

“WHO ARE YOU AND WHY DO YOU GET TO RUN THE MEETING?”

REFLECTIONS ON FACILITATOR IDENTITY AND THE MANAGEMENT OF COMPLEX PUBLIC DISPUTES

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A white-haired, elderly woman approaches the microphone. “I’ve been going to this Church for fifty years,” she says, her voice ringing through the hall. “Who exactly are you and why do you get to run the meeting? Are you even Catholic?” A series of murmurs from around the room suggest the woman is not alone in her skepticism.

It is your very first time facilitating a large public meeting. The Catholic Archdiocese has just informed the crowd of parishioners that their church will soon be closing, and the mood is grim.

Flustered, you hesitate, then finally muster up the courage to respond. “No, as it turns out I’m not Catholic. I’m Jewish, but I don’t think that’s really the point. I’m not here to take sides. I’m just here to help manage this meeting and make sure everyone has a chance to contribute their perspective.”

This response seems to work well enough. The woman sits down, apparently satisfied. You exhale with relief and shift the conversation to the next item on the agenda. Still, you can’t help but feel a bit unsure of yourself. Was your response helpful? Was it avoidant? Was it even a true and accurate description of your role? You just don’t know.

In case it isn’t already clear, the “you” in this story is actually one of the co-authors of this article — Toby Berkman — who now works as a professional facilitator at the Consensus Building

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Institute (CBI).² A decade later, the moment resonates with both authors as an opportunity to reflect on our approach as facilitators.³ The scenario raises several difficult questions related to facilitator identity in complex public disputes, including:

- What is an appropriate response when one's credibility as a facilitator is questioned based on a perceived facet of one's identity, like religion? Was it appropriate for Toby to suggest that his identity as a non-Catholic was not "really the point," or did the role of his religion in this context deserve further exploration?
- What about other kinds of identities, like Toby's status as a newcomer to the community? Was his participation as an outsider an appropriate target for stakeholder concern?
- What might have been done to avoid and/or manage this situation more effectively? What are some best practices for facilitators to navigate arenas where they may be perceived as outsiders based on elements of their identity, or for navigating questions of facilitator identity more generally?

Whatever the answers to these questions, we believe that a facilitator's various identities — both as understood by practitioners themselves and as experienced by others — complicate perceptions of facilitator authority, credibility, efficacy and neutrality in interesting and non-obvious ways.

For our purposes here, identity refers to the social categories and attributes people use to answer the questions, "Who are you?" and "What does it mean to be who you are?"

Social identity has been explored by many different fields, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, amongst others. Published literature from these fields has powerful implications in the room for facilitators, for organizations and for the dispute resolution field in general. This literature, when combined with our professional experience and that of our colleagues offers at least three broad categories of lessons we believe to be particularly relevant for public dispute resolution practitioners and organizations:

- 1) the importance of understanding and navigating identity through an intersectional lens, and doing so with humility and integrity;
- 2) the importance of proactively and simultaneously tracking both internal and external perceptions of identity; and
- 3) the importance of acknowledging both lived and learned experiences as key components and perceptions of identity.

Intersectionality and facilitation

The cross-disciplinary body of work on intersectionality, when combined with our own experience, has valuable insights for facilitators of public disputes. According to Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw's body of work, intersectionality "highlights the need to account for multiple grounds

² CBI is a nonprofit that helps groups collaborate and manage conflicts on tough social, environmental, and economic issues. Visit www.cbi.org for more information.

³ For simplicity, here and below we use the generic terms "facilitator" and "facilitation" to reflect the broad range of multi-stakeholder contexts in which our work takes place, which includes everything from multi-stakeholder dispute resolution to group problem-solving, mediation, dialogue work, and more. Irrespective of the terminology, our observations are intended to apply equally to these various contexts, including public dispute resolution and mediation.

of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.”⁴ We are each individuals with unique perspectives and experiences. Yet, at the same time, each of us belongs to multiple people groups with shared characteristics. Some of these traits are chosen and others are innate, some of them visible, others not. Equally important is the need to approach these issues with humility: we cannot assume any one person’s individual experience based on perceptions of their group identities.

