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Finding Richness in Conflict and Context: The Shimmer and Shadow of Dialectics

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Abstract

Dialectics provide a framework for deeper understanding of complex constructs and processes and allow for consideration of dynamic range of movement. Context, however, is needed to more deeply understand and use a framework of dialectics. Environment, identity, and developmental processes are suggested as important contextual factors. The metaphor of a river is used to illustrate movement within dialectics and potential consequences. The movement within the dialectic process, like a river, is influenced by multiple forces, often conflicting and sometimes in crisis. Recommendations for research, practice, and training that attend to context, language, and dialectics are discussed.

Keywords

race/ethnicity, dimensions of diversity, multiculturalism, training

Floating on a river, I am pushed by currents on either side. If the current is too strong on one side, I become stuck in the bank. If the opposing currents become entangled in a swirl, I become stuck in an eddy. However, if the two opposing forces meet with equal or alternating strength, then I am pushed down the

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river through the shimmering water in the sunshine and through the shadows beneath the trees, alternating between warmth and chill, clarity and darkness, but definitely moving forward. The force and temperature of the water, my confidence as a swimmer and my ability to navigate, as well as the water and air creatures I encounter, all influence my experience.

As with forces of currents, individuals often struggle with opposing belief systems, experiences that seem to contradict one another, or cognitive dissonance in the midst of trying to make meaning of their world. A dialectic framework suggests that these opposing forces provide a rich environment for growth and change. Stagnation occurs when one force significantly overpowers the other, much like being stuck in a bank. Alternatively, when discrepant experiences or beliefs provoke rumination or avoidance, confusion may set in making it difficult to move forward, as the motion in an eddy. The potential for movement is influenced by the forces that occur in context, current and river respectively, as well as the ability and intention with which an individual navigates through this process.

At various times in one's life, developmental processes permit gentle malleable transformation, and at other times, events, crises, and experiences demand that one readjust existing cognitive schemas. Todd and Abrams (XXX) are to be commended for adding depth to the discourse on White undergraduates' understanding of race and racism by introducing the use of dialectics and movement. In particular, the fluidity of the model creates the potential for recognizing how the interplay of forces can change the way one acts, reacts, or interprets situations and circumstances. As I examined the model presented by Todd and Abrams and their conclusions, many questions arose. Human behavior has limited meaning outside of context. Intellectual processes reflect one's ability to experience, digest, and make meaning of information and stimuli within one's environment. This context is essential when considering the development, establishment, and readjustment of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. Clearly, I found the dialectic model and qualitative study presented by Todd and Abrams to be thought provoking with many possible directions for reflection. I will limit the focus of my discussion to highlighting contextual aspects that need to be brought more clearly to the forefront, specifically, context and identity, developmental processes, opportunities in conflict and crisis, and implications for research training and practice.

Context, Identity, and Developmental Processes

When answering the question, "What do you believe about X?" there are at least two paths individuals may travel as they develop their response. One

alternative is to recite an established statement summarizing conclusions about the topic in question. Another alternative is to reflect on experiences related to the topic and form a statement summarizing conclusions based on those experiences. Research tends to focus on conclusions after experiences have been digested and milled intellectually and cognitively. Both paths lead to conclusions that help the participant answer the question. However, the richness and nuance of pivotal experiences in specific contexts are often lost. As a consequence, our understanding of what that individual feels and thinks is abstracted and generalized. The individual's response integrates not just experiences but also messages she or he has received from parents, communities, media, society, and other sources. These messages may be congruent with lived experience, but they also may be contrary. The response is the result of the individual's struggle to absorb and organize this input. Hence, a valuable and rich process is missed that may have provided more useful information than the generalized conclusion. Alternatively, there is greater potential for understanding context and movement by accessing and thoroughly exploring participants' perceptions of actual experiences and their struggle to incorporate those experiences.

If I encounter hostility from someone who is racially different from myself, the way I interpret and respond to that behavior is significantly influenced by where I am, who I am with, what has happened, whose neighborhood I am in, what my relationship is to that person, how I am feeling that day, who I understand myself to be, who I understand that person to be, as well as a number of other variables. There is no way to understand my reaction and perception through my individual Whiteness alone. It is not possible to remove other aspects of my identity (e.g., gender, national origin) or my sociopolitical historical context. My understanding of my Whiteness is shaped by daily experiences and my ability to cope with and interpret challenging events. The richness of the incidents described by the participants in Todd and Abrams's (XXX) study could enhance the model with information about context, identity, and development, if cultivated.

