

## Philosophical inquiry in a culturally diverse, faith-based community

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### Abstract

This paper reports on collaborative research undertaken with the African Australian Christian Impact Centre (CIC) in Perth, Western Australia. It is part of a larger university philosophy outreach program in which the researchers seek to create opportunities for those on the educational and social margins, and young people, to engage in 'doing philosophy', and to learn from them about their experiences. We were interested to evaluate whether the collaborative philosophical inquiry methods we use in our university teaching could be beneficial outside of a formal educational setting, for members of the culturally diverse, faith-based community of CIC. In this multi-method evaluative study, we examined the extent to which participation in a series of Community of Inquiry (CoI) sessions improved or did not improve participants' self-assessment of: (1) their competence and confidence in communicating with others in different contexts; (2) their competence and confidence as a 'thinker'; and (3) their social competence and confidence. Our findings on 'communication' are discussed in this paper. The facilitated philosophical discussions led to insights about 'speaking out' and 'listening', particularly with respect to participants' experiences of cultural and generational differences. We suggest that participation in CoI in a faith-based community setting has the potential to

significantly increase confidence in communication skills, and lead to greater intergenerational, intercultural, and intercommunity sensitivity.

### **Key words**

communication, Community of Inquiry, confidence, faith-based communities, philosophy in community, university philosophy outreach

*[The Community of Inquiry] is a flexible transaction where existing knowledge and experience is subject to questioning, interpretation, and transformation. It is a nonlinear process where individuals iteratively and imperceptibly move between the personal world of constructing meaning and the shared world of confirming understanding. (Garrison 2015, p. 56)*

### **Background and introduction**

This university philosophy outreach program was part of a larger, continuing project in which we are seeking to take the collaborative philosophical inquiry methods we use in our university teaching into the wider community. We are particularly interested in creating opportunities for those on the educational and social margins, and young people, to engage in 'doing philosophy' and in learning from them about their experiences of it. On this occasion we had the opportunity to undertake collaborative research with African Australian young people and their families from the Christian Impact Centre (CIC), a culturally diverse, new-Australian, faith-based community located in Perth, Western Australia. We sought to evaluate whether members of this community would find philosophical inquiry methods beneficial. Members of CIC come together as first, and some second, generation Australians who have emigrated from different sub-Saharan African cultures and nations. They have a shared Christian faith which is connected in different ways with their diverse cultures of origin. Religious settings, particularly Pentecostal ones, tend to be hierarchical in their theological and social structures, and conservative. Could engaging with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) method, a form of philosophical inquiry that is collaborative and 'democratic', benefit young people and their families within this multilayered setting?

Over several decades, a number of studies have been conducted on the philosophical method of CoI in different contexts, but predominantly in educational settings (see Fiock 2020; Stover & Ziswiler 2017). Educational benefits of CoI in schools and other

formal educational settings, including critical, creative and collaborative thinking and the deepening of relationships, are well established (Bini et al. 2018; Jacobson 2013; Millett & Tapper 2012; Orchard, Heilbronn & Winstanley 2020; Prior & Wilks 2018). Online university teaching has expanded the research interest and practice in CoI as a guiding principle and method for virtual learning (e.g. Elicor 2017; Garrison 2015; McLoughlan & Lee 2008). The CoI has also been studied in some other less formal educational contexts, such as with migrant asylum seekers and prisoners and in multicultural settings (Chetty, Bentley & Furner 2020; Elicor 2017; Spiteri 2010; West & Szifris 2020). Open philosophical discussion is also the framework for many Public Philosophy and ‘philosophy in the community’ projects and theorising (Prior & Wilks 2018). Social inclusion—a sense of social belonging—in a diverse society is vital for individual wellbeing and social cohesion. Striano (2010) understands philosophical inquiry to belong to the society as a whole, as a practice of social development, which is foundational to inclusive and robust democracy. Our outreach work from the University of Western Australia sits within these fields. It seeks to provide community members with educational opportunities and centralises praxis as a philosophical orientation and research method.

