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## Facilitating Vulnerability and Power in New Hampshire Listen's "Blue and You"

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# Facilitating Vulnerability and Power in New Hampshire Listen's "Blue and You"

## **Abstract**

This study examines the on-going work of *New Hampshire Listens*, a convener of deliberative conversations, specific to their work with police-community relationships. Attending particularly to the facilitators and planners of New Hampshire "Blue and You" in a small city, the study found systemic practices of early stakeholder involvement in the planning, holding space for disparate views, promoting storytelling, and creating intimate physical spaces addressed the vulnerability felt by participants. These practices distributed power among stakeholders, aided in preparing participants for the conversation, and fostered neutrality in the forum. They provide several ideas for how deliberation practitioners and scholars might respond to the present polarizing political context.

## **Author Biography**

Renee G. Heath, (Ph.D., University of Colorado, Boulder), professor in the Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, studies public dialogue, interorganizational collaboration, and democratic decision making in organizations and communities. She is the co-founder and co-director of the Civil Discourse Lab at UNH.

## **Keywords**

public dialogue, police-community, vulnerability, power, neutrality

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## **Facilitating Vulnerability and Power in New Hampshire Listen's "Blue and You"**

This study takes place as the nation confronts deep divides along issues of equity such as a resurgence of white supremacy and the rise of hate or racially related crime (Cohen, 2017), the vulnerability of people of color and police officers in police encounters, the inclusion of LGBTQ<sup>+</sup> in institutions ranging from the military to public restrooms, and the rise of authoritarian sentiments and practices such as the separating of immigrating parents from their children at our borders. Questions loom regarding how to have difficult conversations around these and other consequential topics in a democratic society that do more than provide "air time" for felt injustices (Escobar, Faulkner, & Rea, 2014). This case examines the practices, progress, and challenges in a multi-phased project called "Blue and You," a series of public dialogue events focused on strengthening relationships between the police and their community.

New Hampshire Listens convenes the public dialogues associated with Blue and You. New Hampshire Listens (NH Listens) of the Carsey School of the University of New Hampshire was founded in 2010. Since then, NH Listens has facilitated public dialogues in 85 communities with more than 4,000 residents, in all geographic regions of the state. In an effort to cultivate deliberative democracy on relevant issues, NH Listens not only convenes and conducts meetings, but has trained more than 300 facilitators and initiated more than a dozen spin off chapters of Local Listens groups carried out by volunteers in respective, interested communities. More than 160 facilitators are active in the NH Listens network. And 14 fellows provide expertise on various subjects such as race and identity. Through these actions they are intentionally building a systemic deliberative infrastructure that is self-reliant by teaching and developing *local* facilitators, and convening relationships among key stakeholders on given issues throughout the state. They have also partnered with other conveners, such as Leadership NH, to convey information about civic engagement and provide basic facilitation skills to more than 120 leaders across the state and across sectors.

Blue and You is a response to the charged political climate. It addresses the deterioration of trust and relationships among communities of color and police officers. Stoked by the deaths of Trayvon Martin in Florida, and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, NH Listens partnered with the NAACP and the New Hampshire Chiefs of Police Association to convene dialogue on related issues in their respective communities. They fostered an ongoing commitment to formalize police-community public dialogue in several of the participating towns. This

study closely examines one of those towns, New Hampshire Small City.<sup>1</sup> Growing attention has been granted to scholarship on public dialogue and deliberation in the context of police and marginalized communities (Cramer, 2016; Maia et al., 2017; Wahl & White, 2017; see also practitioner materials, e.g., Everyday Democracy, “Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation”). This study adds to that literature and responds to a key question guiding essays in this special issue: *How should deliberation scholars and practitioners respond to these political times and contexts?* The study specifically considers questions around preparation as well as power and neutrality in public dialogue in the context of police and community relationships.

### Public Dialogue

Dialogue is the micro-communication practice enacted in public dialogue. More than just the back and forth exchange of conversations, dialogue is a relational act that involves mutual understanding and learning (Escobar, 2011). An underlying theme present in studies of dialogue acknowledges *voices in tension* (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004). This theme illuminates the presence of difference or diversity in conversation (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997) where diversity is not just a category or skin color, but connected to the subject matter (Deetz, 1992). Understanding dialogue as voices in tension relates closely to another ubiquitous theme in dialogue studies, that is dialogue as an effort to *reclaim conflict* (Anderson et al., 2004, p. 262). Additionally, dialogic studies highlight *reflexivity*—how conversants understand the other and oneself in relation to the other’s perspective (Anderson et al., 2004). Atterton, Calarco, & Friedman (2004), interpreting Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue explained:

The experiencing of the other side is essential to the distinction Buber makes between “dialogue,” in which I open myself to the otherness of the person I meet, and “monologue,” in which even when I converse with her at length, I allow her to exist only as a content of my experience. (p. 3)

This reflexivity demands participants prepare to engage in dialogic conversation (Chasin et al., 1996; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; McNamee & Shotter, 2004). Buber (1988) argued dialogue is an act of reciprocity; it levels the power between interactants (see Atterton et al., 2004; Maia et al., 2017). He insisted dialogue calls for “risk” and “sacrifice” (Buber, 1988, p. 60).

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<sup>1</sup> New Hampshire Listens and its facilitators are named openly in this paper. However, participants from the respective communities of study were provided pseudonyms to promote confidentiality and candid reflection.

Many studies attend to dialogue in the *public* setting (Barge, 2006; Black & Wiederhold, 2014; Escobar, 2011; Sprain, Carcasson, & Merolla, 2014). Public dialogue bridges dialogue with deliberation; “public dialogue can, and ultimately should, produce concrete decisions that lead to specific forms of action” (Spano, 2001, p. 144). However, as Black and Wiederhold (2014) argued, “unlike deliberation, which is generally understood to include some aspect of decision-making, dialogue focuses more on building understanding” (p. 287). Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw (2002) identified three aims of dialogue in public deliberation processes; (1) to suspend one’s own belief and continue listening, (2) to foster empathy for the other with whom you engage, and (3) to create a shared language or mode of reasoning regarding the subject.

