

Peer Review Article

Listening Across Differences:

Facilitators' Perspectives from Austrian Mini-Publics

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Abstract

Deliberative mini-publics, created through sortition and stratified sampling, reflect the broader diversity of the larger whole. While these mini-publics are usually facilitated, the lived experience of facilitators in this role has seldom been explored. Facilitators' accounts of the joys and challenges of facilitating mini-publics in the state of Vorarlberg, Austria illuminate the nuances of embodying active listening and interpersonal empathy in this context, with implications for both deliberative theory and practice.

Keywords

listening, empathy, group facilitation, deliberative democracy, mini-publics

Introduction

How might political systems orient themselves toward collective well-being? Crises in democracy have reached visible tipping points, though these conditions have been long in the making (Koenig et al., 2024). In the margins, democratic innovations continue to grow, including sortition-based mini-publics. These

temporary groups of “everyday people” convened to generate policy recommendations on public issues have shown potential for increasing legitimacy in governance (Mansbridge, 2020), enhancing the epistemic quality of policies (Landemore, 2013), and fostering agency among participants (Ehsassi, 2024; Fung, 2003; Yankelovitch, 1991). While their purpose of mini-publics has not been to make claims about human nature, cumulative findings challenge or highly contextualize earlier assumptions about humans’ disinterest in politics and inability to work through differences. Decades of experiments with various formats show that in facilitated contexts, diverse participants find it highly meaningful to work on collective-action problems (Dryzek et al., 2019). We could see this repeated confirmation of group potential as a “precessionary” outcome, Bucky Fuller’s term for beneficial outcomes arising orthogonally from explicit intentions (Bhalerao, 2022) – in this case, the intention to reconnect people and their governments.

A related indirect finding is the value of group facilitation. Regardless of format, most mini-publics rely on some form of facilitation support (Moore, 2012; Landwehr, 2014). Yet despite being essential for helping diverse groups work well together, facilitation remains largely under-theorized in the deliberative literature. Process design and facilitation have been studied in depth in other contexts, such as multi-stakeholder dialogues to address large-scale conflicts and/or create desired futures (e.g., Forester, 1999, 2009, 2013; Hamann et al., 2024; McKenzie & Seneque, 2024; Molinengo et al., 2021). Here we will be “listening to the listeners”—listening to facilitators speak about the joys and challenges of their work with mini-publics—and exploring the implications for democratic theory and practice. In times of democratic peril, listening may seem too soft a tool to meet the hard edges of political crises. Indeed, many tools are needed. Yet in the practice of democratic innovations, it is often the inner discipline of facilitators—their capacity to withhold, to attune, to reflect—that helps understanding to grow and coherence to emerge. This article explores the often-invisible labor of listening and care at the heart of deliberative design: the work that accompanies reconnection and collective meaning-making.

Toward a “Thicker” Understanding of Facilitators’ Roles in Mini-Publics

In deliberative literature, facilitation has often been described simply as ensuring rule-enforcement and turn-taking (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). While minimal structuring may still yield positive results, this skeletal description feels insufficient, especially for those of us who, as scholar-practitioners, want to help others learn key mindsets and skills. Even as theorists call for careful attention to the variance in mini-publics’ larger systemic effects, a deeper understanding of facilitation in mini-publics can inform the spread of “meaningful political conversations across difference” (Curato & Böker, 2016) through larger systems.

In the neighboring field of public engagement, facilitators' work has been described as creating "a climate of mutual respect and psychological safety that makes it possible for people to consider creative new solutions and move from preconceived positions" (Creighton, 2005, p. 169). Along similar lines, some political scientists have acknowledged how facilitators' work of "cultivating mutual respect and reciprocity" (Smith, 2009, p. 174) among participants supports the crucial "rights, principles, and dispositions" (Smith, 2009, pp. 197-198) needed for public deliberation. Meanwhile, understandings of deliberation continually evolve. Hawhee describes it as "the art and practice of imagining shared futures together" (2021) while DiSalvo writes of democratic inquiry as "rehearsing futures" (as quoted in Casado da Rocha, 2023, p. 231). Taking a deeper look at the work facilitators do in deliberative contexts, in support of both imagined futures and concrete next steps, helps us understand more deeply the process of collaborative meaning-making and the climates in which it roots and flourishes.

Early efforts by deliberative scholars point to a paradox in facilitation—the expectation to remain invisible while also carrying responsibility for group outcomes (Blong, 2008; Mansbridge et al., 2006). Moore frames this as "following from the front," naming these tensions not as "mute contradictions" but instead as "lively and constitutive tensions that have to be managed by reflexive facilitators" (2012, p.147). While facilitators themselves may hold minimal facilitator activity as a normative ideal (Mansbridge et al., 2006, pp. 30-32), studies suggest that mid-level amounts of facilitator activity can actually enhance deliberative quality (Blong, 2008; Dillard, 2013; Ryfe, 2006). However, the customary "bracketing off" in empirical studies of facilitators' process contributions blinds us to how differences in facilitation influence outcomes, thus not allowing informed choices regarding value tradeoffs between high-quality group exploration and facilitator minimalism (Blong, 2008; Dillard, 2013).