There is very limited research on this kind of philosophical inquiry in community groups that are culturally diverse and faith-based, such as CIC. Known studies include research reported by Hyland and Noffke in 2005, where the authors examined how pre-service social studies teachers in higher education understood concepts of group marginality and diversity. The preservice teachers were placed in churches, mosques, Buddhist temples and other contexts where they applied a CoI method to explore marginality. The exercise formed a part of the students’ assignments. Most students reported having opportunities to practice their inquiry experiences and being able to think critically about themselves and the concept of oppression.

A recent doctoral study (Jordan 2020) adopted a CoI approach to investigate conceptualisations of the role of African-American clergy in dealing with stigma associated with help-seeking attitudes towards professional mental health in the African-American community. Jordan found that seeking help outside the family, friends, and pastors was not acceptable among African-Americans—most of them believed that disclosing the inner workings of their lives to ‘outsiders’ was unacceptable. This finding notwithstanding, Jordan’s study, and Hyland and Noffke’s (2005) research, offered limited practical and theoretical insights on how CoI operates within such ‘unique’ milieus, a gap this study seeks to begin to fill.

Religious settings tend to be conservative in their moral creeds, conduct and expression. Religious settings tend to be places where people, regardless of their ethnicity, may feel uncomfortable discussing issues that have the potential to expose their views on controversial topics and reveal a glimpse of their 'out-of-church' lifestyles (see Lockhart et al. 2020). For some faith-practising people, such settings are meant to 'fix them' spiritually and morally—by helping them to acknowledge their imperfections or, in some contexts, what might be called their 'sinful' nature. Power in such settings often rests with moral brokers in a hierarchical structure—priests, bishops, pastors, elders. In this regard, speaking out about one's opinion on some topics may be considered rebellion, a 'falling out of faith', or being put on notice as a potential heretic.

It is against this background that we designed the CoI research with CIC. We were interested in the potential educational and community-building benefits for members of this group, a faith-based, culturally and linguistically diverse community whose members are also mediating relationships between their families' cultures of origin and the mainstream cultures in which they live. Elicor (2017) argues that Lipman's concept of critical thinking—thinking that 'facilitates judgment because it relies on criteria, is self-correcting and is sensitive to context' (Lipman 2003 in Elicor 2017, p. 15)—is not limited to Western frames for communication but, relying on Dewey's concept of 'inquiry', 'can be traced back to its origins in everyday problem solving' (Lipman 2003 in Elicor 2017, pp. 15-16). Nevertheless, could the form of Western philosophical inquiry that is both taught by and engaged in through CoIs be of benefit to members of a faith-based community from diverse African cultures?

Founded in 2016, CIC is a Pentecostal church based in Perth, Western Australia. The church's mission is to create relevant disciples for Jesus Christ. CIC runs several community-based initiatives, such as academic support programs for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. These programs provide academic advocacy and tuition in Mathematics, English language, and other academic fields, both on its premises and in some selected Perth schools and colleges. At the time of data collection, CIC had a membership of one hundred, drawn from fifteen countries, mostly sub-Saharan Africa. CIC had an average weekly attendance of 80 people, most of them young people. Members' ages ranged between 18 and 55. Along with their shared faith, CIC members share the experience of living as relatively new immigrants in a majority white Western culture and all that comes with this. The multicultural outlook of the church, and of those who participated in the study, presented several dynamics for CoIs, as discussed in our findings below.

Participation in the CoI program was open to all members of CIC. After a month of consistent announcements inviting potential participants, twenty members of the church signed up, although due to data integrity concerns, only fourteen took part in the pre- and post-data collection process. The fourteen participants in the data collection consisted of three men, seven women and four youth. We use the term 'youth' to refer to males and females in their teens and early 20s. The participants included three young women and one young man. The creation of three demographically distinct groups—a youth group, a women's group, and a men's group—was critical for a faith-based setting where people might be hesitant to speak up freely for fear of being 'judged'. Having the participants separated into the three groups by relevant demographics, and providing appropriate assurance of confidentiality and privacy, contributed to the successful creation of dialogic spaces in which participants felt empowered to speak and had the space and social comfort to listen (Liamputtong 2020; Gillett 2023). The philosophical nature of the discussions in the CoIs over a five-week period produced lively conversations about issues that were relevant for and of interest to participants (Goodburn 1998, Hennick 2013; Liamputtong 2020; Neumann 2011).

