- In New Castle County, a 1997 focus group study with European American/white study circle participants and participants of color presented similar findings about the discussion guide. Participants in that study suggested that the guide should examine race relations more deeply than simply presenting problems between African Americans/blacks and European Americans/whites.

b. Other participants and organizers maintained that study circles on the topic of race involve all the racial and ethnic groups in their communities.

A number of people who participated in the focus groups or in the in-depth interviews disagreed that study circles on race only address racism from an African American/black-European American/white perspective. These participants and organizers advocated conducting study circles on the topic of race to address all forms of racism effectively.

I mean, when we were taking racism a lot of times . . . the first thing that usually comes to mind is black and white . . . you know, but there's a lot of people out here that's just not getting a fair shake at things. Oppression is oppression.

--African American/black participant in Fayetteville

- At least two participants of color in Hartford appreciated the cultural diversity of their study circle sessions and the opportunity to learn from and talk with people from a variety of other racial and ethnic groups:

> There's much more to it than just a white and black issue . . . People of color [come] from different areas of the world, different experiences, and regardless how we think that it doesn't matter, it does, to a great extent. . . . That, too, needs to come out a lot more in the dialogue, so that when we get a better opportunity to not only understand each other, but we'll be able to deal with ourselves ***and then*** deal with the oppressive nature of things or the oppressive people, whoever they may be, much, much better than we do. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

> For me it was enlightening . . . it had an international flavor; everybody in the group was from different countries and they were just expressing the race thing from their country, and as they all stated, the United States is the only country that categorized people according to color. They never looked at themselves like that until they got here. (African American/black participant in Hartford)

- A Latina/Hispanic participant in Hartford said she felt compelled to join study circles on race because she wanted her culture and ethnicity to be included or addressed in the conversation.

- In Syracuse, an African American/black participant said that he valued the participation of a young Native American woman in his group and believed her presence offered an additional perspective on racism.

- In Fayetteville, several organizers concurred that the topic of race presented people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds with the opportunity to address racism. One Latina/Hispanic organizer said:

> I think that because of the topic we had a lot of newcomers coming, like the Latino group, the Korean group, there were some Japanese there, there were Indians, in the Working Group, everybody want to have a say into what was the problem of race in Fayetteville. What sparked it was the death of two black people, but the other groups in the community wanted to say, "It's not just black and white, you know," and they participated. (Latina/Hispanic organizer in Fayetteville)

- A European American/white organizer in Fayetteville described how members of the Korean community contributed to the conversations on the topic of race:

> It brought another dimension, like I said, that Korean [participation], and took it away from black and white. It was a human issue . . . and

> racial . . . the situation of their home life and how they experienced discrimination back in Korea, marrying a non-Korean person, and then the kinds of issues they had as a person coming to the United States and the issues that their children are being involved in or facing. (European American/white organizer in Fayetteville)

- An African American/black organizer in Fayetteville also spoke about expanding study circles on race to be more inclusive, commenting that, "You can't really have a study circles unless you include everybody." He explained that initially, the program's decision-making body only considered reaching out to African Americans/blacks and European Americans/whites. Organizers later learned that they had neglected many other ethnic groups in the community that needed to be involved in conversations about race.

> We would have not taken it as a black-white issue, but as a Fayetteville issue, because we started out with just two segments of people and we could have brought in everyone to the table to start with. But now we know who we didn't bring in, and we've heard from them. . . . We've learned from the experience of how we started and how we need to bring other people to the table, because regardless of who you are, there is a light bulb there, there's an idea. And we need to encompass all ideas in order for Fayetteville to be what they state it is — the all-American city. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

- In Woodridge, one European American/white participant offered a slightly different view, supporting the topic of diversity as a better way to include everybody. She said:

> The diversity appealed to me as not just black or Hispanics or Indians or Polish or Bohemian, but it was the different cultures and it was addressing all the issues. (European American/white participant in Woodridge)

The comments of participants and organizers suggest that the impact of the study circle topic of race on a program's

effectiveness in addressing racism often depends on people's views of race as an inclusive or exclusive issue. The next section, which also focuses solely on the topic of race, describes the perceived impact of topic on participants' expectations before study circles begin.

3. Some people implied that the way the study circle topic of race is stated may impact differently on participants' expectations.