The power of Crenshaw’s framework lies in how intersectionality highlights that we are many things at once, even if particular facets of our identities become more salient in a given moment or context. According to Crenshaw, “identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect.”⁵ Because we live in a society where certain social groups have been afforded privileges while others have been disadvantaged based on shared characteristics, intersectionality also brings to light the compounding effect these various advantages or disadvantages can have on people’s lives.⁶

For facilitators, it is important to be mindful of the potential for these advantages and disadvantages to influence our work directly, or to be present “in the room” as unspoken and often unacknowledged realities. In the Church example above, multiple privileged and/or outsider identity categories, as perceived by the stakeholders, may have been at play as Toby stood in front of the room of mostly blue-collar New Jersey Catholics. These include those called out by the woman at the microphone (non-Catholic, not from the community) and others left unspoken (e.g. a shared racial identity as white Americans for a majority of the parishioners, or unshared attributes such as “well off,” based on Toby’s suit, or “elite,” based on his affiliation with Harvard Law School).

Intersectionality underscores the importance of facilitators acknowledging and leveraging our own multiple identities with humility and integrity. Clearly, a number of Toby’s identities and life experiences separated him from the parishioners in New Jersey. He would have done well to note these layers of difference to himself beforehand, check his own internal biases, and try to enter the meeting with a curious mindset. However, other identities could have provided fodder for common ground. These areas of commonality included, for example, Toby’s own experience and dedication to a community of faith and the months he spent preparing for the meeting by having in-depth, one-on-one conversations with parishioners to learn about their concerns and goals for the church and for their community.

A more fruitful approach to the meeting might have involved Toby acknowledging elements of his outsider status from the start and making clear that he was not claiming to understand what it felt like to be a member of the parish community, while also emphasizing a more comprehensive picture of his background that connected him to the problem at hand. We are not suggesting here to make disingenuous or tenuous connections to win over stakeholder sup-

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins*, available at www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ For example, each year Equal Pay Day symbolizes how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned the previous year. However, the original conception of the day failed to acknowledge that there are compounded penalties in pay at the intersection of gender *and* race. While White women earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by White men, African American women only earn 61 cents to every dollar. (www.equalpaytoday.org/equalpaydays)

port, but rather to lead with integrity about who we are as facilitators, including our strengths and limitations, to build authentic trust and connection. By acknowledging his own multiple identities, Toby might also have opened a window of thinking for the participants about their own multiple and complex affiliations, possibly breaking down cleavages just below the surface in the room.

This kind of transparency may be in tension with the concept of a wholly “neutral,” detached facilitator, but we believe it is critical step for practitioners to build credibility and license to operate across difference.⁷

Navigating internal vs. external perceptions of facilitator identity

Another suggestion is to recognize that identity involves two sides of a coin: our own, internal perception of who we are, and how we are viewed externally by others. These perceptions may not always be aligned.

For example, Danny — this article’s other co-author — has maternal grandparents who are both Cuban; he has many aunts, uncles, and cousins still on the island whom he visits regularly. He speaks Spanish, cooks Cuban cuisine, and considers his Cuban roots an important part of who he is. However, this feature of Danny’s identity is often invisible to others as he looks (and also identifies) as white, given that his father’s family is Jewish. Though his Latinx identity resonates internally for Danny as a key part of his self-image, others may make assumptions about his experience and cultural background that overlook this part of his life based on his external physical features.

For individuals who belong to groups with less social capital⁸ and/or, like Danny, who belong to multiple groups, there can be a significant cost — via additional emotional and cognitive labor — in trying to manage the lack of alignment between internal and external understandings of identity. In referring to the experience of Black folks, W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term “double consciousness” to describe “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”⁹ While everyone may respond differently to how they are viewed by others, the perceived or actual group affiliation(s) of some individuals, depending on race, class and countless other attributes, can overshadow how people receive them as individuals.