### **The Community of Inquiry**

The researchers use CoI in a range of contexts within their university teaching, in undergraduate and post-graduate Philosophy units, an undergraduate Law and Society unit, and in other, school-based outreach Philosophy programmes. When people engage in a CoI they are 'doing philosophy', whether or not the subject of their inquiry involves classic philosophical texts (Kennedy 2004). We as researchers actually engaged in CoIs with the members of CIC; as Golding (2015) argues, the CoI is a 'hybrid method of philosophical-empirical research' (p. 208).

CoI is a method of—or movement centred on (Kohan & Costa Carvalho 2019)—a form of collaborative inquiry that combines the disciplines and objectives of philosophy and science (Pardales & Girod 2006). Philosophy and science both form and inform the scientific method of inquiry by which a conclusion is arrived at through synthetic reasoning (Pardales & Girod 2006). Shields (1999) suggests that the concept of CoI was first introduced by the pragmatists CS Peirce, John Dewey and Jan Adams. It is a methodology that describes and operationalises a social theory of epistemology. Haack (1982) summarises Peirce's argument which, Haack writes, rejects theories of epistemology that posit that we 'know our own internal states by introspection' or through a 'single chain of argumentation' (pp. 156-157). Against this, Peirce argued

that we rely on our knowledge of external factors. Haack (1982) writes of Peirce's approach: '[A]ll our cognitions are hypothetical and fallible; we cannot think except in signs; and we have no conception of the absolutely incognisable' (p. 157). This 'more scientific' epistemology 'trusts in the multiplicity and variety of its arguments' (Haack 1982, p. 157). The CoI instrumentalises the social impulses towards democracy and inclusion (Elicor 2017).

According to Jennifer Bleazby (2012, p. 2), 'Dewey believes we must take into account the perspectives, interests and actions of others who can act as either obstacles to or supports of our aims and actions' and that 'Dewey argues that "inquiry" is initiated when we are exposed to a situation that we find confusing or problematic'. Peirce originally applied this theory of epistemology to science. It was Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp (1978) who sought to apply the theory to education. Lipman and Sharp founded a 'philosophy for children' (P4C) movement based on the idea that anyone, including children, can think philosophically (Lipman 1987).

David Kennedy (2004) describes the CoI in these terms:

[A] community of philosophical inquiry (CPI) is a way of practicing philosophy in a group that is characterized by conversation; that creates its discussion agenda from questions posed by the conversants as a response to some stimulus (whether text or some other media); and that includes specific philosophers or philosophical traditions, if at all, only to develop its own ideas about the concepts. (p. 744)

Here Kennedy is referring to key features of the CoI method:

- Participants sit in an inward-looking circle with no desks or other furniture between them. This is designed to facilitate open communication between participants in a way that reinforces the notion of community by physically being on the same level when speaking and listening to one another.
- The group's inquiry is generated from a 'stimulus text', which may be a written text or other media. Stimulus texts are designed to be equally accessible to all participants; they are present at the inquiry as images or objects, or a short written text that is often read aloud at the beginning of an inquiry.
- Questions are central to CoIs. The beginning of a CoI involves a process by which the group formulates its own philosophical question in response to the stimulus. Participants learn to recognise a philosophical question, often guided

by the 'question quadrant', which distinguishes open, philosophical questions from other forms of question (Cam 2006).

- There is no 'learner' or 'teacher' per se. At the early stages of a CoI, the facilitator has the responsibility for the design, and facilitation of direction, of the inquiry. They act as a guide, but their role 'is not supposed to extend to the favouring of particular viewpoints. The [facilitator] must assist [participants] in following the paths of their own thinking and ... must always stop at the point of legitimising or delegitimising particular points of view' (Pardales & Girod 2006, p. 304). Over time, participants develop a 'teaching presence' (Garrison 2011; Jacobson 2013). As Kennedy (2012) writes: Each individual, thinking for herself [*sic*] and with others, becomes a practising philosopher, and the group as a whole shifts, self-corrects and develops as a philosophical and an ethical culture through the reconstruction and coordination of each individual's philosophical beliefs (p. 46).