Comments in several of the community focus groups suggested that when study circles addressed race in some form, the way the topic was named or stated influenced participants' expectations about the content of the conversations. The extent to which participants' expectations were or were not fulfilled then influenced their perceptions of study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism. These expectations as they related to the topic of race may have differed among European American/white participants and participants of color in particular communities.

- In Hartford, where the title of the study circle program is "Community Conversations on Race," participants in the focus groups reported many different expectations for the content of those conversations. Their comments suggested that the topic lacked specificity about what participants could reasonably expect in terms of conversations about race and about action after the small group sessions ended. The extent to which these expectations were or were not fulfilled appears to have determined whether participants thought topic made a difference in study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism.

    - Several participants of color in Hartford said that as the topic of ***race*** was presented to them, they expected a discussion of issues of ***institutional racism***, such as power, economic control, and exploitation. Because these issues did not surface in the conversations — and because the majority of the dialogue seemed to focus on ***race relations*** — these participants implied that "race" as a general topic was problematic. These participants suggested that if study circle programs intend to

address institutional racism effectively, they should explicitly name institutional racism as the topic. Otherwise, some people may expect something else and leave the conversations unfulfilled.

- In contrast, several European American/white participants in Hartford suggested that as they understood the topic of race, they expected to address race relations and a diversity of perspectives and experiences in the study circles. For most of them, the extent to which this expectation was fulfilled seemed to influence their perception that study circles on race — which unfolded as study circles on race relations and racial awareness — were an effective way to address racism.

- A number of European American/white participants in Hartford also expressed their expectations for the study circles in terms of concerns and anxieties. Because the topic for the study circles explicitly named race as a focus, these participants said they expected their study circle sessions to be intense, possibly to create conflict, and to be tentative in terms of open, honest expression. Here are some representative statements:

> I was a little nervous about it because I didn't know . . . you don't know what kind of things are going to come up. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

> Perhaps not in so many words, but I expected during the course of the session to be at least once accused of being a racist at some point. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

> I was afraid we'd try to outdo each other being good [white] guys. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

> These expectations appear to have been largely unfulfilled, since these same participants reported that the people in their study circle sessions were surprisingly candid and cordial. The positive contrast between their expectations and the reality of their study circles seems to have left European American/white participants with a more positive assessment of study circles on the topic of race, in particular their effectiveness in addressing racism.

- In Syracuse, on the other hand, participants in the focus groups expressed few concerns, expectations, or anxieties about the study circle sessions. Because their community's study circle program explicitly named three components of race in the topic (ending racism, improving race relations, and beginning racial healing), it is likely that participants there had a better understanding of the focus of the conversation, more information, and less uncertainty. The specific naming of the components of dialogues on race may in turn have influenced participants' assessments of the impact of topic on their study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism. One European American/white participant said:

  > A topic like that holds out the hope that it's about attitudes and it's about behaviors and these are things that the individual can affect. (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

Based on the conversations in the focus groups and the individual interviews, it appears that the topic of race has a particular impact on study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism. Participants and organizers often held widely different views, however, on the nature of that impact and what it meant in terms of overall program effectiveness. In general, people agreed that communities need to talk about race. People of color were most likely to value programs that explicitly name race as the topic; some European Americans/whites shared this view. European Americans/whites, however, were more likely to consider topics that approach race through another lens to be most effective.

For the most part, people did not agree about the several other approaches to talking about race. People also disagreed about

who is included or "targeted" by the topic of race; more people seemed to favor a broad interpretation of "race," however.

The next part of this chapter focuses on the impact of the study circle topic from another angle — the impact of topic on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. As in this first section, participants' and organizers' responses to the second part of the research question varied considerably.

B. The impact of the study circle topic on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds

Conversations with organizers and participants in many of the Best Practices learning sites revealed a considerable amount of difference in opinion regarding the impact of the study circle topic on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participants and organizers stated many different theories about which topics attract specific groups of people and which topics keep people away; they based their theories both on observation and conjecture. Yet since community programs typically addressed only one topic (race or something else) and organizers in these communities cannot compare participation across topics, we have very little in the way of hard evidence to support some of the claims or presumptions presented below. They are, quite simply, views. In addition, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, we did not have access to the opinions of those who did not participate in study circles at all and so we do not know if the topic made them stay away from study circles. While the full impact of topic remains to be seen, it is clear that participants and organizers presently view the study circle topic as having a significant impact — both positive and negative — on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Promoting study circles is to convey that this is an issue that affects all of us and racism is at the root of a lot of other problems . . . [The] big challenge is how do we package this so that everybody sees their own common interests and how everybody can benefit from better race relations. That is hard to do when you are white and male and you have had the power in the U.S.

