THE FERGUSON NEIGHBORHOOD POLICE STEERING COMMITTEE

A Report Compiled for the Open Society Foundation

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In November of 2014, the city of Ferguson overflowed with protesters and community members mourning Michael Brown's death, the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, and the city's refusal to hold the Ferguson police department accountable. The Department of Justice (DOJ) responded to Ferguson community members' pleas for racial equity by conducting a study that found explicit evidence of racial discrimination within the Ferguson Police Department (US Department of Justice, 2015). The report illuminated patterns of behaviors in violation of the First and Fourth Amendments, unconstitutional court and law enforcement practices that disproportionately affected African American residents, and how those practices eroded trust—making policing less effective, more difficult, and less safe.

Following the release of their report, the DOJ created the Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee (FNPSC)--a group of Ferguson community members dedicated to creating positive change in Ferguson through multiple measures. They were charged with making recommendations for a community policing model, revising and making recommendations on new, old, and outdated policies, and acting as a liaison between the Ferguson Police department and the citizens of Ferguson. Unfortunately, the 90 people who comprised that committee had different ideas about what constituted positive change for their community. Some members wanted to increase police presence and "clean up the streets." Other members used the DOJ report as evidence that a non-biased, alternative community-policing model was necessary. Eighteen months later, the FNPSC failed to make any progress due to constant infighting amongst members.

In May of 2017, I attended the American Alliance of Museums annual convention as a representative of The Justice Fleet, a mobile social justice museum fostering healing through art, dialogue, and play. The Justice Fleet was invited to exhibit the Radical Forgiveness experience in the Museums and Race Space in an effort to create a space for healing and decompression for activist and advocates working in the museum industry around issues of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. A Ferguson resident and member of the Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee (FNPSC) visited the exhibit and painted with us. During our hour-long conversation, she talked about the work of the FNPSC.

FNPSC

A dividing political line split member's goals and desires for their communities. The division was rooted in a lack of mutual understanding and direction concerning social justice, community policing, and racial equity. She said they needed The Justice Fleet to visit the FNPSC and engage members in the area of intra-member conflict management and the role forgiveness plays in healing through trauma associated with systemic oppression. When I told the Ferguson resident painting with me that I was also a professor of Communication and Social Justice and could offer dialogue training, facilitation training, and attempt to foster healing through a specialized curriculum around identity, community, and crisis, she asked me to pitch my ideas to the group.

The Ferguson NPSC meets once per month in the city of Ferguson. I attended their August meeting. For the first 45 minutes, I took an environmental scan. It was evident that their most immediate breakdown was explicitly rooted in communication. I changed up my pitch to begin with the basics of deep listening, critical thinking, and critical speaking, then went into The Justice Fleet and how we cultivated healing spaces through art, dialogue, and play. After my pitch they made their first unanimous decision, to hire me as a volunteer consultant. I stayed after the vote, and continued to take notes on communication interactions to better prepare me for the months to come and observed elements that would determine our path together.

The group was diverse in age and split almost evenly between black residents and white residents. I observed a lack of respect and deep listening due to trauma, incongruent dispositions regarding what safety means and how best to achieve it, and what the role of community is in social justice processes. It was also evident that there were group members who espoused racists, non-racists, and anti-racists beliefs and practices resulting in heightened levels of tension in the group.

The Ferguson NPSC had been meeting for over 18 months, but had not accomplished what they set out to accomplish due to intra-group conflict. Not only did the group need to heal from trauma caused by systemic oppression, they needed to heal from intra-group trauma. They also needed to exercise radical imagination to think through what policing can look like in a community where a large portion of the residents feel disempowered, brutalized by the police, and a lack of agency in determining a way forward.

The members' expressed desperation for a swift change in in-group dynamics that would foster a collaborative environment where they could heal from racial injustice while also generating imaginative ideas for community policing. As a communication professor rooted in fostering social justice, I utilized a community based, participatory dialogue model that provides resources and creates spaces for community members to engage in dialogue and capacity building around topics they deem necessary and germane to healing from racial bias and inequity.

The process is multi-layered and each component builds on the previous stages. This report introduces the concepts, theories and practices I utilized to help transform the way the FNPSC communicated with each other, and eventually go on to finalize recommendations for their community policing model. I begin with a timeline of events.

TIMELINE

August 2017: Pre-pop up, pitch, and environmental scan

I attended the YMCA Back to school event to pop up and share our model with 5 of the FNPSC members. The following week, I attended the FNPSC monthly meeting to observe and assess communication styles and community norms, and deliver a miniature session on communicating across difference. The FNPSC voted unanimously to invite me to be their dialogue and facilitation coach. I agreed to work with the FNPSC and stayed to continue assessing their communication behaviors. Immediately evident was the need for including a workshop on healing from racialized trauma and how to effectively communicate across difference.

September-October 2017: Curriculum Design

Through the months of September and October, I met with members of the FNPSC to engage in stakeholder conversations and conduct an environmental scan. This resulted in a customized curriculum developed specifically for community members, FNPSC members, and Ferguson police officers.

November: Facilitation Training

I met with the designated Facilitation subcommittee and conducted facilitation training.

December: Healing Workshop with The Justice Fleet

The Justice Fleet the first healing workshop as a seminar style lecture on Radical Forgiveness with the entire FNPSC and had them engage in the Forgiveness Quilt. Following the activity, community members were extremely enthusiastic about the continued work, so much so that they requested I bring their painted canvases to every meeting thereafter to continue unpacking what it means to heal from continued racial inequity.

February: Active Listening

In February we unpacked listening as a critical and active skill. In this interactive, lecture style meeting, I engaged members with multiple activities centered on teaching listening, and provided various worksheets and information for them to take home.

March: Social Identity & Privilege

Our March meeting consisted of customized curriculum delivered around understanding social identity, identity mapping, implicit bias, how we communicate different aspects of our identity, and unpacking privilege. Participants completed an identity mapping worksheet and several activities to help them understand more clearly how identity affects every aspect of their lives.

April: Radical Imagination with The Justice Fleet

In April we shifted towards world building. Using the Justice Fleet's Radical Imagination exhibit, participants were tasked with building the Ferguson they want to live in. The members were divided into three groups. There were two new members who were joining the FNPSC for the first time. It was evident that they had not completed the training provided for other members. However, seasoned members were able to adequately use their words, stories, and experiences to push back against exclusive and negative language and better incorporate the new members. After participants built their just communities, we dissected each groups' creations and pointed out any systems of oppression they may have perpetuated and versus entities they built that challenged oppression. All just communities were documented with photographs and voice recording.

Following the Radical imagination build, each member filled out a survey and documented their assessment of the program and their own communication behaviors.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

An **Environmental Scan** is a process of systematically surveying and interpreting information about events, practices, beliefs, values, and their relationships within an organization's internal and external environments.

Conducting an Environmental Scan prior to writing a curriculum for a community partner helps achieve radical inclusion. All too often, facilitators go into spaces with a preset curriculum rooted in assumptions about a particular group. An Environmental Scan ensures that we don't make those assumptions and that we are being radically attentive to the different dynamics of each group. Every group is unique and has specific needs and specific goals. How we help group members realize their goals requires that we understand how the group works. This is the job of someone who is a gifted observer in communication, imaginative in approach, and mindful of preconceived understandings. When done well, the environmental scan should determine the future direction of a consultant's curricular choices and the types of activities members need to engage in in order to successfully achieve member identified goals.

In August of 2017, I met with the Ferguson Neighborhood Police Steering Committee for an Environmental Scan. During the first 45 minutes of the meeting, I silently observed relational and communication behaviors centered around listening, critical thinking, oral communication, and nonverbal communication. I also observed existing relationships. I played close attention to nonverbal behavior cues like posture, vocal tone, where people were sitting, who people were sitting with, and how people were interacting. I also focused on the space itself. We were in the Ferguson Community Center in a large room with 10-15 round tables. At the front of the room, there was a projector, flip chart, note taker, and moderator.

Immediate Observations

Immediately obvious was a lack of active, deep listening. Several members were engaging in a process called feedforward, or the practice of selective listening and ignoring in order to formulate future arguments. Some community members were less invested in understanding a person's perspective and more invested in retaliation. I also observed selective dismissal. Members would physically, emotionally, nonverbally, verbally, and orally dismiss other members' comments, statements, questions, beliefs, ideas and values. There was little cohesion between different group member's values, perspectives, and beliefs. In order to draft policy recommendations to advance equity and change in the community, members must have a shared vision for equity and community change alongside a shared vocabulary and understanding of social justice, community policing, and how to communicate as a unit.

Other communication behaviors that stood out included community members who identify as anti-racists using the meetings space to educate those who espoused racist ideologies, community members using their privileged positions in the community to dismiss and silence other members, and physical altercations between disagreeing members.