We used this method of philosophical inquiry to investigate the effects of participation in a CoI process for members of CIC. We examined the effect of their participation on their self-assessed confidence and ability in communication and thinking skills, and their sense of belonging. In this paper we report on communication (speaking and listening) skills.

## Methods

The research was designed as a multi method evaluative study, for which ethics approval was granted by the University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (RA/4/20/5659). The multi methods design, consistent with the philosophical orientation of the CoI, is conceptualised as a pragmatist philosophical approach and enables researchers to address research questions that require quantitative and qualitative methods to answer (Mitchell 2018; Schoonenboom & Johnson 2017). The literature suggests that most CoI research focuses on surveys (see Stenborn 2018; Stover & Ziswiler 2017). To extend this methodology we employed a multi method evaluative study to gain better understanding of connections or contradictions in quantitative and qualitative data sets (Creswell & Creswell 2018; Timans et al. 2019).

Five one-hour weekly, concurrent CoI sessions were organised with the three participant identified groups—men, women, and youth. This was reduced from our intended six 90-minute sessions due to COVID-19 disruptions. Each group was

facilitated by a member of the research team, all experienced CoI facilitators, in separate rooms on CIC's premises. Participants signed relevant informed consent documents prior to the first CoI. Each group stayed with the same facilitator for all five sessions, and the sessions were fully catered.

The first session introduced CoI concepts and processes. We explained the CoI method, such as, that it involves sitting in a circle, has a focus on questions rather than 'answers', and that the group develops its own inquiry based on the formulation of a philosophical question drawn from a 'stimulus text'.

Drawing on Cam's (2006) 'Question Quadrant' we then introduced the idea that there are different kinds of question: open-closed and inside-outside the text. Participants practised recognising and formulating their own different forms of question and then practised the skill of formulating open philosophical questions in response to a poem titled 'Kintsagi' by Silvia Cuevas-Morales (nd). In sessions two to five the groups made suggestions in terms of developing the themes for the CoIs—'community', 'culture', 'leadership' and 'home'. Each week participants practiced formulating open, philosophical questions in response to a 'stimulus text'. The questions were shared with the group, then the group selected one question to be the basis for the inquiry. Sometimes selection was by consensus; on other occasions a group member was asked to select the question that they were most interested in inquiring into. Facilitators guided and fully participated in the inquiries.

The stimulus for each week (after the first CoI introductory session) was a concept, coupled with a short text or image. Consistent with the observations of West and Szifris (2020) that explicit focus on private, personal topics can restrict philosophical inquiry, we chose stimulus concepts that raised communication and belonging within participants' community, but participants' faith and cultural backgrounds were not explicit topics. The stimulus concept for the second session was 'Community', coupled with an extract from Ambelin Kwaymullina's writing on Aboriginal Law, Learning and Sustainable Living (2005, p. 14). 'Culture' was the focus of the third week of CoI. A diagrammatic image of the 'cultural iceberg' (Hall 1976) as used as the stimulus. The image depicts 'easy to see' aspects of culture, such as language, folklore and dress above the water and 'difficult to see' aspects of culture, such as concepts of justice, beliefs and assumptions, and aesthetics, below the water. The stimulus concept for the fourth session was 'Leadership', coupled with an image that depicted 'out-the front' leadership and 'interactive/collaborative' group action. The fifth and final session focused on 'Home', accompanied by a joyous



image of a boy with family. As the sessions progressed, the philosophical quality of the questions and depth of discussion developed. Many of the sessions were difficult to conclude because discussion was so vigorous, and enthusiasm abounded.

The research team collected quantitative data (mostly descriptive statistics) before the first and after the last CoI session. The results were analysed and then used to develop questions for face-to-face interviews with participants (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Personal reflections of the CoI facilitators also formed part of the data. Aside from demographic questions, the quantitative questions focused on three areas that examined the extent to which the CoI sessions improved or did not improve participants' self-assessment of: (1) their competence and confidence in communicating with others in different contexts; (2) their competence and confidence as 'thinkers'; and (3) their social competence and confidence. The quantitative data was collected via interactive keypad technology. This allowed for real-time data collection and instantaneous analysis.