--Latina/Hispanic organizer in New Castle County

The remainder of this chapter presents two main categories of responses to this question:

- The impact of the topic of race on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds
- The possible impact of other topics on participation

1. Participants and organizers suggested that the topic of race has both positive and negative impacts on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Although most participants and organizers said that they greatly value study circles on the topic of race, many of them acknowledged that race attracted some people while keeping others away. Participants and organizers recognized both

positive and negative impacts of the topic of race on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds; however, they often spoke most easily about groups of people whom study circles on the topic of race failed to involve.

a. People cited at least two main positive impacts of the topic of race on participation.

Participants and organizers throughout the Best Practices learning sites suggested at least two main ways the topic of race impacts positively on participation:

- The topic of race attracts people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who have a real interest and commitment to taking action on the issue.

- The topic of race particularly attracts significant numbers of African American/black participants, both those who want to put the issue to rest and those who want to take it further.

I think the success of participation has a lot to do with when people are committed to the topic. They're there because they want to be and they want to discuss it. They're concerned about their understanding of it or they want to expand their understanding of race and racism.

--African American/black organizer in Hartford

Participants and organizers spoke in detail about how the topic of race appeals to people with a keen interest in working toward solutions to community problems, particularly the problem of racism. Although few people specifically stated that study circles on race attract African American/black participants, responses to questions about participation — as well as the fact that no one suggested an alternative topic as a way to attract more members of the African American/black community — strongly support this claim.

- In Syracuse, organizers gave careful attention to how to present the topic of race in order to attract as many participants as possible. After struggling with this issue for nearly six months, organizers decided to incorporate three components of race — racism, race relations, and racial healing — into the program's title. Organizers viewed this multidimensional topic as the best way to fulfill a variety of needs and involve a diverse group of people. One African American/black organizer explained it this way:

  > We started off with many people who are very committed to the resolution of this issue. And we

I have a personal interest in promoting the oneness of mankind in all different kinds of ways, and getting involved in the study circles was just one way to do that.

--European American/white facilitator in Fayetteville

This presented three unique opportunities for me to get involved, meet some people, learn a great deal, and maybe introduce — if I felt it was successful — into my law enforcement community. At the very least I felt it presented an opportunity for me to understand better why this is an issue, what these problems are, and what I could do to personally affect it.

--European American/white participant in Syracuse

were trying to think about how we would get others who are not so focused on this issue involved, how not to turn them off, how not to exclude them, how not to just talk to each other who have strong beliefs in this. So it was that discussion around creating the dialogue and the pamphlets and all that, that we decided that those were the three areas we would use to take a look at them. (African American/black organizer in Syracuse)

- Participants in all of the Syracuse focus groups indicated that the opportunity to address race directly strongly appealed to them and influenced their decision to become involved in study circles.

> Really, it's just a commitment to . . . trying to deal with race in whatever ways I can find to do that, that brought me. (Multiracial participant in Syracuse)

> The immediacy of how insidious racism is over and over, in that day-to-day life, is just I wanted to talk with folk and hear what they had to say . . . (European American/white participant in Syracuse)

Personally, why I am involved is that people of color need to move forward in this environment. Moving forward in this environment requires an effort that is continued on and caused by things like study circles. I remain actively involved because this is something that can cause things to happen, and that continuity helps that.

--African American/black facilitator in New Castle County

- In Fayetteville, several organizers suggested that the topic of race attracts participants who want to create real changes in the community, instead of those who make the same tired recommendations. One said:

> We had a lot of people who volunteered and participated who cared deeply about these issues and already were pretty open-minded. And that's why I valued their suggestions so much, because they really, they were so thoughtful, they went way beyond what you normally hear with regard to suggestions about what can a community do. (European American/white organizer in Fayetteville)

- An African American/black organizer in Fayetteville offered this view of why the topic of race attracts people of color, particularly African Americans/blacks:

> Because we're continually seeking equality. Whenever the opportunity raises itself to express how we're feeling . . . There are some people in this community that are going to take advantage of that opportunity. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

b. People identified several negative impacts of the topic of race on participation.