McNamee and Shotter (2004) argued individuals prepare for dialogue by enacting the following; avoid speaking from abstractions, be present to the immediate situation (i.e., not mired in historical injuries), set ground rules, and practice the imaginative (e.g., “What if I were speaking to a loved one?”). Heath and Isbell (2017) added dialogic partners allow the other’s position to be reasonable. But how does preparation translate from interpersonal dialogue situations to public dialogue forums? Heath, Lewis, Schneider, and Majors (2017) identified additional considerations that must be taken into account to prepare for public dialogue such as investment in recruiting diverse others, shared information, and neutral facilitation. This differs from the treatment of preparedness in dialogue studies, which emphasizes individual reflexivity. Given what is thought to be a more divisive and politically charged climate, what do we know about preparing participants for public dialogue? Accordingly, this study examined, *how do we prepare for public dialogue regarding police and community relationships?*

### **Power and Public Dialogue in Police-Community Relationships**

Public dialogues between marginalized community members and police officers prompt concerns about power (Wahl & White, 2017). Dialogic reciprocity might be compromised in the aims of the dialogue. In the contexts of police and community, is dialogue genuinely about understanding and learning, or is a dialogic forum utilized to advocate or persuade a particular position? For example, has the public dialogue been designed to construct a positive image of the police or is the dialogue designed in a way that allows for the tensions and the reclamation of conflict such as the questioning of police tactics? Escobar et al. (2014) argued, “Advocacy seeks resolution whereas inquiry seeks exploration, but arguably both are necessary in deliberation” (p. 93). However, advocacy done insincerely could also fail at reciprocity by silencing injured voices. Wahl and White (2017) studied deliberation in a case study of police-community forums

and were particularly interested in what they referred to as “high stakes issues (...) discussed in settings of significant inequality” (p. 515). They argued,

Critics of the communicative paradigm have consistently been suspicious that its orientation to deliberation leaves it oblivious of the influence of power. In the present context, one might pose this challenge as follows: How can deliberation and either consensus or fair compromise occur in the highly unequal and contentious sphere of police-community relations where oppressed communities face off with armed agents of the state? (p. 492)

The authors are critical of forums that do not foster both “agonistic” as well as dialogic<sup>2</sup> (geared toward understanding) communication. They argued, “a legitimate democratic outcome—defined as emergent policy co-constructed with mutual buy-in, may emerge when pursuit of understanding and accountability are allowed to intertwine in a relation of on-going tension” (Wahl & White, 2017, p. 515). Accordingly, public dialogic forums on police and community relations must balance understanding with challenges and agonisms that also hold those bearing power accountable.

This balance between understanding and agonism warrants consideration. Facilitators of contentious and consequential discussions must attend especially to critiques of impartiality as they strive to maintain neutrality in order to foster candid and open discussion (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2005). More recent deliberation scholarship contends neutrality is never fully achievable (Parsa, 2016). Parsa argued facilitators “make an active commitment to listen, to engage, to honor each person and perspective (...) this being multi-partial – not impartial” (para. 4). Dillard’s (2013) study of facilitating strategies suggests that less involved and more neutral facilitation can actually negatively affect deliberative outcomes. That could certainly be the case if facilitators mistakenly conflate treating people equally with respect, with the idea that all perspectives are equally valid (Carcasson, 2017). Consider, for example, a perspective that is clearly racist (e.g., “black women are welfare queens,” when actually white women comprise statistically more welfare recipients). A neutral response runs the risk of sanctioning racism. “Involved facilitators are more likely to promote deliberative

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<sup>2</sup> Though Wahl and White (2017) appear to treat agonistic and dialogic communication oriented toward understanding as in dialectical tension, given the themes present in dialogic literature, (e.g., tension, difference, and conflict) dialogue scholars may be inclined to hold the view that agonistic communication could also be considered dialogic if it is enacted within other dialogic norms of reciprocity and reflexivity. If it is purely intended to challenge, combat, or contest without reflexivity or reciprocity than it could be viewed as in tension with dialogue.

functioning than forums with less facilitator involvement” suggesting neutrality can also constrain decision quality (Dillard, 2013, p. 232), or what Spada and Vreeland (2013) called moderator effects. In the context of public dialogue, Heath et al. (2017) argued neutrality in public dialogue warrants further examination. Therefore, this study also examines *what role does neutrality play in the power embedded context of police-community dialogue?*

### The Study

Empirical findings captured in this paper result from post meeting follow-up interviews of primary actors in Small City Blue and You. The facilitator, and co-executive director of New Hampshire Listens, Michele Holt-Shannon, was interviewed multiple times, both formally and informally. She spends between 60-70 hours a week facilitating public dialogue in respective New Hampshire communities. With a few exceptions, “Surprising little detailed attention is paid to the role of facilitators in the literature on participatory and deliberative democracy” (Escobar et al., 2014, p. 97). Additional interviews were conducted with four other key persons involved with the planning and participation of Blue and You events including two senior police officers, a school representative, and an Indonesian Pastor and immigrant who ministers a large immigrant congregation. Those interviewed for this project had attended at least three planning meetings as well as the large community event attended by 92 persons. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed for further analysis; they followed a semi-structured format around key questions.<sup>3</sup> The data also represent observation of a Small City Local Listens meeting, a spinoff dialogue convener of New Hampshire Listens, and two Blue and You meetings organized by another similarly sized city, West City. This provided the opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences of the Small City participants to observations of West City. Additionally I consulted hundreds of pages of documents including influential participant guides and reports of meeting results prepared for the public by NH Listens. Data were analyzed with a cluster analysis, identifying both repetitive and significant themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The findings here represent patterns in the planners’ reflection of their experiences. Data also reflect rich exemplars that assist in capturing the experiences of Blue and You participants (Van Maanen, 1988), thus the findings stay close to the participants’ own voices. Holt-Shannon reviewed the findings and determined they were a “plausible” accounting of Blue and You (Deetz, 1982).