After conducting the Environmental Scan, I reported back to community members to check perceptions and then began drafting their specialized curriculum based on my expertise as a communication professional focused on using communication as a tool to advance equity and social justice.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

Following the environmental scan, I met with different members of the Ferguson NPSC and community stakeholders. The goal of these meetings was perception checking. Perception checking refers to the process of sharing perceptions of a specific event with other people who experienced the event for evidence of alignment. If perceptions are not aligned, parties involved share their experiences in an effort to create shared meaning.

My specific goals were to make sure that my perception of the August meeting was in line with the members of the group, share my goals for the curriculum, and solicit feedback. Once I achieved alignment and organized feedback, I mapped out what the group needed to learn and address, the order in which they needed to learn and address those items, and the best activities to help solidify and ground those lessons and sought more feedback. The design and perception checking process is not a linear one, but rather circular. The radically incisive consultant is consistently soliciting feedback, perception checking, and sharing design ideas throughout the process.

I chose a five step process . . .

1) Facilitation Training and Peer Consultation

Facilitation training research shows us that when we learn from and with our peers, there is embedded trust. When we learn materials well enough to teach them, we embody knowledge.

2) Healing Workshops

Healing must happen as we search for solutions, otherwise, we risk recentering and recreating our trauma in our solutions.

3) Active Listening & Critical Communication Skills

The role of a change agent must be predicated on listening to those they serve with and crafting messages that speak to the needs of the entire community. That requires savvy communication skills.

4) Social Identity and Privilege

Understanding who we are in relation to others, within a system of power is a first step in creating sustainable change.

5) Radical Imagination

Shifting from deconstructing systemic oppression to building new and just systems requires learning how to imagine beyond constraints or else we run the risk of repeating old systems in our new paths forward.

FACILITATION TRAINING

The role of a peer facilitator is to mediate and generate. Mediation requires that a facilitator keeps the group focused and on task without deterring the dialogue. Generative facilitation requires probing through deep questioning, inviting engagement, and validating participant experience so that everyone feels compelled to participate. In dialogues about social justice, this is especially difficult when multiple perspectives are present. However, the benefits are numerous.

Research shows that when learning from our peers in facilitated dialogues, there tends to be embedded trust, greater information retention, and more engagement with the material. While peer facilitation is ideal for certain types of learning, peer facilitation also poses challenges. Not having the space to insert your own opinion and your own bias can be difficult for some people. Having to mediate between people who vehemently disagree or peer and friend groups is also challenging. It is also difficult to listen to perspectives that may be different from yours or probe without being dismissive.

I met with the facilitation subcommittee, a small group of 5-7 members, following the environmental scan and curriculum design, and took them through the following series of lectures, activities, and dialogues.

Safe vs Brave Spaces

The Role of a Peer Facilitator

Differences between Debate, Discussion, and Dialogue

Chosen Activities for FNPSC

Safe Space vs Brave Space

We started off exploring the notions of safe space versus brave space and the importance of cultivating community via communication. How we enter and interact in a space has drastic consequences for creation, productivity, and harmony. A safe space is a comfortable space that is free from harm or risk. Safe spaces are important for people to cultivate. They are spaces that guarantee safety and promote self-care. Unfortunately, in a public setting, one can never guarantee a safe space free from intentional or unintentional harm and risk. In addition, our private comfort zones do not push us to engage what I call the learning edge, or the uncomfortable space between the known, unknown, and need to know that shifts our perspectives and forces growth. The learning edge is the most conducive space for learning and growing past our own perspectives. In order to approach the learning edge, we must be brave and cultivate spaces that Brene Brown calls brave spaces.

A brave space is a space where we choose to be vulnerable, open, and honest in inclusive ways that promote broadening our perspective. It is a space that encourages difficult dialogues across difference. There are several important characteristics of a brave space to note.[1]

Embrace Civil Controversy

Embrace civil controversy because we know that controversy allows us to grow and become more aware of what's going on in our lives and other people's lives. Civil controversy is controversy rooted in and connected to the goals of the group. The civil is a matter of engagement with content, not policing and controlling the way people choose to engage. But rather content that is rooted in civic engagement and connected to the expected outcomes of group communication.

Own Your Intent AND Impact

In brave spaces, we must own our intent and impact. All too often offending parties use intent to absolve them of harmful language or actions. For instance, if someone says a racially insensitive comment, they might follow that comment with, "Well, that's not what I meant. I didn't mean for that to happen. That wasn't my intention." Just because we have good intentions doesn't mean aren't offensive or causing harm to others. In a brave space, we own our intent and impact. We monitor our words and actions to ensure they are rooted in goodwill. Then, we follow up to ensure our communication does not have a negative impact on others. And if/when it does, we hold ourselves accountable and avoid excusing our unintentional behavior. This may look like apologizing and brushing up on our vocabulary. It may also look like being more mindful of our implicit bias. It looks like taking action to ensure we do not continue to communicate and behave in harmful ways.

Respect is Complex

Respecting other people may seem like a simple task that includes being kind, listening actively, affirming other peoples beliefs, ideas, and values, and being open to different perspectives. This is easy when we are engaging with people we share values with. But what happens when people say things that are racially insensitive, or when people use micro-aggressions, or when someone's behavior is offensive and harmful? When someone causes you harm via communication behaviors, can you still respect that person? Well, the answer is "yes," acknowledging that respect is complex, and it's not always easy. Respecting with complexity means allowing people the space to make mistakes but also holding them accountable in ways that are respectful. It looks like people calling people in if they have the capacity to do so. It also looks like developing action items to shift harmful behaviors as a unit.

Use Questions to Probe, not Dismiss

Cultivating a brave space means challenging each other to grow and understand broader perspectives. It means asking questions that challenge assumptive values and push the group to avoid **groupthink**. Groupthink refers to the process of convergence in group settings where members stop expressing their own views for fear of not being in alignment with dominant group values and ideas. When groupthink occurs, the entire group looks as if it agrees on everything and moves forward as a unit when there is actual contestation present. One way to avoid groupthink is to challenge each other through probing questions. Even if we agree, we can still probe and push our ideas further. We can use questions to broaden the range of ideas being developed and advocate for including ideas that may be missing or not immediately observable.

Practice Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness in group settings means being mindful of our bias, being mindful of other people's bias, being mindful of our social identities, being mindful of other people's social identities, and understanding how these four things affect the way we move through the world and how we see others moving through the world. Everyone has bias and everyone has social identities. These things directly impact how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how communicate with others. We cannot not be biased, but we can be mindful of our biases and how they affect our ability to thrive.

Embrace Discomfort

Difficult conversations can be hard to engage in depending on our own mental health and trauma. Difficult conversations can create anxiety, pain, resentment, hostility and other negative emotions. Some conversations move beyond difficult and become triggering, pushing us beyond our learning edge. In a brave space, we embrace the discomfort of difficult conversations while also being mindful of our own learning edges and when to engage. Once triggered, it is difficult to participate or learn. But the discomfort in being vulnerable and approaching the learning edge can be mind-opening and clarifying. In a brave space, we embrace that type of discomfort, knowing that discomfort helps us learn. Being uncomfortable is a space to grow and critically re-imagine our role in the world.

Ownership

In a brave space, we must own our experiences and our accountability. We take ownership by speaking specifically to our experience and not speaking on behalf of others. We take ownership by avoiding generalizations about groups of people. We tale ownership by using "I" language and speaking from a place of authority and affirmation. We take ownership by practicing self-accountability via admitting to our mistakes and developing action items to do better and shift behavior over time. We also do this by owning our intent and impact.

The Role of a Peer Facilitator

Peer facilitators mediate conversations in ways that promote social justice, mutual understanding, shared meaning, and compassion. Peer facilitators do this by encouraging deep listening, sharing, reflection, and questioning. The peer facilitator is not steering the conversation towards a specific goal, but rather asking the right questions to prompt deeper understanding and deeper listening and encourage meaningful relationships to form among people with different values, identities, and histories. Peer facilitators are not considered experts in a specific subject, but rather engaged participants that use structured activities and readings alongside reciprocal sharing and reflection to maximize learning.

Challenges to Peer Facilitation

There are several challenges to peer facilitating. Sharing, being vulnerable, and empathizing with others requires emotional labor. Engaging with participants who disagree is difficult. Learning how to acknowledge opinions and attitudes and ideas that we don't agree with is a skill. However, remembering that respect is complex, it is possible to engage in a dialogue in respectful ways without compromising your own belief and value systems. We can dialogue with people who are not like-minded without sacrificing our own self.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

So what is dialogue? Well it is not a debate or a discussion.[2]

Debate

The goal of debate is to defeat the opponent via several strategies. Debaters look for weakness in the opponent's arguments and emphasize disagreement. Debaters advocate one perspective or opinion as the ultimate truth. Debaters search for flaws in their opponents reasoning and judge their opponents viewpoints as inferior, invalid, or distorted. Debaters listen only with the intent of countering versus understanding. Debate leaves little room for human experience or emotion. Instead, debaters discount the validity and feelings of others. Debaters focus on conflict and difference as an advantage. Debaters disregard relationships, relational maintenance, and reciprocity. Debaters use silence as a weapon, assuming that silence and introspection are products of ignorance or defeat. If you've ever been to a debate tournament, you've seen these things in action, and they're very effective in shutting down opponents.

