

# Toward a Beloved Community: Facilitated Group Listening as a Tool for Community Development and Civic Engagement

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## Abstract

Community dialogue is critical to the success of community development and civic engagement efforts. Facilitated Group Listening (FGL) can be used to foster empathy and critical consciousness across lines of difference in communities, promoting understanding and action. After the killing of Michael Brown by then-officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, a community group in the rural southeastern United States used FGL to foster structured community dialogue between African American community members and law enforcement officers. Engaging in FGL contributed to increased communication and improved empathy among participants. Recommendations for future use of FGL are provided.

In 2014, the date of August 9—previously known most notably as the anniversary of the United States’ bombing of Nagasaki, Japan during World War II—took on new significance. The killing of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American man in Ferguson, Missouri by White police officer Darren Wilson, reverberated across the country and the world. Mr. Brown’s death ignited a national conversation about systemic injustices in criminal justice, including racial profiling, brutality and abuse, revenue policing, and racial bias in law enforcement. Just as Mr. Brown’s killing prompted an uprising in Ferguson and critical analysis of the social forces that contributed to it, news of his death prompted three residents of Statesboro, Georgia to consider whether a similar situation could occur in their town, given demographic similarities and tensions between African American communities and law enforcement. They asked, “What can we do so we don’t become another Ferguson?”

The residents explored ways to proactively organize fellow community members to respond to this question. Later in 2014, the Bulloch County Beloved Community Steering Committee emerged from this effort. The group’s name was inspired by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision of a “Beloved Community,” in which community members can navigate conflict through love and

empathy to find common ground.<sup>1</sup> The Steering Committee comprised eleven African American and nine White representatives from local faith communities, higher education (including students, staff, and faculty), community activists, and law enforcement. Through a series of weekly meetings over six months, the Steering Committee planned an event to facilitate a community conversation as a first step toward developing trust and collaborative relationships to address gaps between local African American communities and law enforcement. Realizing the difficulties inherent in facilitating meaningful dialogue in diverse communities, the Steering Committee sought an approach to community dialogue that offered the potential to bridge contention and power imbalances across these two groups, and identified Facilitated Group Listening (FGL) as a promising approach. Based on principles of active listening (Rogers & Farson, 1957), FGL is a group discussion “process that enables people with differing or opposing beliefs to engage in safe, respectful and creative dialogue” (The Listening Project, 2015). A dearth of literature exists on both the practice and impact of FGL; however, the technique offered such promise for meaningful dialogue in this divided community that the Steering Committee invited the creators of this technique to train the organization in the effective use of FGL.

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the concept of Beloved Community, see: The King Center. (n.d.) The Beloved Community. *The King Philosophy: Nonviolence*365. Retrieved February 27, 2024 from <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy>

## FGL Overview

FGL is an active listening technique primarily used to allow groups of people to increase their empathy and trust across all sides of contentious issues through structured periods of talking and listening (The Listening Project, 2015). FGL's ultimate goal is to promote holistic listening without intent to respond, and to disagree respectfully while sharing personal experiences featuring the issue at hand (The Listening Project, 2015). This process identifies common ground, fosters empathy, and contributes to a robust understanding of community issues.

The FGL process described here is derived from the work of the Listening Project, a North Carolina-based non-profit organization specializing in helping community-based organizations address divisive issues related to social inequities (Peace Insight, 2018). Since the early 1990s, the Listening Project has used FGL with diverse communities and organizations domestically and internationally (Walters & Huggins, 2016). Groups participating in FGL usually comprise people from different backgrounds with opposing views and beliefs. FGL encourages individuals to share their views and beliefs in "safe, respectful dialogue that increases mutual understanding" (Walters & Huggins, 2016, p. 1). Groups are structured to address a certain issue currently affecting the community, and the FGL creators posit that this approach allows individuals and organizations to "collaborate to bring about positive change that is rooted in the voices and the priorities of the people" (Walters & Huggins, 2016, p. 4).

Active listening is a cornerstone of FGL. Rooted in the work of Rogers & Farson (1957), Gordon (1973, 1977), and Glasser (1990), active listening has been used in educational settings to help children, teachers, and parents improve communication and project respect and understanding for all parties involved. While it has been modified over time, the core of the active listening approach remains listening to diverse voices and gaining understanding of others without judgment.