The quantitative results on 'communication' are discussed in this paper and reveal shifts between the pre and post data. The research team followed up with semi-structured and open-ended interviews with CoI participants on their perceptions of the extent to which the sessions improved their communication and influenced their relationships. Of the original 14 research participants, eight were interviewed: two men, three women and three youth. The interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes each and were facilitated by two members of the research team. One conducted the interview, the other sat in as a familiarity checker and note-taker. Interviews were audio recorded after obtaining participants' consent.

The data were de-identified and stored on password protected computers and in lockable filing cabinets. The team collated the data through manual transcription of the interviews and initial coding (Liamputtong 2020). The team identified major themes which were triangulated with the quantitative data and facilitators' notes (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Each of the major themes was developed into full stand-alone stories, one of which is discussed in the current paper – communication skills.

## **Findings**

Two sub-themes emerged from participants' reflections on their experiences of the CoI sessions relating to their self-assessments of their communication skills. These were 'speaking out' and 'listening' – particularly with respect to their experiences of cultural and generational differences within their community.

### *Speaking out*

The two data sets collected demonstrate that participants' experience of the CoI sessions helped them reflect on 'speaking out', as a member of their community. This was especially so for the youth. In the context of cultural and generational differences and strong cultural values of respect for elders, the sessions gave the youth greater confidence in having their own 'voice' and offered them an opportunity to reflect on how they could 'speak out' with respect. Most of the participants (N=13) felt confident to communicate their own ideas to other people after the program. A similar trend was observed when the research participants were asked to respond to the questions on the extent to which the session impacted their confidence to talk to people. Twelve of the participants (86%) indicated that the CoI sessions enhanced their confidence to talk to people.

Several participants confirmed this finding in the interviews. When asked what they gained from the CoI sessions Interviewee 4 said, *'Well, I pretty much gained—my confidence. Speaking in that circle it helps me open more and open more. Like, I'm a person that keeps to the background and lets everything happen, so, yeah, I gained a bit of confidence to be able to speak out more.'* In a similar vein, Interviewee 7 said:

*I think the first thing [I gained] was knowing yourself as a community member and also being able to see other people's perspectives; and then, being able to voice out your own opinion. Just because there seems to be someone who is an elder in the community doesn't mean you can't speak/say your own opinion—and that. So, yeah ... not disregarding your own voice, that's right.*

A common theme in interviewees' responses concerned authority in the community, specifically where the authority to speak lay. There were very few responses concerning confidence to speak in the CoI sessions themselves; rather the theme was about confidence to share ideas within the community, especially where their ideas were different, or the topic concerned matters that were private. For example, Interviewee 4 reported that some issues that were not usually talked about, were discussed in CoI sessions:

*Yeah, usually we don't [talk about it]. Especially towards the older people. I feel that they—are not going to be more open to talk about it. Your Mum or your Grandparents are like, they are not quite open to talking about the emotional, their emotions and feelings, like that.*

One such topic was mental illness. Interviewee 4 said:

*Well, God! 'Cos for me I remember [in one session] talking about mental illness. So, I had this feeling like—in the African community, it's not really ... when someone say—'Oh, you just have to push that aside, oh you are just going through—aaah—issue', or 'you get alright'. So that's helped me open up my belief more because I always had that belief ... I hardly talk about it in front of people.*

When asked about their view on 'disagreeing with a person in your community', Interviewee 7 thought it depended on the topic and also the person: *'Because obviously we are very like, in my culture I suppose—or my community—respecting our elders is a big thing.'*

'Speaking out' was a strong theme especially, as noted, for the youth. Participants were asked follow-up questions about what they thought were the features of the CoI sessions that enabled them to speak out. Several interviewees pointed to the non-hierarchical structure of the CoIs and the centrality of open questions, as opposed to a 'lecture-style' format. Interviewee 5 said, *'I didn't know that you do things like this [at the researchers' university]. I was like "Oh wow!" I didn't know that'*. Another interviewee reported that they:

