

**THE PRESENCE OF RACISM ON CAMPUS: HOW EFFECTIVE ARE
DIFFICULT DIALOGUES AT ADDRESSING RACISM?**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

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JAYLN LEE-EDOH

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Dr. Srividya Ramasubramanian

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I, Jayln Lee-Edoh, certify that all research compliance requirements related to this Undergraduate Research Scholars thesis have been addressed with my Research Faculty Advisor prior to the collection of any data used in this final thesis submission.

This project required approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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ABSTRACT

The Presence of Racism on Campus: How Effective are Difficult Dialogues at Addressing Racism?

Jayln Lee-Edoh
Department of Biomedical Sciences
Texas A&M University

Research Faculty Advisor: Dr. Srividya Ramasubramanian
Department of Communication
Texas A&M University

Systemic racism continues to be an issue on university campuses, especially those that are predominately white. Previous research has found this type of treatment to negatively affect people of color's academic performance and mental health. Commitment to diversity and a positive racial environment on campus aids in the collegiate success of students of color. This study investigates the connection between race and the resources the campus community uses to combat racism before attending the difficult dialogue session. Difficult dialogue sessions involve conversations about racism. The implementation of difficult dialogues has raised awareness and provided a safe space for students, staff, and faculty to openly discuss racism. Successful difficult dialogue sessions have the power to identify what collective actions are necessary to implement social change on campus. Through these sessions, participants were faced with discussing racism that occurs at their university. Trained notetakers recorded the responses of the participants during each session. After, participants completed a survey about their experience before and after completing a difficult dialogue session. Through a quantitative and qualitative

approach, participant feedback from each session was analyzed to understand the responses of individuals in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, STEM, field. Results show that white STEM participants claim to have more resources to combat racism before the difficult dialogue sessions than non-white STEM participants. Analysis of the open-ended responses describes the reasons for these results. Through further research and data analysis, we hope to gain insight into how resources are obtained and used by participants to further implement and improve race relations across campuses.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to everyone involved in the Difficult Dialogue team that worked hard all year to make this program a success. This project could not be done without them. I would also like to dedicate this to everyone who participated in the Difficult Dialogue sessions and anyone who has experienced racial discrimination.

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The data analyzed for The Presence of Racism on Campus: How Effective Are Difficult Dialogues at Addressing Racism were provided by the Innovation X Difficult Dialogue team.

All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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NOMENCLATURE

TAMU	Texas A&M University
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
PWI	Predominantly white institution

INTRODUCTION

National tensions are running high, people want to be heard and for change to come about. Now more than ever is it important to come together as a community with an open mind and ears to listen and empathize with one another. College communities must address racial issues, and difficult dialogues have been proven to be a good way to do that (Ramasubramanian, Sousa, & Gonlin, 2017). When using difficult dialogues, previous studies do not seem to use narratives to embody racial experiences on college campuses. During this project, special attention was given to the actual experiences of students or faculty members at Texas A&M University revolving around racism. After each dialogue session, it was expected that individuals will leave with a deeper understanding of others' experiences with racism and tools for improving racial relations.

University campuses continue to have issues regarding racism, especially those that are predominately white. Feagin and Elias (2013) defined systemic racism as the foundational and persisting structures of racial oppression and racism that have shaped the United States. Racism presents itself in many ways such as racial slurs, discrimination, and racial microaggression. Conversations addressing these issues are needed now more than ever as we see social tension grow around communities. An incident in 2016 where high school students visited a predominately white institution for a campus tour. They were faced with racial slurs on multiple occasions at that PWI which initially proved the need for difficult dialogues (Ramasubramanian, Sousa, & Gonlin, 2017). Even though that incident has long passed, racist acts continue to happen, and the need for difficult dialogues continues. The continued battle to have senator Mathew Gaines recognized in campus exhibits and people recognizing Sullivan Ross as a time

when Texas A&M had no Black student conveys why conversations about racism need to continue happening (Slattery, 2006, Korte, 2020).