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<sup>3</sup> These interviews are on-going as is the Blue and You project.

## **Blue and You**

The impetus for Blue and You can be traced directly to pluralism, cultural disagreements, and increasing distrust of institutions to name a few of the concerns of this special issue. Holt-Shannon attributed the Blue and You talks to heightened concern regarding police violence captured in national headlines. She leveraged key relationships throughout the state to convene community dialogues on issues related to police. This included a statewide community policing public dialogue, a regional tri-town Blue and You community dialogue, of which Small City was a participant, and public dialogues specific to other New Hampshire cities and regions. This study is focused on the work of Small City Blue and You because of its on going commitment to host public dialogues. Small City has approximately 30,000 residents, of which 88.5% identify as Caucasian. Its minority residents identify as (1.2%) Black, (3.5%) two or more races, and (4.5%) Asian. It is home to a large Indonesian immigrant community. The annual median income is approximately \$70,000 per household.

The first attempt to hold a community dialogue was described by the chief of police as “preaching to a choir of fans.” Organizers designed a new event with a specific focus to bring greater diversity into the conversation. In the fall of 2016, Small City, convened collaboratively with the police department and New Hampshire Listens, hosted a community-wide event titled *NH Blue and You: Creating Community Change through Connection*. More than 90 people participated in the two-hour meeting held at a local coffee house. Thirty officers from Small City police department participated including its three most senior, the chief and two captains. Small City police department proceeded to host a follow-up meeting to the community event in the summer of 2017. Approximately 20 persons participated in this meeting. NH Listens partnered with the chief of police to plan and facilitate all of these meetings. Interviews took place approximately one year after the 92-person public dialogue providing an opportunity to determine outcomes of the meetings.

## **Perceived Relevance of Blue and You**

Participants in this study deemed Blue and You a success in Small City for several reasons. First, they felt like they had strong participation from the community including some of its most vulnerable groups such as the Indonesian immigrant community. They described new relationships between police and community members citing ongoing informal meetings such as coffee between the chief of police and members of the community who represented minority viewpoints, including participants of the Black Lives Matter movement. Second,



the community continues to have multiple structures in place to facilitate difficult conversations with an active Small City Listens chapter and subject specific follow-up meetings organized in partnership with the police and NH Listens that were a direct result of the community-wide meeting.

Participants involved in planning rated their community dialogue project ranging from 8-10 on a scale of 1 to 10, (with 10 being most successful), however, they also believed they could improve their outreach to the African American community. The police department in particular also hoped to elicit greater feedback from those with explicit concerns in future meetings. The pastor from the Indonesian community rated the project the most successful—10. She represents approximately 1,500 Indonesian immigrants, 5% of the (published) population of Small City. Her experience challenged perceived social orders, she said, “It’s to help me to understand that I’m not alone. I can voice my concerns. I thought my friends and I were on the bottom of that structure [societal classifications]; actually we’re not.” The project also tempered her sense of isolation, “I feel that I’m not the only one who [is] facing this kind of challenge. There’s other people. When you know that you are not the only one. You feel great. ‘Okay, I’m not the only one struggling with this.’ This is not just *our* issue; this is a nation-issue.”<sup>4</sup>

Participants also claimed tangible outcomes from the meeting; significantly the police department added a policy to *publish* their internal statistics regarding the tracking of complaints, car stops, and demographics and bias. The police also changed the language of the memorandum of agreement outlining the duties of school resource officers to include mentoring and teaching. Police leaders credited these changes directly to the Blue and You dialogues. These “emergent polic[ies] co-constructed with mutual buy-in” represent the best hope for public dialogue (Wahl & White, 2017, p. 515).

### **Distributed Vulnerability**

The most ubiquitous theme in the data was the common but disparate sense of vulnerability of participants. Vulnerability captures what Buber referred to as sacrifice and risk. Vulnerability is the backdrop to understanding preparation and neutrality in the face of unequal power. Vulnerability is deeply entangled with the political context in which these forums take place. The police chief admitted that

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<sup>4</sup> Transcripts were modified to ease in reading while still trying to stay close to the participants’ voices.

the change in political rhetoric from federal administration to federal administration complicated the context for police and community relationships:

When the prior administration was in office, it created a lot of issues with a seeming lack of support at the federal level of the local police. We had to work through issues with our International Associations of Police, we had meetings, we came up with that 21st century policing model, and in the end [Obama] had a better understanding (...) That helped spawn a lot of these community meeting groups and things like that.

The chief recognized the present rhetoric was polarizing. “Now I feel we have a president [Trump] who is just the opposite. He talks a good game about the police but you can also sense that at that level, ‘us against them’ rhetoric.” With a backdrop of “us against them,” participants of Blue and You enter dialogue from a position of distributed vulnerability, meaning vulnerability is felt by a range of key participants, representing diverse viewpoints in Blue and You discussions. While some of the vulnerabilities of participants are shared or overlap with others’ such as fears of violence, some vulnerabilities are attributes of particular others.

The political context contributed to fears of violence, authority and arrest, in general. At the same time, social media<sup>5</sup> facilitating instant access to images and video of police shootings, have left police fearful of being ambushed because they are being defined by someone else’s worst mistake, or worse yet, a “rogue cop.”