Discussion

The goals of discussion are to persuade others while avoiding conflict. We see this style of group communication most often in the classroom, where the teacher is trying to persuade the students to believe or remember lessons, adopt particular attitudes, and/or invest in specific ideas without creating conflict. In a discussion, participants seek answers and solutions. Participants solve their own and other's problems. Participants attempt to find answers, and/or offer advice even if there is no concrete answer and best way forward. In a discussion, there are preset goals in mind that participants are determined to achieve. In a discussion, participants maintain a power distance in order to steer meaning and control the space. For instance, teacher maintain their power and steer discussions to create specific and assumed shared meaning. Discussants listen for places of disagreement in an effort to find agreement and avoid conflict while persuading. In discussion, participants avoid feelings, as they are not germane to learning, and instead of building relationships, they strive to retain existing relationships and power distance. Finally, discussants avoid awkward moments of silence and instead, continue to push towards the conversation goal.

Dialogue

While debate and discussion are competitive and persuasive respectively, the goal of dialogue is to listen and understand each other. Dialogue participants are searching for shared meaning. Shared meaning does not require consensus. Instead, it means each participants understands the other participants point of view. It means that "I understand you, and you understand me. We've come to some shared meaning." Instead of exploiting disagreements to generate conflict, dialogue participants find places of agreement and depart from there, while allowing for and inviting differences of opinion and experiences. The more participants invite those differences, the better equipped they are to understand others and to empathize with others. In a dialogue, participants ask questions and invite inquiry that foster connection. Instead of having a preset idea of what participants must believe or do, dialogue participants allow the questions and curiosity to develop the path of understanding. Dialogue participants dedicate their time and energy to collective respect in order to come to shared meaning.

In a dialogue, participants are not concerned with maintaining power distance or judging others as inferior or invalid, but rather, listening respectfully to other's ideas and valuing each participant as an important contributor. In a dialogue, participants listen without judgment. The goal is only to understand and broaden our own perspectives to include the experiences of others and empathize. A dialogue participant's job is to understand what others are saying, not to put a qualitative mark on their beliefs and statements.

In a dialogue, participants validate each other's experiences and feelings and allow each other to feel in the space. Instead of avoiding or weaponizing feelings, in dialogue, we allow ourselves to feel.

Instead of exploiting or avoiding conflict, dialogue participants articulate areas of conflict and difference because conflict and difference create the discomfort that gets us closer to the learning edge.

The job of a dialogue is to build and honor relationship, not to retain or disregard.

Finally, in dialogue, participants honor silence. Silenced leaves room for deep thought, introspection, and reflection. Silence means we are thinking through concepts, thinking through ideas, and thinking through differences.

CULTURE

The final concept to explore in facilitation training is the notion of culture and cultural difference.[3] I use the **cultural iceberg** metaphor to survey the complexity of humans. A giant iceberg sits in a body of water. The small part protruding above the surface of the water is filled with easily observed and experienced things we associate with cultural exploration like food, language, music, the visual arts, the performing arts, literature, holidays, flags, clothing styles, and common activities. These elements comprise the tip of the iceberg, or the shallow experiences that don't require deep learning.
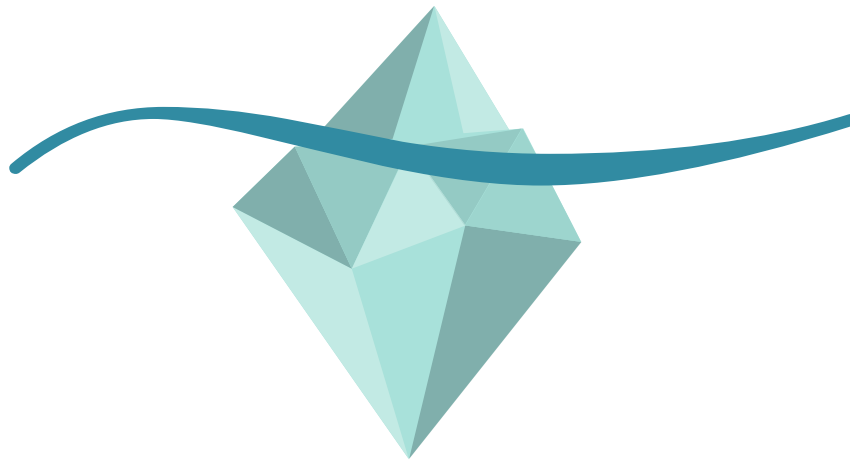
Once one goes beneath the surface, to explore the bottom of the iceberg, they begin to unpack just how much complexity a culture can cultivate. There are many things that affect and impact the way a group of people moves through the world as a unit. These are things that are not easily observable and include the nature of friendship, what is considered beautiful, learning styles, attitudes towards aging, views on raising children, approaches to problem-solving, the construction and experience with time, assumptions around gender roles, and leadership styles. These are things that are difficult to understand unless we spend a lot of time with people in a culture or grow up in a particular culture. In a dialogue, it is important for participants to always keep in mind just how complex humans are. If we are trying to understand each other through dialogue, we should keep the cultural iceberg in mind, recognizing that there is always more to learn about people who are different. Many elements go into creating cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs. We can't reach understanding if we only focus on the tip of the iceberg.

ACTIVITIES

After facilitators learn the art of facilitation, we move on to the actual activities, how they are run, and prompts to begin the dialogue. For the Ferguson NPSC, I chose IdentiTree, The Privilege Walk, and an Active Listening exercise. I also brought in two of the Justice Fleet Exhibits, Radical Forgiveness and Radical imagination (not included in this report).

IdentiTree [4]

Understanding our own social identities is a crucial first step in fostering community with others. As we learn and understand our own complexities, we open up space to begin exploring how others are different. The IdentiTree exercise is a simple yet effective identity exercise that helps participants see their place in the world next to others. It also fosters a sense of complexity around matters of identity and salience.
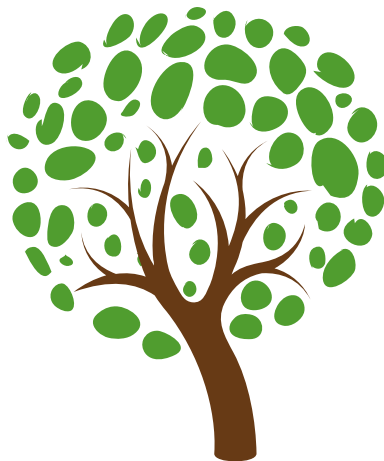
On a single sheet of computer printout paper is a tree. Each branch represents some aspect of social identity. Categories include race, sexuality, ability, sex, gender, ethnicity, religion, spirituality, class, and political affiliation. One branch is left blank for participants to write in elements that are not included. Participants are asked to write in how they identify on each branch and to draw zero to five leaves on each branch based on how often they think about that social identity. Five leaves means a participant thinks about a social identity daily. Zero leaves means a participant rarely thinks about a social identity. Naming and acknowledging how a social identity category affects our daily lives is important. It allows us to disclose our social identities, begin to understand our social identities and how they impact the way we see ourselves and others in community.

After participants fill out the tree, the peer facilitators lead them in a dialogue around issues of saliency and group identity.

Saliency

The first dialogue is around elements of saliency. **Salience** refers to an element of our identity that stands out or becomes important in a specific moment for different reasons. For instance, when I enter a basketball gym, my gender as a nonbinary, femme presenting human becomes salient because masculine identified people tend to dominate spaces designed for athletic performance.

The prompts are as follows . . .

Which elements of your identity are most salient to you (most aware of)? Which ones do you think about least?

Did anything surprise you as you were completing your identitree? Which branch do you think may be the biggest surprise to others?

What were your earliest memories about some of these elements of your own identity?

What are situations where your less salient identities do come out? How do you feel when those identities become salient to you? (e.g. feelings of discomfort? Pride?)

Agent vs Target Group Identities

The second set of dialogue prompts are about agent and target group identities. **Agent group** refers to dominant identities, and **target group** refers to non-dominant identities. For instance, being Black is a target group identity whereas being able-bodied is an agent group identity.

The prompts are as follows . . .

Which of these elements do you think have the biggest impact on how others perceive you, either positively or negatively?

Which of these elements have an effect on your own decision-making?