Discrimination towards people of color can negatively shape their college experience due to racism-related stress (Reynolds et al., 2010). Lack of concentration, intrusive thoughts based on racist encounters, and increased risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses are all examples of the negative effects of racism-related stress (Reynolds et al., 2010). This has been proven to be the case, especially for students in STEM who feel they must prove they are capable of being successful in that field (McGee, 2016). Commitment to diversity and a positive racial environment on campus aids in the college success of students of color (Reynolds et al., 2010). Promoting difficult dialogues has the potential to promote social change on college campuses. Difficult dialogues are defined as discussions that can provoke strong emotional responses due to conflicting views (Gayles et al., 2015, Watt, 2007). Topics about racism and discrimination tend to be uncomfortable for students, staff, and faculty members to engage in (Watt, 2007). Therefore, creating a safe space for people to engage in conversations about racism, discrimination, and microaggression at Texas A&M was necessary to improve the college experience of all students and change the campus climate due to racism.

Gayles et al. (2015) identified difficult dialogues as an effective way to address diversity issues by allowing participants to incorporate and engage in diversity content. This project intended to address racial incidents and have effective conversations among multiple people of different races. The first step to solving a problem is to have an open discussion about it. Through facilitated difficult dialogues, different people had the space to come together to listen and empathize with each other. Understanding the effectiveness of this program will allow other

universities and departments to develop a program to have these types of dialogues to promote racial change.

Through a quantitative and qualitative approach, this project will analyze participant feedback of each difficult dialogue session and conclude through literature reviews. We intend to use difficult dialogues to foster an environment of empathy and open listening to leave participants with tools to improve racial relations. Through this case study, we hope to gain insight into ways dialogue sessions are effective and what collective actions are necessary to implement social change on campuses, and to contribute to existing literature relating to facilitated difficult dialogues.

Through facilitated dialogue sessions, groups will be presented with journal entries about racist experiences students have had at this campus and have conversations about what was read. Participation was open to any one of the Texas A&M community, including students, faculty, and staff members. Each group will consist of individuals of different races to discuss different points of view. After each dialogue session, each participant will take a survey about their experience. Texas A&M University library databases will be a resource for literature reviews. Project team members will collaborate to facilitate and take notes during each dialogue session. This project will specifically focus on the responses of individuals in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics field. The collected data from feedback forms completed after those sessions will be analyzed. While analyzing the data, special attention will be paid to common themes mentioned, contrasting views, and the overall perceived impact of the difficult dialogue session. Participants' feedback will be analyzed to understand how the dialogue sessions were perceived from various points of view. Analyzing the feedback was important in

understanding how different groups of people may respond to the sessions. This will hopefully lead to insightful discoveries about the effect of race on pre-resources to combat racism.

1.1 Institutional Racism in STEM Higher Education

Being an African American woman pursuing a STEM degree, I experience the effects of institutional racism. Throughout my undergraduate years, I have always been one of the few black students in my STEM-related classes. The lack of diversity in my STEM classes is clear as day. The question is why? Lack of diversity is not only among students but prevalent among the faculty and staff. The absence of representation for minority students can negatively impact their educational experience (Li & Koedel, 2017). This underrepresentation has been caused by the continued struggle to create a steady flow of minority students within STEM (Estrada et al., 2016). When this is the case, minority students are left to advocate for themselves which may be difficult without institutional support. Underrepresentation may also lead to some students doubting their intellectual capabilities. (McGee, 2016). STEM is not an easy path and having a support system is necessary for success. Without that support system, complete integration into STEM can be difficult.