Escobar's work (2011, 2015, 2019) has been particularly generative in framing facilitation as a relational practice that helps equalize power. He also highlights facilitators' work as taking place both 'on-stage' during gatherings, and 'off-stage' during preparation and follow-up. Yet even considering the growing attention to the roles of 'public participation professionals' in democratic innovations (Bherer et al., 2017) and the increasing number of practitioner guides (e.g., Gerwin, 2018; White et al., 2022), we can still benefit from facilitators' reflective practice-based knowledge (Schön, 1983). Thus, it has been a deep honor for me to expand from practicing facilitation, and then also from teaching and writing about facilitation, to listening deeply to the voices of other facilitators in my qualitative research.

Before moving on to the research, I would like to say a word about ethical dilemmas and matters of power relations. Democratic innovations take place amidst both collaboration and tensions between practitioners, government officials, and academics. The growing need for process expertise has sparked concerns that consultants' economic interests might contaminate the idealism of

the public square (Hendriks & Carson, 2008). More recent work explores how consultants face ethical dilemmas when encountering pressure from public administrators to arrive at predetermined outcomes (Parry, 2024). Studies of facilitator malpractice have generally found facilitators to be acting responsibly, yet persistent concerns about facilitation being “possibly undemocratic” point to an uneasy recognition of the power inherent in facilitators’ roles (Morrell, 2018, p. 242). Concerns about potential misuse of power, while necessary, can foster an extreme “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Dzur, 2019, pp. 122-134) which can eclipse what facilitators do to use power well.¹ In this larger context, my research explores the forms of care, presence, and discernment that underpin the holding of democratic spaces.

Learning from Facilitators in the Vorarlberg Citizens’ Councils

This article draws from a broader doctoral study of experienced mini-public facilitators working in a long-standing institutionalized context: the Citizens’ Councils in Vorarlberg, the westernmost province of Austria (Zubizarreta-Ada, 2023). Working with Dynamic Facilitation, an empathy-based method designed to “lead to openness, inclusion, and creative solutions,” the intention of these Councils is to address community issues while strengthening community ties (OECD, 2020 pp. 48-49; Participedia, n.d.a, n.d.b; Zubizarreta et al., 2020).

As a researcher-practitioner, deep listening and empathy practices have been a “red thread” in my personal and professional life. While fluent with other methodologies, I also teach and write about Dynamic Facilitation. However, my own work has been primarily with businesses and non-profits (Zubizarreta, 2013). Thus, as an “insider/outsider” researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2015), I have been deeply curious to learn about these Austrian facilitators’ work in the public sector, and what it looks like in practice.

My larger doctoral project is grounded in the assumption that as reflective practitioners, facilitators bring both past knowledge and openness to experimentation to each new instance of practice (Schön, 1983). Inspired by Forester’s elicitation of “practice narratives” (2009, 2013), I adapted it as a methodology to explore my research questions:

What insights emerge from facilitators’ individual and collective reflections on transformative moments within the group dynamics of these councils, and what are the larger democratic implications of the work that these facilitators are doing?

¹ However, for some positive uses of facilitator power, see Hardy et al., 2013, and Westin & Montgomerie, 2024.

I chose to begin each interview with some warm-up questions, asking “What do you most enjoy?” and “What do you find most challenging about facilitating Bürgerräte?” For the main part of each interview, I asked practitioners to select a particularly meaningful moment from a Council of their choice, and worked with follow-up prompts, like “What happened before that?” and/or, “What happened next?” as invitations to expand upon their initial seed descriptions (Laws, 2020).

My research followed Institutional Review Board procedures, informing participants of their rights and obtaining signed consent forms prior to participation, including permission to record and transcribe our conversations. Subsequently, participants had an opportunity to review and clarify the transcripts. Given my own extremely limited German language skills, I sought bilingual practitioners with experience in facilitating Vorarlberg Bürgerräte through snowball sampling. Research participants included 11 professionals, all of Central European ancestry, with a mix of genders and ages. Six worked as independent consultants, four as public administrators, and one as an independent sustainability researcher. Their prior professional backgrounds included various combinations of social work or education (5); public administration (3); coaching and consulting (2); computer science (2); mediation (1); and videography (1). Four had facilitated less than 10 Councils, five had facilitated between 10 and 20, and two had facilitated more than 20.

All interviews were conducted in English (a few facilitators requested the presence of an interpreter as a back-up). Throughout the interviews, my most frequent response was reflecting back the gist of practitioners’ statements. While my main purpose was to offer facilitators the deep listening they so often provide for others, these reflections also helped fine-tune interpersonal understanding, generate resonance, and naturally elicit corrections and/or further elaboration from practitioners.

The “warm-up” questions about joys and challenges were intended to build rapport and provide a springboard into the deeper narrative interviews. Yet unexpectedly, they also surfaced rich material, offering insight into facilitators’ relational awareness, emotional labor, and internal tensions. Rather than bracketing these responses as peripheral, I chose to examine them more closely. These are the findings I will be exploring here.

