CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
NORTH RIDGE

Seminar in Ethnic Relations

Report of a graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Counseling and Guidance

Frederick C. Thompson

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Approved by

Signature
Introduction

SEMINAR IN ETHNIC RELATIONS

In satisfying the requirements for the graduate project, I chose to organize an ethnic relations seminar on the school campus where I am employed as a counselor. Being of Afro-American descent and primarily involved in the counseling of minority students, I had little counseling contacts with white students on campus. Considering the idea of an ethnic relations seminar, I knew that it would not only be beneficial to myself but also to the students involved as well. In my efforts I was able to recruit a cross-section of students representing the Black, White, and Chicano students. A small number of minority students who were to be involved in the seminar were those with whom I had regular counseling contacts. The remainder of the students were recruited from the campus at large. At this time I must point out the fact that while this particular campus is characterized by racial isolation (student population four thousand; Chicanoos representing 3.5%, Blacks 3.6%, and Whites 92.9%) and racial prejudice being both overt and covert, the problems that exist on this campus are not unique in any way. Actually, having the seminar on campus proved to be an ideal situation in that students with common racial problems already existing in the individuals on campus were able to come together under the umbrella of the seminar and deal with them. I might add, that this was probably the most unique and exciting
counseling experience that I have ever been involved in.
SEMIPAR IS ETHNIC RELATIONS

Initially the sessions began September 15, 1972. A convenient
time was established for the twelve two-hour sessions that the group
would meet, the time being 2 p.m. after the last class session of the
day, once a week. During the first session the group consisted of
forty students. However, after this session ended the group dwindled
to fifteen students as those who merely came to the first session out
of curiosity elected not to return to the remaining sessions.

The second session was confined mostly to introductions in view
of the fact that the group had just begun to settle down. Most of the
group members were strangers; however, a couple of them knew each
other from previous school functions. Racially the group consisted of
seven White students, five Black students, and three Chicano students.
After introductions the members seemed quite defensive and resisted
talking about themselves. My initial approach was to advise them that
the group would have little structure and rules would be imposed as
needed. By doing this, I had hoped to break the ice. I also began to
verbalize about my own personal experiences relative to racial conflict
in the hope of relaxing group apprehensions about relating to other
group members their personal feelings about themselves. I did not
expect them to immediately respond by coming forth with all of their
problems during the first session; that was not my intention. I
merely wanted them to identify with some of the things I had told
them and reciprocate with the group. This method, I was sure, would
get the group going in the right direction, that right direction being that of discussing their hang-ups.

The next week, September 22nd, was a good session. There was good all-around participation, and the group members seemed more eager to talk about themselves. Bill Williams, age twenty and White, became the focus of attention. I felt this was a very constructive process since Bill appeared to me to be quite conservative in his attitude in everyday life. Bill even dubbed himself an "Archie Bunker," but was able to do so with a smile. I felt that Bill was really making a valid attempt to be honest in his attempt to relate to the group, but I sensed the group going on the defensive as he did so. My first impulse was to go to his defense, but I did not do so after thinking that maybe this was what the group needed even if he had to be put on the firing line. I was sure that he knew what he was getting into. As Bill went on, one would think he was ready to run out and join the Ku Klux Klan.

After Bill had made several anti-ethnic statements, I momentarily lost control of the group. It became necessary at this point to restate the purpose of the Ethnic Seminar, that of solving racial problems—not the creation of them. After the group members had begun to settle down again, I also pointed out the fact that each member of the group must be given the opportunity to relate to the group what he wishes to express and that this would be the only way we could achieve any understanding of each individual's problem. Everyone agreed with this, and we continued with the session. Various suggestions were brought up on how Bill could deal with his prejudice, but after getting no response from Bill the matter was dropped.
Considerable time was spent with each group member trying to tell of his likes and dislikes of minority and majority group members. At that particular moment I felt it necessary to interject and suggest to the group that they examine some of their own feelings of hate, ask themselves why, and try to come up with an honest answer to their question. This proved to be the "walk a mile in my shoes" problem, which they found difficult to handle.

As we progressed into the fifth session, I elected to remain in the background. At that instance I wanted to listen and observe, interjecting only as a resource person when called upon. I knew I would have to give the group time to discuss all of their prejudices before we could begin to examine them. At this point we were almost there.

Among the group there was considerable diversity relative to family income. Of the fifteen students, all the White and one of the Black students were from middle class homes where the income exceeded ten thousand per year. The remainder of the students indicated family incomes of six thousand or less. At this point I was almost ready to equate family status with students' attitudes but dismissed the idea after further observations of the group. I discovered that environment had played a major role in shaping their present attitudes in regards to racial issues. One particular student who I felt really exemplified this fact was Carol, A Black student who had it instilled in her from childhood that she was inferior to others, especially Whites. However, she felt more at ease in the group situation with a mixture of Black, White and Chicano students. This was primarily because for the first time she was listening to the
White students say that no one was superior to any other human being. This gave her the moral support that she so badly needed at this time. The group tried to reinforce her positive feeling, and an attempt was made to stimulate her thinking on the optimistic side. Some progress seemed to be made in that direction. I was especially pleased with this gesture of positive support from the group. It became apparent that the group was beginning to show feeling of understanding.