There is no doubt that predominantly white institutions are built on institutional racism. Institutional racism, also known as structural racism, consists of subtle structural policies that negatively affect minorities and put them at a disadvantage to their white counterpart (Murji, 2007). Whether these policies are intentional or not does not undermine the effect on minority students, faculty, and staff. Such institutional racism promotes racial biases, color-blind racism, and racial profiling. Each of these can contribute to the continued lack of diversity in STEM. Institutional racism dates to the late 19th century when Jim Crow laws began. Jim Crow laws upheld the idea of separate but equal. Although these laws are no longer in effect, the

institutional racism roots they planted into the United States are still prevalent. Slaton (2010) studied racial integration in engineering at the University of Maryland. The study concluded that the former president's efforts to keep black and white engineering students separate, which led to black absence, continues to affect the ability of black students to immerse themselves in higher education.

Another example of institutional racism is in how white institutions react to and support color blindness. For instance, fliers where the intelligence of African Americans were mocked were spread by students at Colorado State University. The response of the university spokesman stated that the actions of those students did not represent those of the faculty or staff, rather than condemning the act. (Moore & Bell, 2017). Unfortunately, incidents like these continue to happen.

Although efforts have been made to address racism, where most PWI's fall short is the lack of action. It is one thing to recognize an issue and it is another to do something about the issue. According to Moore and Bell (2017), responding to racism with counterspeech is common, but is a weak solution to social justice. The shift within larger institutions is vital to implement social change (Estrada et al., 2016). Individual work must happen as well, but institutions need to be committed to change. Difficult dialogues can be used to shine a light on these types of issues and discuss how they affect students and what actions can be made to address those issues.

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

Difficult dialogue sessions included participants, facilitators, and notetakers. Participants in these sessions include students, staff, faculty, and anyone associated with Texas A&M. There was a total of 603 participants who completed the feedback forms. Unfortunately, not everyone identified what college and/or race they were, and those feedback forms were excluded. There was a total of 413 non-STEM affiliated feedback forms and 175 STEM affiliated participant feedback forms received (Figure 2.1). Only 147 STEM forms were used for this study. Of those STEM affiliated participants for this study, 38.6% were white, 23.4% were black, 13.8% were Latinx, 11% were Asian, 0.7% were American Indian, 0.7% were Middle Eastern, 10.3% were biracial, and 1.4% were multiracial (Figure 2.2). Of the participants, 57.8% were undergraduates, 21.1% graduates, 6.8% were faculty, 4.8% staff, and 9.5% were other.

College Affiliation

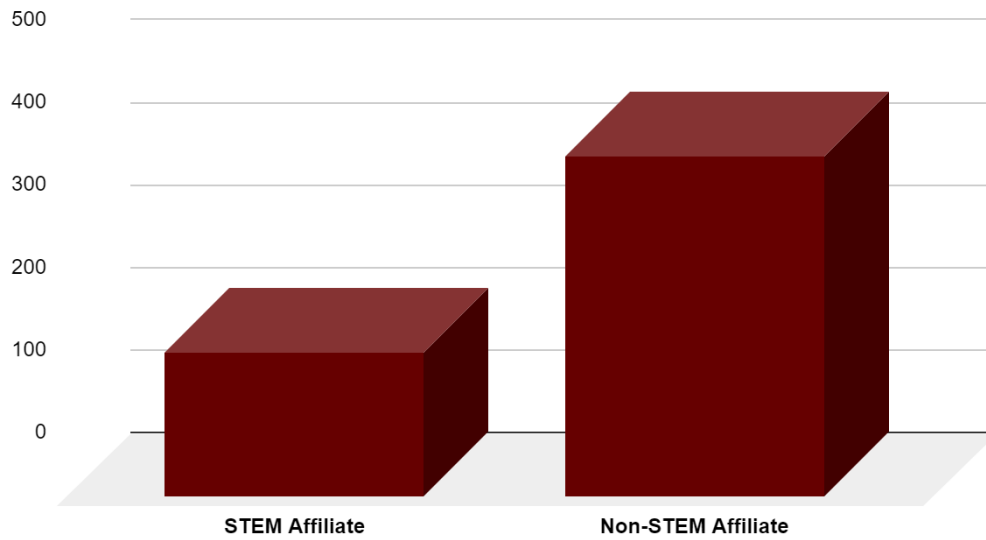


Figure 2.1: Stem or Non-Stem college affiliation of participants.