Following an iterative, inductive process, I began with open coding of responses to the warm-up questions to identify emergent categories, and then moved into a more focused thematization, seeking resonances across these responses. Rather than applying a fixed analytic framework, my work was informed by my action research experience as an organization development consultant, which often leads me to look for larger patterns among the individual interviews. My findings here are not intended to generalize across all facilitation contexts, nor to present a definitive typology of facilitator experience. Instead, the aim is to illuminate the main patterns that arose: How practitioners in this setting experience the subtle dynamics of listening, empathy, and tension-

holding. Given scant research on facilitators' lived experiences, and the key nature of their work, I start with their responses before turning to implications for current deliberative theory.

Findings from Practice: Joys of Facilitating Bürgerräte

Facilitators spoke of three main joys: witnessing participant development, serving as catalysts, and appreciating the structure.² Many described participants' visible transformations—from skepticism to connection, from guardedness to curiosity – and shared stories of participants becoming more empathetic, reflective, and engaged. Others spoke of witnessing agency emerge, as participants realized they could organize, act, or pursue political learning beyond the Council. Facilitators also took joy in their role as deep listeners, describing their presence as a catalyst for others' clarity and connection. Here are some of their voices.³

Joys of Witnessing Participants' Individual or Group Development

Some of these responses highlight the transformative aspect of the group experience:

There is a joke running within our team, with our facilitators. We have this facilitation suitcase, when we go to the workshops and the councils and so on, and we say this facilitation suitcase is like a beauty case, because it makes people more beautiful. There is a kind of magical development people make through this process, that they build a connection to each other. And there is trust in the room. That's always wonderful to see, in such a short time, [...] 12 to 15 people who are randomly selected and don't know each other, transform into a real group and community. And a kind of caring

² Practitioners were free to offer multiple responses to this warm-up question; reviewing the transcripts afterward yielded a total of 27 responses, which after several rounds of clustering and grouping resulting in the above three categories.

³ For the dissertation research, participants chose to use their real names in association with the longer narratives that formed part of the broader study. For other sections designed as a mosaic of voices (such as the one which seeded this article), I communicated my intention to weave in individual contributions anonymously, following the Dynamic Facilitation principle of centering the larger emergent picture rather than individual contributors. Here I use numbers to differentiate the different voices.

All direct quotes are from English-language interviews, with the occasional use of German words retained. Ellipses in brackets ([...]) indicate omitted words; words in square brackets indicate clarifications added for readability. Natural pauses or trailing off are shown with em dashes (—). All emphases are as spoken by the original speaker.

community because they care about the issue they're talking about.

So, when they come, they're curious and skeptical. And they're watching out, what's going on here, and why am I here. And you can see, as the process goes along, they get more alive—and *you can really see it*. At the beginning, they are sitting in the circle, and watching the others. And it's a different appearance when we start into the second day, for example. It's always absolutely fascinating to me (Interview 2, Jan. 14, 2021).

It is not surprising that when groups go well, participants build trust and connection, and *come alive*. Yet what stands out here is how closely facilitators are observing participants and rejoicing in the shifts they see.

Other responses spoke to the *development of empathy and connection* in the group:

What I enjoy the most is [...] when they really start to feel that they are working on something together and start letting go of their ideas of how things should be, really go into a deeper understanding of persons and of personal viewpoints, which they didn't have before. [...] In this personal connection, they understand there is not an idea I talk to, but there is a person I talk to—and this person has personal insights and personal feelings, and they begin to be empathic. And if this empathy rises, this is actually one of the things I enjoy the most (Interview 1, Jan. 8, 2021).

Some facilitators described witnessing *a growing sense of agency* among participants:

Something that I generally enjoy a lot when I do facilitation work is to observe how people have this process of reflection. So maybe coming from a problem or coming from a complaint—and when I ask them to go deeper, and when I mirror them, and when I listen to them, and when I repeat what they say, how they get into this reflective state, where they change their role from being passive to being active. Sometimes it feels like they say, “Ah, well, we could actually do this!” (Interview 3, Jan. 30, 2021).

This growing sense of agency can take the form of *greater confidence and interest in political participation*:

We often hear, when we do the check-out, they're totally surprised by the creativity of the group and the different people sitting here. One of the most [frequent] feedback we get is when they come, they say, “I'm not interested in politics.” And when they go, they say, “I couldn't imagine that discussing difficult political issues could be so creative and constructive.” (Interview 2, Jan. 14, 2021).

Agency can also take the form of greater *curiosity regarding how others think*:

Before, people are being careful, guarded, they don't want to say what they really think. And *after*, they are more interested in how people think. As one [participant] told me, when they go shopping now, they not only hear someone's opinion and think, 'Is it right or wrong'? They want to understand *why* someone might have this opinion, and they ask questions to know why. And this is new (Interview 4, Jan. 30, 2021).

This facilitator is recounting how afterwards, during a chance encounter, a participant mentioned their new desire to understand the reasoning behind others' opinions, rather than simply agree or disagree. And this is one of the joys of her work.

Another indicator of increased agency was *continued group interaction afterwards*:

In one *Bürgerrat*, two or three days after the *Bürgerrat*, they organized themselves. They were interested in social change and social policies, so afterwards, they organized themselves to continue to meet. The other day, in Feldkirch, they made an excursion, like a field trip, by themselves—to learn more about the field of energy and city planning. They organized events by themselves to get together and learn more about how local government works, as a learning journey. And this happened after three different *Bürgeräte* (Interview 4, Jan. 20, 2021).