Our FGL approach<sup>2</sup> begins with an overall large-group orientation to the process. Emphasis is placed on expressing gratitude for participation and establishing an equitable shared space. Before dividing into small groups, a lead facilitator

describes the purpose and guidelines of FGL and reads a "contract," or series of rules and norms governing the small-group conversations (e.g., listening intently, not interrupting speakers, adhering to time limits). The contract also includes a clause to maintain the integrity of the process; anyone not abiding by the shared rules or norms is asked to leave the group. All participants verbally consent to abide by the contract.

Each small group is led by a facilitator who has received training in the FGL process. Facilitators do not respond to the questions; rather, they manage the group discussion and ensure everyone follows the contract. Small groups usually comprise no more than five people, not counting the facilitator and (if desired) notetaker. A notetaker may be used if the results of each small group are to be compiled into a larger, more detailed report. After the facilitator reiterates key points from the contract, the group agrees on how to manage time limits for each response. The facilitator introduces the first question, and one by one, the participants answer, uninterrupted, in an allotted time (usually 1 or 2 minutes, provided all small-group participants have the same amount of time). After all participants have responded to a question, the facilitator then checks in with each person, verbally reviewing their responses to ensure they were heard accurately. If discrepancies arise, participants can briefly clarify. Then, the facilitator poses the next question, beginning with a different person so that no single individual sets the tone for every question. When all smaller groups have completed their questions, they converge into one large group for a structured debriefing in which participants reflect on the information heard, quality of the process, and next steps—individually and collectively.

## Review of Relevant Literature and Theoretical Framework

The need for an approach to community dialogue in diverse and even contentious communities, rife with power imbalance, extends well beyond law enforcement–community relations. Practitioners of community development and civic engagement, as well as scholars engaging in participatory research, value and seek community participation. Even researchers in the historically numbers-driven field of public

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<sup>2</sup> We differentiate our approach, developed in collaboration with The Listening Project to meet local needs, from the broader approach of "facilitated group listening," which refers to any approach to group discussions where a facilitator is present to encourage active listening among participants.

policy increasingly acknowledge the importance of including community perceptions when conducting policy analysis and evaluation. Broad, inclusive participation from communities is crucial for community engagement and empowerment and enhances the legitimacy of policy decisions, leading to more effective and equitable policy outcomes (Fung & Wright, 2003). Diverse community voices give valuable contextual information on various problems and solutions, supporting development of more effective, sustainable programs and policies (Page, 2007; Paulin, 2006; Surowiecki, 2004).

Community dialogue is at the heart of civil society, the ways in which we come together with others to make our interests known and shape our communities, that is “the human scale of politics” (Levine, 2013, p. 14). Participation serves as its own selective incentive—taking part in shaping collective action facilitates skill-building and self-efficacy, increasing the likelihood of future participation. This process is referred to as the “school of democracy hypothesis,” adapted from de Tocqueville’s writings on the benefits of voluntary associations (Halpern, 2005; Lichterman, 2005; McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Similarly, community input enables better applied research, allowing researchers to solve **real** problems of community importance rather than simply studying problems of interest to scholars (Doornbos et al., 2015; Hossain, 2019; Israel et al., 2001; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

Despite its varied benefits, community participation has its challenges. First, community-member engagement can be an arduous endeavor. Determining whose voice must be heard to elicit a range of perspectives in a layered, nested, diverse community—and creating a space where those voices are amplified—is a lengthy, time-consuming process. As articulated in a panel discussion on the value of community input in program design and evaluation at the Association for Public Policy and Management conference, “Relationships move at the speed of trust” (Hossain, 2019). Gaining trust as a researcher or practitioner, particularly when one is from outside of the community, can be difficult. Community participation can also reproduce existing power structures, undermining inclusivity. Participatory research in the social sciences, particularly Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), highlights the need for equitable community engagement. However, inequality of participation is often evident in practice (Israel et al., 2001; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Forums for community dialogue often favor wealthier, more

educated individuals, diminishing contributions from individuals experiencing disadvantage such as racial/ethnic minoritized groups, women, and the poor—especially those with intersecting marginalized identities (Levinson, 2003; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001). Participation can also privilege voices with skills and expertise, robbing many of the ability and opportunity to build self-efficacy. Those with skills in public speaking and debate, experience speaking in group settings, and knowledge of community issues being discussed are more likely to speak during community discussions. Even when invited to participate in group deliberations, women and racial/ethnic minoritized groups participate less often, and when they do speak, their views are less likely to be acknowledged by others (Young, 2001).

