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# Deliberation and Diversity: Perceptions of Small Group Discussions by Race and Ethnicity

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## Abstract

One of the challenges facing public deliberation scholars and practitioners is to identify deliberative processes that address inequities in interaction and foster active participation among all members of ethnically or racially diverse groups. This study draws from cocultural communication theory and uses mixed methodology to examine the experiences of citizens assigned to racially/ethnically diverse small groups who participated in “By the People: Dialogues in Democracy” — a national/local initiative and public deliberation event. One hundred participants in a local deliberation in Omaha, Nebraska, completed a postevent questionnaire, and 20 participants were subsequently interviewed. Data were analyzed to compare the perceptions of White participants and participants of color (African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian American). Analysis of variance indicated that participants of color perceived greater communication quality and group effectiveness and experienced more satisfaction with their small groups than did Whites. Both White interviewees and interviewees of color said they valued being exposed to diverse group members and perspectives, the respectful tone of the group interaction, the facilitators’ ability to guide the interaction, and the opportunity to learn. Consistent with cocultural communication theory, participants of color specially praised the equal opportunity to speak in their groups and the experience of being heard. The results fortify the importance for public deliberation practitioners to take concerted steps to ensure racial/ethnic diversity and egalitarian interaction of members in deliberative small groups.

**Keywords:** race, ethnicity, deliberation, small group discussion, communication theory

The United States is rapidly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. It is projected that by 2050 the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites will decline from 65% to 46% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Both as a practical matter and for principles of equity, it is incumbent on policy makers, scholars, and public deliberation practitioners to understand the structure and dynamics that support effective and satisfying deliberation about public policy issues among diverse groups of citizenry. Although scholars and practitioners agree that engaging diverse groups in deliberation is good for policy making, the manner in which such deliberations are implemented may serve to either galvanize or negate its benefits (Grogan & Gusmano, 2005). Studies have found that racial and ethnic diversity can positively affect deliberation (McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996; Sommers, 2006). However, the potential also exists for deliberative groups to be mired in conflict or exclude historically marginalized individuals (A. Brown & Mistry, 2005; Lau & Murningham, 1998; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1998). Cocultural communication theory (Orbe, 1996, 1998) suggests that interethnic communication often stifles participants who have been socially marginalized because many group communication systems and norms reflect prevailing styles and experiences of culturally dominant members. Although nondominant group members may use a range of strategies in social interactions to negotiate cultural differences and counter oppressive forces (Orbe, 1998), these individuals should not be expected to struggle for inclusion when they participate in facilitated deliberation.

Within this environment, both empirical data and theoretical inquiry are needed to further knowledge and discourse about how diverse citizen groups experience and perceive deliberation. This article reports on and assesses a modest attempt to address this challenge. Using a case study approach and mixed methodology, we examine the perceptions of citizens assigned to ethnically/racially diverse groups who participated in a facilitated public deliberation. Of particular interest was comparing the perceptions of a small group deliberative experience by White participants and participants of color.

### **Deliberation and Diversity in Small Groups**

Commentators have defined deliberation in a variety of ways. Generally, deliberation about public policy has been described as a communication process in which participants weigh the consequences and benefits of different approaches to a public issue (Fearon, 1998; Matthews, 2002). Deliberation requires consideration of all participant viewpoints, and review of information or evidence that results in the formulation of informed opinions about the issue of discussion (Chambers, 2003; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Gastil, 1993). Deliberation is not the same as debate, in which a winner or loser is revealed through a process of rhetorical argument. Nor does deliberation involve coercion, deception, or withholding of information (Goodin & Niemeyer, 2003; Przeworski, 1998).

Deliberation also can be distinguished from dialogue, though effective deliberation often incorporates the values, principles, and practices of dialogue (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelschaw, 2002; Makau & Marty, 2001; National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, 2008). Drawing from the philosophy of Martin Buber (1923/1971, 1947), many scholars describe

dialogue as a genuine kind of communication and way of relating to others as whole human beings. Participants in dialogue speak and listen with mutual authenticity and openness, seeking to understand and learn from each other's experience and perspective without refuting the legitimacy of divergent views (Black, 2005; Pearce & Pearce, 2004; Stewart, Zediker, & Black, 2004). Infusing dialogue into deliberation is said to create moments of deeper reflection, greater understanding, more open exploration and refinement of perspectives, and higher quality decision making (Bingham & McNamara, 2008; Makau & Marty, 2001).

In deliberation of policy matters, diverse perspectives fuel discussion in which all options and their associated costs and benefits can be considered (Gastil & Black, 2008; Matthews, 1998; G. Smith & Wales, 2002). This is particularly important because individuals may not normally exchange political ideas across ideological lines, and instead opt to seek reinforcement with like-minded personal acquaintances (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Deliberation thus heightens the importance of discourse across political or social lines (Barabas, 2004; Elshtain, 1995; Fishkin, 1991). The exchange of different opinions provokes internal reflection and external discussion, may lead to the finding of common ground among different perspectives, and is essential to the formulation of informed opinions and policy choices (Habermas, 1989; Rawls, 1997).

However, groups traditionally marginalized in political discourse such as women and ethnic or racial minorities may be less apt to participate in deliberative events in comparison to the general population (Goidel, Freeman, Procopio, & Zewe, 2008). Nonparticipation of marginalized groups may result from a variety of factors, such as economic constraints, social pressure, preconceived negative expectations, lack of trust, or other obstacles (B. Brown, Long, Gould, Weitz, & Milliken, 2000). A group's analysis of costs and benefits suffers if deliberation lacks diversity and reflects only or primarily the perspectives of culturally dominant group members (Streich, 2002).