For facilitators, these observations suggest the importance of working to become more self-aware with respect to our own internal identities, how we are likely to be perceived by stakeholders, and how both of these factors relate to the interaction at hand.¹⁰ Facilitators should carefully

⁷ While not the focus of this article, intersectionality also has clear implications for managing the identities of stakeholders. It suggests the importance of using facilitation techniques that create space for stakeholders to bring their full set of multiple identities into the room, and paying particular attention to groups/individuals who may face disadvantages or advantages across multiple identity categories based on embodied characteristics, institutional affiliation, professional experience, or personal perspective.

⁸ For a definition of social capital, please reference: <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/literature/definition/>

⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

¹⁰ While this article focuses on how facilitators can effectively manage their own identities, culturally savvy facilitators should also consider how these same dynamics are at play with stakeholders, in particular those from marginalized groups who may be experiencing the additional labor of navigating spaces where they are underrepresented. These stakeholders may be particularly attuned to the lack of alignment between their internal and external understandings of identity based on experiences in other contexts and therefore bring this lens into the facilitation process.

plan when and how to bring elements of their “internal” identity into the open, communicating them to clients and stakeholders when disclosure helps to move the conversation forward or creates the opportunity for others to reciprocate openness. Our colleague, CBI Senior Mediator Michele Ferenz, has put it aptly. “At end of the day it’s about authenticity and not pretending to be something you’re not,” she says. “We need to be able to authentically and ethically convey how ‘my story is part of your story.’”

Sometimes, this kind of transparency can have surprising results. While there may be an assumption that stakeholders and clients value working with facilitators whose identities mirror their own in certain ways, this is not always the case. CBI’s experience suggests that, in some instances, stakeholders may even prefer a facilitator who is seen as an outsider and therefore more “neutral” or capable of offering benefits that insiders cannot by virtue of being too entrenched in the conflict. For a recent dialogue among Inuit representatives on a climate impact assessment, for example, the organizers approached CBI for advice, and we offered to refer them to a skilled facilitator with an indigenous identity. However, the organizers suggested that an indigenous facilitator would bring his or her own identify conflicts, and a white American from CBI would do just fine. Of course, facilitators should also be prepared to step away from particular engagements if it becomes clear that stakeholders value a particular kind of identity-based experience that the facilitator cannot provide.

Understanding the value of both lived and learned experiences

A third lesson involves understanding and valuing both lived and learned experience as elements of one’s identity. Lived experiences are those that can be attained only by living as a member of a particular identity category. Learned experiences are those that can be acquired through practice, opportunity and exposure.

We can offer at least two core mantras when it comes to navigating these dual elements of identity. First, both elements have value. Second, the two elements are not equivalent or interchangeable. For example, though both Toby and Danny have plenty of expertise drawn from different aspects of their own identities, the fact that we are both cisgender men means that we cannot be the authority on what it is like to be a woman, trans, or gender non-binary facilitator. We would be remiss to suggest that our reflections and advice on the topic of facilitator identity could fully take the nuances of these lived experiences into account.

Creating space for both lived and learned experience to surface in facilitation spaces can enable clients and stakeholders to bring their full selves to the engagement and unlock perspectives and solutions that may go otherwise unrecognized. Facilitators should consider when it is appropriate and ethical to draw on both elements of experience, both in the room and when considering which projects to take on.

When this work is done effectively, it can play out in surprising ways. For example, CBI Managing Director David Fairman recalls feeling concerned about his role in facilitating a dia-

logue in Nigeria around development strategies. What place did he have as a white American in helping to convene and facilitate this particular dialogue? Was his involvement, in fact, preventing a similarly skilled Nigerian from stepping into that space?

To his credit, David raised these concerns explicitly with the client and with stakeholders, who assured him that they valued both his expertise as a facilitator and his strong professional network. They wanted him to be involved. He ended up working in close partnership with a highly skilled Nigerian facilitator, ensuring that both lived and learned perspectives were represented in the work.