*loved how they, some of the questions that [the facilitator] put, were not really questions, they were images or maybe like, they were statements and now 'it is up to you to make it up from there'. Like, it was an open statement, and you could just choose a word from it ... [I]t's a different scenario to having someone come in and teaching you to answer this question. But the fact they were very, very open and it was up to you to make a statement [such as] 'actually I have a question from the statement'—you know [it was] different.*

Another participant thought that the 'feeling of being open' was helped by the *'way we sat in a circle ... it allowed people to open up ... It made me feel more open, to speak up and be open towards that topic.'*

As is clear from these responses, much of the reflection by participants about speaking out concerned speaking out across different generations and positions of cultural authority. However, as noted, the CoI groups were organised by age and gender: a women's group, a men's group and a youths' group. This meant that participants did not have the opportunity during the CoIs to practice 'speaking'

across generational differences and some positions of cultural authority. They were, however, able to explore their desire to speak out openly in the future within their community and potential ways of doing this.

A further focus, along with a desire to speak out more, was participants' concern that they express their views with respect. They wanted to be able to disagree and say so, but in a way that maintained relationships in their community. In the pre-survey data, 10 (71%) participants indicated in the affirmative that if they disagreed with someone, they could communicate their reasons for disagreeing. After the program, there was a shift in the participants' views, with 13 (92%) participants responding in the affirmative to the same statement. In confirming this, Interviewee 5 said, *'I think you can disagree with someone ... but be polite and not rude'*, and Interviewee 7 said:

*I've been living in Australia for a couple of years now, and sometimes, like obviously my community is—I connect that with culture ... Well, yeah, I'll just say culture right now. Because ... sometimes I hear my Mum over the phone telling [me]—'Oh, this and that'. Okay, if I voice it out, in the way that I think that it's supposed to be, she might mistake that for being rude.*

When asked whether their view on disagreeing with a person in their community had changed because of the CoI sessions, Interviewee 3 said:

*It has. It has. Like I said, we can agree to disagree respectfully. It doesn't have to be that 'you don't know anything. I'm better than you'. Or, 'you have no idea', or whatever. I respect that and then I move away. I think sometimes [disagreeing is] good ... But the way you go into it you'd be surprised that the person will end up learning from you.*

### **Listening**

The quantitative data revealed a shift in the views of the CoI participants' confidence, not only to speak out, but also to listen to others. Ten of the participants (71%) indicated in the post survey that they enjoyed listening to other people, against the baseline data of only six (43%). Although there was no change in the views of those who responded with 'somewhat like me' after the program, there was a change in the 'neutral' respondents.

A theme of 'listening' as part of effective communication emerged from the interviewees' responses, specifically the active nature of listening and its value for relationships. Many of the participants reported that the CoI sessions helped them

deepen their understanding of what 'listening' means. They thought listening was associated with 'tuning in' to or being aware of others and that it was also useful for managing disagreement. For those who spoke explicitly about listening, it seemed to be something they didn't necessarily expect to be the important aspect of their CoI experience that it turned out to be. Participants also reported that listening to others in the sessions meant they learnt from and more about each other, and that this enhanced their knowledge about and connection with their church community. For example, in response to the question: 'what did you gain, if anything, from doing the CoIs', Interviewee 3 said:

*The discussion — being able to listen to other people's stories ... being able to get out of your own zone, of your own mind to listen to other people ... quite a lot of the time we are very quick to talk—I also gain and learn the act of listening. You know? The act of listening to other people's opinion, letting other people talk.*

In response to the question, 'have you been concerned about other peoples' opinions about the things you think and say' since the CoI sessions, Interviewee 3 said, 'Yes. Yes, in the sense that you ... it has made me more "aware", you know, more aware of my environment, people's feelings. How people think'. In reference to when a 'disagreement' might emerge and whether and how the disagreement could be explored, the same participant said, 'You can tell that the environment, the atmosphere is changing by the tone of the voice and so that is why you ... pay attention to your environment—pay attention to the person'. This view was confirmed in the quantitative data. Before the program, only three (21%) of the participants strongly agreed that they could identify a mistaken belief they once held; after the program, the number changed to seven (50%).