Even when deliberative groups have diverse membership, the nature of the group interaction can mar the deliberative process. Traditionally, marginalized group members may not participate in the discussion to the same degree or in the same manner as dominant group members (Marder, 1987), and this difference is likely to intensify when the group composition is unbalanced. Specifically, people of color may tend to participate in groups less actively when the group is numerically dominated by Whites than when the group is ethnically balanced (A. Brown & Mistry, 2005; Li, Karakowsky, & Siegel, 1999; Mendelberg, 2006).

Considerable evidence suggests that oppressive forces of racism and sexism are commonly replicated in the interaction of diverse small groups (A. Brown & Mistry, 2005). Assumptions and unconscious judgments held by group members that reflect social prejudices can alienate and antagonize participants (Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000). Deliberators may talk past each other based on incompatible interpretations of language that trigger divergent reactions (Ryfe, 2005). Additionally, discussion dynamics may reflect different expectations of participants, strong emotions, and spontaneously created power hierarchies in which more charismatic, well-spoken, or well-known individuals receive more attention and deference than others (Button & Mattson, 1999; Sunstein, 2000, 2002; van Stokkom, 2005).

Commentators have also argued that the practice of deliberation is inherently biased against women, minorities, and non-Western populations because it is premised on forms of communication that disadvantage these groups (Dahlberg, 2005; Fraser, 1992). Because deliberation has traditionally emphasized reasoned argument styles of communication over storytelling and emotive, aesthetic, rhetorical, or inferential styles of communication, deliberation is not seen as an inclusive form of policy discourse (Sanders, 1997; Young, 1996). Supporting this difference critique are studies finding gender differences in communication in mixed small group or discussion contexts (e.g., Andrews, 2006; Hawkins, 1999; Hyde & Deal, 2003).

Cocultural communication theory (Orbe, 1996, 1998) further illuminates the processes through which deliberation in diverse groups can stifle or silence communicators who are from historically underrepresented groups or cocultures, such as women, people of color, and people with disabilities. Grounded in muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981) and standpoint theory (D. E. Smith, 1987), cocultural communication theory suggests that silencing and marginalization occur because dominant groups control the rules and interpretation of communication. The experiences of different cultural groups give rise to different perceptions of the world, and one of the advantages of belonging to dominant groups is that their preferred ways of communicating are privileged. In contrast, cocultural groups have more difficulty conveying their own views and experiences when using culturally privileged modes of expression, leading to greater dissatisfaction (Miller, 2002). Cocultural theory thus provides a framework for understanding interethnic communication and the communicative practices enacted by persons of color to negotiate identities and cultural differences, counter the repressive force of the dominant social structure, and make their voices heard (Matsunaga & Torigoe, 2008; Orbe, 1998). Cocultural group members adopt particular communication orientations and select from a variety of communication strategies depending on their preferred outcomes, current abilities, previous experience, assessment of costs and rewards, and the situational context at hand (Orbe, 1998). However, it is reasonable to assume that the use of these strategies by cocultural group members does not necessarily or consistently result in inclusive interaction in diverse deliberative groups, and these individuals should not have to solely shoulder the responsibility to produce such interaction.

Gastil and Black (2008) have offered a helpful two-part conceptualization of deliberation that captures and unifies its characteristics and requirements in light of these criticisms. In their definition, deliberation as political communication encompasses *analytic* components in which participants start from a shared understanding of the policy issue at hand, identify key values at stake, and consider all solutions and their associated benefits and trade-offs. Deliberation is also a *social process* in which all participants have an equal opportunity to speak, obligations to comprehend and consider all views, and maintain a level of respect for other participants (Gastil & Black, 2008).

Practitioners of deliberative democracy and dialogue have heeded the call for deliberative activities to be diverse and inclusive (Heierbacher, 2009). Actual effects of diversity on group discussion have been mixed. Racially heterogeneous groups may have more difficulties than homogenous ones if tasked to arrive at a consensus or solution to a problem (Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Staples & Zhao, 2006). Commentators

have postulated that heterogeneous groups may tend to polarize on the basis of fault lines dictated by visible demographic identifiers. Because of a tendency to group-identify, stereotypes and in-group/out-group favoritism or marginalization might promote a lack of cohesion, decrease in communication, or hardening of subgroups (Lau & Murningham, 1998; Phillips, Mannix, Neale, & Gruenfeld, 2004; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1998). The topic of discussion might also activate subgroups or barriers among individuals within a heterogeneous group. For instance, a discussion about affirmative action or other policies that implicate race or gender might stimulate the creation of subgroups along racial or gender lines (Lau & Murningham, 1998) that would not necessarily occur in other contexts. Some studies indicate that the existence of heterogeneous subgroups within a larger working group may be associated with emotional or task-related conflicts or lower performance outcomes than those experienced by homogeneous ones (Li & Hambrick, 2005; Thomas, 1999), and such dynamics may be exacerbated by the level of social differences among participants (Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009; Lau & Murningham, 2005). However, other studies have found that racially diverse groups may be better at generating creative ideas than homogeneous ones (McLeod & Lobel, 1992; McLeod et al., 1996), consider more information and perspectives (Sommers, 2006), facilitate positive learning behavior among team members (Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003), or increase morale within the group (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Diverse groups may also outperform homogeneous ones after time on select outcomes (Carte & Chidambaram, 2004; Watson, Johnson, & Zgourides, 2002; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson, 1993). Other research has found that diversity within groups may be associated with both positive and negative work group processes, and its effects may be too difficult to extricate within highly dynamic environments (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) or may depend on the nature of the group task and other contextual factors (Maznevski, 1994; Thomas, Ravlin, & Wallace, 1996; Timmerman, 2000). Additionally, some degree of intragroup conflict might be beneficial depending on the task at hand and expected outcomes (Jehn, 1995). Theorists have differentiated between task-oriented versus personal or emotional types of conflict among groups, with the former potentially having positive effects for overall group performance and the latter having negative associations (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