### **Fear of Violence**

Holt-Shannon observed, “society comes right in the room” when facilitating difficult dialogues. The dean at a local high school, who participated in four planning meetings and is a member of the local chapter of Small City Listens, described some of the concerns of the planning group.

So there was a patriot group (...) a white, predominant all white group that shows up, had shown up at different community conversations. And they’re all legal. They have their weapons and their weapons are registered. But you know just as an intimidation tactic is what that patriot group had done in the past. They did not show up. We worried about some local folks ... also along the same vein. Sometimes, they have shown up

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<sup>5</sup> Though social media may also be viewed as beneficial in terms of increasing transparency, it emerged in these data as having been experienced negatively by police.

at school board meetings very aggressive verbally with specific people. So we talked about those individuals and they didn't show up.

Participants are keenly aware of the potential for violence as has been experienced in other forms of public social expression such as protests.

### **Fear of Authority and/or Arrest**

Vulnerable groups also face symbolic and material risk when engaging in police community forums. The Indonesian pastor who participated in three planning meetings explained how the geopolitical history of her church members influenced their fears of interacting with police. In Indonesia, they were discouraged from speaking to police. Pastor Lee explained the conversations she has had with her members, “We always feel, ‘don’t share,’ because if you share, you are going to get in[to] trouble, or you will get more problem.” Based on their experiences in Indonesia she said, her church members think

“Shut up. Don’t say anything.” But I learned that sharing is very important. If you expect somebody to treat you well, if they don’t know you, how can they? You know. So share. Sharing is very important. I tell my friends, we are so rich with culture (...) but nobody know about our culture if we don’t share. (...) But, so they try not to talk with the police, or won’t approach them. So I told my friends, “We can. I can share it to the police.”

This evolved attitude requires significant vulnerability considering interactions with the police in her home country could end up deadly.

In Indonesia (...) we have to bribe the police. And if something bad happens to you, you cannot go to the police, unless you have money. So even though somebody is killing you, you are very helpless. So sitting next to the police officer and talking and also sharing my concerns, it just, you know, very happy moment.

While the pastor described her own journey in recognizing it is okay to speak with the police, she explained she struggled to get members from her church to attend the public dialogue. And she had been unsuccessful in achieving participation from the Muslim, Indonesian immigrant community. She acknowledged that her members fear deportation made more acute with federal administration policies. The present political context heightened vulnerability. She explained, “We have people who keep fighting for the vulnerable communities. Because especially this,

you know current situations, I'm sorry but the president [Trump] is just, like, against."

### **Fears of Being "Ambushed"**

From a different perspective, members of the police department grapple with vulnerability; local police cannot be divorced from the national context to which they are being held accountable. Chief Amato explained, "It started in Ferguson (...) Every time there was a shooting involving a white police officer and a black male we felt the effect of it here. Officers felt a little under siege by the news." He explained how local understandings of police work have been influenced by the national coverage; "They just see someone in a uniform and a gun, and what they've seen in the news. And of course what they see in the news is the most sensationalized cases in the country." He expressed frustration with the coverage, "We are a country of 350 million people, and to have so few incidences. And to make it seem like it's happening in every community." Police are faced with this challenge even in a community like Small City, where according to Chief Amato, "97% of police officers go through their entire career without ever shooting anybody. So, shootings are actually very rare in the big scheme of things. Statistically very rare." The chief claimed the coverage led to questions such as, "How many people have you shot in your career?" To which he would respond, "None." Community members would in kind respond, "None?!" "What do you mean none?!"

Captain Damien, who both facilitates and participates in the planning of the meetings, explained that they spent a significant amount of time during the public meeting discussing the role of school resource officers because, "Some cop in North Carolina or somewhere was seen tumbling a kid out of their desk. So you fight the mistake of an officer half way across the country. Police departments everywhere are answering for that kind of thing." The captain admitted it was difficult for police to feel "safe" to share with members of the general public. "I think it's a guarded (...) profession (...) it's often difficult for people, even those that love us, to relate to exactly what we do and why we do it."

Holt-Shannon admitted to being motivated to convene the Blue and You forums throughout the state of New Hampshire when she became exposed to police vulnerability. After participating in a Blue Courage workshop, she said her main takeaway was, "how isolated, especially when a public thing happens in the news and there's a video (...) police get even more insular/isolated. They even talk

about not talking to their families anymore.” Captain Damien described the reticence of officers who were asked to participate in the dialogue:

This is different for cops. Sitting down to talk about race relations, immigrants, community members and their suspicion of the police. And you’re the police. And you’re sitting in a group of people is a little...cause their just humans too. And they’re like, “What is this all about? Am I getting ambushed here?” Verbally ambushed?

These expressions represent vulnerabilities felt at the individual level. However, institutional vulnerabilities are also a very real possibility for police departments. Police leaders worry that participating in public dialogue may expose a hidden weakness that may exist in their own department.

Chief Amato: I was nervous because one of my fears as the chief of police here is that is something going on in my department that is really bad, that I don’t know about? You know, blinded sided by something? So I’m wondering, “I wonder if something is going to come out?” I haven’t had any complaints, some kind of real issue. But do I have a rogue officer out there doing something? (...) I mean I think I have a handle on things. I mean we hire really good people but there are no guarantees in life. Right?

Every person interviewed expressed vulnerability establishing it as ubiquitous and dispersed, not just a feeling typically assigned to the most visibly marginalized populations. Vulnerability, shared, though not equivalent, is a sign of the times.