STEM Demographics

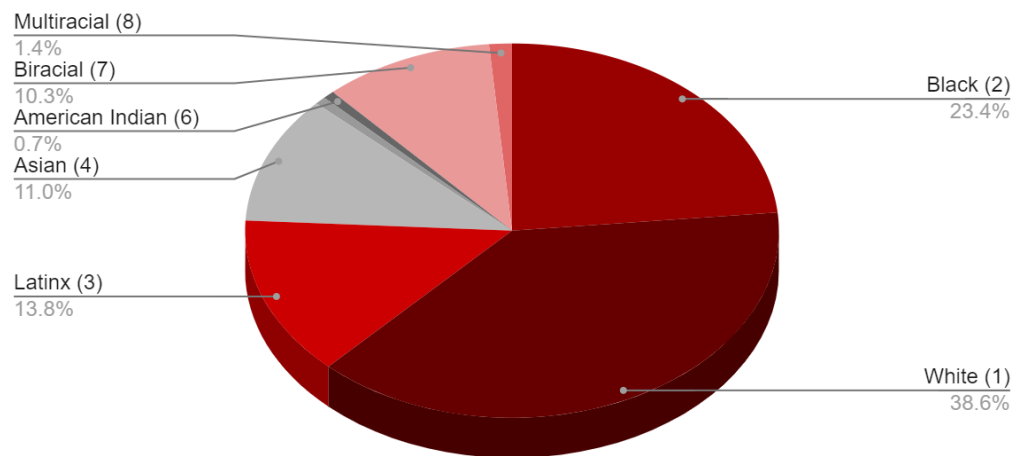


Figure 2.2: Demographics of the STEM participants of this study

2.2 Order of Events

Each session began by identifying ground rules that should be upheld by every participant throughout the session. These ground rules were set in place to make sure groups were able to have an effective yet comfortable conversation. After the ground rules were established, the journal entries were presented. Journal entries are the experiences of racism or discrimination students have experienced on campus. Participants were allowed time to silently read each journal entry. These journal entries were the key focus of these sessions. They were the driving force of the conversations had in small group discussions. Small group discussions were used to create an intimate environment to discuss the journal entries. The questions asked were: ‘What were you/your group’s thoughts and feelings as you read through these journal entries?’ ‘Which of these entries impacted you/your group and why?’ and ‘What can we do individually and collectively to improve race relations on campus?’ These questions will allow us to understand the thought process of each participant. The session wrapped up by leaving participants with resources and ways they can help take action against racism and microaggressions. In the past, these resources were given to participants as physical handouts. Recently, these handouts have been distributed to participants via email. Concluding the session, feedback forms were given to each participant to fill out before leaving the session. Recently, the feedback forms were emailed to participants before the session ended.

2.3 Feedback Forms

Feedback forms were used to understand the impact of these sessions. Feedback forms were anonymous. The feedback form asks for demographics like race/ethnicity, gender, college affiliation, and if they were classified as undergraduate, graduate, faculty, or staff. The questions analyzed in this paper are ‘Prior to the dialogue, do you feel you have adequate resources to engage in discussion regarding race and racism on campus and ‘Please explain your opinion on the previous question. You may use as much detail as you like.’ The anchors to the first question were yes, no, neutral, and undecided. The difference in responses between white and minority STEM participants will be quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed.

2.4 Defining STEM

There has been a broad definition of STEM which has not been clearly defined at the undergraduate and graduate level (Xie et al., 2015). Depending on where the definition comes from, STEM has been defined to include social sciences by some but not all. For instance, the National Science Foundation includes social sciences as STEM, however, the U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement do not consider social sciences as STEM when considering professional visas (Xie et al., 2015). At Texas A&M University social sciences are within the College of Liberal Arts. To analyze the data for this study, it would not make sense to remove some majors within the College of Liberal Arts and not others. For this reason, any major associated with the College of Liberal Arts was removed.