Interviewee 6 reported the sessions developed their 'critical thinking' and 'helped my questioning style, [I was] able to probe' and 'ask follow up questions to keep conversation going'. And Interviewee 8's reflection on listening, in the sense of 'tuning in' to others, included the following:

*My whole view of so many things [has] changed. The idea of subjectivity and objectivity ... you know the 'objective' meaning of statements or conversations—so what people say, and then their 'subjective' meaning ... you want to try to get to appreciate what people are saying; why they are saying what they are saying ... and maybe the reason behind what they are saying.*

Later, the same participant said, *'[I]f you explore; if you ask [a person] further questions and engage with them, you — need to be really "inquisitorial" sometimes, to know that people are actually saying more than [what] you thought you are listening to.'*

Significantly, listening was also linked to cultural values of humility: *'[The sessions] help me to know that you are not always right, and you don't know everything. You know, there is a proverb in African—I'm saying that "if you fill your head with pride, there is no room for wisdom"'* (Interviewee 3). Interviewee 8 said, *'Sometimes we come with [the] perception that "these guys don't know much—We know" ... but the moment you get to engage ... it can be a humbling experience. So, depending on your readiness to learn it can be a humbling experience.'*

Apart from reflecting on listening as a skill, participants reported on the outcomes and experience of listening in the CoIs themselves. They reported 'learning from others', that their relationships within their community had been enhanced and that they simply enjoyed listening to and engaging with others. *'Even though we are all in one group, and under the same umbrella which is the church—but ... we all got so much of ideas and knowledge that we all put together ... you just learn from others' experiences'* (Interviewee 1).

For a number of participants this included learning about others' national culture and how it differed from their own. For example:

*Listening to the other ladies in the group talking, it just made me realise that we're all from one continent ... We're all from Africa, but there're certain things that we 'do' that are different ... We are all family orientated in a similar way. But I noticed with the Ghanaian ladies, like how they relate to their families, their Uncles—their Aunties ... it's ... slightly different from how we would relate.*

Many of the participants reported that the style of communication in the Col sessions enhanced their feeling of connectedness with others in their community. A number of participants expressed this sentiment with excitement; these very positive expressions centring on the experience of hearing from others and realising the richness of what they had to offer. For example, in response to the question, 'what did you gain, if anything, by doing the Community of Inquiry sessions?', one participant said: *'Well, what really I gained was just a various idea of others ... it's just ... like—"wow!"—and you just learn from others' experiences ... it was beautiful. Just gaining from others' experiences, it was amazing.'* Another participant expressed a similar joy in

listening to others: *'[A]nd we all sit [together]—and everyone is bringing [their] mind to issues ... and you're like—"wow!" ... then you are like "wow, that [participant's contribution] is brilliant". You know it's something I really cherish. Something I really cherish.'*

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This study sought to fill a lacuna in the research on the use of CoI, regarding the potential benefits on thinking, communication, and social skills in a faith-based and culturally diverse community context, as opposed to formal educational contexts where most CoI research has been undertaken to date. In this multi method evaluative study of the effect of participation in a CoI for members of a faith-based community, the research team began by asking quantitative questions focused on three areas in order to examine the extent to which the series of CoI sessions improved or did not improve participants' self-assessment of: (1) their competence and confidence as a 'thinker'; (2) their social competence and confidence; (3) their competence and confidence in communicating with others in different contexts. The initial quantitative results where there were shifts between the pre-CoI and the post-CoI self-assessments highlighted to the research team areas of interest. From the combination of the quantitative data and the qualitative data, the research team identified major themes which were triangulated with the quantitative data and facilitators' notes (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The result is the theme of this paper: the development of confidence in communication skills.

The research team wanted to know whether participation in the philosophical method of CoIs by members of a faith-based, culturally diverse, and largely African migrant community in Australia, influenced participants' self-assessment of their confidence in communicating with others in different contexts and from different cultural backgrounds. Previous research and theorising on the beneficial effects of involvement in CoIs has focussed on the development of critical thinking skills, empathy, and communication.