The session of October 20th, the sixth session, included all of the original members with the exception of Bill Williams. It should be noted that Bill did not come for this session and later elected not to return at all. It was also interesting to note that Bill seemed to enjoy the general put-down the group gave him after making some of his wild statements; I got the feeling he really had ambivalent feelings toward his peers whenever they put him down as they so often did. Leaving the group was his way of escaping the pressure.

When it became apparent that Bill was losing interest in the seminar, I realize now, of course, that I should have counseled him separately. Perhaps then Bill might have returned to the remaining sessions. After all, I had to admit he did make the initial step in getting involved in the seminar. Even now after the seminar has ended, I find myself still reflecting on what I could have done and did not do.

We were now into our ninth session, and I sensed that the group members were fed up with this continuous rapping as the only form of relating. It was apparent that some other form of activity was needed to maintain group interest. The basic format I used was to ask each group member for a report. At first these reports of what was
happening in their daily encounters with people of ethnic descent were quite dismal. The group would discuss what was happening and what could be done, as well as how they felt about it. This "How do you feel about it?" thing was the most difficult, and ultimately I advised the group to begin concentrating, in silence, on how they felt and report those feelings as best they could to the group. Occasional awareness, sensitivity, and role playing exercises were used, and this method seemed to be successful to some degree; however, at times it proved to be embarrassing to the group members.

Lisa, a Chicano of nineteen, found it very difficult to role play simply because she was somewhat shy in mixed company. However, with some coaching from other group participants and myself, she made a concerted effort at role playing and experienced some success in doing so. There was one particular thing I noticed about this group, and that is the fact that it seemed to respond quite well after reinforcement was given for some act or statement they considered difficult to take part in. So it was from the ninth session on to the very end that I began to use reinforcement more and more to keep the group on the right track.

As the seminar proceeded, I found myself becoming more involved in the group activity and not remaining in the background as I had originally planned on doing. Perhaps my initial approach was wrong; if it were, I would be the first willing to admit it.

As we proceeded into the eleventh session I recall being confronted in the seminar. I also recall Ronald Wilson, a Black student, being responsible for the confrontation. Ronald was somewhat taciturn during group discussions, so I was amazed when he chose to
take part in the group discussion. I was even more surprised when I became the target of his conversation. I was asked if I considered myself free from racial prejudice. Of course, my initial answer to his question was that to my knowledge I did not believe that any individual on earth could truthfully say that he or she was not prejudiced; their very existence in our particular society would attest to that. Even though I knew I had completely evaded the question, I expected him to repeat the question again in hopes of getting an answer. But he did not attempt to do so again. To be perfectly frank about the matter, I would have to admit that I was a bit shaken by his direct approach; in consequence, the entire group knew what was happening at that moment, too. There was a period of silence, and that is when I suddenly realized that as a group leader I had lost my effectiveness as a leader. I was not being honest with the group. I should have prepared myself for direct confrontation, especially in dealing with controversial topics.

When the group discussion continued, I sensed a great deal of warmth between myself and the group. It was as if the group members were aware, and I was certain that they knew, I had suddenly suffered a temporary setback, and they were willing to understand this. That little gesture from the group was the reassurance I needed at that moment. After reflecting upon the matter, I feel that my basic reason for being shaken could be attributable to Ronald's continued silence throughout the seminar and then his sudden verbal attack, or what seemed to be a verbal attack, upon myself. There was no doubt in my mind that during this eleventh session I, too, had strong feelings to contend with, and it was time to reflect upon our progress.
Summary

The twelfth session was devoted entirely to evaluation. The students involved in the seminar were able to evaluate the seminar and their personal progress over the eleven sessions. General comments mostly centered themselves around the fact that no individual involved in the seminar could recall having gone through a similar experience such as the one this particular seminar provided them. When asked to tell of any personal growth that they might have realized, students responded with: "The seminar forced me to look at some of my own feelings and examine them" Some of the students remarked that they felt better after being honest with themselves. The students were hard put to answer questions relative to the seminar itself having not been involved in any previous group activity to compare this one with. One student indicated that he felt that I should have taken a more active role in the seminar by helping them over the rough spots. He also indicated that at times he was under the impression that the seminar had no sense of direction and that other group members, as well as himself, were lost in a state of confusion.

I consider the seminar a very worthwhile experience. I also am aware of the fact that I was working with a select group of students in that all of them chose to take part in the seminar on their own; it was entirely their own decision to remain in the seminar until its conclusion. Group participants did not leave the seminar with a panacea for their ills, but I do believe that they will be better individuals having had a part in this particular seminar.