The “dark side” of community participation posits that those with more ideologically extreme views are more likely to dominate conversations in venues for community dialogue than those with more moderate views (Fiorina, 1999). Additionally, rather than moving toward a reasoned, multifaceted point of view, individuals often leave group deliberation pushed more toward the extremes of their pre-deliberation views (Sunstein, 1999). Public opinion research supports that, on average, African American and White individuals, as well as men and women, hold widely different views on public issues (Cochran & Sanders, 2009; Eagly et al., 2004; Fox & Oxley, 2015; Kinder & Winter, 2001; McDermott, 1994; Wilson & Dunham, 2001). Without the context to understand different lived experiences, viewpoints of racial/ethnic and gender minority groups may seem extreme from the viewpoint of the majority (Levinson, 2003). Taken together, this means that with traditional methods of community dialogue, a demographically and ideologically diverse group may emerge more divided after deliberation than before.

We contend that FGL offers a means to overcome barriers to inclusive participation and the negative outcomes often associated with participatory community dialogue, rendering it useful to a range of scholars and practitioners seeking community input. The FGL process ensures that group members actively listen to one another, rather than prepare to defend their own viewpoints, as is common in many group discussion approaches. It is well documented that active listening builds trust. FGL is a useful tool to build trust among community members as well as with researchers or practitioners entering a community (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Lloyd et al.,

2015; Nadler & Simerly, 2006; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). By centering and valuing each participant's lived experience, FGL offers a path to redress power imbalances and foster cultural humility (Hook et al., 2013; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Each person is an expert on their own lived experience; therefore, FGL breaks down the "tyranny of knowledge" and expertise that dominates many community dialogues. A carefully and intentionally crafted FGL does not privilege the skilled, instead placing value on broad ranges of perspectives. In the FGL process, all participants' voices are heard, removing the likelihood of hearing only extreme voices and reducing the likelihood of group divisiveness. FGL, then, may be useful for practitioners and researchers seeking to include and center community members' voices.

Freire (1970/2000) recognized the power of dialogue where all are able to speak equally, rather than individuals speaking for one another, as essential to transforming social institutions. Speaking from lived experience and hearing the lived experiences of others is the starting point for political action. Recognizing that listening to others is essential to a healthy democracy, a movement has emerged in recent years, a "bridging field" of organizations working to "[bring] Americans together across differences to listen, understand each other, and discover common interests" (Listen First Project, 2022a, para. 3). Scholars note that listening across difference is a powerful tool in civic life, but note shortcomings in traditional approaches to community dialogue (Barthold, 2020; Blades & Parsa, 2021; Hendriks et al., 2019). It follows that FGL may be considered a powerful strategy in the civic renewal movement, a term coined by Sirianni and Friedland (2005) to unite grassroots, citizen-centered organizations, working to "enhance the ability of citizens to do the everyday work of the republic" (p.1). The practices of civic renewal organizations fall into three clusters: community organizing and advocacy; political reform and civic education; and deliberation and dialogue. Together, they seek to broaden and deepen democratic work, promoting citizens' capacity for collective action and self-government (Levine & Liu, 2015). Deliberation, especially among those with different opinions and experiences, cultivates common ground that facilitates collective action. A key goal of the civic renewal movement is to encourage citizen deliberation not limited to policy issues, and instead "infuse talking and listening" with

diverse community members into everyday life; FGL offers such an opportunity to translate these elements into action (Tufts Alumni, 2016).