### **Facilitating Vulnerability**

One of the guiding questions of the study sought to understand how preparation is experienced relative to public dialogue. In this case preparation is understood in the context of facilitating vulnerabilities. Buber understood vulnerability as the antonym to power—the key to reciprocity in the dialogic situation. In *Blue and You*, the facilitator fosters the expression and acknowledgement of vulnerability as a mechanism for sharing power in conversation holding vulnerability in tension with power. Early planning with key stakeholders made visible unseen vulnerabilities. Additional preparation for expressing vulnerability was embedded in community structures that preceded the dialogue but never the less paved the way for sacrifice and risk in the communication situation.

## Planning with (Not Just Inviting) Key Stakeholders

It is well established that diversity is an important element of participation in public deliberation (Heath et al., 2017; Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2005; Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012). The experience of Blue and You confirms the necessity of including people with diverse perspectives at the *planning* stage of public dialogue. Holt-Shannon built upon key relationships she had made throughout the state and through her work on different subjects to bring together diverse stakeholders. Chief Amato described the planning group as a “combination of people involved on all sides of the aisle, all sides of the fence, so that the way questions are framed, they are not insulting anybody but they are reaching the goal of proper dialogue and it’s constructive.” A unique anecdote surfaced in the interviews and was retold from the perspective of every planner interviewed. Planning participants met several times with NH Listens to design the public meeting, though participants did not identify themselves as being on a “planning committee” and they did not necessarily each attend every meeting that preceded the public dialogue. The first planning meeting was held at the new police station. This exemplar (Van Maanen, 1988) shows how powerful groups do not necessarily recognize their power, and vulnerable groups can be empowered through explicit discussion at the planning stages.

Chief Amato: So we invited [young activists] to participate in the planning part of the event. But the planning of that was interesting because our first planning meeting was held in the training room here at the PD. And the young people were telling us they were intimidated by just being in the room. (...) One of the young men said, “You know Chief, just the way you are dressed, you have a shirt and a tie.” I never thought of a shirt and tie being intimidating but to that generation, to that group, with their political leanings, they were seeing police as a potential barrier. And I don’t want to say ‘enemy’ but something that intimidates them.

The chief admittedly was caught off guard by the young activists’ comments. He said, “It kind of floored me because when we built this building we built it to be friendly and the lobby and the training room, it’s really not heavily, it doesn’t look like a law enforcement fortress.” Unsolicited in the interview, Captain Damien described the same experience. He used phrases such as, “that was a really enlightening moment for me.” He explained,

It just *never* occurred to me. I just thought I dress professionally when I’m in civilian clothes at work. I either wear a uniform or a suit. (...) Now have I ever thought of it when I was a detective and I had another

detective with me and we were dressed like this and we were knocking on a door? Yeah, like okay, the big boys are here. It's all business. Two detectives are at your door. It's a big deal. Sure I've thought of it in those terms. But never in a--you've been invited here to have a meeting because were going to plan an event thing (...)—totally blew my mind.

The planning meeting allowed for the solicitation of this unexpected conversation. The chief explained, “We talked a lot about, ‘Why do you feel that way?’” A resolution was negotiated among the planners. They jointly determined the ground rules for their next planning meeting. Chief Amato: “We said, ‘Why don't we do it somewhere different?’ And they said, ‘Yeah, how about the coffee shop downtown?’ So yeah, ‘We'll meet there. And I won't shave and I'll wear jeans and t-shirt.’ So that's what we did.”

This exemplar, mentioned also by Holt-Shannon and the dean at the high school, became an important turning point referenced by the Indonesian pastor who started to understand the potential for her community's own relationship with the police. She said, “One person said we are going to have a meeting and we encouraged the chief not to wear his [uniform or professional clothing] so just wear a shirt. So I liked that too. It's very humble. I loved that.” Pastor Lee later explained the affect this conversation had on her understanding of the process: “I felt I can voice my concern about the police, about *anything*. And I also felt welcome. I felt that even though I am an immigrant, I can say anything!” She described how she was surprised the young person challenged the police. “And I thought, ‘Wow,’ this is not just about sharing concerns to police, but this is about *everyone* who are different (...). And I feel that I'm *not alone* at that time.”

The inclusion of the young activists in the planning processes at Small City allowed a conversation to surface that helped to chip away at authoritarian barriers, invisible to, but present in conversations with, the police. Maia et al. (2017) writing about deliberations between police and the community also note the significance of police wearing uniforms in deliberative forums. What is telling about the reflection here is that both leaders of the Small City police department, articulate, thoughtful men, expressed dismay regarding their intimidation. Though they fully expected they were intimidating in some locations such as when detectives arrive at your front door, they were surprised by the feedback in the community planning process. Authority is built into taken-for-granted conventions. Their disbelief reveals that power is often not obvious to those who wield it. Small City police were genuinely unaware, using words like “blew my mind.” It is precisely this absence of awareness of the ways that power is embedded in systems and practices that obscures hegemonic, and sometimes,

discriminatory practices. Yet planning meetings with relevant stakeholders has the potential to unravel embedded power setting the tone for the larger public dialogue.

The lesson in the retelling of the uniform story is that it is equally, if not more important, to invite persons with diverse vulnerabilities into the planning process not just the dialogic event. The antidote to power organically surfaced in the planning meetings when participants were encouraged to speak candidly. The story is symbolic of the significance of the planning meetings. Pastor Lee recalled sitting at a planning meeting when she heard the question, “Who else can we invite?” The phrase was transformative for her. She said, “Was that meaningless probably to somebody? But I think that’s very meaningful question to me. It makes me feel, ‘This is, wow! Welcome.’ That’s a big question. That’s very important. I won’t forget that question.” Thus planning meetings are an important strategic location for pre-staging equality and preparing for reciprocity in the conversation. They allow for agonisms (Wahl & White, 2017) to surface early in the planning stage that can foster a fairer public process.