The findings of our research suggest that participation in a series of CoIs has the potential to produce a self-assessed increase in confidence in communication skills, both speaking and listening, and the ability to communicate across cultural and generational differences in a faith-based community. The quantitative data revealed a shift in the views of the CoI participants' listening abilities and willingness to speak out on issues—even in a conservative setting such as a Pentecostal church. Interview participants reported that the confidence in communication skills gained from the

CoI sessions helped them to better learn from others; better understand themselves; and better develop community relationships. These learnings included insights about the cultural diversity within their African community. Many participants also highlighted the importance of learning to listen to others, especially in respect to matters upon which they disagreed. A key theme for participants was the role of listening in enabling better communicating across differences in values, attitudes, and beliefs.

While a key theme in the interviews was that the experience of the CoIs contributed to an increased feeling of confidence in a range of abilities related to communication and critical thinking, there were differences in terms of emphasis between the different CoI cohorts according to age. Participants in the youth group focussed on their increased confidence in the ability to 'speak out', to talk about sensitive topics that might normally be difficult to raise in the context of their community comprising many people from cultural contexts where there are norms of respecting one's elders and keeping one's emotional life private. They also reported that this increased confidence in speaking out was directly linked to the style of communication characteristic of the CoI—the open questions and the development of critical thinking and reasoned communication. In contrast, the interviewed participants from the women's and men's groups tended to focus their comments on their increased awareness of the value of listening. These two groups reported an increased awareness of the value of deep listening, not just in the sense of giving other people the space and time to speak, but in really attending to the speaker and, by doing so, gaining a richer understanding of the other's views and experiences. A better ability to attend to the non-verbal elements of communication was also reported.

Hierarchy in their community was an important focus in participants' responses, however, they did not frame their experiences in terms of the structure of their faith community. Rather, their insights were expressed in terms of generational protocols and cultural expectations such as respect for elders. That participants' focus was not their faith community as such may have been influenced by the researchers' decision, as noted, not to focus on the faith identity of the community directly, or by the fact that the CoI facilitators were not members of the participants' faith community and were seen as outsiders in that regard.

Another plausible explanation is that participants' experiences of culture and faith may be closely interrelated. Several studies have concluded that immigrants from sub-Saharan African backgrounds share similar beliefs and values relating to the



traditional embeddedness of religion and customs, respect for the elderly, relational interdependence, and collectivistic cultural orientations (Akosah-Twumasi et al. 2020; Hofstede 2001; Karsten & Illa 2005). In light of these studies, participants' responses may provide insights into their positioning as members of a faith-based community. From the data we collected, it could be argued that participation in CoIs can help to surmount the tacit assumption that shared faith equals agreement. This could allow for deeper recognition and understanding of differences in cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes within a culturally, economically and age-diverse community. This in turn allows for deepening of interpersonal relationships, identification of needs and supports, and strengthening of the community overall.

These findings suggest that CoIs may be a useful method for supporting effective communication within faith-based communities that are founded on more hierarchical structures and relations. It is noted that this study investigated communication within gender and generational groups and not communication between members of those groups. Further research with cross-generational and mixed gender groups could extend the findings of this research.

The role of the facilitator is crucial for a CoI to build an environment in which participants feel empowered to speak out and to listen with full attention. The facilitator is responsible for designing and then guiding the inquiry, but must refrain from exhibiting preference for any view expressed. The decision to run the CoI sessions concurrently and assign a particular facilitator to each group for all five sessions was fundamentally a matter of logistics. The research team also felt that it would be easier to get commitment from the different age groups if all the sessions ran at the same time on the same day. That the facilitators were different between the groups might suggest a limitation on any comparison between the experiences of participants, however improvements in self-assessed confidence in communication skills was reported across all groups. It was also surmised that consistency, in terms of facilitation, would aid in building trust and a sense of community within each group, as it allowed for the creation of safe and supportive environments in which participants could develop their confidence, their communication skills, and their ability to engage in dialogue across personal and cultural differences.

Ultimately, this evaluative study of the effect of participation in a CoI for members of a faith-based community was done on a small scale and the results should be considered preliminary. That said, the results from this research do suggest that participation in a series of CoI sessions, for members of a culturally diverse faith-

based African-Australian community, has the potential to increase confidence in communication skills, and lead to greater intergenerational, intercultural, and intercommunity sensitivity. Further research on how CoI may facilitate communication in other faith settings is recommended.

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