## Research Approach

In spring 2015, a shift in leadership and membership of the Beloved Community Steering Committee to include public health and civic engagement scholars led to a new lens through which to view FGL. While the FGL in this case study was completed by practitioners, they maintained detailed notes to better understand the process and impact of the event on participants. While not an exact transcript, notetakers for FGL were instructed to capture the participants' exact words, when possible, to affirm that the participants had been heard accurately. Due to the member-checking inherent in the FGL process—the facilitator reviews each participant's responses at the end of each round and gives participants an opportunity to affirm or correct the notes—notes from this FGL event were well suited for qualitative analysis.

After participating in other FGL events, and noting the potential of FGL to overcome limitations of current approaches to community dialogue, the authors obtained retroactive IRB approval in 2020 to examine the notes from the 2015 FGL event for research purposes. We then used deductive coding to investigate the following research questions:

1. Can FGL overcome limitations of approaches to community dialogue, such as difficulty building trust, lack of broad and equitable inclusion, and divisiveness?
2. Can FGL be used as a tool for civic renewal, as defined by Sirianni & Friedland (2005) and Levine (2013)?

Rather than a rigorous empirical study of FGL, we use a practice-informed case-study approach (Chynoweth, 2013) to bring the FGL tool into focus for use by practitioners and researchers seeking to facilitate broadly participative community dialogue.

## Statement of Positionality

This is a collaborative work with seven authors. All authors are active or past members of the Beloved Community organization referenced in this case study. Authors five, six, and seven served as facilitators during the FGL event highlighted in the case study. Individually, we are a civic engagement scholar (author 2), public health scholars (authors 1, 3, 4, and 6), community activists (authors 5 and

7), and a retired educator (author 5). Collectively, we approach our work with Beloved Community as community-development practitioners, not as researchers; however, our expertise and associated research interests offer a lens through which we interpret our experiences.

### Case Study

The Steering Committee used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants representing a range of identities and experiences. Twenty-nine participants were recruited to participate: African American youth aged 16–25 years ( $n = 8$ ), African American community leaders ( $n = 6$ ), and law enforcement officers from local agencies of diverse racial identities ( $n = 15$ ) (McCollar et al., 2016). The FGL session was a full-day event, opening with greetings from Steering Committee members and an overview of the agenda and process. Following the overview, participants were divided into seven small, heterogeneous groups of 4–5, comprising African American youth, African American community leaders, and officers. Each group was guided through the FGL process by a trained facilitator (all members of the Steering Committee), while a notetaker documented the proceedings of each group. All small-group facilitation protocols were piloted by Steering Committee members one month prior to the actual event.

In each group, the facilitator posed a prescribed question, and each participant was given two minutes of uninterrupted time to respond. Stopwatches were used to mark time for each person. If a person's response was less than two minutes, they were still granted the full amount of time in case new ideas or reflections emerged after their initial remarks. Each group participated in two rounds of questions, separated by a lunch provided by the Steering Committee. Following the two rounds of FGL, all participants, facilitators, and notetakers reconvened as a large group to debrief about the process, new insights gained, emerging questions, and suggestions for next steps. In addition to the debriefing, participants completed two forms. The process evaluation feedback form consisted of ten items on a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 4 = "strongly agree") to evaluate the quality of the FGL experience, along with two open-ended questions to identify what worked best and what could be improved about the process. In addition, the individual debriefing form included five open-ended questions for participants to

document personal insights and reflections from the day's dialogues, and four five-point Likert-type items assessing changes in comfort in discussing the topic in heterogeneous groups (1 = "very uncomfortable" to 5 = "very comfortable") from before to after the FGL.

After the FGL session, all notes from both notetakers and facilitators were collected and typed. The Steering Committee members organized into pairs, and each pair was assigned one of the nine listening session questions to analyze. Within each pair, Steering Committee members coded the responses independently using an inductive approach, and then met to compare codes and reach consensus. Once all pairs had completed their thematic analysis, the larger Steering Committee met to review all themes and provide additional input. Before publicly sharing results, the Steering Committee sent draft copies of the summary report to all FGL participants for member-checking, and held a debriefing meeting for participants in which the summary was formally presented for their feedback.