Which elements of your identity are privileged/agent/dominant group memberships (access to power, economic control, provide standards and norms)?
Which ones are targeted group memberships (face disadvantages, differential treatment, lack power and influence)?
**What are your feelings and thoughts?**

Saliency helps people understand that social identity categories are not fixed. They're dynamic and becoming more or less important depending upon where a person is in the world. Additionally, whether or not a person is in an agent group versus a target group impacts how they perceive others and how others perceive them. It also impacts things like decision-making, membership to certain groups, and intra-group and inter-group experiences. When taken together, the IdentiTree exercise gets people to see that social identity categories matter. They are not all that there is, especially with respect to the Cultural Iceberg, but they matter, and they dictate how we move through the world.

Privilege Walk [5]

Privilege is extremely complex. There are various types of privilege, including but not limited to racial privilege, financial privilege, national privilege, beauty privilege, and ability. There are so many different kinds of privileges that each one of us experiences. Those privileged directly affect what we have access to, how we access and interpret stories, how we understand people's experiences, how we refuse to understand people's experiences, and how we move through the world. Although privileges are co-dependent, having one privilege doesn't prevent a person from also experiencing pain or suffering. The Privilege walk is a visual activity that helps make clear the different types of privilege, or lack thereof, and how they affect the way we move through the world with nuance. I use the privilege walk activity in classrooms and workshops so participants can see just how differently every human sharing the space lives their life with respect to social identity and experience.
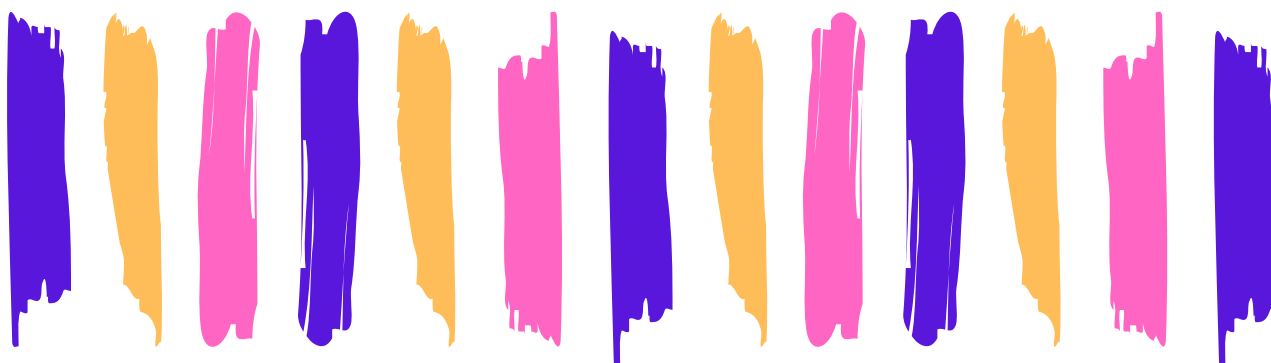
The activity is set up in a large space. All participants start together at one end of the room or in the middle. The facilitator then reads a statement and asks participants to take a step forward or back depending on their answer. As statements are read, people begin to separate with the most privileged moving to the front of the room, and those with less privileges moving to the back. The visual imagery after the walk shows the diversity of participant experience and the complexity of each individual person.

Privilege Walk Continued . . .

Following the walk, participants are asked to look at their positions and the position of other participants and reflect on what it feels like to be in their position.

Then, the peer facilitator leads a dialogue using the following prompts . . .

1) What emotions did you experience while moving forward or backwards?

2) What emotions did you experience while watching others move forward or backward?

3) Does anyone want to share what it felt like to be in the front or the back of the room?

4) Did anyone think they had more or less privileges than they ended up having? What does that feel like?

5) Does anyone want to share a story related to one of the statements?

> **a. Probe participants following any shares to see who has similar experiences or feelings and ask them to share as well to promote intergroup solidarity and connection.**

6) What have you learned from this experience?

7) How does it feel to know that much of what you experience was determined by your social identities before you were even born?

8) What can you do with this information in the future?

The dialogue questions following the walk are geared towards helping us understand that much of what we have earned based on having privileges has very little to do with us as individual humans, but rather our genetic makeup, where we were born, and how we were born. The more we can be cognizant of those privileges and how they affect what we can and cannot do, the more we can understand our capacity for impacting social networks and social change. It is important to name the guilt, oppression, and spectrum of privilege after the walk and open the conversation to more nuanced talk about what privilege looks like and how it affects the way we move through our world.

Active Listening for Social Justice

The final lecture and activity included in this report focuses on active listening for social justice. This segment of the training was not included in the peer facilitation training. Instead, everyone was present for the lecture and activity as participants. I delivered the lecture and facilitated the activity. The goal of this meeting was to unpack listening as a critical and active skill while illustrating just how difficult it is to listen, but also why it's one of the most important aspects of social justice.

I begin with a quick activity adapted from the childhood game, telephone. I ask five volunteers to leave the room and for one volunteer to join me. Without offering any information about what we are doing or why, I begin to tell a long, somewhat pointless story about a student who needs to see their advisor so they can graduate on time. I then ask each volunteer to one by one enter the room and tell the next volunteer what they know. The people in the room who do not volunteer get to witness the spread of misinformation, as the message gets completely overhauled with each iteration. Once all volunteers have completed delivering their rendition of the truth, I read the original passage to everyone. While silly, this activity points out the unfortunate truth: most people don't know how to listen deeply or critically.

Active Listening for Social Justice Continued . . .

To begin the lecture, I start with the transactional model of communication.[6] I ask participants, "What is required to communicate?" Eventually we draw a sender and a message. Overtime, we fill out the model to include communicators sending and receiving messages via encoding and decoding processes through channels. Each message has to filter through what is called noise. **Noise** refers to anything that can infiltrate a message or the ability to decode a message.

There are five types of noise: physiological, physical, psychological, digital, and semantic.

Psychological Noise

Psychological noise consists of anything cognitive that can affect how a person interprets a message. This can include a person's experiences, biases, thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes.

Physiological Noise

Physiological noise refers to things happening in the body of the person listening. Being tired, sleepy, or hungry can drastically affect the way a person reads a message.

Digital Noise

Digital noise refers to technology and the massive room for distractions and misinformation.

Physical Noise

Physical noise consists of whatever is happening in the immediate environment. This can range from bright lights, to a picture window that distract participants, to clicking sounds heard in the room.

Semantic Noise

Finally, Semantic noise refers to the actual message and how it is delivered. For instance, if a person is yelling, can't find the right words, or speaks too quietly, a message may not be interpreted accurately.

Once participants see how messages are sent, how they travel, and how easy it is to misinterpret and misunderstand them because of how they travel, participants begin to understand the importance of deep critical listening.

We then revisit the game of telephone and discuss what types of noise were present, ways I could have been more clear as a speaker, and what the volunteers could have done to ensure receiving and delivering the message as clearly as possible. I then go onto discuss the qualities of deep critical listening, barriers to listening, and the important of critical listening, speaking, and thinking in the movement for social justice.

Deep Critical Listening

Deep critical listening is different from hearing. Hearing is a physiological process by where a sound is sent through sound waves into your eardrums. The person hearing does not have to pay attention or focus. Examples of things we hear include background noise like a plane flying overhead or the clicking of a pen in the classroom. Listening is a psychological process. Listening requires that a person pay attention and process what they are listening to. Listening is a three-part process that requires understanding, application, and response.

Understanding

Listen to ensure all parties involved come to shared meaning. Participants listen to understand what the other person is saying fully. Perception checking is a useful tool to ensure shared meaning and alignment. Perception checking is a three step process for listeners: 1) paraphrase the essential points; 2) ask if your paraphrase is in alignment with the speaker; and 3) as clarifying questions to probe deeper.

Applying

Process the messages you listened to by checking your own knowledge, seeing where the new information fits into your own schema, checking your impressions and ideas about the initial message, and applying that information to what you already know.

Responding

Offer verbal and nonverbal feedback to ensure the person you are listening to knows you are listening, feels affirmed, and continues the dialogue.

After offering this information, I ask questions to generate dialogue . . .

"Why is critical listening essential to critical thinking?"

"How does it affect our ability to communicate?"

The answers are obvious: If we are not listening, we cannot participate in the dialogue. Critical listening is germane to being a part of a dialogue and being able to communicate effectively.

Barriers to Active Listening

So why is it so hard to listen? There are several barriers to active listening.

Lack of Concentration

If someone is attempting to listen to more than one conversation at a time, or if they're just disinterested or preoccupied, that lack of concentration directly inhibit their ability to focus and concentrate on a message.

Noise

Revisiting noise, I remind participants of the physical, physical, semantic, digital, and physiological noise. Albeit physical noise in the immediate environment, physiological noise in the body, psychological noise in the head, semantic noise in the message, or digital noise distracting participants, noise plays a direct role in prohibiting effective listening.

Jumping to Conclusions

Another barrier to effective listening is jumping to conclusions, or making assumptions about what someone is going to say prior to them saying it and then fabricating your response before they can even finish.