Developmental processes are hidden but add complexity to the reports of the participants in the study by Todd and Abrams (XXX). I will elaborate on just two aspects: identity development and intellectual development. As aptly noted in the dialectical model, participants' understanding of themselves as White reflects the extent to which that identity has meaning to them and influences their movement in the dialectic as well as their perceptions about issues related to race. It is significant that participants were undergraduate students and that 21 of the 22 were between 18 and 20 years old. Much research has indicated that this is a critical time for identity formation with respect to self and others (Orbe, 2004). Identity development involves many different dimensions

including sociorace, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability status, religion, socioeconomic class, national origin, and indigenous status, among others (Arredondo et al., 1996; Hays, 2008). The salience of each of those identities shifts and changes based on context (Hays, 2008; Jones, 1997; Jones & McEwan, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991) and is shaped by their intersections. One's stereotypes, assumptions, and attributions about others often mix demographic or cultural anchors such as race and social class (Landrine, 1985; Toporek & Pope-Davis, 2005) and undoubtedly involve dialectics of not just race but also one's own social class identity. To understand movement within dialectics, an individual's ecology, the complex tapestry of their identities, as well as the messages they receive from their parents, their community, and the national narrative must be considered. To understand the dialectics of Whiteness, we may need to ask questions such as, How are the dialectics of Whiteness defined for someone in a predominantly White community and is that different from the way they are defined for someone in a multiracial community? How are they defined by someone who is blind and is that different from someone who is not blind? How are they defined by a gay White man who has experienced significant discrimination at the hands of heterosexual White men?

Development also shapes the intellectual and cognitive processing required when engaging with opposing forces presented within the dialectic. Todd and Abrams (XXX) discussed the process they observed and noted that some of the participants struggled with competing belief systems or explanations for their belief systems. In addition to the contextual forces that may shape this process, the individual's intellectual ability or tendencies toward dualistic, multiplistic, or relativistic thinking (Perry, 1970) may be a large component of what is observed by the researcher. In other words, a student's or client's ability to navigate the dialectic process may hinge on her or his intellectual ability to embrace and integrate seemingly contradictory experiences and emotions. This intellectual ability may be critically important during times of conflict and crisis and may be where intervention can be most meaningful.

Opportunities in Conflict and Crisis

Asking participants about specific experiences is beneficial in that pivotal events and participants' resolution of those events provide a richer understanding of their developmental processes as well as tools that can be useful in navigating a dialectic process. As Todd and Abrams (XXX) noted, the framework of statuses in Helms's (1995) racial identity development model is useful in that it allows for the complexity of tensions across multiple

dialectics for one individual. It is also significant that movement across various racial identity statuses or stages is often prompted by events or experiences in which existing cognitive structures are unable to absorb or explain the event. As a consequence, individuals shift their internal structure to cope with or accommodate conflicting information and feelings. Wellman (1993) shares the stories of five White individuals describing their experiences and thoughts about racism, prejudice, racial equality, and related issues. Across the narratives, it is clear that significant events shaped the storytellers' beliefs and assumptions. Sometimes the result was a hardening of negative racial attitudes, and other times softening, highlighting the need to understand how people cope with events that challenge their beliefs as well as the role that their context, local and national, influence their perceptions.

Crisis and conflict provide opportunities for struggling with dialectics and increasing the complexity of understanding racial dynamics and structural oppression. Alternatively, crisis and conflict may also be a catalyst for regression into more rigid thinking and a reduction in problem solving. In facilitating this process as an educator, I find Fleck's (2009) elementary explanation of dialectics to be helpful. He explains that opposing forces comprise dialectics and gradual change results from points when one force overtakes the other. This may be followed by the reverse or by continuing the original path. Either way, there is change. There is never a true return to the original state, even when forces alternate in their power. Thus, the process of change resembles a spiral rather than a circle in that it may seem that the situation, belief, or condition has returned to the original position; however, the action of each force has permanently affected the other. The idea that individuals change and grow as a result of negotiating conflicting thoughts or experiences has been very helpful, in particular for White students who get discouraged in the process of becoming more racially aware. Often, increased awareness is accompanied by a sense of feeling overwhelmed as they see the racism in themselves, their families, and their community in a way they had not seen it before. Understanding the dialectic process can be helpful in maintaining stamina through the process. This framework has also been helpful for students of color who may feel frustrated with the slow progress of their White classmates or with their own progress in areas of their own privilege.

Implications for Research, Training, and Practice

Todd and Abrams's (XXX) study represents movement toward a greater insight into White individuals' understanding of themselves and their relations to

others. I believe the greatest potential is increased understanding of movement and the process by which White individuals may grow or regress in terms of their racial schemas and behavior. The following are just a few recommendations for further research, training, and practice including integration of context, use of language, and dialectics in training and practice.