### Findings

*Can FGL overcome limitations of approaches to community dialogue, such as difficulty building trust, lack of broad and equitable inclusion, and divisiveness?*

**Building Trust.** At the beginning of the small-group FGL sessions, participants were asked to share their hopes and concerns about participating in the session. Both groups acknowledged the lack of trust between the two, and the willingness to build trust. Individuals from all small groups strongly stated that there is a lack of trust and respect between law enforcement and African American communities. Many of the responses were very personal, reflecting that they personally felt mistrusted by a member of the opposite group. During the debriefing, participants from both law enforcement and the community indicated development of empathy and trust, and an increased awareness of the shared humanity between the groups. One community member noted that hearing from police officers and other community members "softens and opens my heart and reminds me to see everyone as fully human." Officers echoed a similar theme, of seeing community members as individuals and seeing one another as human. Community members particularly expressed increased trust in communicating with law enforcement. On the individual debriefing form, community members



indicated their general comfort with talking openly about tensions between African American communities and law enforcement increased from a mean of 3.56 on a 5-point scale before the FGL session to a mean of 4.06 after participating. Community members reported that their general comfort with interacting with law enforcement officers increased from a mean of 3.68 before the FGL session to a mean of 4.43 after participating.

**Equitable Inclusion.** The FGL process, with intentionally heterogeneous small groups and equal time for each group member to speak, ensures broad and equitable inclusion of participants. On the process evaluation form, all participants agreed that they felt comfortable to speak freely about their thoughts and experiences during the session (mean = 3.83 on a 4-point scale). Reflecting on what parts of the FGL process worked best, a theme that emerged from both law enforcement and community members was that the small-group sessions gave everyone an opportunity to speak. As one participant remarked, the best part was that “everybody got a chance to speak.” All participants indicated that they remained attentive and engaged while others were speaking throughout the small-group session (mean = 3.82 on a 4-point scale).

**Overcoming Divisiveness.** Participants’ responses during the FGL small-group session demonstrated a clear divide between law enforcement officers and African American communities. Despite living and working locally, there was little evidence that the groups considered themselves part of the same community. Themes of distrust, misunderstanding of lived experiences, and stereotypes that were seen as a result of media presentations and historical relationships between the community and police officers confirmed that the two groups began the FGL process very divided. Both community members and law enforcement reported they emerged from the process with a better understanding of the other side’s perspective. Several community members indicated that they were able to better understand the challenges faced by law enforcement officers and law enforcement officers noted a better understanding of the fear and mistrust of police officers among community members. As one officer noted, “I know the stress of being targeted as a police officer, but I can take off my uniform. ... The Black community can’t change their skin to get an opportunity to not be in fear.” From the process evaluation form, all participants agreed that the responses from other group members helped them to understand other people’s perspectives (mean =

3.64 on a 4-point scale). One participant reported that the best part of the process was “the way that we were grouped with others so that we could see different perspectives.”

*Can FGL be used as a tool for civic renewal, as defined by Sirianni & Friedland (2005) and Levine (2013)?*

We found that our FGL process encouraged talking and listening with diverse community members and, more importantly, contributed to the capacity for collective action. As discussed above, participants began the FGL session very divided. Shared hopes included finding common ground and looking for understanding, finding positive and helpful outcomes, and increased awareness of everyone’s humanity. Participants identified misconceptions, stereotypes, and a lack of trust between law enforcement and the African American community. Responses demonstrated a clear separation between officers and African American communities. Many participants, particularly officers, spoke about “choosing sides” or being seen as choosing sides. Both “sides” indicated that they wanted to be seen as people, rather than just representatives of a group. Themes that emerged from participants as they reflected on the FGL process were that communicating with members of the other “side” was helpful in facilitating understanding and in moving toward overcoming problems between the two groups. One participant reflected, “Small groups helped everyone to have a more clear understanding of the problem ... and was more solution-oriented. I felt extremely optimistic after small groups.” Both officers and community members agreed that getting to know each other as individuals would facilitate improved relations between the two groups. Reflecting on the most effective next step to improve relationships between African American communities and law enforcement, both groups remarked on the power of talking and listening during the FGL process to effect change. One community member stated the most effective next step would be “more facilitated listening sessions.” Another community member mentioned that the most effective way to improve relationships would be to “learn about one another” through events such as FGL. Officers noted that change could be achieved through “more one-on-one open discussion,” and “more events like this with more people.”