Prejudice and Bias

Prejudice and bias are also huge barriers to effective listening. If a participant sees someone's skin color and makes assumptions about them that are negative, that will impact their ability to listen to what they're saying or identify their points or see the truth behind their points. Prejudice and bias works both ways. There's good bias, what we call the "halo effect," where we hear someone speaking, but because we think they're a good person, we take what they're saying as good, even though it might not be. And then, there's negative bias, the "horn effect." We assume that someone is saying something that is negative because we don't like them or because of past experiences.

Barriers to Active Listening Continued . . .

Identifying versus Empathizing

Another barrier is identifying rather than empathizing. Trying to identify what is happening and prescribe an answer is not active deep listening. Instead, listeners should reach for empathy. Listeners should try to put themselves in someone else's shoes and experience the phenomenon being discussed from their perspective.

Sympathizing versus Empathizing

Another barrier is sympathizing rather than empathizing. Saying to someone, "Oh, I'm so sorry. This is sad," is an act of sympathy. We can offer sympathy, but this is not empathy. It doesn't help us to grow. We need to be able to feel what others feel and understand what others understand in order to create impact, and change that's impactful in meaningful ways.

Closed Minds

The last barrier we discuss is close-mindedness, or being unwilling to grow and share in new knowledge and new understanding.

If someone's experiencing these barriers, a communication partner can look for signs of ineffective listening and try to increase engagement. Those signs include sudden changes in topic, selective listening or picking apart an argument and only focusing on the things that you want to focus on, daydreaming, and advising, or someone who keeps offering advice without listening to the issue at hand.

Active Listening to Cultivate a Brave Space

Using the same framing from the facilitation training, I reintroduce brave space in the context of listening and offer the following action items:

Take listening seriously.

Be an active listener.

Resist distractions.

Don't be diverted by appearance and delivery.

Suspend judgment until everything's on the table.

Focus your listening on the dialogue itself.

Develop note-taking skills.

Assume good intent, but also question it.

Understand that respect is complex.

Exercise grace and compassion.

Affirm each other's feelings.

Focus on Complexity.

Challenge your biases and try to grow from them.

Remember that power is intersectional.

Active Listening to Cultivate a Brave Space Continued . . .

Humans are complex beings with a lot of ideas, feelings, thoughts, experiences, baggage, and history. We often make mistakes and are constantly growing. As we engage with this work, we must focus on complexity in order to create a brave space, versus being reductive and reducing humans to a single comment, a single action, or a single thought. Social injustices and the categories of oppression grow much faster than our language can keep up. This means that we humans will make mistakes and potentially cause harm along the way. When we cultivate brave spaces, we make room to grow through our inadequacies as we become more adequate in a given area. When we exercise grace and compassion, we create brave space for folks to be able to make mistakes and grow and learn from those mistakes. In spaces designed to advance equity and cultivate social change, we must exercise grace and compassion knowing that we are all learning, and we are all a work in progress.

Critical Thinking in the Movement for Social Change

After we learn how to listen critically, we move into improving our critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is a process that requires us to do the following:

1) Evaluate messages

2) Locate the main argument

3) Align premises and supporting evidence

4) Uncover any fallacies

5) Apply the main argument to what you already know

6) Separate fact and opinion

7) Engage media literacy (or be able to assess, analyze and evaluate media message)

8) Recognize key strategies of division like trolling, bullying, and insensitive buzzwords and phrases like "I have black friends, I can't be racist."

Critical Speaking in the Movement for Social Change

Critical speaking refers to using our voices as change agents, which requires thoughtful, strategic, effective communication. While it is important to be open and honest, if we owning our intent and impact, we must be mindful of our audiences, weigh potential interpretations and impacts, be intentional about how we frame messages, utilize the most effective channels for the context and audience, and think about how our communication may change, create, or impede future progress towards social change.

- ## Say what you want to say . . . but . . .

  Think about context   **Think about effects**

  Think about audience   **Think about culture**

  Think about possible interpretations   **Think about future**

- ## THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK!

- ## Own your Intent & Impact

- ## Recognize Key Strategies of Division and Determine Engagement

- ## Keep Ethics at the forefront

  Make sure goals are ethically sound

  Be fully prepared for each interaction

  Be honest

  Avoid Name Calling and Abusive language

  Put ethical principles into practice

  Avoid Plagiarism

  Be courteous and attentive

  Avoiding prejudging the speaker

  Maintain the free and open expression of ideas

At this point, I introduced the differences between debate, discussion, and dialogue for the entire group and incorporated the same lessons utilized in the facilitation training section.
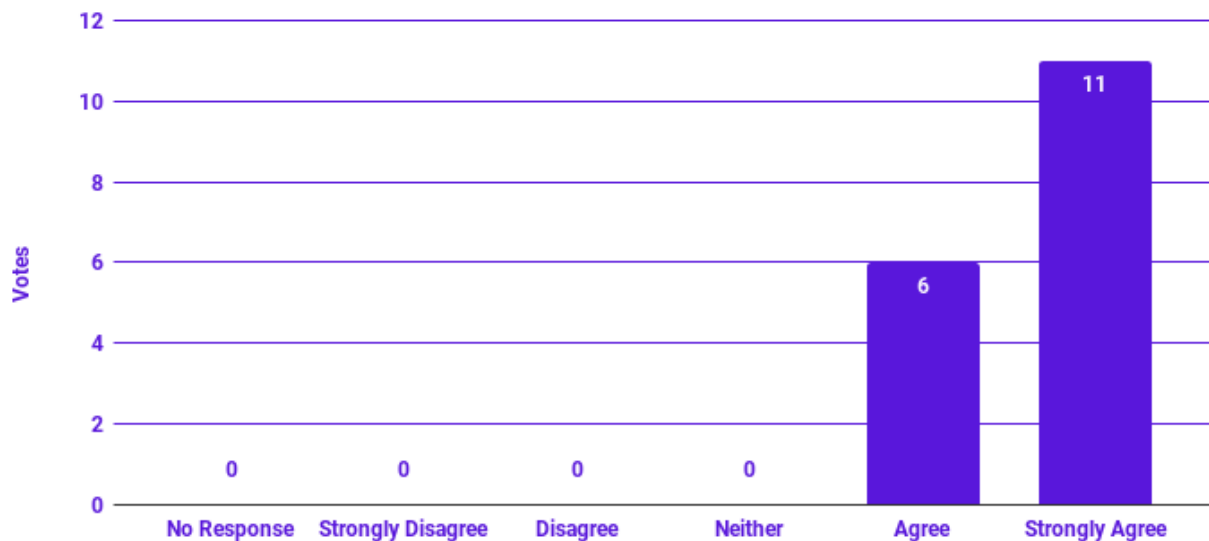
ASSESSMENT

During the April meeting, the Ferguson NPSC members presented their community-policing model to the Department of Justice and filled out a survey.
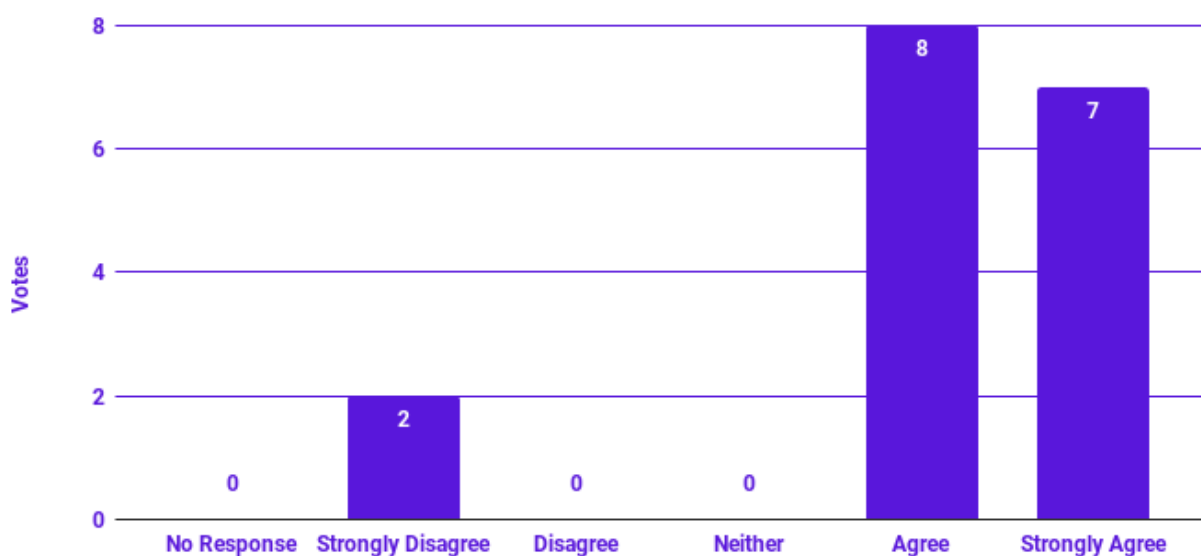
Survey Results

