
Facilitation and Inclusive Deliberation

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1 The Problem of Internal Exclusion

While scholars of citizen deliberation frequently consider problems that participants face in accessing deliberative environments (see Cohen 1997), they often fail to address a more subtle form of exclusion that occurs within deliberative environments. As Young (2000: 53-65) explains, some participants may be marginalized *during* deliberation if they have lower chances to be heard, introduce topics, make contributions, or suggest or criticize proposals. In other words, they may face the problem of ‘internal exclusion’ (see also Habermas 1996).

To challenge this problem, facilitation may serve as an important means for inclusive deliberation. For example, facilitators or moderators can structure group communication in a way that empowers disadvantaged participants (Fung 2004; Fulwider 2005).¹ Still, evaluations of facilitation are infrequently studied (Sunwolf and Frey 2005). The study described here looks at the effects of different types of facilitation.

2 A Field Experiment in Facilitation

In 2002, the local municipal authorities sponsored Listening to the City Dialogues (LTC), a series of town hall meetings in New York, to gather populations. Among the 826 participants in the LTC-O, 45% were

¹ The words ‘facilitator’ and ‘moderator’ are used interchangeably here.
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Manhattan residents, 9% were family members of 9/11 victims, and 12% classified themselves as survivors of 9/11. Participants were then assigned to twenty-six discussion groups aimed at gender and demographic heterogeneity within each group. With the exception of two groups which began later, all worked through the same five-step agenda (introductions, hopes and concerns, rebuilding and revitalization, creating a memorial, wrapping up) in parallel over the course of two weeks. While participants could read in all discussion groups, message posting was allowed only in the group they belonged to. Five hundred ninety-three participants contributed one message or more, leading to a total of 9036 messages.

Since the role of facilitators was not entirely consensual among the group of LTC-O conveners, a field experiment was designed (Figallo, Miller, and Weiss 2004). Discussion groups were evenly assigned to one of two conditions. In the *basic facilitation* condition, the task was to keep participants focused on the agenda and ensure rules of civility. Participants were notified by email when a new agenda item was scheduled. Also, deliberations were monitored, and, if necessary, a facilitator intervened to make sure that interpersonal conflicts did not disrupt discussion. However, as this was not often the case, facilitators remained invisible for the most part. The *advanced facilitation* condition augmented the basic condition with professional facilitators who were recruited for each discussion group, in order to balance participation, create a respectful climate, and stimulate, clarify, and summarize discussions (see Pysner and Figallo 2004).

3 The Difference That Facilitation Makes

LTC-O discussion archives were analyzed to assess the degree of inclusion of traditionally underprivileged groups. Figure 1 shows the percentage of women and non-whites among the population of New York City, among the upper quartile posters, who contributed about 80% of all messages in each discussion group.² A first comparison between population and registered participants indicates the degree of external exclusion. The 'exclusion curve' marks a significant decrease in inclusion for women and even more so for non-whites. A second comparison between registered and most involved participants suggests the degree of internal exclusion: Inclusion dropped further for women in the basic facilitation condition, but not in the advanced facilitation condition. The results for non-whites on internal inclusion and facilitation effects mirrored the pattern found for women.³

² Population figures are based on data from the US Census Bureau (2000).

³ So did the pattern for participants with lower education and lower income. However, unlike for women, differences between the basic and advanced facilitation condition for

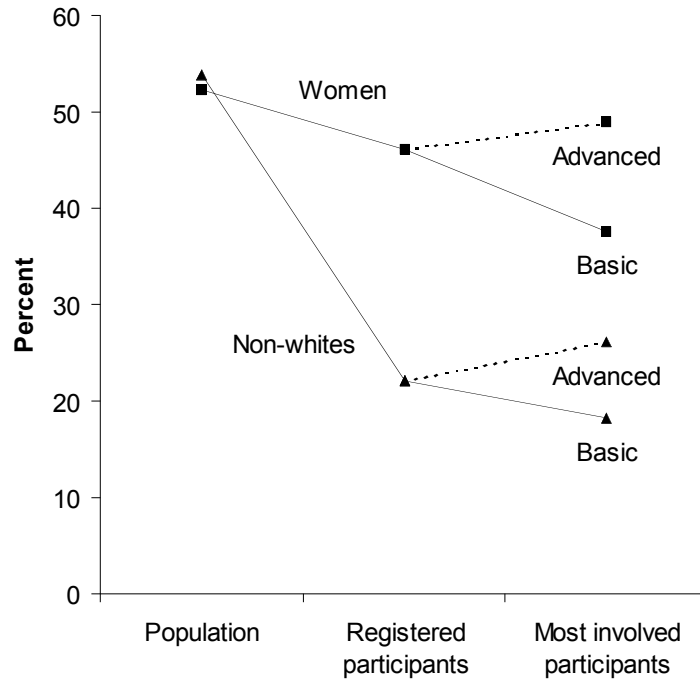


Figure 1. Exclusion curves for women and non-whites in the basic and advanced facilitation condition

These results suggest that the problem of internal exclusion is only serious under the condition of basic facilitation. This result is particularly troubling, as the basic facilitation approach seems to be the most common in the field of face-to-face and online deliberation (Rhee and Kim 2009; Wright 2009; Rosenberg 2004). Although basic facilitation may be inexpensive, require few specialized skills, and is easy to standardize and automate, it proves ineffective in avoiding further exclusion in deliberation.

Why then was the advanced facilitation approach more successful in empowering women to engage in deliberation? One possible explanation is that women felt more motivated because their specific use of rhetorical forms—they used narratives almost twice as often as men did in the LTC-O

nonwhites (as well as for lower education and lower income) failed to reach statistical significance. Still, there is good reason to believe that the problem of internal exclusion becomes equally acute for nonwhites (and people with low income or low education) once external exclusion is mitigated for them to the level women faced in the LTC-O.

(Polletta and Lee 2006)—was better accommodated. Thus, the challenge for facilitators in (online) deliberation is not only to provide a space for citizens with different interests and opinions but also to provide a space where citizens with different ways of expressing themselves feel equally welcome.

Advanced facilitation may include various facilitator competencies (Lieberman Baker and Fraser 2005) and forms of facilitation, such as Rosenberg's (2004) facilitation strategies for reason and transformation oriented deliberation, or Edwards' (2002) conceptualization of the moderator as a democratic intermediary. Further studies are needed to identify which of these are most effective in reducing internal exclusion.

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