A frequent theme in the literature on satisfaction in groups is that participants react more positively to their group when they perceive that communication was open and that they were respected, listened to, and given enough opportunities to speak (Hagen & Burch, 1985; Kramer, Benoit, Dixon, & Benoit-Bryan, 2007; Oetzel, 2001). Satisfaction in diverse groups therefore may tend to be lowest among historically marginalized group members because, as noted earlier, they generally have not received equal treatment (Grogan & Gusmano, 2005; Kramarae, 1981). However, even these nondominant group members may be satisfied when they perceive that they received their fair share of time to voice concerns and the rest of the group truly listens and tries to understand their perspectives (Clark, Anand, & Roberson, 2000).

In summary, the literature on deliberation indicates that diversity is potentially beneficial to group effectiveness and satisfaction. However, this potential is squandered if cocultural group members (Orbe, 1996, 1998) are disempowered. This raises the fundamental question of to what extent deliberation is perceived as a fair and equitable process. Cobb

(1993) defines empowerment as those discursive practices that enhance the opportunity to fully participate in interaction—to voice one’s views and have those views responded to and incorporated into the reality that is being constructed. If cocultural group members are given fewer opportunities to shape the agenda or express views or if their views are more likely to be ignored or discounted, the potential benefits of diversity will go unrealized (Grogan & Gusmano, 2005). Additionally, the potential problems and negative effects that can emerge from group diversity, such as polarization and unproductive conflicts, may be greatly diminished if the structure and communication processes of the deliberative group support a climate of mutual understanding, learning, and empowerment of all parties (Frey, 2000). Although cocultural group members are sometimes able to enact communicative practices that help their voices be heard (Orbe, 1998), diverse groups that incorporate dialogue into the deliberative process can enhance effective and satisfying communication among participants (Burkhalter et al., 2002; Frey, 2000).

### **Study Objective and Approach**

The purpose of this study was to examine how members of diverse citizen groups who participated in a deliberative forum perceived their small group interaction. We were particularly interested in comparing perceptions of the small group deliberation experience between White participants and participants of color. We employed a mixed-methods design in our study. We used quantitative methods to examine the influence of participant race and ethnicity on perceptions of the small group experience and qualitative methods to explore in more depth any similarities and differences in the experiences of White participants and participants of color.

### **Case Background**

Our data were drawn from the 2007 “By the People: Dialogues in Democracy” deliberation that took place in Omaha, Nebraska. The “By the People” (PBS, 2007) effort was a national/local partnership sponsored by PBS’s MacNeil/Lehrer Productions in which 11 communities across the country convened deliberative discussions about a variety of public policy issues. Participating academic and community partners each chose their topics of interest and convened “By the People” discussions based around the deliberative polling format (Fishkin, 1995). The deliberation in Omaha focused on the topic of immigration issues affecting the state.

### **Method**

Study participants consisted of adult residents of Omaha who were recruited via telephone. A mixed-design sample of ( $N = 3,091$ ) Omaha-based telephone numbers was compiled, consisting of numbers generated through random digit dialing ( $n = 971$ ), randomly selected phone numbers for Omaha ( $n = 600$ ), and listed oversamples of phone numbers from census blocks with high numbers of African Americans ( $n = 920$ ) and Hispanics ( $n = 600$ ). These oversamples of numbers from minority neighborhoods were included to try and

obtain a racially diverse participation rate. A total of 542 respondents participated in a telephone survey about immigration issues and were invited to attend the deliberative discussion. A smaller subsample of Omaha residents actually attended the discussion ( $n = 100$ ). Table 1 displays the frequency and percent of deliberation participants in each racial/ethnic and gender identity category.

**Table 1.** Deliberation Participants' Racial/Ethnic and Gender Characteristics

Participant Characteristics	Frequency	%
Racial/ethnic background		
Hispanic	7	7.30
Non-Hispanic		
African American	18	18.75
Asian	1	1.00
White	66	68.75
Native American	2	2.00
Other	2	2.00
No answer	4	4.00
Gender identity		
Female	52	52.00
Male	48	48.00

Study participants were randomly assigned to 10 discussion groups with 10 individuals in each group. Each group had an assigned moderator who facilitated the discussion about immigration issues among group members. The small group discussions were structured to consist of two periods of deliberation with a break in between. In the first period, after introductions and an overview of ground rules, the participants were asked to share their views about the nature of immigration problems, and the second period focused on generating and exploring possible solutions. The facilitation training that the moderators received focused on dialogue as a key aspect of deliberation and accordingly emphasized the importance of encouraging participants to be genuine and fully engaged in the interaction, listen intently, speak from their own experience, and ask questions of one another out of true curiosity and the desire to know more (Fagre & Littlejohn, 2006). Following the discussions, a survey instrument was administered to gauge participants' perceptions of discussion dynamics.