2.5 Defining Non-White Participants

There is no completely agreed upon way to categorize races. It is understood that some people may identify with multiple, or one part of their race and it is not completely fair to box everyone in one category. To effectively analyze the data a tough decision was made to include any biracial or multiracial individual within the non-white category.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Basic demographic information was reported as well as the information reported from the participants through the feedback forms. This study only looked at parts of the feedback form. For this study, only data collected in sessions from 2016-2019 were used. Sessions that were inconsistent with the original codes were removed.

Although there is data from 2016-2021, this study uses the sessions from 2016-2019 for data analysis. These were the only sessions with the same feedback forms with consistent anchors for data analysis.

3.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Answers provided by the participants in the feedback form were anchored and ran through SPSS, a statistical analysis system. To further simplify the data, race and responses were recoded. Race was recoded to either white or minority. In this study, minorities include black, Latinx, Asian, Middle Eastern, American Indian, biracial, and multiracial participants. The responses to the question were recoded to yes or no, no including the responses no, neutral, and undecided. From the SPSS data analysis, the chi-squared data was used to interpret the data.

3.2 Qualitative Data Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

Coding methods were used to identify the common themes that occurred in the qualitative data gathered through feedback forms. This process was completed by using an open theoretical coding approach as described by Oktay (2012). Further analysis was done to understand the findings from the quantitative data analysis. The question ‘Please explain your opinion on the previous question. You may use as much detail as you like,’ was analyzed. Common themes were identified by grouping similar responses together. From there, an overall theme was created for each group.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Results

The link between race and the availability of pre-resources was analyzed using a chi-squared test by running the data through SPSS. The results show that there was a significance between the two variables tested. White participants were more likely than non-white participants to have resources regarding race and racism on campus before attending the session, $X^2(1, N=141) = 5.38, p = .02$ (see Table 4.1). Although the total number of participants was 142, one participant failed to respond to this question. Figure 4.1 depicts that although there was approximately the same amount of white and non-white participants that said no, there was a major difference in the number of individuals who said yes. Table 4.2 shows the exact number of white and non-participants who said yes and no.

Table 4.1: Chi-Squared test for pre-resources data

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.383 ^a	1	.020		
Continuity Correction ^b	4.593	1	.032		
Likelihood Ratio	5.359	1	.021		
Fisher's Exact Test				.023	.016
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.345	1	.021		
N of Valid Cases	141				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 21.45.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Table 4.2: The results of white and non-white participants responses about pre-resources.

Crosstab

		White, NonWhite				Total	
		White		Non-White		N	%
		N	%	N	%		
YNRecPre	1.00	28	51.9%	28	32.2%	56	39.7%
	2.00	26	48.1%	59	67.8%	85	60.3%
Total		54	100.0%	87	100.0%	141	100.0%