I conducted a survey during the final meeting to gauge satisfaction and growth. There were 11 statements to rate on a Likert-Type scale from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) with 3 being neutral and N/A as a final option.
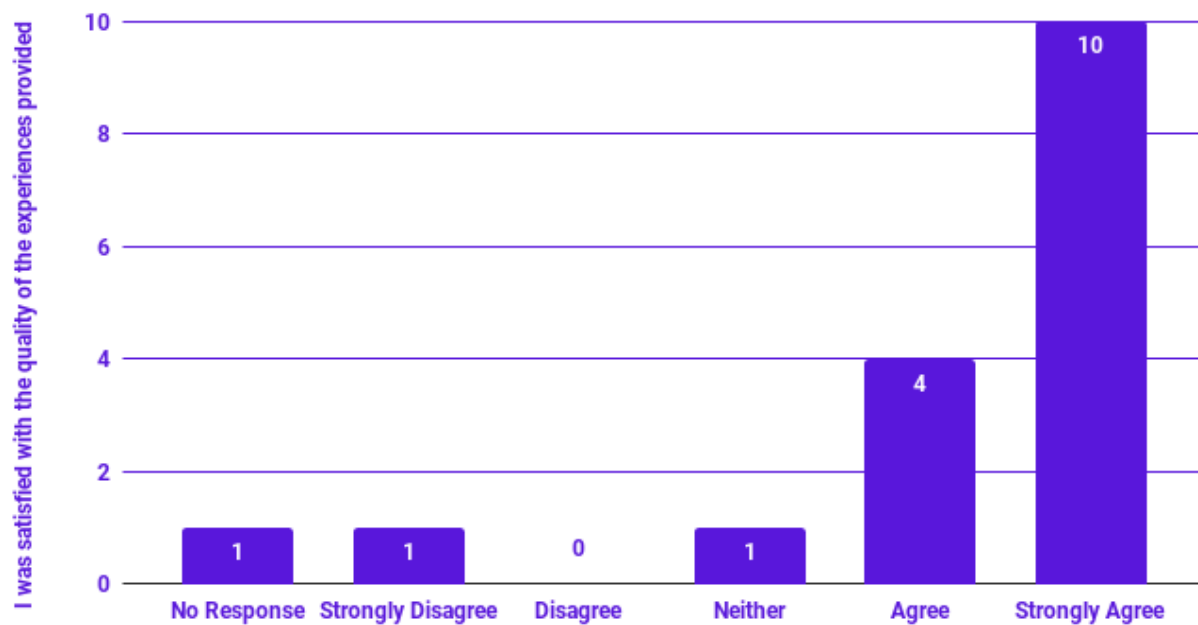
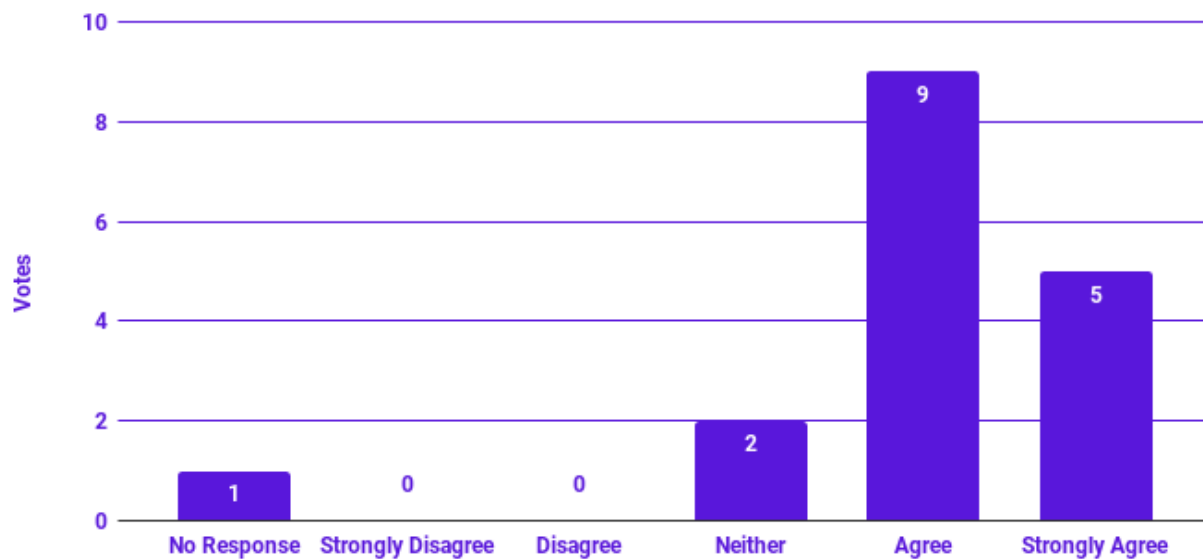### I understood Amber Johnson's role at the Ferguson NPSC meetings.

	No Response	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
Votes	0	0	0	0	6	11

My expectations were met.

	No Response	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
Votes	0	2	0	0	8	7