Asking Questions About Context and Experience

Research that attempts to isolate specific attitudes and behaviors without adequate acknowledgment of the context within which those attitudes and behaviors exist is limited in its meaning. Research designs that integrate ways of assessing and understanding complex constructs within their context provide substance and clearer implications. Ensuring that measures and protocol assess experiences, whether actual or perceived, allows for a greater understanding of context and moves the researcher a step closer to the actual process of attitude development as opposed to trying to assess a conclusion. This is somewhat akin to the therapy and counseling process in which clients are asked, "What do you recall?" and "What experiences led you to believe X?" Granted, the research process would need to be shaped differently to allow time for this richness to unfold. In addition to shaping the protocol to encourage this exploration, subsequent interviews would help provide the space to adequately gather this information and observe the process.

One strength of qualitative research is that voices of participants are central to the report. As Todd and Abrams (XXX) pointed out, self-awareness of one's own bias as a researcher is important and they modeled nicely reflexivity in their process. Sharing participants' stories without making assumptions of intent or other internal processes is critical. This can become difficult when the topic is sensitive and raises the researchers' own issues. As Todd and Abrams noted, they chose to qualify and interpret some of the participants' comments rather than report directly as a means of minimizing harmful effects on the readers and as a way of distancing themselves from racist statements. Yet, throughout the discussion of the results, assumptions of intent and underlying processes that could not be assessed in a 45-minute interview appear. Perhaps another method of reporting participant voices may be helpful. Focusing on conveying reported experiences and describing the context as perceived by participants may help the results to more closely represent participants' voices in a meaningful way and lead to greater clarity about what shapes experiences and how psychologists and educators can best intervene. Following this with comments about the researchers' framework or interpretation in a way that clearly communicates that it is the

researchers' perspective may lead qualitative research toward greater congruence with the participants as well as a clearer dialogue between participants, researchers, and readers.

Examining Language

The language of research, practice, and training conveys worldviews, assumptions, and frames within which participants, clients, and students are expected to respond. Language can be a "shortcut" to communicate questions, ideas, and experiences. A difficulty with this shortcut is that it is not always clear that the language is being used the same way by all and is understood equally by all involved. Language also has the potential to confuse and oppress whether intentionally or unintentionally. In reading Todd and Abrams's (XXX) study, I was acutely reminded of mixed messages contained in the term *color blind*. In this context, color blind is used to refer to an attitude or cognitive state. It is well defined in research (e.g., Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Brown, 2000) and has served as a useful shortcut for a very complex construct reflecting primarily a lack of awareness and less sophisticated understanding of racial issues. It is generally acknowledged as a problematic state. Color blind is also a specific sensory condition of color vision deficiency. I would like to encourage the field to consider identifying a term that is more specific to the cognitive and psychological relationship to race rather than using a term that is associated with a disability. My concern is that the dual use of this term may perpetuate negative connotations and stigma that should not be confused with or paired with a specific physical and sensory condition.

Using Dialectics in Training and Practice

Using a dialectical approach in training and counseling is not a new concept. Yet, to develop this area further, it would be useful to explore how to best help students and clients most effectively use the conflict and crisis for movement. Activities that extend intellectual capacity for multiplistic and relativistic thinking may help increase students' and clients' ability to hold seemingly conflicting experiences. Integrating other aspects of the developmental process, helping students and clients understand the interaction between their internal process and external context, as well as facilitating them in identifying and enhancing their own tools may help them approach and navigate through crisis and conflict in a way that helps them move toward antiracist understandings and interactions.

Todd and Abrams (XXX) noted that they were cognizant of their responsibility to honor the voices of the participants while also being cautious about publishing material that could be construed as hurtful and aggressive toward the audience. A similar dynamic also appears in training and group practice. Conflict and crisis experienced by individuals within dialectics often result in struggles with language to describe their experience. In the process, all those present are asked to be respectful of each other. Yet, it is a difficult task to balance patience and nurturing for White students, or students of any privileged status, while providing a worthwhile learning environment for students in targeted groups.

A final note about implications for training and practice involves questions about why an individual might choose to maintain racist ideology or disbelief about White privilege in the face of clear evidence and how we, as educators and psychologists, might allow this to inform our interventions. Possible explanations include feelings of guilt, overwhelm, and uncertainty about how to do things differently. A fruitful area for counseling psychologists is the potential found in helping students and clients gain a sense of agency to interrupt racism (see Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Shifting the focus from guilt toward responsibility and then facilitating the development of skills and resources to institute change can be an empowering place to be as a White person who hopes to be a positive force and use the dialectic tension for growth. Todd and Abrams (XXX) noted the challenge in staying focused on participants' strengths and capacity for change. This is critical within teaching and counseling as well.

Conclusion

In crisis and conflict, individuals may wrestle with two (or more) opposing forces, and in the process, their understanding and perspectives shift. The contextual landscape, internal and external, shaped by history, community, and developmental process, can facilitate or interfere with positive growth. The dialectic process is dynamic and ongoing and, thus, there is a continuous interplay of shimmer and shadow. Along with shadows of hurt, betrayal, and disillusionment, potential for shimmers of greater racial and self-understanding can emerge.

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Bio

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