Note: 1 = no; 2 = yes

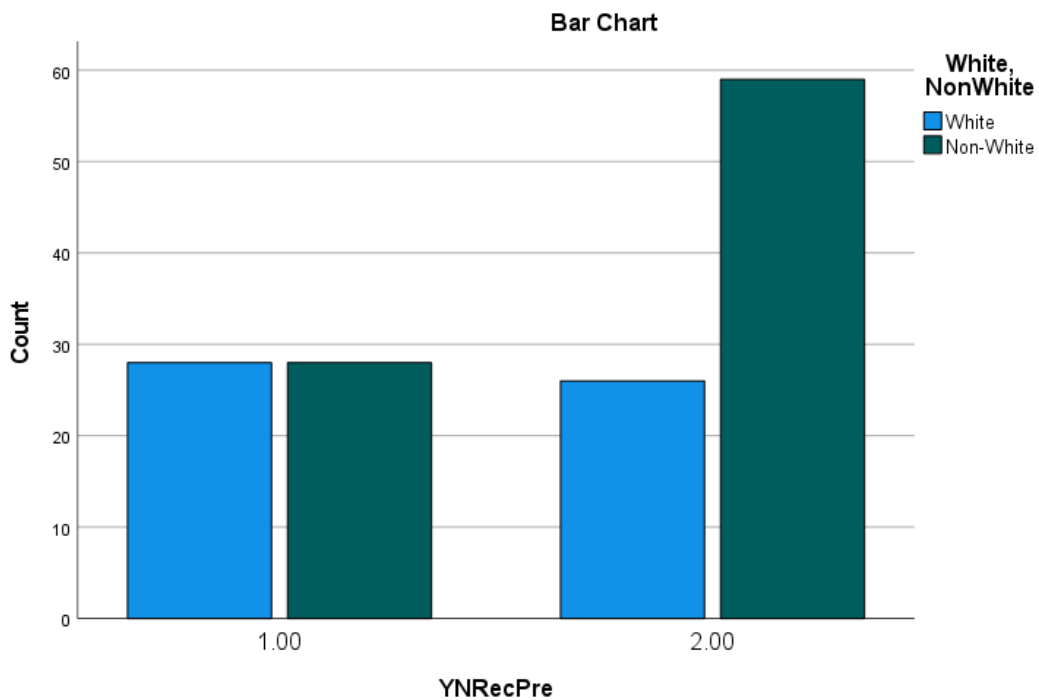


Figure 4.1: Bar chart comparing the no (1) and yes (2) responses of white and non-white STEM participants.

The qualitative data coding identified common themes between white and non-white participants as well as different themes between the two. The common themes between white

and non-white participants were having an irrelevant conclusion and being a part of a specific group. The neglected resources were identified as a theme specific for white participants.

Personal experiences/research was identified as a theme specific for non-white participants.

Table 4.3 describes each theme identified in this study.

Table 4.3: Identified themes and the overall description of responses.

Themes	Description
Ethics/diversity Class	Instances where participants identified taking an ethics or diversity class as a resource.
Being a part of a group/department	Instances where participants identified their friendships or departments as a resource
Neglected resources	Instances where participants identified receiving emails about resources and the University offering resources as a resource
Irrelevant conclusions	Instances where participants did not answer the question about resources but instead mentioned the session in some way or something other than having pre-resources
Personal experiences/research	Instances where participants mentioned their personal experience, research, or efforts that have exposed them to race-related issues and equipped them to handle conversations about those issues.

4.2 Qualitative Research Findings

This study aimed to analyze the effect of race on pre-resources and the impact of the session based on post-resources. The focus was specific on the responses of STEM participants and their experiences with race.

The findings hint at the importance of clearly defining what a resource to address race and racism is, as well as possibly having an additional form before the session to ask about pre-resources. Surprisingly, the data showed that white participants allegedly had more resources than non-white participants to address race and racism before the session. It was expected that minority participants would initially have more resources to combat racism than what

participants. By further analyzing the open-ended responses, common themes were identified that helped understand why these results were found.

The most common theme among white and non-white participants was irrelevant conclusions. Responses including irrelevant conclusions simply did not answer the question that was asked. They either mentioned the session as a resource or made a statement that had nothing to do with resources. For example, one participant stated, "I think the tips offered are extremely helpful." Instead of answering the question about what pre-resources they had, they mentioned they found the tips from the session as helpful.

Another theme common between white and non-white participants was being a part of a specific group. Although these were common between whites and non-whites, there was a major difference between what specific groups were identified. White participants identified being a part of TAMU or spending time with individuals from other cultures as resources to combat racism. On the other hand, non-white participants identified being involved in diversity commissions, inclusion councils, and other inclusion focused groups. A representative response by a white participant stated "I [am] a part of A&M." Being a part of TAMU does not necessarily equip individuals with the ability to fight racism. A representative response by a non-white participant stated, "I have attended several events focused on race relations and I am a peer diversity educator on campus." These responses indicate that there was a difference between what non-white and white participants identify as a resource or a difference in their understanding of a resource.