Follow-up telephone interviews were then conducted by the first author with 20 participants to gain a fuller understanding of their experience and perceptions of the groups. The interviewees included eight individuals randomly selected from the subsample of White participants and a total of 12 individuals selected from each of the cocultural groups (five African Americans, five Hispanic Americans, one Asian American, and one Native American). A qualitative, responsive interviewing approach was employed, grounded in a naturalistic, interpretive philosophy (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Using this approach, the interviewer and interviewee became mutually influential conversational partners as the interviewer attempted to learn about the interviewee's interpretations of his or her experiences. The interviewer began with a standard list of broad questions, listened closely, adapted



questions as needed, and asked unplanned questions to explore what the interviewee was saying (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Open-ended questions were asked about participants' overall perceptions of the small group deliberative experience, whether they felt able to communicate their views fully, the general tone of their discussions, and impressions of other participants. Correspondingly, our qualitative analysis of the interview data was grounded in the interpretive paradigm. Interpretive researchers assume that people act and make sense of their experience within webs of meaning that differ across social groups and cultures (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Interpretive analysis seeks to interpret the meanings that people have about their world (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, we approached the interview data with the goal of understanding how the interviewees interpreted their interactions in their small groups.

The telephone interviews were transcribed verbatim, and we labeled each of them with a case number that was linked to the race or ethnicity variable in our quantitative data set. We analyzed the transcripts using a process of coding and categorization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), an inductive process in which we coded units of text as they related to emergent categories. The first two authors read all the transcripts closely numerous times without knowledge of the participants' race or ethnicity. We then coded several transcripts independently using NVivo software, which enabled us to progress through each transcript while selecting units of text and assigning codes based on our interpretations of meaning. Next, we discussed our codes and interpretations, identified emergent categories, and eventually synthesized the categories into a small number of overarching themes. After agreeing on a list of themes that emerged from the data, we used a consistent set of codes with all interview transcripts again. We then organized the coded units of text under their themes, rechecked our interpretations, and selected interesting passages to illustrate each theme. To determine whether any of the themes was evident exclusively in the responses of certain racial or ethnic groups, we identified the participant race or ethnicity associated with each coded unit of text and reorganized the units of text within each theme for White interviewees and interviewees of color separately.

The validity of our qualitative inferences was assessed by employing two strategies: multiple investigators as a form of triangulation and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As coresearchers, we experienced a marked level of consistency in our coding and interpretations of the data. Although there were several instances in which only one of us selected a particular unit of text as code worthy and we occasionally assigned different codes to the same unit of text, our themes exclusively reflect our interpretations of those units of text that we both independently selected for coding and assigned the same code. We also asked a peer who was external to the study and had extensive experience participating in and facilitating racially and ethnically diverse discussion groups to review, challenge, and push our interpretations of the data.

## Results

### Survey

The postevent survey included a series of questions assessing participants' perceptions of their small group deliberative process, including perceptions of the quality of communication within the small group deliberations, the effectiveness of the group, and how satisfied the participants were with the group. The survey items were reduced into scales based on previous research when appropriate. Respondents were classified into one of two groups based on self-reported race and ethnicity (White vs. persons of color). Group comparisons were made using univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Scales assessing communication quality and group effectiveness were based on work by Kramer, Kuo, and Dailey (1997). Specifically, a 10-item scale measuring communication quality (e.g., "Everyone had an equal opportunity to participate in the group") and a 4-item scale measuring group effectiveness (e.g., "This group was effective at generating good ideas") were used. A 5-item scale measuring group satisfaction (e.g., "I was satisfied with the quality of the group outcome") was based on a scale developed by Connolly, Jessup, and Valacich (1990). Respondents indicated dis/agreement with each item using a 5-point fully labeled Likert-type scale ranging from  $-2$  (*strongly disagree*) to  $+2$  (*strongly agree*). All scales were coded such that a higher score represents higher levels of the construct (e.g., greater effectiveness or greater satisfaction). See table 2 for item means and standard deviations.

**Table 2.** Scale Item Means and Standard Deviations

Scale Items	Mean	SD
Communication quality	1.37	0.50
As a group, we communicated respect and consideration to each member.	1.51	0.57
As a group, we gave everyone's ideas fair consideration.	1.43	0.57
I felt other members of the group listened to me.	1.47	0.56
I felt I could speak up whenever I had something to say.	1.28	0.83
As a group, we accepted differences in members' styles of interacting.	1.34	0.73
As a group, we listened to everyone's ideas.	1.35	0.59
Everyone had an equal opportunity to participate in this group.	1.39	0.60
As a group we managed any conflicts or disagreements in a way that made it easy to continue working together.	1.34	0.59
I felt satisfied with my participation in the group.	1.29	0.70
Overall, I was satisfied with how we communicated together as a group.	1.31	0.60
Group effectiveness	1.22	0.58
This group made effective use of the group members' knowledge and experience.	1.31	0.67
This group was effective at generating good ideas.	1.25	0.72
This group was effective at evaluating the quality of its ideas.	1.01	0.73
This group developed positive interactions among members.	1.29	0.59
Group satisfaction	1.20	0.57
I was satisfied with the quality of the group process.	1.18	0.65
I was satisfied with the quality of the group outcome.	1.14	0.75
I was unhappy with the other group members. (reverse coded)	1.14	0.97

I was satisfied with the overall quality of the group effort.	1.21	0.61
I would be willing to work with this group again.	1.32	0.65

**Note:** Sample sizes varied from 98 to 99.

### *Scale Creation and Reliability*

Factor analyses confirmed that the scales assessing communication quality, group effectiveness, and group satisfaction did represent unidimensional constructs, and subsequent reliability analyses demonstrated that the scales were internally reliable ( $\alpha = .93$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ , respectively). Responses to these three unidimensional scales were analyzed based on a respondent's mean score using univariate ANOVA. Respondents were included in each analysis if they had answered at least one item of the given scale. Therefore, group sizes varied slightly across analyses.