In nearly all of the focus groups and individual interviews, participants and organizers easily identified the categories of people who did not participate in study circles and cited the topic of race as one possible reason why some racial and ethnic groups may have stayed away. Participants and organizers suggested that the topic of race sometimes negatively impacts on participation by attracting too many of the "usual suspects" and not enough of other groups of people; their comments focused particularly on European Americans/whites and minority groups such as Latinos/Hispanics and East Indians. A few participants suggested that attrition of specific racial and ethnic groups during the study circle sessions is an additional negative impact, though the specific racial or ethnic group that gradually stopped coming varied from situation to situation.

My take is that white participants were just thrilled to be involved in all of this and that probably came through very strongly, and they probably were very self-congratulatory for their open-mindedness and involvement.

--European American/white organizer in Fayetteville

- In Hartford, some European American/white participants suggested that study circle programs may be able to involve more European Americans/whites if the topic does not name race directly. According to one participant, "if you go straight at race, you'll only get people like us," meaning those who are most interested in working on issues of race and who are typically most involved in their community. Other participants agreed that the topic of race may keep away people who are less inclined to be active in the community.

- In Fayetteville, one Latina/Hispanic organizer shared this view, saying, "Yes, race probably kept some people away, and the theme of race kept some people away, but I think that it kept [away] the people that would not come anyway."

- Participants and organizers in both Hartford and Syracuse suggested that some of the people who did not

It feels a little bit like preaching to the choir. And we want to stop preaching to the choir and start preaching to the congregation. And even those that haven't attended church in a while.

--European American/white facilitator trainer in Springfield

It's hard to keep white males in this. Anything having to do with race unity they find other priorities somehow. And I'm not saying it's intentional, but that's the phenomenon that I've witnessed.
--European American/white facilitator in Fayetteville

participate in study circles on race either do not recognize race as a problem or wish to ignore it.

- In Fayetteville, several organizers explicitly stated that European Americans/whites, especially European American/white males, do not consider race to be their problem. One African American/black organizer said:

> I just believe that the white male traditionally doesn't like to engage in racial settings in terms of the dialogue, because, quite frankly I believe that a lot don't think that there is a problem; that everything is OK. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

Another African American/black organizer in Fayetteville said, "When you talk about the issue of race . . . They [Caucasians] don't perceive it as their problem. And that's a reality. They don't."

- During the conversations, participants frequently used the word "uncomfortable" to describe why the topic of race may keep some people away. In Hartford, some organizers described the difficulties that people in the suburbs (primarily European Americans/whites) have with talking about race:

> Actually they didn't want to talk about race and that's why we ended up doing it about youth issues in general, not about race issues, because they felt very uncomfortable. (Latina/Hispanic organizer in Hartford)

I think that we have to work hard and move deeply to get to people who wouldn't traditionally talk about this stuff 'cause it's too emotional for them.
--African American/black organizer in Syracuse

- Other organizers in Hartford suggested that people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds have a difficult time talking about race and often find it to be a "scary" topic. This fear may prevent participation by some.

> If you want them to focus on race, and from what I'm hearing going around the table is that they'll touch on every other issue but the issue of race. They're not comfortable, even if it's a diverse group or if it's an all-white group, which I've been in as well, they're not comfortable discussing it. (European American/white organizer in Hartford)

- Several study circle organizers and participants in a number of different communities suggested that the topic of race also negatively impacts on participation by such racial and ethnic groups as Latinos/Hispanics, Asian Americans, Native Americans, or recent immigrants from other cultural backgrounds. Some of the factors cited for low levels of participation by these groups include the extent to which people desire cultural assimilation, the extent to which race in America is perceived to be an African American/black-European American/white issue, discomfort, and perceptions of relevancy. In Colorado Springs, for example, organizers reported that people from the East Indian, Chinese American, Korean American, and Japanese American communities were not represented in the "Community Conversations on Race." According to organizers, members of these racial and ethnic groups appear to be either satisfied with what the city was providing them or uninterested in attracting attention to their difference.