Other facilitators mentioned their *appreciation for participants' dedication and hard work*:

To have so often that experience, where those very different people find a way to open themselves, to say very personal things, and to do this *really* hard work to find a common outcome [...] They don't make decisions in the *Bürgerrat*, we all know that, but they get to influence and help the people who have to make decisions, to make good decisions. It's not a methodology where we ask people for a street survey for one hour, or for sitting together for a three-hour workshop. [Instead], we bring them into a room for one and a half days, where they work on a summary, they present it at the *BürgerCafé*, and they hand it over to the politicians. So that's a lot of work and effort. And I have had some experiences where people got very, very frustrated because their work was not honored. In that situation, you really get the feeling of what it means to give your time and your heart and all your intellect and your patience, to sit together with other people, and work on something [without being] sure how seriously it will be taken in the end (Interview 9, Mar. 29, 2022).

Developing agency is not a linear process and can involve a sense of frustration. Yet here we can see how deeply this facilitator cares about participants' frustrations: even while responding to a question about "what do you most enjoy," they have already begun to mention some of the challenges.

Some facilitators specialize in Youth Councils (*JugendRäte*), an adaptation of *Bürgerräte* for young people only. One said:

With these Youth Councils, we get a lot of feedback that the people really enjoyed it, and they really had a great time, and it was so good that they were allowed to speak their mind. [...] That's what I experienced with young people, who don't have these sorts of spaces in society, and who live in or work in circumstances where they are mostly told what to do, or how to behave. For them, it's a revelation, this kind of space, where their opinion is valued, and their insights are appreciated.

But I'm thinking, "This is so easy, you know? Why do we have to come, and give them this space, where they are allowed to say what they really think?" It's also sad in a way, that there are so few of those spaces, and it's so easy to provide—just taking them seriously and encouraging them and trusting them (Interview 3, Jan. 30, 2021).

Taking them seriously", "encouraging them", and "trusting them" are described here as *key relational elements of facilitators' work*, yet these listening-related factors are not often found in skeletal conceptions of facilitation. We are learning about these stances indirectly, through facilitators' responses to the question of what they most enjoy about their work—and here, with a tinge of sadness that these contexts are not more widely available for youth.

Joys of Being a Catalyst

These responses focus on facilitators' own experiences of being a catalyst, usually through the work of what many called "deep listening." Listening and empathy have already shown up in some of the earlier responses, in connection with witnessing participants' individual and group development. In these responses, facilitators are also describing their *own* experience with the listening process as joyful:

The format [...] makes the room very open, and you have another role as a facilitator, because you have to be like a fascinated child—you are by each person, with the one who speaks, and you

are understanding the things they say, and this *tiefe zuhören*⁴, this listening deeply, creates a very interesting effect on the person. They are really happy if you understand them well, and if you do it very consistently, then they are empty. [...] And then, if they are ready, I go to the others.

This is another way of working with groups. And I like this form, because it opens other possibilities for all the people in the room, because they have to hear the other person, for as long as needed. And this is a new experience for the people that come in because they don't have this experience in other places. [...] And this is a magic moment for me (Interview 10, Apr. 12, 2022).

This facilitator mentions the term “empty”, as did others in the interviews. Rough, the originator of the Dynamic Facilitation approach, uses the term “empty” to describe the outcomes of the “purge” catalyzed by facilitators’ “deep listening” (2002, pp. 89-91). Through the process of being respectfully received, heard, and mirrored back, there is a resulting “emptying out” of participants’ initial ideas along with an opening to being able to hear others.

Other responses in the category of “being a catalyst” described facilitators’ enjoyment of being with the unknown, hearing the unsaid, recognizing shifts in the group’s unfolding process, and contributing via active listening to participants’ creation of meaningful outcomes.

Enjoying the Structure and Dynamics of the Format

Here facilitators mentioned enjoying the significant diversity among participants created by the sortition process; the length of the mini-public and the value of overnights; the joy of working with and learning from a co-facilitator. One response mentioned the appreciative and open climate that welcomes the whole person, including emotions, while another mentioned the climate of authenticity. Yet as we will see in the next section on challenges, *welcoming the whole person* while also ensuring an appreciative climate, is not always so simple.

Findings from Practice: Challenges of Facilitating Bürgerräte

I initially grouped challenges into two domains, following in-the-room and beyond-the-room aspects of facilitators’ work (Escobar, 2015). In the room, the most common theme was “holding back”—refraining from offering solutions or opinions, even when participants struggled. This restraint was described not as

⁴ While all of the interviews were in English, at times practitioners used some German words. I have left them in German in the quotes, in honor of practitioners’ hard work and willingness to communicate in their second language.

passivity but as a form of disciplined presence, which included the difficulty of holding space for extreme views without collapsing into agreement or judgment. As described by facilitators, this requires self-awareness, deep emotional regulation, and the ability to maintain relational coherence in the face of discomfort. Beyond the room challenges include structural design issues (e.g., topic relevance, time constraints, accessibility) and working with decision-makers.