### *Group Comparisons*

Because respondents were clustered into 10 discussion groups, we first determined whether multilevel analyses were necessary. We tested for main effects of discussion group as well as discussion group by ethnicity interaction effects and did not find any significant effects. Therefore, it was acceptable to proceed with unilevel methods (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

Mean scores on communication quality, group effectiveness, and group satisfaction were compared between White respondents and respondents of color. To account for differences in group sizes, Welch's variance-adjusted ANOVA was used; however, results from the adjusted and unadjusted ANOVA techniques did not meaningfully differ. Therefore, for ease of presentation, results from the unadjusted ANOVA are presented in table 3. There were significant differences between groups on all three scales such that persons of color perceived greater communication quality ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ) and group effectiveness ( $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) and experienced greater satisfaction ( $M = 1.43$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) with their group deliberations than did Whites (communication quality:  $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ; communication effectiveness:  $M = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ; group satisfaction:  $M = 1.06$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ). Eta squared, a measure of effect size, indicates the percent of total variance in a scale mean accounted for by the variance between Whites and persons of color. Our results indicate that race/ethnicity accounts for 10% of the variance in the group effectiveness and group satisfaction scale means and 6% of the variance in the communication quality scale mean.

**Table 3.** Analysis of Variance for Perception Scales

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Communication quality				
Between-group effect	1	5.55*	.06	.021
Within-group error	93	(0.24)		
Group effectiveness				
Between-group effect	1	10.65**	.10	.002
Within-group error	93	(0.30)		
Group satisfaction				
Between-group effect	1	9.60**	.10	.003
Within-group error	92	(0.29)		

Note: Values in parentheses represent mean square errors.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

### *Interviews with Participants*

Our qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in six themes. Four themes were shared by interviewees regardless of their race or ethnicity: *diversity*, *respectful tone*, *facilitation*, and *learning*. Two additional themes emerged in the responses of people of color: *equal opportunity to speak* and *being heard*. Although the responses of a few White interviewees were coded under equal opportunity, the meaning of the theme was markedly different for Whites. None of the themes emerged exclusively in the responses of White participants.

### *Common Themes*

#### *Diversity*

Both White interviewees and interviewees of color expressed positive sentiments about the overall demographic diversity of deliberation participants. As a Latino participant said:

We were pretty varied in terms of age, the age range really varied. The fact that the female and male ratio was pretty well balanced; and the different ethnicities represented, were well thought out. I'd have to tell you in my group there were at least four different ethnic groups represented and by that you know like Hispanics, there were obviously people who were Anglo and African American and Asian, so the representation of different groups of people was well thought out.

A number of participants felt that the experience of talking to people of different backgrounds was both a rare and educational experience, because, as one participant stated, normally "you just live in your own little bubble." As noted by a White participant:

My overall opinion was very, very favorable. I personally enjoyed the event and I loved how it really gave me a personal opportunity to see people and meet people from different parts of Omaha that I would never have the opportunity to meet or interact with, just because we all tend to stay in our own little sections

of town and not interact with each other and not get opinions back and forth. I loved it. I would do it again.

In addition to overall satisfaction with the demographic diversity of the deliberation, interviewees consistently expressed positive thoughts about the diversity of viewpoints. As stated by an African American interviewee:

It's only been through dialogue and sitting down with people and listening to their views and trying to understand how they develop their views, I mean that's how you understand diversity and appreciate it. And I think in Nebraska, which is not diverse and where people have such limited opportunities to interact with people who are different than them, this type of discussion is even more important.

Another African American interviewee specifically noted how—in her belief—the experience of being exposed to diverse people and views might have been particularly novel for some White participants:

I think it was a welcomed opportunity, because I'd be willing to bet that some of those gentlemen haven't really had a chance to sit down with an African American or with women to talk about this, because I think in Nebraska people just tend to gravitate to their own.

#### *Respectful tone*

Most participants expressed positive comments about the character of the group discussions they engaged in. Appreciation for the opportunity to discuss perspectives and opinions in a nonconfrontational way was a shared theme among many of the participants. Many interviewees noted how valuable it was to them that they could air their views in a polite and respectful atmosphere: "I don't like to see one person dominating the discussion. I was glad that everyone was very polite and listened to everybody and let them finish." One participant was surprised at the tone of the discussion: "They were actually a great group. Like I said I was expecting the standards to be a lot lower but you know our group got along together, there were no arguments."

A few individuals specifically noted how a positive and respectful rapport among group members gradually developed over the course of the deliberation. As one White participant described:

I think at first before we all talked with each other and got more comfortable with one another, you know there might have been some dancing around the issues and some "Oh boy, do I want to say that because he or she may take that the wrong way," but then after we had that little break I felt a greater comfort within the group from the other participants. I think that's because we sat and talked a little bit while we were having snacks, and I think people were even more open than they were originally.