Finally, participants were asked about concrete action steps they planned to take after participating in the FGL session; the themes

that emerged supported activities that would contribute to civic renewal. One officer indicated that they planned to “meet and educate more people in the community on how we can help each other change the environment.” Others stated they would “listen more and listen without talking” and “have more conversations with people of color.” Further, an officer committed to “make more time to attempt communication.” One African American community member indicated they would “become a better listener.” Another committed to “do more to help the community.” Both groups indicated that after the FGL session, they realized that improving relations between law enforcement and the community would take effort on both sides, and indicated a willingness to engage in this work.

## Discussion

As exemplified in the case study, FGL can be an effective tool for civic engagement and critical community dialogue. FGL creates a structured space that fosters more equitable communication and empathy, particularly between groups that may be considered oppositional. This can lead to finding common ground and can serve as the foundation for shared problem-solving and agenda-setting for community-improvement efforts. We find evidence that FGL can be used to overcome some of the limitations of more well-known approaches to community dialogue and, more broadly, can be used as a tool for civic renewal. Further, our findings situate the work of Bulloch County Beloved Community in the emerging bridging movement, a coalition of community organizations who seek to “aggregate, align, and amplify” efforts to bring Americans together across lines of difference in an increasingly divided society (Listen First Project, 2022b, para. 1).

Trust is a critical component of effective community dialogue (Bernstein & Isaac, 2023). FGL contributes to establishing trust among diverse community members through the use of small-group discussions, carefully crafted questions that focus on introspection, and the facilitators’ establishment of an equitable space that does not privilege any one person’s voice over another’s. The application of uniform time limits for each speaker, combined with emphasis on active listening, creates space in which participants can learn from the experiences of others without debate and find common ground with others who may be significantly different from them. FGL offers a means to build civic

relationships, characterized by “loyalty, trust, and hope” (Tufts Alumni, 2016), the very foundation of collective efficacy. Trust is an essential component of social capital, defined as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). Communities with higher levels of social capital are more likely to engage in collective action (Helliwell & Putnam, 1995; Knack, 2002; Ostrom, 1994; Putnam, 1993; Rydin & Pennington, 2000). The starting point for collective action is building civic relationships, which are “predicated on the value of the other person as a fellow citizen, seen as someone who should be encouraged to participate in the common life” (Levine, 2013, p. 56), and facilitated by talking and listening. Levine articulates the principles and strategies of the emerging civic renewal movement in a book-length invitation to join the movement to do work that is “deliberative, educational, experiential, loyal, hopeful, democratic, and open to a wide range of fellow citizens” (2013, p. 181). Levine refers to deliberation, collaboration, and organizing to overcome barriers to participation as part of the “virtuous cycle” of civic renewal (Tufts Alumni, 2016). As anyone who wishes to participate in FGL is welcome, it fits Levine’s criteria as a fundamentally civic strategy, as it “treats citizenship (membership in a community) as a sufficient condition and does not privilege status, expertise, or power” (Levine, 2013, p. 26).

Our goal for this manuscript is to shed light on this powerful tool, and ensure that it is accessible to practitioners and researchers that could build community capacity for collective action by using FGL. Certainly, a more rigorous empirical approach to examining the benefits of FGL would be informative. We recommend future directions take a practice-based research approach to empirically testing the benefits of FGL for community dialogue, building civic relationships, collective efficacy, and civic action. As the processes presented here align with efforts of other organizations in the bridging field, utilizing the Social Cohesion Impact Measurement (SCIM) tool to examine the impact of FGL on attitudes and norms related to bridging divides between groups would contextualize the role of FGL in this collective impact work (Bridging Movement Alignment Council, n.d.).

Based on the aforementioned FGL experience, we offer some considerations for those who may seek to use FGL in their community

work. These considerations will address FGL planning, the role of the small-group facilitator, and large-group debriefing.

### *FGL Planning*

After reflecting on our FGL experience, we determined that careful, detailed planning was essential for success. The Steering Committee identified key points to consider in future planning processes.