Neglected resources were a common theme among white participants. Neglected resources does not necessarily mean that the participants did not use those resources, there is no way of knowing that. This term is only being used to describe the fact that these participants only

mentioned having these resources offered to them but did not mention if they used them. An example response of this theme was, "I get emails about them all the time." This suggests that even though some participants are presented with resources, they may not take advantage of those resources.

Personal research or experiences was a common theme among non-white participants. These participants mentioned how their personal experiences or research have helped them to be more comfortable in race-related dialogues. For example, one participant stated, "I have worked on these discussions for the better part of my life now and finally comfortable with these." This indicated that non-white participants came into difficult dialogue sessions with a deeper understanding of race relations and how to combat racism.

The common themes identified show the diversity in how this question was answered. There are a few reasons why this could have happened. For one, participants may have misunderstood what was being asked. The definition of a pre-resource was not clearly defined and was left to the interpretation of the reader. Another issue could have been that this question was asked after the session. It may have been difficult for some participants to differentiate between their pre-resources and post-resources. Lastly, an issue could have been recall bias.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, this study found that there was a significant difference in the responses between white and non-white participants when reporting the resources they had before attending the session. Further analysis revealed that there were inconsistencies between how the two groups responded which led to white participants claiming to have more prior resources. This study should serve as a resource to improve and/or create programs to address racism. Also, understanding where participants receive their resources for racial injustices is important to improve the availability of such resources. Racism is a prominent issue that includes institutional racism, microaggressions, and discrimination. These issues can be addressed with difficult dialogue sessions such as the one presented in this study.

It is important to recognize that there was an uneven number of white to non-white participants. The ratio of white to non-white participants was 71/104 and was not representative of the population at TAMU where white individuals are the majority. The data we see in this study makes it difficult to generalize over a broader group of students.

The implications of this research can be used by researchers, universities, and STEM fields. This study identified that the current feedback form question about having resources before the session may be subject to recall bias (Infante-Rivard & Jacques, 2000). Recall bias occurs when participants inaccurately report previous events. The data found that there was variance in how participants interpreted and responded to questions. This occurred in the study when participants were not able to separate what they already knew from what they learned from the session. This also occurred when participants were not able to answer the question at hand. Future researchers should be aware of this issue and form questions and feedback forms that

limit recall bias. Limiting recall bias could be improved in a few ways. One way is to specifically define what a resource is. Another solution could be creating two feedback forms, one for before the session and one after the session. Feedback forms before the session could be done at the time of registration or before the session begins. This will allow researchers to understand participants' prior knowledge of racism which could help better determine the impact of these difficult dialogues.

Universities can use this data to find better ways to make sure students are receiving the necessary resources to combat racism. Resources to combat racism involving ethics and/or diversity seemed the most relevant and common between both groups. Such findings can suggest that having more classes available that address ethics and/or diversity could positively change the racial climate at TAMU. Even making those types of classes mandatory could make a difference in the ability of students to combat racism.

Although the data itself did not have a strong STEM presence, this data can be used to form difficult dialogue sessions specifically for STEM related professions and university departments. When asked about the resources they had to combat racism, there were a few non-white STEM participants that stated no with one saying, "prior to this evening, I was under the impression that the college had no desire to have this conversation." The data only looked at the responses of individuals associated with STEM. This participant was a part of the College of Agriculture. Assuming they are referring to the College of Agriculture, it shows that some students do not feel supported. It may be beneficial to implement concentrated difficult dialogue sessions for colleges within the STEM bracket.

The truth is, many other data analyses and conclusions can be found with this data alone. More research must be done to understand minority experiences. All in all, well-designed difficult dialogues and feedback forms can impact the minority experience and lead to social change.

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