I was satisfied with the quality of the experiences provided

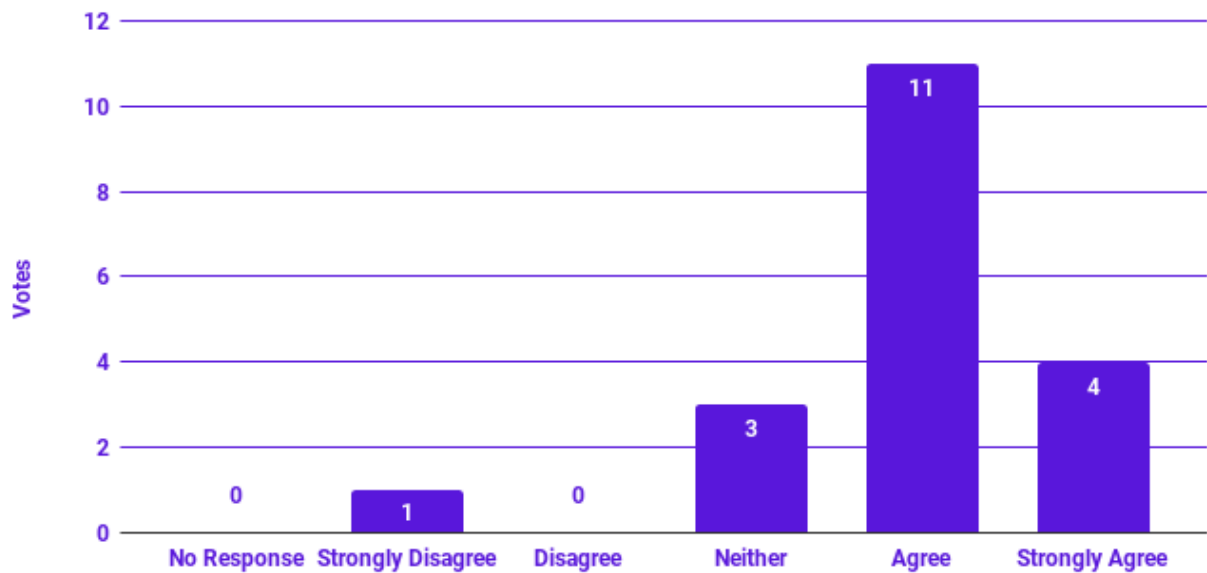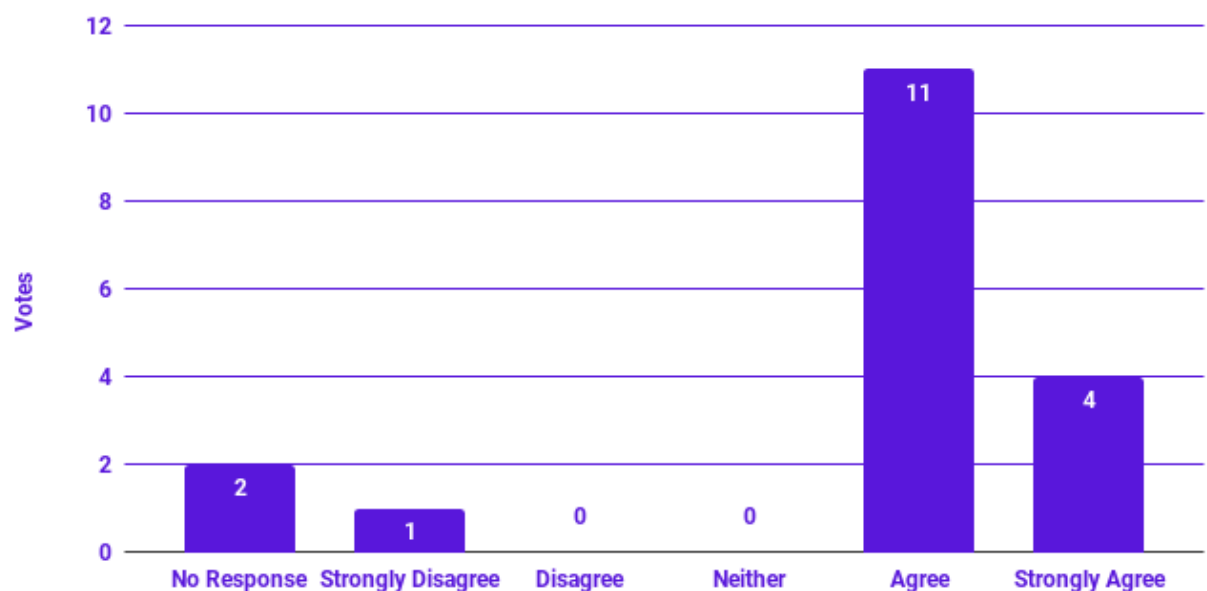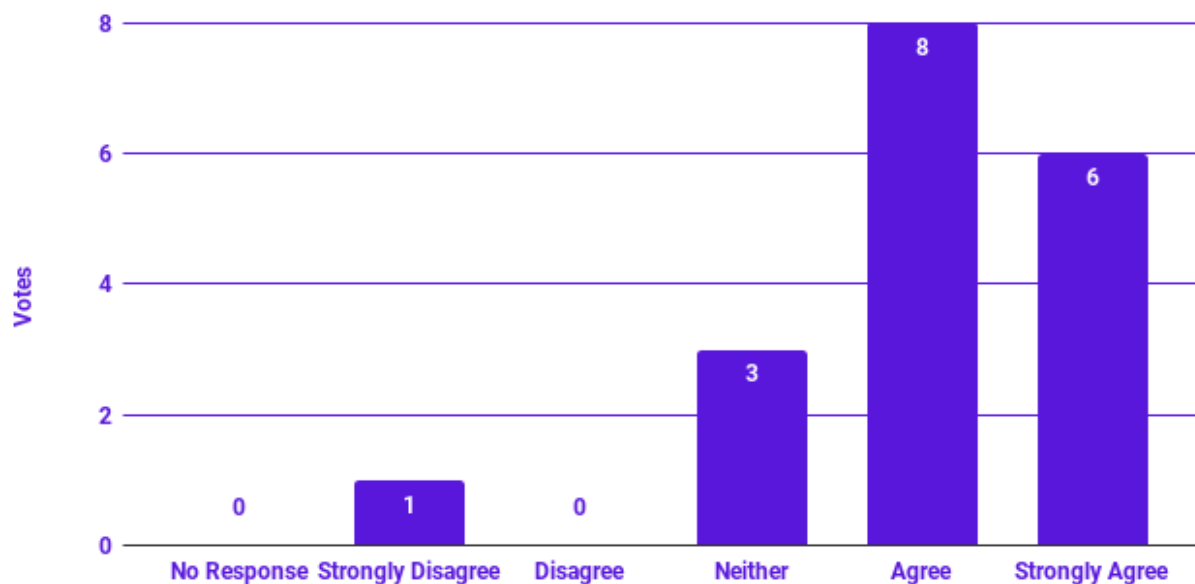
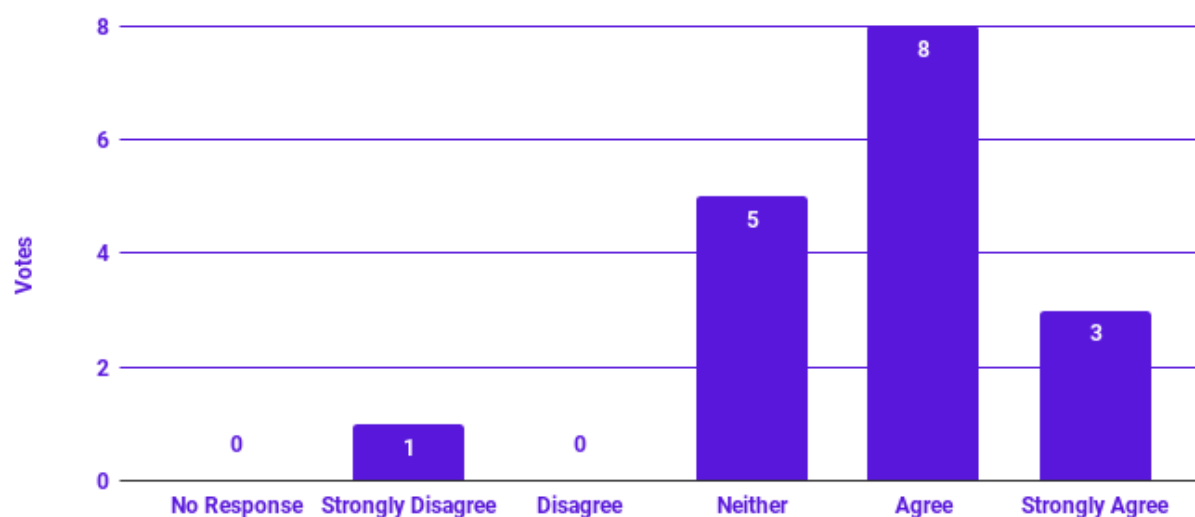## I learned about racial injustice.

I understand my bias more clearly

After Dr. Johnson's visits with the FNPSC, I am better able to communicate with other members of the FNPSC.

I understand the principles of Radical Forgiveness.

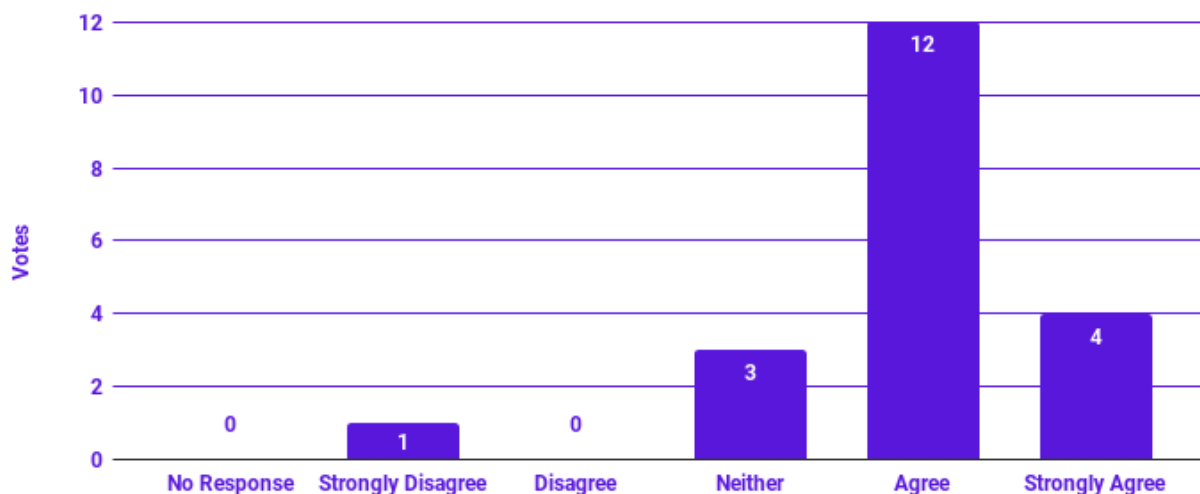| Response	Votes
No Response	0
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	0
Neither	3
Agree	8
Strongly Agree	6

Visiting the Justice Fleet gave me an opportunity to reflect on the importance of forgiveness and letting go of pain, hate, and fear.

Response	Votes
No Response	0
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	0
Neither	5
Agree	8
Strongly Agree	3

After Dr. Johnson's visits withe the FNPSC, I feel better equipped to imagine the world I want to live in.