It is important that the members of the planning group take time to build trust among each other. There were several ways we pivoted and adjusted our plans to honor the time and investment needed to build trust between members. The initial planning process took us longer than we expected at the outset. The Steering Committee met weekly for six months to plan for the event, but some meetings required deviation from planning to discuss the diverse, and sometimes conflicting, thoughts and experiences of the committee members. For example, during the planning process, Freddie Gray was arrested by the Baltimore Police Department and died in police custody. Sandra Bland was pulled over in Texas for failure to use her signal when changing lanes. After her arrest, Bland was found dead in her cell three days later. Sam DuBose, an unarmed African American motorist, was killed by a former University of Cincinnati officer during a traffic stop. Based on their positionalities and social locations, committee members had very different, sometimes visceral reactions that needed to be processed in real time, especially as they directly pertained to the task at hand. To facilitate these difficult conversations, the committee began opening its meetings with icebreaker-style questions designed to help members center themselves in the work. The committee also instituted a set of “Living Arrangements,” or guidelines that members agreed to abide by in meetings to maintain the integrity of group discussions and provide equitable opportunities for everyone to be heard.

We identified several logistical questions to consider in the planning process, which may contribute to or detract from the connective goals of the event. For example, the use of a neutral setting can be helpful in establishing comfort. The Steering Committee carefully considered the importance of holding the FGL event in a space that was open and welcoming to all participants; therefore, we avoided the use of any religious spaces or even the university, as many community members do not feel comfortable

interacting with the campus. Thus, the setting for the aforementioned FGL was a former elementary school cafeteria with no official “ties” to either constituency participating in the FGL session, nor did it have any other characteristics that would have limited participants’ comfort or responses. The Steering Committee also chose to arrange the small groups such that the participants, facilitator, and notetaker sat in a circle with no tables, to avoid physical barriers to open communication within the group. Attention to such details as physical space is critical to equalizing power dynamics and encouraging engagement (Mar et al., 2023).

Another critical aspect of FGL planning is the development of small-group questions. In addition to inviting participants to engage in dialogue around difficult community issues, we were also bringing them into an unfamiliar process. As noted in previous research, participation in community dialogue is often influenced by social identity, with people of more privileged identities being more likely to engage (Levinson, 2003; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001). The questions were ordered progressively to enable participants to build trust with the process, facilitator, and each other. Specifically, groups began with introductory icebreaker questions, then moved to questions about thoughts and experiences, root causes, and finally a visioning question to provoke thought about future actions. This approach allowed participants to become comfortable with sharing their thoughts and with using the full time allotted for their responses.

Small-group composition is an important consideration for the planning process. According to FGL guidance, small groups should be composed such that each group has diverse voices, experiences, and viewpoints. This becomes especially important when the topic at hand is a conflict in which there may be two or more distinct sides represented. Consistent with sound community-based practices, Steering Committee members who were trusted in their respective communities purposefully recruited participants to ensure parity of representation between African American multigenerational community members and law enforcement officers. Once confirmed, participants were pre-assigned to small groups to maximize heterogeneity. However, this presumes that everyone who is recruited will be present for the session, which cannot be guaranteed. Based on this experience, we carefully considered how to maximize diversity in small groups for subsequent FGL events, especially in



cases in which preregistration or preselection of participants was not feasible or appropriate.

Because our FGL session involved law enforcement, we endeavored to minimize dynamics of power and hierarchy to promote comfort in communication. Turnhout and colleagues (2020) note that uneven power dynamics can be exacerbated when the more powerful actor participates in dialogue as part of their paid work and community members are expected to volunteer their time. To attempt to mitigate this imbalance, the Steering Committee requested that officers attend in plainclothes and without service weapons in order to foster a more equitable environment for dialogue. However, law enforcement policy dictated that the officers were required to participate in uniform and carry their service weapons, as they were attending during their work time. This was one of the more difficult dynamics of planning this particular FGL and is a good example of the often nuanced components that may need to be considered in working to create a space for FGL sessions involving institutional or structural power differentials.