In-the-Room Challenges: Holding Back for Participants' Benefit

We begin with a fairly simple instance:

Sometimes it's a bit painful to hold back all this information that I have. Like people are thinking, "Ah, how could we make transport more sustainable? Ah, I don't know if there's any way—" and I know of ten examples where cities have tried new innovative things, but I'm really trying not to influence them in any way. Because it should be their idea, they should come up with it. And sometimes it's a bit painful to see them running in circles and then end up at a solution where I'm thinking, "Yeah, there are much better ways than that already" (Interview 4, Jan. 30, 2021).

This may parallel Scharmer's concept of "staying with it"; the challenge of "building and evolving the holding space for something new to develop and be born" (2018, p. 51), which requires "holding back" on the part of the facilitator. The next response highlights how "holding back" becomes even more challenging when listening to extreme views:

Recently there was a situation where we were talking about vaccinating [...] We've got the QAnon and also the QuerDenker, people with strange theories about Corona. And all of a sudden someone started with arguments, where I thought it's going that way. And I got really, really nervous. That was challenging, because I realized, "Oh, I'm a bit scared now, [whether] I can still be the facilitator."

As a facilitator, I really try [...] to suspend my own ideas. So, when something comes up that is *really* contrary to what I usually think, it's harder to keep the space and to stay with the person. And it was very interesting, because I was really nervous, and I was sweating. And I could feel in my body, that I was really nervous (Interview 7, Mar. 16, 2022).

When working with extreme views, facilitators are not just managing their own internal reactions, but also the reactions of other participants.⁵

For me, the most challenging [matter] is, when someone says [an] opinion that is different from mine. To hear all, and to [say] “all is okay.” All opinions are okay, and to not judge them. I really need much meditation before, so that I feel really empty [...] Because I feel that the people, they can feel if I can really take their opinion, or they can feel when I think “Oh—” And this is the most challenging, really to be like empty pot, and to take it all in. Sometimes I must sit on my tongue and say, “Ooooh—”

Yes, thank you so much for being open about this challenge. I'm hearing you say a few different things here; one is that, um—you know, it's hard! And sometimes, we have to sit on our tongue—You think there is a level at which people can sense or feel if we are not fully taking them in. And you want to do right by them, by being as empty as possible, so that you can fully take them in. So, it's not just that you are not saying something?

No, it's much deeper. Yes, at the beginning [of doing this work] I thought, “Okay, when I have a poker face, it's okay.” But there are many, many layers under this. Like [the poet] Rumi said, “we meet in the field where [there] is nothing right, nothing wrong.” I think this is a really important way to be a good facilitator, and maybe I can give you a *Beispiel*—an example of that.

It was the *Bürgerrat for Bildung*, education, the future of education. And one man said to me, “It's good to be strong with the children and also to hit them, when they [do] not do what we want.” And when people say something that [does] not conform with the others, I can feel that they think that I have to say something. I don't agree [with the statement] when I feel it, but I want to be with this man or woman, and I want to understand what he or she means. I'm sure there are situations where participants of *Bürgerrate* think I have to say more, or I have to say, “That's not right.”

Yes, so let me see if I'm understanding—you're thinking about a particular example, a Bürgerrat that was focused on the future of education. And when a man said something about needing to be strict, including hitting children when children are misbehaving, you could feel inside yourself that you don't agree. And at the same

⁵ My reflections during the interview to check my own understanding are in italics; the comments by the back-up translator are also in italics and labeled as such. When in the context of their English-language interview, a practitioner includes a word in German, it is in italics.

time, you could also feel the desire to be curious and to want to understand more?

Back-up interpreter: *What I understood is that she senses that the other people, the participants, expect her to react to that man [...]. She senses that people want her to say, "being strict and hitting kids is wrong." The people expect her to react to that because it's wrong.*

Facilitator: *Ja*, because then others, they say "No, that's not right." And they go to a different opinion. And I say, "Moment, moment", and I ask the man, "Why do you think this?" (Interview 4, Jan. 30, 2021).

In this response, we see three related aspects of "holding back" in a challenging situation: (a) listening deeply to someone expressing an extreme view; (b) actively keeping other participants from jumping in; and (c) tolerating the frustration of the other participants. Here is another response on the challenge of tolerating participants' frustration:

It's very important to be very consistent in this form of moderation, because [as you are engaging in deep listening with one person] the other people have to wait. And there are many *Emotionen*, emotions, when they have to wait. And they have to go through crises, they do not have all good emotions, because they have to wait—and in the brain, there are many things that come together, but they have to wait.

And I think this is one of the secrets of the *Methode*, method, because they have to go through these emotions. [...] the emotions are a way to understand. You can *feel* it in the room [...] whether they are connected (Interview 10, Apr. 12, 2022).

Another response also speaks to the challenge of *holding one's own discomfort*, order to be present to participants' emotions:

I would say, to have a good result from a *Bürgerrat*, you have to be able to get out of your comfort zone. Human beings are often irrational. They are also emotional. As a facilitator, you're really asked to handle this mixture of rationality, irrationality, emotionality, fight and harmony. There's so much going on, at the same time. This is possible, but difficult: it depends so much on how you feel that day, how you get into this process.

Are you anxious? Are you tired? Are you curious? Or not? It's very, very important to be strong at that moment, to be very present at that moment—therefore this is the most difficult facilitation methodology. But you get a lot [out of it] when it works out well (Interview 9, Mar. 29, 2022).