	Votes
No Response	0
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	1
Neither	2
Agree	9
Strongly Agree	5
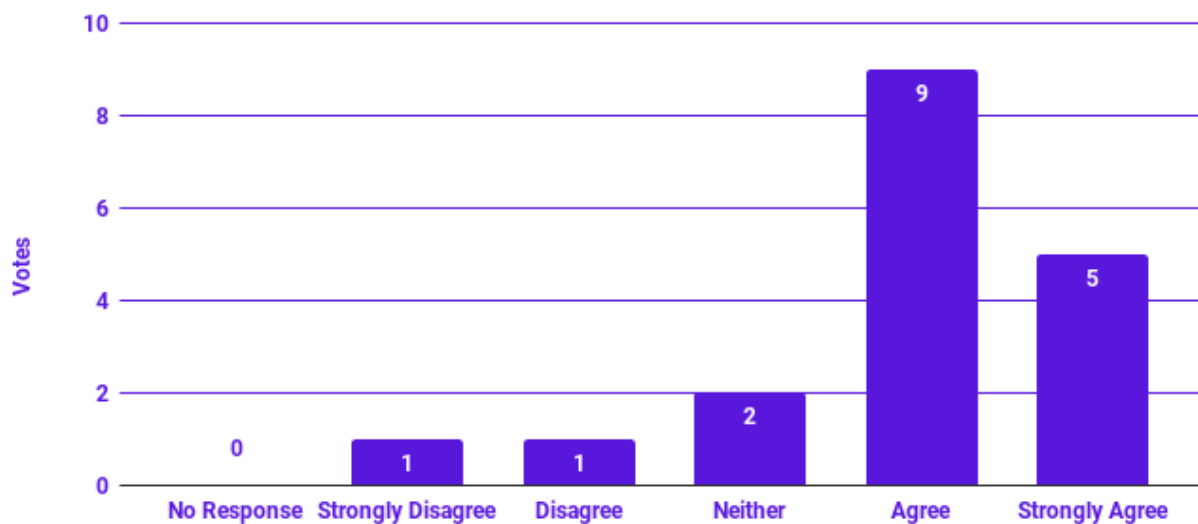
After learning about the principles of dialogue and communication, I am better able to communicate with people who are different from me.

	Votes
No Response	0
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	0
Neither	3
Agree	12
Strongly Agree	4

I am able to apply the principles of Radical Forgiveness to my immediate life.

Bar chart — Votes:
- No Response: 0
- Strongly Disagree: 1
- Disagree: 0
- Neither: 3
- Agree: 9
- Strongly Agree: 3

Following the questionnaire were 3 open-ended questions.

We were working on talking, dialogue, and listening, but we were having difficulty hearing and listening to each other.

Communication between the group was horrible. So much frustration and tension. We were talking at each other and not listening to one another.

A lot of anger, tension, disagreements and racial divisions

Sometimes one-sided.

Combative

Racial Division

Frustrated

Contentious

Confrontational

Prior to Dr. Johnson meeting with the Ferguson NPSC, describe the communication style of the group.

Firm

Limited

Mad

Formal

Angry

Bad

Tense

Disagreements

Discussion were along pre-existing positions and thoughts.

Power struggles for control of a consent decree established group. Control was Robert Rules of Order, majority vote rules versus consensual decision making.

Communication before was terrible. But some of it was resolved before the sessions started.

A lot of contention. Much of which ended before Amber came because the bullies left.

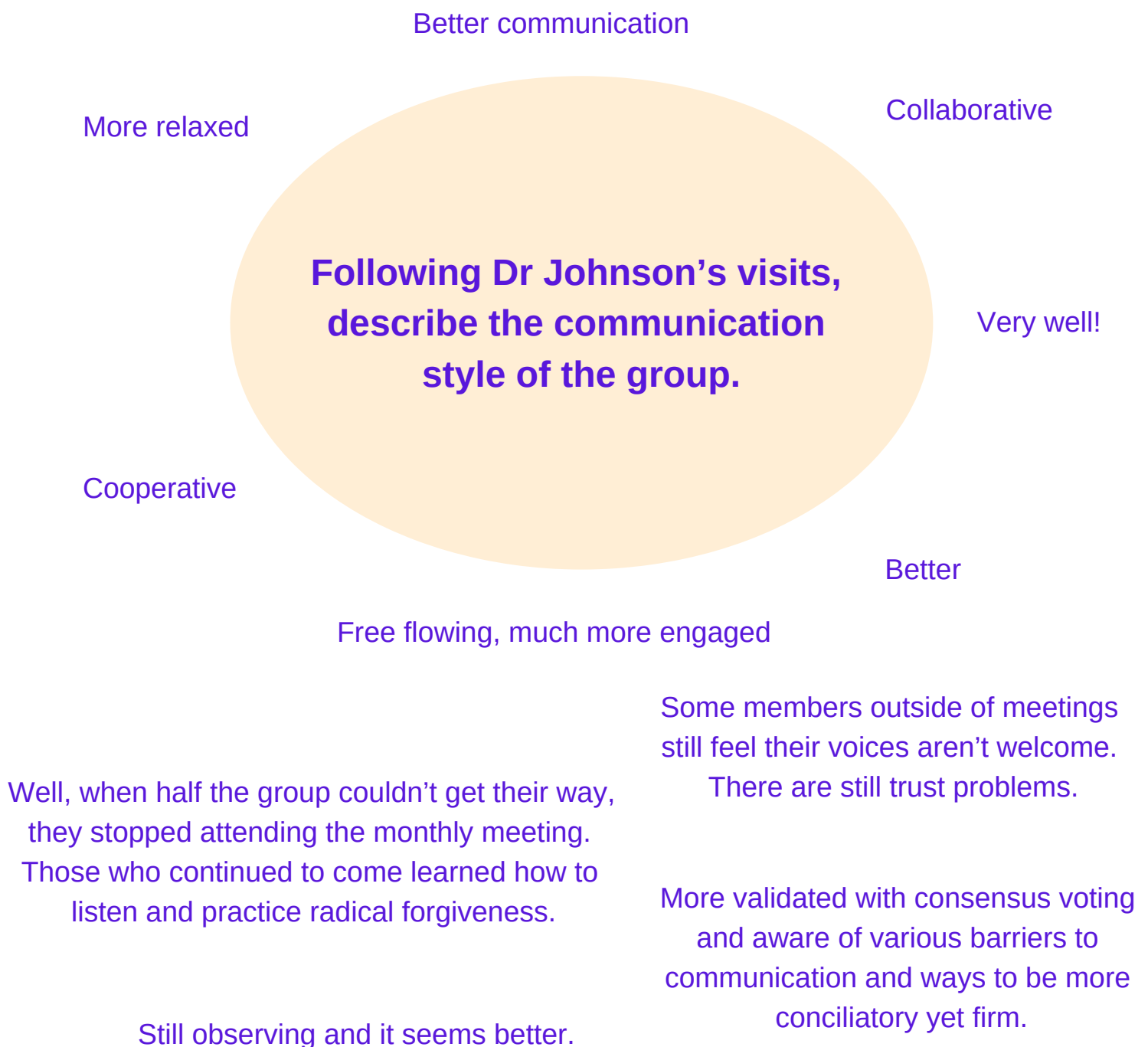Now the group is on the right path to communicate with each other.

We work better together because we listen and understand better.

More active listening, less anger, more camaraderie involved, more relaxed.

Some members were more willing to admit to other members viewpoints, but more improvement is still needed.

People seem much more comfortable and open.

Better communication

More relaxed

Collaborative

Following Dr Johnson's visits, describe the communication style of the group.

Very well!

Cooperative

Better

Free flowing, much more engaged

Well, when half the group couldn't get their way, they stopped attending the monthly meeting. Those who continued to come learned how to listen and practice radical forgiveness.

Some members outside of meetings still feel their voices aren't welcome. There are still trust problems.

More validated with consensus voting and aware of various barriers to communication and ways to be more conciliatory yet firm.

Still observing and it seems better.

Thanks for the advice and the way you pushed us to use our minds together.

It was good to see other points of view and good to know the feelings of others.

Thank you for coming and for bringing your projects, Dr. Johnson. Although we're a city that is still so racially divided, many of us are still committed to doing the work that will help Ferguson progress into a community that is inclusive in every way.

This work was amazing. It would be fantastic for the rest of our community as well. I really appreciate Dr. Johnson's approach, analysis, and dedication to our group.

Other comments.

Love it. More more!

We are not perfect, we are a work in progress.

We appreciate you Dr. Johnson for helping us.

Very good information. I learned a lot from Amber. I hope you can come back! Thank you!

Need additional training to move from understanding to fluent implementation.

Some changes were due to other factors like people leaving who caused divisions, but Amber and the Justice Fleet made a huge difference.

There was a big change in membership that happened at the same time as Amber began to work with us. I am sure Amber made a big impact, but important to remembers there many other factors as well.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

The FNPSC completed their community policing plan and report for the Department of Justice following our work together. Now that their report is complete, survey results and personal communication with members illustrate a desire for continued work. Ferguson NPSC members are interested in community engagement, getting more Ferguson citizens involved as they push forward with implementation, and more trainings around matters of racial equity, social justice, and communication.

I would like to invite a conversation about collaborating with Shawna Davies and other staff working with the Governmenal Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE). I firmly believe that the Ferguson NPSC could benefit from ACT training, as well as Racial Equity 101 as we move forward to ensure that all members of the FNPSC have the same language and understanding as they craft their next steps. I would also appreciate GARE as a collaborator beyond my scope of work with the FNPSC as they begin thinking specifically about community policing and developing their community plan and model. While the FNPSC has already completed their community-policing model, they are interested in strengthening community engagement and getting more Ferguson citizens involved.

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