#### *Small-Group Facilitator*

The facilitator's role is a multidimensional one, requiring a variety of skills and attributes to be successful. Based on post-FGL debriefing with facilitators, the following points emerged.

Facilitators must be fully present in the moment with small-group participants to maintain group integrity. Indicators of presence include making eye contact with speakers and taking brief notes to assure that the reflection at the end of each question round is an accurate representation of what the speaker said, not interpreted paraphrasing. FGL participants indicated that the facilitators' use of participants' own words during reflection was an indication that they were being heard accurately; this was essential to the trust-building process. In preparation, our facilitators practiced simultaneously listening and taking notes in small groups before the event. The facilitator's notes enabled the facilitator to provide an accurate reflection that verified and affirmed the group members' responses but were not intended to be a full transcript.

Facilitators must take care not to offer their own opinions within the group, managing verbal and nonverbal communication so that all individuals receive similar acknowledgment and favoritism is not experienced. Facilitators should strive to be as neutral as possible; however, this does not negate

the need for facilitators to process what they hear within their small groups. Therefore, we provided space after the FGL for facilitators to debrief with each other, reflecting on what they had heard and their own reactions to what was stated.

#### *Large-Group Debriefing*

The case study provides valuable insights for the large-group debriefing following the small-group FGL. While the debriefing is important in the overall FGL process, it can also undermine the overall FGL goals if not managed properly.

The work taking place within the small groups contributes to empathy, understanding, and goodwill among the group members, as well as levels of trust and group cohesion fueled in part by shared vulnerability. However, that progress could be negated if participants retreat into their larger "groups" or "sides" and retrench themselves in their initial stances. We suggest that FGL organizers arrange for members of each small group to remain together during the debriefing to maintain the integrity of the bonding connections established.

Another strategy that can contribute to productive large-group debriefings is the use of guiding questions that further encourage reflection, while also reorienting the group toward action. In the aforementioned FGL, we took a short break between the end of small-group sessions and convening the large-group debriefing. During this time, the individual debriefing form was distributed to participants to focus their observations. They were asked to list points of common ground they found with others in their group as well as questions that emerged as they listened to others. Finally, they were asked to identify one way in which they were willing to challenge themselves as a result of participating in the FGL. The use of these guiding questions provided participants with concrete action plans for moving forward and maintained the productivity of the session, even when participants disagreed.

#### **Limitations**

We recognize this case study is not without limitations. First, while participants noted increased trust, empathy, and understanding of other viewpoints, as participation in FGL was voluntary, the FGL process may limit participation to those individuals who are most willing to share their experiences and listen to others' lived experience; therefore, they may be more likely to develop trust, empathy, and understanding of

others than the broader population. Second, while it was not expressly stated by African American community participants, it is important to note that the presence of law enforcement officers in uniform—including weapons—may have intimidated some participants and prevented them from speaking openly and candidly. This may have been particularly pronounced among participants with prior negative experience with law enforcement officers.

## Conclusions

Based on the Bulloch County Beloved Community's experience, FGL can be an effective tool for conducting difficult discussions around divisive community-wide issues. Since the case study, Beloved Community has successfully used FGL with community members to discuss the perspectives and opinions of divisive topics such as gender, race, class, wealth, and academia's presence in small rural cities. As illustrated above, there are many considerations when planning and executing a successful FGL event; however, based on our experience, the benefits of FGL are well worth the effort. Feedback we received from participants via our evaluation tools supported our assertion that the FGL process encouraged participants to listen to those with different life experiences and that listening built empathy, trust, and understanding for others' viewpoints. In addition, comments from participants supported the potential of FGL to contribute to the development of collective efficacy. We plan to continue our use of FGL to build trust, promote civic relationships, and encourage other researchers and practitioners seeking robust community participation to consider the usefulness of FGL in supporting their goals. Future work will include empirical evaluation of processes and outcomes to build evidence to support the powerful role of FGL in the civic renewal movement. Recognizing the alignment of FGL to the goals of the broader bridging field, utilizing the Social Cohesion Impact Measurement (SCIM) tool in future empirical work would best illuminate the potential of FGL as a best practice for organizations seeking to bridge divides between groups (Bridging Movement Alignment Council, n.d.)

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