In-the-Room Challenges: Miscellaneous

A scattering of other challenges included helping participants shift from seeing themselves as representatives to speaking more authentically; coordinating the roles of facilitator and scribe; managing participants' deflation when learning about the low response rate to the much larger pool of randomly-chosen invitees; managing one's own frustration at seeing participants "tone down" their recommendations in preparation for the reporting-out phase.

Beyond-the-Room Challenges: Structural Issues and Working with Decision-Makers

Design choices made before a Council begins can affect in-the-room experiences. While some Councils develop into significant human encounters, others stay on a more surface level. Some facilitators attributed this flatness to "shallow issues" without enough complexity or energy:

So, do we really have a *good* one, a "dragon problem"? Or is it a question which is not really a "dragon problem"—and then we have the problem that the people don't really want to come, because it's not so interesting (Interview 11, Apr. 13, 2022).

Other structural challenges included not losing valuable information when distilling abundant input down to a handful of recommendations. Also mentioned were difficulties experienced by some youth and elders with format length, and the challenge of working with language differences in a talk-based method. Although only mentioned in one interview, these last two have implications for accessibility. Finally, some facilitators mentioned they found working with decision-makers more challenging than any in-the-room situation; this theme will be explored in future work, as it also surfaced in some of the longer narratives.

Reprise: Revisiting "Holding Back to Hold Space"

Earlier we heard a facilitator describing the challenge of welcoming different perspectives, with an example of the man who did not believe in "sparing the rod." The story continues:

[...] The next day, this man, he told us a story: how he, when he was young—and his father hit him. And he cried—this was really a healing time of *Bürgerrat*. I think this is, for the participants, a deep learning. Because they experience that, and not only hear that. When I want to explain [...] in words that it's important that we hear all opinions, it's not so deep. In comparison, when I just do it [...] I know that they will understand the next day, not now. And there's no need for me to explain, or make the magic moments go away, because of too many words.

Yes. So, in the moment, you didn't explain why you were doing this—?

It's like, laugh, laugh also work like this. [These were the words I originally heard but did not understand.] Many always speak about it. It's boring.

You just did it. Trusting that participants will come to understand eventually, by experiencing the process, the value of listening to all perspectives. And I didn't quite understand that thing that you said at the end about laugh? Laughter—

Not laugh! Love, love, *Liebe*. Love—

Oh, love! Oh, so you don't want to talk about love, you just want people to experience it?

Yes.

Back-up interpreter: *I think she was saying that you can't explain how important it is, to be heard. People have to experience it—just like love. If people experience it, they know what it is; you can't talk about it* (Interview 4, Jan. 20, 2021).

Later in the interview, this facilitator chose this experience as her “most meaningful moment” in a Bürgerrat, and we proceeded to unpack it further. Yet already we start to see the power of feeling heard, and how some things may need to be experienced to be understood. Also, what a facilitator chooses *not* to do, and why, may be as important as anything we can observe.

Parallels and Contrasts with Deliberative Theory

Listening, as a normative expectation for citizens in broader deliberative encounters, has been acknowledged as arduous work (Scudder, 2020). Yet mini-public facilitators' own work as listeners, and how their listening influences participants, has been largely unexplored. As facilitators, “holding back” our own ideas and interpretations is an essential aspect of listening well, yet one usually taken for granted.⁶

Elbow (2006, 2008) distinguishes between “the doubting game”, which aligns with cultural norms of what good thinking looks like, and “the believing game” involved in the effort to deeply understand another's perspective. He further points out how the implicit cultural bias toward the “doubting game”, limits our ability to recognize intelligence in those proficient at the “believing game”:

⁶ For a moving exception, this article on Deliberative Polling includes some paragraphs describing how a student facilitator's restraint was severely evaluated (Diamond, 2019).

When we see them listening and drawing out others, we call them generous or nice rather than smart. We don't connect good listening with intelligence, and we call creativity merely a mystery. [...] And because our intellectual model is flawed in these ways, we don't teach this ability to enter into alien ideas. (Elbow, 2008, p. 9)

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, philosopher and psychotherapist, explores how the dominant cultural value of speaking or 'holding forth', over and above listening or 'holding back', may be at the root of larger cultural dysfunctions (Fiumara, 1990). I would add that this cultural imbalance contributes to blind spots regarding facilitators' essential work. As Elbow points out, the intelligence, heartfulness, and skill required to meet the challenge of "holding back" is not often acknowledged. Yet it is essential to facilitation, especially when working with extreme views.

We see the powerful impact of deep listening in social psychology findings documenting how Deep Canvassers going door-to-door to "non-judgmentally exchange narratives" with strangers, catalyze "durable reductions in exclusionary attitudes" (i.e., lasting shifts toward greater inclusivity) (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 422). Some facilitators in my research described significant transformations as participants experienced non-judgmental listening in these Councils (Zubizarreta-Ada, 2023), including the one we began to glimpse here of the man who experienced a shift in his beliefs about physical punishment.

Listening in Vorarlberg Mini-Publics as "Witnessing Testimony"

In one of the few academic papers on this particular mini-public format, Asenbaum describes two Councils he observed (2016). Years before, a former Nazi concentration camp had been turned into a memorial; later, a proposed extension stirred up conflict between older people in the region who "want to leave the past behind" and younger people who sought continued engagement with the past. Yet "despite the controversial issue at hand, an open, tolerant, and productive atmosphere was created" (Asenbaum, 2016, pp. 4-5).