### **Community History**

The story of the uniform also reinforces the organic nature of planning. In every community NH Listens works, they face the challenge articulated by Holt-Shannon: “You have to start where people are. So you know you’re bringing people together in a space that has different perspectives and different levels of sensitivity about all kinds of stuff.” Small City had a highly active and enthused chief. The structures, attitudes, and philosophies that pre-exist community and police dialogue potentially serve as vital to preparation for public dialogue. Small City demonstrated deep commitment to the philosophy of community policing, which served as a primer for a willingness to be vulnerable in community talks. Chief Amato explained the historical backdrop of community policing and its relationship to contemporary police-community relationships:

Community policing started with President Clinton, 100,000 cops on the street. So one of those 100,000 was the housing authority officer. One was our first high school resource officer. We hired a couple of officers to go into different neighborhoods and be what was called “proactive policing versus reactive policing.” (...) When you received a grant you couldn’t just put them on the road and answer calls. You had to put them in a neighborhood. It was very, very innovative. It really changed law enforcement in the country. So you can take those ideas and just expand



on them. And I think Blue and You is an expansion of that. That's the way I see it.

Captain Damien's reference to community policing makes visible the shift in power that happens between police and their constituents. His comments were consistent with his chief's. He explained that police should be comfortable in the public dialogue forum because they regularly have interaction in the community. "We are so big on community policing that you should be able to have somebody walk up to the cruiser and knock on the window and say, 'tell me about?' or 'what do you think?' and have that conversation." He explained that annual community events had taken place for years that fostered relationships between community members and the police including events planned on "National Night Out" and hosting a Citizen's Police Academy cultivating the skills of interaction. The police also partnered with Small City Listens, the localized chapter of volunteers inspired by, and trained by NH Listens, to conduct community dialogues on a wide variety of subjects. Dean Carol credited the Citizen's Police Academy and partnerships with the school resource officers with fostering strong police-community relationships.

The police were well aware that some of those police-community structures already in place fanned a base of predisposed supporters. They discussed the shortcomings of still feeling like they had connected well with some groups but less so with others—particularly young adult African Americans. However, Pastor Lee shared a story significant to her and her church members that served as a pivotal experience for some of them. The story emphasizes the community-policing model. Several years before, the police wandered over to the church one evening, stirring the concerns of her constituents.

When we were having bar-b-cue outside, I was in the sanctuary and somebody [called], "Pastor! Pastor! Two police are outside right now." So everybody want[ed] to leave because they were so scared. And the police officers said, "The smell of the sauté [was] so good so we came over." [laughter]. So that's why they came. You know they've been coming whenever they [smell food]. So that's the story! So since then, they have been coming ...it's a small town.

Pastor Lee admitted her church members were scared. "You know, 'what's going on? Should we leave?' because that's how we feel, or felt when we were in Indonesia. Whenever we encounter with the police, that means we have to pay or something bad will happen." She credited the willingness of the police to reach out and come to their community as an important step toward relationship

building. Pastor Lee felt reaching out to marginalized communities was vital preparation for public dialogue. Her advice to planners of public dialogue and the police was, “Don’t just invite them to the meeting; reach out. Attend their service. Attend their meetings. Ask them, ‘Can I come?’ Instead of wait[ing] for them to invite you, invite yourself.” She explained how meaningful it was to her community to have those outside of it take an interest in their lives. She said, “Really? He wants to come? For us, our culture, we love when somebody says, ‘Can I come?’ So we feel honored if someone wants to come.”

Accordingly, structured community events, such as National Night Out, formalized positions such as school resource officers, and informal episodes such as crashing an Indonesian bar-b-cue and reaching out to a vulnerable population influenced attitudes and willingness for police officers and marginalized persons to sit down in public dialogues with the community. This willingness was not necessarily replicated in other New Hampshire communities hosting Blue and You meetings. In fact, West City’s police chief was not only reluctant to participate in the planning stages, but did not attend the two public dialogues I observed. Acknowledging historical relationships in the community can help facilitators adapt their methods to “start where people are.”

### **Neutrality as a “Wade Into the Messiness”**

A second question relevant to this study and relevant to the theme of vulnerability, regards *what role does neutrality play in the power embedded context of police-community dialogue?* As mentioned earlier Parsa (2016) challenged the idea of complete neutrality in facilitating public dialogue. Yet, without neutrality it is unlikely any conflicting viewpoint will be enticed to the table for fear of “ambushing” as described by Captain Damien. Neutrality is about managing the different perspectives at the table so that they can be voiced and learning and understanding are made possible. Holt-Shannon explained a conversation she recently had with one of her facilitators who asked, “How can we do this work without playing into the power dynamics that we want to disrupt in the first place?” Another facilitator asked her, “Can you create space where there is real equity in voice when you have police officers and youth in the room?” She described practical ways to manage so-called neutrality: “I think we pay attention to numbers. I think we have to name it. We call it ‘group agreements’ [ground rules] but we’re not waving a magic wand...you know what I mean? We have to wade into that messiness.” Wading into the messiness of designing and facilitating a credible public dialogue illuminates the vulnerability of facilitators who do this work. Blue and You facilitators accomplished neutrality by creating and holding space for difficult conversations, promoting storytelling,

and by designing equalizing structures such as small groups without physical barriers.

### **“Holding Space” and Embracing the “Abhor”rent**

In deliberation literature equality is the “approach to deliberative fairness” and equity accounts for “advantages and disadvantages that have shaped participants’ experiences, which may require treating participants differently” in an effort to achieve fair deliberation (Abdullah, Karpowitz, & Raphael, 2016, p. 1). Blue and You sought to foster equity through conversational spaces. Upon reflection with colleagues Holt-Shannon fought the pressure to alter the dialogic format based on the possibility of the attendance and participation of members from extreme groups, and the potential confrontation with abhorrent views. The struggle around neutrality comes to light in this reflection:

So we had a whole conversation about this recently and we said, “Okay what’s our boundary?” and we said, we will never ask people to stay in a conversation with someone who is espousing violence. So that is one boundary. It’s kind of a low bar but I asked [my colleague] with Everyday Democracy, “If someone is not espousing violence but they are holding views that we totally abhor, can they still come into dialogue?” And she said, “I think the answer to that has to be ‘yes.’”