Interviewees noted that although there were disagreements between participants, they were still handled in a polite manner. As one African American stated:

Oh there were, like I said, older conservative white males who had very definite opinions about immigration and I think everyone was very respectful and let them speak even though it was kind of hard. But you know, it was handled in a very respectful way, and I think the group did that. It didn't require any facilitator to demand that.

One Latina participant was apprehensive about how the other small group discussion members might react to her. She felt that her visible presence in the discussion contributed to the discussion's civil tone:

One of the things that was kind of interesting is that I was probably the only one who actually looked Hispanic . . . So everybody was always . . . very courteous. They understood "We have one of them here," they just made assumptions of who "them" are and "they're here, and one of them is here in your group." So that really I think brought to this conversation a little bit, just a little bit, well we have to be on best behavior.

#### *Facilitation*

Most of the White interviewees and several interviewees of color offered unprompted comments about the facilitators of their small groups. The majority of these comments were positive. As a White individual observed, "our facilitator was very good. I suspect that I had heard that all the facilitators seemed to do a pretty good job, and I was most impressed with that."

Interviewees described the facilitators as having the ability to influence the group interaction in helpful ways. For example, some participants said they valued the facilitator's ability to keep the conversation focused. As a Hispanic interviewee stated, "Our coordinator kept us very well focused on the topic of discussion so someone wouldn't lead astray and then just start going off on some other topic or tangent about something else." A White participant similarly characterized this ability of facilitators as vital to the group interaction:

I do know that we digressed somewhat from some of the questions and that's when the moderator was good at getting us back on track. So I think the moderator, it would not have worked without that moderator pulling us back on track all the time.

Interviewees also applauded the ability of the facilitators to influence turn taking so that everyone had a chance to speak. As a White individual said, "the moderator was the one in control and she was very good at giving everybody a chance to say something that had something to say." The importance of the facilitator's control was illustrated by a Hispanic interviewee, who shared a personal experience:

And if I had something to say, if someone else was discussing, if I just raised my hand I just patiently waited, the coordinator realized that I had something to say, was very good about calling on me and making sure that I had time to express my opinion about what we were discussing about at the time.

Interviewees also noted that the facilitators actively encouraged silent group members to participate. A White interviewee identified a facilitator's technique for accomplishing this:

As a matter of fact, the facilitator went around [the group] and it was a good way to lay out in a circular fashion and that got really, that forced some people who may not have said anything to get input on the schedule.

Not all of the comments about the facilitators were complimentary. Two interviewees said they wished their facilitator had done more to control other speakers. A Hispanic individual explained:

There was only one thing I didn't like and it had nothing to do with opinions. It was just that we had one person that kind of just spoke and spoke and I think she liked hearing her voice, but other than that. What she was saying was valid it was just that I wished the mediator would have stepped in and curbed her a little bit.

Interestingly, a White male was the only interviewee who suggested that his facilitator's inability to curtail other speakers compelled him to interrupt:

I found in mine that there were a couple of people that kind of dominated the conversation. . . . I thought I didn't interrupt too much. But I did butt in a few times to get some comments in, but I don't think I had enough time to say all of the stuff that I wanted to.

### *Learning*

A number of interviewees stated that the discussions were a learning experience. As an Asian American participant said,

I had the opportunity to learn what other members of the same group, what kind of opinions they had, and how their views were different from mine or similar to mine. So it was very effective and I did get a chance to learn a lot.

At the very least, several participants felt that exposure to other viewpoints led to a greater awareness of issues and perspectives:

It made me more aware of other peoples' situations; of adults who have been through immigration—illegal or legal. I think it's just getting everybody else's

ideas, and it also reinforces my ideas and gives me an opportunity to listen with an open mind.

The deliberation also provided participants with an opportunity to confront their own beliefs by listening to the experiences and perspectives of community members with whom they otherwise would not have interacted. In this sense, the deliberative experience led to a shift in opinions and/or knowledge among a number of participants. One White participant recalled a shift in his thinking as a result of the deliberation:

*Participant:* I know I had my opinion changed on a few things. And one point is that I used to think it was just crazy to offer driver licenses to illegal aliens, and now I think totally opposite, I think it's crazy not to. And I just never really thought to think through it until I heard that discussion.

*Interviewer:* That's a really interesting point there, I want to follow up on that. What do you think was responsible for you changing your opinion on that issue?

*Participant:* I don't know why I ever really thought the other way. I honestly can't think of why I had such a strong opinion beforehand because it just makes so much sense there's really no other reason why they shouldn't have drivers' licenses. It's for everybody's benefit. So anyway logic persuaded me, common sense, which I apparently didn't have until I compared my sense to the community's.

Several participants made brief comparisons between their discussion experiences with the news media. For them, the deliberative experience provided a richer perspective on issues than what they felt was normally offered by the news media. One African American woman recalled,

So instead of first walking in there and not just knowing about it off of the news, but sitting there and talking with a person on the side of you, actually gave you a little more detail than what the TV and the media were doing. . . . When you watch the news it's kind of like you're getting one side of the story, and with the discussion it was, you know, you got more opinions or something you didn't, you might have found out something that you did not know about a topic. . . . But it gave, to me it gave me a little bit more insight of before you jump to a conclusion on something, at least try to go and find out another side of it, and then try to make an opinion and be fair about it.