In addition to discussing the above negative impacts of the topic of race, participants in most of the focus groups and in some of the original site visit interviews commented on the level of attrition in their study circle sessions. While some participants attributed the level of attrition to the topic of race, others ascribed dropouts to scheduling logistics, poor facilitation, or other unrelated challenges. In addition, while some participants observed racial patterns in terms of who left and who stayed, that is, whether European Americans/whites or people of color were more likely to leave the study circle groups before the end of the five or six weeks, others did not discern such patterns. Since Best Practices team members did not speak with participants who left study circles before the final session, the following views are based solely on the observations or conjecture of those who remained in the study circle groups.

- According to some focus group participants, European American/white people showed a tendency to drop out of study circles either because of their discomfort with the topic of race and the issues that emerged in the conversations or because they did not recognize racism as a problem in their workplace or in their lives.

- In Syracuse, one participant of color reported that those who lacked "a commitment to racial equality and

> To get someone, say, that has just come into community that is not comfortable with language or has language barriers, that is going to be a little more difficult to get that person to come in and sit in a group like this and express their feelings.
>
> *--European American/white participant in Woodridge*

changing things" were more likely to stop coming to the sessions. While she recalled that both people of color and European Americans/whites left her study circle group, she said that probably more European Americans/whites left. Another participant in the focus group responded to this by saying that it is hard for European Americans/whites "to face that privilege issue" and agreed that people who don't change their minds tend to leave the groups.

- Among the Hartford organizers, some reported that they did not see a difference in attendance by European Americans/whites and people of color. Others experienced a drop-off on the part of people of color in suburban groups or in groups that lacked significant diversity. Some of these people attributed inconsistent attendance to the extent to which people of color considered the conversation on race relevant to their own situations.

Ours got down to like three people. . . . the deeper we tried to go, the less people showed up the next week.

--African American/black participant in Woodridge

- In Woodridge, at least one participant of color reported that the more intense the conversation in his study circle group became, the fewer people returned the next week.

- In Colorado Springs, organizers reported that a number of Latinos/Hispanics signed up for the Community Conversations on Race, but then dropped out. Early analysis among coalition members revealed that this may have been due to Latinos/Hispanics' discomfort with talking about race in a public setting.

Based on the large number of people throughout the United States who have participated in study circles on the topic of race and the comments of these organizers and participants, it is clear that the topic of race can and does attract people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Yet according to participants and organizers, the topic of race can also keep some groups of people away, namely European Americans/whites who feel uncomfortable talking about the issue or even acknowledging it, and members of other racial and ethnic groups who feel less personally connected to the issue. The next section presents some of the alternative study circle topics proposed by participants and organizers as a way to address the perceived negative impacts of the topic of race.

2. People named a wide variety of topics other than race that may achieve greater participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Participants and organizers offered a variety of other study circle topics as possible alternatives to race, explaining that these topics may result in higher levels of participation by other racial and ethnic groups, specifically European Americans/whites or Latinos/Hispanics. Significantly, African Americans/blacks did not suggest using a topic other than race to increase participation by members of the African American/black community. Several African American/black participants and organizers did, however, name other topics that could lead to more balanced participation in study circle programs.

a. Some people suggested topics that would attract more European American/white participants.

- In Hartford, a few organizers suggested that both young people and adults seemed more comfortable talking about issues of diversity. One European American/white organizer noted that public schools also seemed to prefer approaching the issue from the perspective of multiculturalism rather than racism.

- Participants in other communities, particularly those in Woodridge, agreed that diversity may be more attractive to European Americans/whites. Woodridge participants noted that the Village administration may have perceived diversity as "a little more palatable" than race relations to all sectors of the community. (We note again that European American/white organizers in Woodridge chose the diversity topic partly on advice from an African American/black coalition member.)

- A number of European American/white participants in Hartford suggested that the topic of education or perhaps community relations may generate more interest among European American/white people. Given that several European American/white participants in Hartford had reported experiencing some anxiety about taking part in a "community conversation on race," these suggestions may stem from their sense of how to make important

community conversations that address race less threatening and more appealing to other European American/white people.

- Other European American/white participants in Hartford suggested that something hot, topical, and relevant to a particular place may result in more participation by European Americans/whites.

> I'll bet you the large majority of the people who participated were inclined to feel this way anyway. And you need a topic, I think, like maybe public education or community relations, especially after a local event, which would get other people to the table. (European American/white participant in Hartford)

- In Fayetteville, several organizers shared the view that education or other broad community issues may attract more European American/white participants. One African American/black organizer said:

> Quite frankly, I think it would have made a difference in participation and the size of the group if another topic had been chosen, a topic that both [African Americans/blacks and European Americans/whites] are comfortable with. (African American/black organizer in Fayetteville)

- A European American/white organizer in Fayetteville suggested that their study circle program might have attracted more European Americans/whites, in particular traditional leaders, if they had chosen a topic such as community development.