Chief Amato shared the same viewpoint regarding dialogue and described how police are challenged by neutrality in their own positions, yet committed to its principle. He said, “I have to be the same to everybody. If it's a protest out in the street, and white nationalists or the anti-white nationalists, we have to be neutral to protect both groups. That’s our job.” He noted the irony that sometimes he is protecting protestors who are protesting against the police.

In the public dialogue arena, Holt-Shannon vividly recalled an early Blue and You meeting in another city where the conversation felt unwieldy and the role of the “neutral” facilitator was challenged by the racist expressions of participants.

I had one facilitator of color who was really thrown by some stuff that happened in her group. A white liberal man came in. Didn’t sit down. Started talking at the police officers in the group. They got defensive and started saying things like, “I’ve worked with those people.” Referring to people of color, with young women of color, students in the group. Then one student [of color] started crying. He was not going by the group agreements.

In a democratic society that values free speech, facilitating public dialogue means allowing distasteful perspectives to be heard. Protecting the ability to hear out others fosters neutrality and is a frightening wade into the messiness. Holt-Shannon explained how the facilitators handled the event, described above:

So that needed a ton of debriefing. And then there were follow up meetings about that. There's all kinds of things happening in that moment like supporting your facilitator, knowing that some other choices could have been made by [the] facilitator, dealing with the breaking of group agreements by the man who is standing up, pausing and processing the defensiveness and statements by the officers, and trying to move from there.

This messiness includes holding a neutral space for conversation. Without the presence of sometimes-abhorrent perspectives, what possibility exists for *mutual* understanding or learning? This is a part of the risk of dialogue.

How do we get in that knowing that she's a chief and he's a sixteen year old? That's not going to be equitable in the social power sense. But can we create a space that's a container to hold that so that there's authentic interaction? And that's the hardest thing is knowing that society comes right in the room and it gets recreated right in front of you as a facilitator. And you feel responsible for it because you're holding that space. And people blame you for it because you're holding that space. (Holt-Shannon)

Holt-Shannon elaborated on neutrality as the idea of holding space. "It is less about neutrality, although that is part of the conversation, and more about how do you hold a space for people [who] disagree?" She explained, "There were people mad at me because the officer said what they said." She claimed, "I don't want to defend that officer, but we're hoping that they, having been in this conversation, reflect on their own practice and their own professionalism, [and consider] what do they need to be thinking about?"

### **Promoting Storytelling**

A central part of that space for Blue and You is allowing for stories that expose participant vulnerabilities that in turn may foster equity and challenge power. Holt-Shannon further described the challenge as creating "space" for equitable sharing of voice and people's stories. "Not allowing someone to say 'that's not true' when someone told a story. It was their own experience." Holt-Shannon, as

do many scholars and practitioners of public dialogue, acknowledges the power of stories (Black, 2008; Escobar, 2011; Heath et al., 2017). It is the facilitator's role to create the space for storytelling. She said,

I believe just spending time, hearing other people's stories. Like for students of color to hear stories about officers and the stuff that they deal with and the good that they do, and [for] officers to hear the multiple targetings that [people of color] have endured. I believe that story will stick with you somehow.

Putting so much faith in the story does require a willingness to embrace the messiness. NH Listens colleagues debated about what they needed to do or say in the event that certain groups of people show up to the dialogue. Holt-Shannon, whose office is housed in a university said, "I get the inclination, teachers and preachers want to tell people what they need to know in order to be in this conversation." Experience has led her instead to believe,

We have to accept that you just can't spit it all out at them and have it get absorbed, and *stories have to teach*. And so we know people have built relationships and they're in touch with each other. We know stories got told that were cathartic and meaningful that other people have carried around and told those stories. Yes, they erase each other's particularities sometimes. (...) They might not get it exactly right (...) And so it is very imperfect [emphasis added].

The willingness to rely on the messiness of storytelling appeared to work for those who planned *Small City Blue and You*. Captain Damien recalled, "We have a pretty big contingent of Indonesian immigrants here and learning about their culture and what they do, and what's their religious belief, and how strong they are in regards to family and extended family. It's interesting." The Captain believed those conversations fostered positive change among the officers. "So the more you talk, you get to know people. It breaks down the barriers. (...) pretty much all [police] said they learned something they didn't know." Pastor Lee found the process humanizing. After having admitted that at one point, earlier in her life, she held negative views about the police she said she now feels, "They're people. *They're human beings* and they want to help."

Even in West City, (which lacked the successful planning process described by *Small City Blue and You* planners), stories told in their second meeting outed important social topics. In a follow-up meeting with 14 people, (12 persons of color, 11 who emigrated from Africa, including one of the four police officers),

facilitators gave participants three prompts related to a national event that affected them, a personal event, and an experience with police. Stories that emerged brought to the forefront the effects of incarceration on a community and family, the struggles of single parenting, the effects of living under martial law, modern-day slavery, the mental health instability experienced by immigrants escaping trauma, and student and police discomfort living with the threat of school shootings. One story directly confronted police bias; an African American man described a hostile encounter with the police in his attempt to “catch the sunrise,” something he had only experienced once before, in a public space. Despite strained power dynamics that lead up to the meeting, West City demonstrated neutrality through storytelling opportunities.