### ***Prominent Differences***

#### *Equal opportunity to speak*

Most of the interviewees of color said they valued the equality that was afforded to them as participants in the small groups. In particular, they praised their groups for providing all members with an equal opportunity to express what was on their minds. As one African



American individual said, "everybody had an opportunity to speak. People really spoke their minds to the best of their abilities." This sense of equality and openness made the groups enjoyable, as a Hispanic interviewee explained:

I liked it, I really enjoyed it. Everyone had a chance to speak their peace and how they feel about it, how it's affecting them and their families. I just thought it was an easy way to get people to open up to talk.

The interviewees of color also described their group members as open to differing opinions rather than as trying to dominate with their own points of view. For example, an African American participant explained how the group afforded all members an equally receptive environment:

That everyone gets to share their perspectives on things and that it is done in a manner where people do not feel that they are being attacked for their opinion. . . . That is important to me. I don't like when someone gets on their soapbox like they are the only one, and they are holding the conversation and no one else can contribute, as well as when people feel that they can't share their opinion because they will be attacked for what their opinions are.

Importantly, the interviewees described this atmosphere of equality and validation as something unusual, not to be taken for granted. A Native American interviewee, for example, contrasted the confirming sense of equality in her group to previous experiences of being marginalized:

And each person got to say what they needed to say with no repercussions, no dismissal, no "We don't care what you said and we're moving on to the next person," there was none of that. It was totally equal and that's what important. And I've been in groups before, several times before, and sometimes it's like "Uh, what you just said does not matter because we don't like it and you're not making any sense."

Several African Americans emphasized the value of unfettered interaction when describing the equal opportunity to speak. They talked about a sense of equality as group members freely interacted and responded to each other. As one African American interviewee explained:

I think no one person was able to dominate the floor with their opinion and I think everybody got a chance to say something if they wanted to say something, and if they had a question to get an answer or something. So I think it was more that everybody was able to jump in if they had something to say or an opinion.

African American interviewees also discussed how interaction equality made it possible for group members to understand new opinions and rethink their own. For example, another African American individual said,

They all expressed their opinions, like in our group if someone disagreed or didn't quite understand, we could be more specific and explain as to what it was. I even think in our group people that were thinking one way, and after someone spoke and expressed and explained what is was, maybe that changed their mind and their way of thinking.

A few White interviewees similarly noted that everyone in their group was given the opportunity to speak. However, their comments did not convey the depth of appreciation, sense of surprise, or awareness of group power dynamics that were evident in the comments of people of color. White interviewees were glad everyone had the chance to speak and observed that some people are "naturally inclined" to speak more than others. As one White interviewee stated:

There was one gentleman in our group who would not talk and our moderator tried to get him to add to the conversation and he said "I'm just listening." And there were a few of us that talked more than the others did, but everyone had an opportunity and everyone spoke except for this one man.

*Being heard*

Closely related to the equal opportunity to speak, several interviewees of color said they valued the opportunity to be heard in a receptive atmosphere. This sentiment did not emerge in any of the white interviewees' responses. For example, a Native American individual described her experience in her group as:

Fun, and when I say "fun" it was like wow somebody really cares what I think, somebody really cares what that person across the room thinks, and somebody really wants to know how we feel about this.

Hispanic participants in particular spoke with satisfaction about the opportunity to share their views on immigration with people who were listening attentively. As one Latino participant stated, "I think people listened and valued my opinions of what I had to say."

Two Hispanic interviewees further explained why it was important for their voices to be heard on the topic of immigration. One individual noted,

I have my own opinion as far as immigration point of view because I do have one that's going through the immigration process. I have a, my husband is going through it. So it really helps me to help them see my point of view of how things are as to that aspect.

Another Hispanic interviewee shared a similar view:

Even if it [the group] wasn't friendly I was going to say what I was going to say . . . because obviously I'm not for anti-immigration, I'm Hispanic. And I see the reality of things even though I was born here in the United States, you know, there's a reality here. And I was able to convey my thoughts and was allowed to share them with the group.

In summary, the qualitative analysis revealed both similarities and differences in the experiences of white participants and participants of color. The qualitative results augmented the quantitative findings, enriching our understanding of the participants' perceptions of their group experiences.

## **Discussion**

Our study examined perceptions of small group deliberation by a racially and ethnically diverse sample of individuals. Almost uniformly, all participants enjoyed the opportunity to deliberate in a racially and ethnically diverse small group. However, our survey results indicated that participants of color reported significantly more positive perceptions of communication quality, group effectiveness, and satisfaction with their group than did White participants.

The interviews provided insight into why White participants did not perceive their group interactions quite as favorably as did participants of color. Although both Whites and persons of color valued interacting in diverse groups, the respectful tone of the interaction, the ability of the facilitator to provide guidance, and the experience of learning from other participants, only individuals of color expressed marked appreciation for the equal opportunity to speak and be heard. Cocultural communication theory (Orbe, 1996, 1998) as well as previous research on group dynamics (e.g., A. Brown & Mistry, 2005) suggest that many people of color have considerable experience being silenced and marginalized when interacting with White, dominant group members. Whereas many White individuals may expect equal treatment or take it for granted when communicating in a public deliberation setting, the experience of being able to speak one's mind and have others listen attentively in a group with at least 50% White membership appears to have been unusual and noteworthy for individuals of color.