Asenbaum framed his observations with Sander's construct of "testimony" to describe how this came about. He describes how, as participants address their testimony to the moderator, "the moderators' concentrated *attention* and *appreciation* [emphasis added] is mirrored by the group" and thus, "respectful and constructive conduct is quickly established within the group" (Asenbaum, 2016, p. 5). As we saw earlier with the facilitator who works with young people, attention and appreciation are recognized here as powerful aspects of what a facilitator does. Asenbaum also clarifies that testimony does *not* imply "that participants simply narrate their stories, oblivious to what has been said by others before;" instead, a dialogical fabric is woven by participants who "pick up

arguments of others, express consent or dissent, and propose alternative views” (Asenbaum, 2016, p. 5), even while directing their comments to the facilitator.⁷

As Otto Scharmer writes, "Dialogue is not people talking to each other. Dialogue is the capacity of a system to see itself" (2015). It is this *capacity of a system to see itself* that develops as participants listen deeply to a broad range of perspectives. While in one sense, this happens in *any* deliberative mini-public, when the design builds in high-quality mirroring, this intensifies the creation of a powerful group field.

What Does “Witnessing Testimony” Make Possible?

Having participants direct their comments to a facilitator is sometimes viewed askance, given conventional wisdom that “best practice” requires participants to directly address one another. Yet the structure of dialogue through an intermediary that Asenbaum (2016) describes as “testimony” is analogous to some dialogue practice where participants offer their comments to the “fire at the center” (Garcea & Linley, 2011, p. 168) rather than to one another. It also parallels formats from family therapy (Freedman, 2014) and conflict resolution (Friedman & Himmelstein, 2008) where participants speak to the mediator, who offers “active listening” to each participant in turn, while others are “overhearing”.

This “reflecting back” can be easy to overlook, as the facilitator is not saying anything new, only repeating back what has already been said. Indeed, Asenbaum is silent on this. Yet as we have heard in the facilitator interviews, “this *tiefe zuhören*, this listening deeply, creates a very interesting effect in the person. They are really happy if you understand them well.” Another facilitator described how upon hearing a reflection, participants often “get into this reflective state, where they change their role from being passive to being active.”

One might be tempted to de-emphasize the power of active listening by seeing it merely as facilitators “modeling good listening” for participants. Yet nowhere in the interviews did facilitators describe reflecting back as setting an example, nor as modeling good listening. Instead, they described their relational role as being genuinely curious; one facilitator described it as being “like a fascinated child”. Facilitators also described their listening work as helping participants “empty themselves” to have room for new thoughts and for listening more deeply to others. Facilitators also described listening as an opportunity to offer empathy and, in so doing, to awaken participants’ own empathy.

⁷ For more on how participants in other contexts use storytelling as a way to express divergent perspectives, see Black, 2008 and 2013.

Contrasting Practice and Theory

Clearly, these facilitators experience listening and empathy as deeply connected. Yet this differs significantly from some deliberative theorists who posit an inherent conflict between listening and empathy (Scudder, 2020), based on a definition of empathy that involves “imagining” or “guessing” how others might feel (Morrell, 2010). While significant differences persist in how scholars define empathy (Hall & Schwartz, 2019), Scudder and Morrell share a similar perspective; empathy as an *intrapersonal* phenomenon taking place *within* an individual—although *about* another—rather than something enacted *between* people.

This similarity underlies their disagreement about the *value* of empathy; Scudder’s concern is that a person could choose to simply *guess* or *imagine* how others might feel and use that to avoid the demanding work of really listening to another (2020). Yet seeing empathy and listening as potentially opposed appears initially quite perplexing to those of us steeped in communicative practices stemming from Carl Rogers’ humanistic psychology. Here empathy is intimately connected with listening, and enacted collaboratively through the practice of “listening-and-reflecting-back” to check our understanding with each other (Rogers, 1980).⁸ This relational, co-constructed approach to empathy actively involves at least two people, in contrast to the *intra*-personal understanding of empathy as primarily an individual experience—though one *about* another). Reminiscent of “Nothing about us, without us!”, a relational, co-creative approach to empathy involves a dyadic communicative dance that is often experienced as deeply satisfying by both listeners and speakers.

I am by no means proposing a single definition of empathy here; different communities of scholars use the term in significantly diverse ways. What I *am* affirming is that the interactive understanding of empathy has a long history, which continues to this day. Barrett-Lennard (1981) uses the terms “facilitative relational empathy” or a “cyclical model of empathy” to describe this interactive understanding of empathy. An empathic approach to listening includes regularly reflecting back to the speaker, in a tentative and respectful manner, what we have just heard, thus checking our limited understanding and explicitly inviting the other person to correct us and/or to expand as needed (Barrett-Lennard, 1998; Irving & Dickson, 2004; Topornycky & Golparian, 2016).