> If we could've framed it around: "This is our community, how do we want it to be?" and work from another direction instead of head-on, we might have had more people come to the table sooner. . . . I think more business people would have [embraced that topic]. I think more of the status quo, the white power structure would have.

> We probably could have gotten more of our military active duty citizens . . . (European American/white organizer in Fayetteville)

This same organizer also suggested that the timeliness of the issue is important and that she would have preferred to conduct study circles when the issue was hottest in order to bring more people to the table.

b. Other people suggested topics that would attract more participants from other racial and ethnic groups.

- In addition to offering ideas for attracting more European Americans/whites, participants in communities such as New Castle County suggested that study circles on education may be more appealing to Latinos/Hispanics. Some evidence of this appeal can be seen in Inglewood, where a significantly large number of Latinos/Hispanics participated in study circles focused on education.

- One Latina/Hispanic organizer in New Castle County said, "Personally, I think the Latino community would jump at the chance of doing something on education. We have a 40 percent drop-out rate from high schools — one of the highest in the nation."

- A Latino/Hispanic organizer in Aurora suggested "discrimination" as a topic that more Latinos/Hispanics would be willing and able to talk about, particularly as it relates to expectations about cultural assimilation.

- An East Indian facilitator in New Castle County suggested a topic other than race for attracting members of the Asian American community:

> For East Indians in particular, most of them are first-generation immigrants who came to the U.S.A. for opportunities. So they have been focused on surviving and doing well. And also because the culture, Indian families are big and work is done within the families. The issue for Indian people to get involved in study circles may be that of ethnic identity. (East Indian facilitator in New Castle County)

In a number of the focus groups and interviews, participants and organizers often described factors other than the topic that affected participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, for better or worse. Some of these factors related to the logistics of study circles, such as scheduling, the number of sessions, and transportation. Other factors related more to perceptions of relevancy or notions about the process. People in the learning sites cited the attraction of the process or dialogue model, the attraction of a link to action, and a desire to change the community as possible explanations for why people do or do not participate in study circles. At least one organizer cited the impact of the program's leadership, explaining that specific groups of people may mistrust those who are perceived as the leaders of the effort and stay away for that reason.

As far as impact on communities on color, this has had more impact on white middle-class and upper-middle-class folks rather than on people of color. Yet there is strong participation from people of color. That is why it is good to stay with same topic. More and more the effort works itself through the whole community . . .

--European American/white organizer in New Castle County

For the most part, participants and organizers agreed that the topic of race attracts people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who have an interest in and commitment to working on race-related issues. Participants and organizers also implicitly agreed that the topic of race particularly attracts African American/black participants.

People generally agreed that the topic of race impacts negatively on participation by some racial and ethnic groups, although they offered several different reasons for this view. In addition, people had many different views on which topics might attract higher numbers of European Americans/whites or people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as Latinos/Hispanics.

While some study circle programs have indicated a desire to conduct rounds on other topics — notably the topic of building strong neighborhoods — others have stated a long-term intention to focus on the topic of race. It remains to be seen what impact these other topics will have on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

C. Conclusion

It is still too early in study circle programs' history to assess the full impact of topic on study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism and on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. As study circle programs mature and experiment with different topics, our understanding of the impact of topic will expand, too.

At present, participants and organizers say that the topic ***does*** have a noticeable impact on study circles' effectiveness in addressing racism and on participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participants and organizers do not agree, however, on the nature of that impact. For many, study circles on the topic of race will continue to be the most effective way to address racism ***and*** attract African Americans/blacks to the effort. According to other participants and organizers, study circles on other topics may increase participation by racial and ethnic groups such as European Americans/whites and Latinos/Hispanics and still address racism effectively.

While few patterns currently exist regarding the impact of topic, there appears to be general consensus on at least one point: the study circle topic matters to the overall success of a study circle program. According to these participants and organizers, the study circle topic not only drives the content of the small group sessions, it also conveys the intentions of the program to the community and often determines who does or does not come to the table.

Chapter X

Appendix A

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