Cocultural communication theory suggests that members of historically underrepresented groups adopt particular communication orientations and use a variety of communication strategies to counter dominant group members' attempts to exclude or silence them (Orbe, 1996, 1998). From this perspective, it appears that persons of color in our study may have successfully negotiated their identities and participation in the group interaction. Perhaps in the context we examined—a small group public deliberation on issues of immigration—our White participants did not attempt to marginalize persons of color, lessening their need to use arduous or wearisome communication strategies in order to be heard. Our trained facilitators also might have helped to open up space for persons of color to successfully negotiate participation with White participants. Additional research is

needed to explore these and other possible explanations for our findings, perhaps through the analysis of recorded group deliberations (e.g., Siu, 2009) and focused interviews with cocultural group members.

The difference critique suggests that deliberations could undermine, rather than advance, meaningful participation in small group discussions for participants of color. Few empirical studies have examined the dynamics of group deliberation for evidence of the concerns implicated by the difference critique. Our study does not provide evidence of a direct difference but, rather, suggests that there may be a variety of factors that might mediate or influence any such effects, such as context, decision rules, presence of an effective facilitator, and other factors (Hickerson & Gastil, 2008; Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2007; Mendelberg & Karpowitz, 2006). We believe that this debate over difference in deliberation is far from resolved.

Overall, our findings suggest that respectful, egalitarian public deliberation in racially and ethnically diverse groups is associated with participants' satisfaction with the deliberative experience, particularly among persons of color. To the extent that such positive interactions may cultivate affinity and understanding among individuals of different races and ethnicities, we have hope that citizen deliberation might not only be good for policy making (Grogan & Gusmano, 2005) but might help alleviate racial tension over time. Our research suggests public deliberation practitioners might be well advised to make concerted efforts when sampling, recruiting for, and composing discussion groups to obtain diverse participation. The use of facilitators who are trained to encourage high-quality communication and full participation among group members might also be beneficial. Our results suggest that facilitators should be particularly alert to those moments when group members need help to keep the discussion on track and curtail overly talkative participants so that everyone has opportunities to contribute.

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. Our sample was composed of residents of Omaha, a metropolitan community in the Midwestern United States, and the results may vary for other populations. Although efforts were made to recruit an appropriately diverse demographic sample, individuals did self-select from the initial sample into our final sample of participants and may have had predispositions associated with our study results. Additionally, because there were such small numbers in certain racial and ethnic groups, participants of color were combined into one group to make comparisons with White participants more robust, possibly masking the dynamics of differences among subgroups. Future research should obtain adequate numbers of all subgroups to allow for more specific comparisons.

We chose participant race and ethnicity as our characteristics of interest. Future research should also examine how the racial or ethnic composition of the group (A. Brown & Mistry, 2005; Li et al., 1999; Mendelberg, 2006) might affect participants' perceptions of group interaction and effectiveness. There are provocative findings in the jury area suggesting that diversity in jury composition does not affect case decision making (Rose, 2009): Might the same be true for decisional quality in deliberations? The jury research conducted by Gastil, Deess, Weiser, and Simmons (in press) reveals a complicated set of relationships among juror demographic characteristics (including but not limited to race and ethnicity), deliberations (and deliberation quality), decision outcomes, and juror satisfaction. The same

kinds of complexities might exist for deliberative experiences outside the jury context, and we think research is sorely needed to examine these complexities.

Further research also should be conducted with other sample populations and examine associations between satisfaction with other participant characteristics, such as gender, age, and social class. Additionally, the deliberative discussion topic we employed was immigration policy. Participant satisfaction with deliberation should be further explored using a variety of different discussion topics.

Another focus for additional research is the impact of moderators/facilitators on the perceptions of participants in diverse deliberative groups. Facilitators can have considerable impact on how group members participate and the success of deliberation. In his analysis of storytelling in deliberative groups, for example, Ryfe (2006) distinguishes between strong and weak approaches to facilitation, concluding that facilitators who are trained to balance the positive features of these two styles may be most effective at helping deliberative groups share stories and communicate productively. Our facilitators were specifically trained to help participants incorporate dialogue into the deliberative process, which may have encouraged storytelling as well as more openness and inclusion of different perspectives and experiences (Bingham & McNamara, 2008; Black, 2005; Burkhalter et al., 2002). Future research should compare facilitated groups with self-run groups, as well as different approaches to facilitation, to determine how facilitators affect the perceptions of participants. The possible interaction between the discussion topic and the approach to facilitation could also be explored, as a dialogic approach may be most helpful for hot-button issues that elicit incompatible worldviews and values (Burkhalter et al., 2002; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

In conclusion, our research is but one step in examining the critical issues of race and ethnicity in community deliberations. Including diverse views and perspectives in public policy forums is a still yet to be realized ideal. As the use of more novel forms of public participation continues to grow, so does the need for assuring that diverse views are incorporated into such efforts. However, obtaining racial and ethnic diversity in participatory forums remains a vexing challenge. It is noteworthy that the participants of color in our study indicated such great satisfaction with their group experiences, and the vast majority of our participants valued the exposure to people whose experiences and perspectives differed from their own. In a time when so many sociopolitical contexts often serve to polarize discussion and beget the worst in people, our study documents that we can do better than that, and Americans across the board will be appreciative of having the opportunity to have their voices heard as part of organized, respectful, informative discussions.

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