Empathic listening is key in mediation, conflict de-escalation, counseling and psychotherapy, and also taught in medicine (Buffington et al., 2016; Jagosh et al., 2011) and business (Covey, 1989). In mediation, Friedman and Himmelstein (2008) call it “looping”; Susskind calls it “active listening” and describes it as essential (as quoted in Mansbridge & Latura, 2016, p. 45). Yet even in this field

⁸ Although the origins of empathic listening are primarily associated with Carl Rogers, empathy historian Susan Lanzoni (2018) describes how Otto Rank and Jessie Taft influenced Carl Rogers’ listening approach.

where active listening is quite well-known, some theorist-practitioners are concerned that the term “empathy” may be too psychological, proposing instead that reflective listening’s value may be in allowing people to hear their own selves more deeply (Cobb, 2013)—an interesting parallel to Scharmer’s call to “bend the beam of observation back to the observing self” (2015).

Rogers’ legacy lives on in lay communities including Gendlin’s Focusing (Gendlin, 1984), Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication (Little, 2020), and the Empathy Circle movement started by Edwin Rutsch (Kakai, 2021; Nowak, 2020). Empathic listening is also a core component of the u-school for Transformation’s methodology (Presencing Institute, n.d.) and has been used in interventions designed to strengthen the social field in school settings by introducing new alternatives for constructive communication around conflicts (Pomeroy & Herman, 2023).

And, as we have seen in these interviews with facilitators of mini-publics in Vorarlberg, Austria, empathic listening is very much alive in their accounts of what they enjoy in their work, as well as what they at times find challenging.

Concerns and Caveats

First, it is worth highlighting that any tool can be misused. In Carl Rogers’ lifetime, he came to lament the commodification of his empathic reflection practice (Irving & Dickson, 2004; Rogers, 1980). Contemporary practitioners and researchers point to *intention* and *integrity* as key to ethical work with active listening; its practice involves the cultivation of values-based dispositions (Jagosh et al., 2011) and includes significant nuance (Robertson, 2005). Yet if we assume that convergence inevitably requires compromise, we may regard active listening as inherently manipulative. As a facilitator in this study pointed out, the potential benefits of deep listening and interpersonal empathy may need to be experienced, in order to be understood.

In the field of democracy studies, Dobson (2014) warns that “helping people feel heard” can be manipulative without good faith efforts to respond with action. This resonates with facilitators in this study who emphasized the need for governments to seriously consider mini-publics’ outcomes, knowing how harmful it can be when powerful small-group experiences are met with subsequent disregard. Thus, ensuring integrity involves much more than what occurs *within* a Council.

Varied designs for mini-publics exist world-wide that rely on diverse formats and facilitation modalities. While most practitioners have heard *about* empathic listening, these findings may be less relevant in contexts where this practice is less central. Still, practitioners often welcome learning novel approaches. All of the facilitators I interviewed had trained in multiple modalities, “Art of Hosting” being the one most frequently mentioned (Quick & Sandfort, 2014; Sandfort & Quick, 2017).

Even with these caveats, these facilitator responses affirm the relational value of empathic listening for creating shared understanding. Though it can be challenging, especially in situations where quite different perspectives are present, this listening practice can also be deeply enjoyable for both participants and facilitators. While these facilitators did not use the language of power, their examples show how deep listening, relational empathy, and “holding back to hold space” are some of the ways they are using their power well.

Implications for Further Research and Practice

As Dillard argues, it would be helpful for future deliberative democracy researchers to realize that “facilitation is not a single stylistic category” (Dillard, 2013, p. 231). Neither are mediation and negotiation (Seul, 2022). Most professional practitioners have a varied repertoire, and their work will look different depending on context. I hope that, as researchers continue to explore which forms may be most useful in different contexts (von Scheidemesser, Oppold, & Stasiak, 2023), this study can serve to expand perspectives on what *good facilitation* can look like.

In 1980, Carl Rogers affirmed that “an empathic way of being can be learned from empathic persons [...] and learned most rapidly in an empathic climate” (p.150). Researchers could re-examine this claim in a present-day context. The *Bürgerräte* could serve as a site for exploring how facilitators’ deep listening stance, embodied in their reflective listening responses, creates a social field that generates open minds, open hearts, and open wills (Scharmer, 2018).

Facilitation approaches that include some form of empathic listening can be especially helpful for mini-publics on high-conflict topics. In-depth practice with empathic listening builds valuable “muscle-memory” that can be drawn on to work constructively with conflicts. In turn, mini-publics on high-conflict issues can become a source of powerful narratives that, when shared more broadly, contribute to systemic cultural shifts (Zubizarreta, 2015).

While mini-publics of many distinct kinds have shown what is possible when we bring together community members with diverse perspectives into supportive contexts, their broader effects vary depending on interactions with the larger political system (Curato & Böker, 2016.) Still, given their significantly positive benefits for participants, we could reasonably ask how these “supportive contexts” might become more widely available. In a polarized world, we could all benefit from having more of us able to take turns stepping into the role of facilitator, actively welcoming others’ enthusiastic contributions.

This is why the embodied knowledge that facilitators are continually developing, matters. This knowledge is born from practice and presence (Scharmer, 2018), from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Whether we see ourselves as simply offering some basic structure and making space for every voice, or as co-creating a field of deep listening and empathic presence—may facilitation continue to nourish spaces where inter-

human curiosity, agency and community can flourish. We all need to develop the power to bring out the best in humans.

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