### **Small Groups with “Knees in the Center”**

According to Small City participants, small groups were an important part of the dialogic space. Pastor Lee specifically named small groups as a structure that made her feel a part of the community, “In our community, sometimes, some people also feel that way, ‘Oh we are not part of that.’” She went on to attribute the success of the dialogue to dividing officers into groups with diverse community members. “What I’m talking is small groups. And make sure that everyone is ... what do you call it? Not just one like knows is a group of police officers. But it’s like very diverse.” Dean Carol likened the small group structure to creating the atmosphere of a good party. She described a humanizing practice that puts your knees in the center. “We had tables and groups assigned but [facilitators instructed] ‘Get rid of the table it’s taking up too much space.’ They like to facilitate meetings that way. Get rid of the obstacles and just have your knees in the center.” Captain Damien also argued small groups were important to the process because they were “casual” and “informal.” This format allowed them the intimacy to get to know each other. The format should not be taken for granted. To contrast, at the first West City Blue and You public dialogue, despite on-going planning meetings, officers mistakenly arrived with the expectation they would be participating on a panel. The implications for power are blatant; they were not expecting to put their knees in the center. Assuming they would be physically positioned as an expert panel, they were not prepared to be vulnerable.

### **Conclusion**

Blue and You public dialogues provide a unique opportunity to examine ongoing relevant challenges to deliberative democracy. Each Small City planner believed that the present political and social context mattered and was indeed threatening. Primarily the “us against them” rhetoric, fear of violence, authority, deportation,

and being ambushed, contributed to the vulnerability participants felt as they faced one another in the public context. This research adds to our understanding of facilitation in heightened politicized contexts as more than facilitating diverse perspectives, but as recognizing and facilitating diverse vulnerabilities. The former implies how we understand something, the latter illuminates power in the dialogic situation. Vulnerabilities are not equivalent, especially in the context of accepted authoritarian practices such as aggressive deportation. Expressing vulnerability can signify privilege; some vulnerable groups expose themselves to material consequences for their expression while others do not. Acknowledging vulnerabilities in participants may be helpful in bringing some groups to the table and considering how to design the discussion. However some may pay too high a price to participate, creating a significant barrier to public dialogue.

Within the context of vulnerability the study considered what prepares participants to have difficult conversations regarding race and police authority. It identifies the importance of diverse voices being included *early* in the planning process allowing for agonisms to surface and to help attend to power differences. Additionally, participants were uniquely prepared for community-police dialogue because of their history of embracing community policing as a philosophy. This research adds an empirical example for deliberative scholars and practitioners assessing community readiness for public dialogue in respect to police-community relationships. From a practitioner standpoint, facilitators may suggest public dialogue priming activities such as participating in National Night Out, citizens police academies, and spontaneous visits with typically marginalized groups in their respective communities.

The case also extends recent conversations about equity in deliberation by rethinking neutrality in terms of equitable spaces and communicative structures. The Blue and You experience taught its facilitators to embrace even ideas that are abhorred, to focus on creating the space for stories allowing the *story to teach*, and to build structures that disperse vulnerability such as diverse small groups and physically sitting with knees in a circle without the barrier of tables and desks. Blue and You instructs us to think about neutrality in terms of dispersing equity in conversational spaces and physical structures rather than foregrounding the responses of the facilitator. Emphasis on discussion prompts, intimate venues, and time to share stories fosters the venue for participants.

Storytelling is particularly important in unequal power situations. This study adds to research on storytelling by foregrounding stories' constitutive power to foster equity via counter narratives to dominant perspectives in the dialogic situation. Black (2008) argued storytelling in deliberative contexts invites perspective

taking, negotiates identity, and helps others be present to one another by bringing their experiences into the conversation. This case adds that stories speak truth to power. Making space for stories is how facilitators remain neutral and also avoid, as Holt-Shannon described, “playing into the power structures they hope to disrupt.” The process is imperfect and runs the risk of not cultivating mutual understanding if stories remain untold. However, it is instructive to consider the powerful role of stories in the contexts of an increasingly authoritarian society. Forums for storytelling and outlets for narrative may hold more import than ever before because they humanize experience (e.g., just trying to see the sunrise), leave little room for debate, build empathy, and live beyond forums in their retelling. Public dialogue has an important role to play here as stories challenge certainty.

This study also re-conceptualizes small groups in public forums. Small group research has a rich history related to decision making and problem solving (e.g., Gastil, 1993). In this study, small groups *disperse vulnerability* so that communities can begin building relationships. The result of how this experience altered, arguably the most vulnerable in the community, is best told by Pastor Lee. Subsequent to the public dialogue, one of her church members was approached by a police officer and he was asked to show the officer his identification. The church member was in her words, “just in the parking lot at Asian restaurant [not doing anything].” Pastor Lee believed the situation was an example of profiling. She said, “So I call [the police]. And that’s like, “Wow, I can do that!” Pastor Lee claimed her experience in the small planning groups fueled her confidence to challenge the police on behalf of her congregation members. This is an interaction she said she would have not initiated prior to her participation in Blue and You planning. Like stories, small groups foster a communicative forum that is less threatening and can initiate challenges to authority that might not surface in larger groups.

NH Listen’s systemic practices of early stakeholder involvement in the planning, holding space for disparate views, promoting storytelling, and creating intimate physical spaces addressed the vulnerability felt by participants. These practices provide several ideas for how deliberation practitioners and scholars might respond to the present political context. Additionally, Small City Blue and You highlights the role of smaller communities as hopeful venues for public dialogue and deliberation. The study of small communities and the role they play in disrupting authoritarian trends warrants attention. In the United States 38,356 cities have a population *smaller* than 49,999 (The Statistics Portal, n.d.). In particular, this study’s outcomes of stronger relationships between marginalized citizens and police, and greater transparency and accountability regarding police



work, support public dialogue as a viable avenue of democratic participation. These outcomes demonstrate public dialogue can do more than provide “air time.”

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