Lived experience is often explicitly or tacitly minimized (or discarded) in professional spaces, particularly for people belonging to marginalized or underrepresented groups, even when insights derived from that lived experience can enrich facilitated dialogues or processes. For example, Danny openly identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. As part of this marginalized group, Danny is often the only one from this community in the room (or may think he is because others who do identify as LGBTQIA+ feel uncomfortable or unsafe to disclose that part of themselves at work).¹¹

Danny's experience as a minority based on his sexual orientation shapes how he participates in facilitated processes and may help orient him to which voices are underrepresented in a given context. At a recent stakeholder meeting on energy and safety, for example, Danny was the only person to voice the absence of any First Nations, Indigenous, or Tribal representatives, even though Danny was the most junior facilitator in the room.

To return to Toby's church example, his learned experience as a professionally trained facilitator suggested he might bring some skill and resources to the table, but his lack of lived experience as a member of the community positioned him as an outsider. Before the meeting Toby would have done well to consider whether he could credibly lead the process in light of his lived experiences, and to have discussed this openly with the client. Was there someone closer to the problem at hand who could have engaged the community more effectively? Was his expertise as a process manager valuable enough in this context to justify his involvement? Could there have been some way of featuring his respect for lived experience by partnering or co-facilitating with someone on the ground so that both elements of identity were given equitable space?

At the outset of the meeting itself, Toby could have openly acknowledged both the benefits and limitations of his lived and learned experiences. An opening like the following might have been effective:

I haven't experienced first-hand what it means to be part of this community like all of you, and I haven't been part of a church that's closing down. I won't pretend I fully understand what you're going through. I'm also not Catholic, although I do have a lot of admiration for its teachings and come from a community of faith of my own. What I do bring is some

¹¹ According to New York University Law School professor Kenji Yoshino, "covering" an aspect of one's identity like this – in order to be safe, to fit in, or to be successful – requires active energy. See Yoshino, Kenji. *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*, 2007.

experience working with communities that are facing difficult times, helping them think together about how to move forward, and an interest in listening and learning.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that lived experience is the *only* kind of valid experience for facilitators, or that we should always take clients' or stakeholders' preferences on these issues at face value. We believe in taking advantage of opportunities to demonstrate competence and good faith across difference. Some situations may call for simply persevering through a process, demonstrating one's skill, credibility, and trustworthiness by working hard to incorporate diverse voices and acting with integrity. In some instances, it may even be appropriate to respectfully challenge a stakeholder's or client's preconceptions around the need for certain lived experiences. For example, when clients have expressed a preference for a male facilitator due to preconceptions about women's leadership capacities, CBI has typically drawn a hard line and insisted that CBI's practitioners of all gender expressions are eminently capable of managing complex dispute processes, even in cultural contexts that may be resistant to recognizing non-men in leadership roles.

Key lessons and take-aways

In summary, pre-dialogue, our key suggestions for practitioners include the following:

- Do your homework and think about your own identities, how they relate to the engagement at hand, and whether your engagement feels appropriate and credible. If you have any doubts, check in with the client and/or others in the community you will be serving. In some instances, it might be most appropriate to step aside or seek a co-facilitator who brings a different set of identities to the table.
- Keep in mind your multiple identities and those of your stakeholders and clients, and how they might intersect in ways that might make effective and authentic dialogue more challenging. Consider how your own background and experiences might bias you in one direction or another and seek to foster a curious mindset.
- Consider how you want to present yourself and how you disclose elements of your identity ethically and strategically. Consider both internal identities and how you are likely to be perceived externally, as well as the role of both lived and learned experiences.
- Though in an ideal world, you could head off any resistance before entering the room, consider running through some potential scenarios of what you would say if challenged on a particular topic or facet of identity during the facilitation process.

Once in the room, the following additional recommendations may be helpful:

- When you first introduce yourself, offer a transparent and authentic description of your relevant identities, how they may connect you to the problem at hand, and where your limits may lie.
- Be prepared to address pushback proactively and compassionately. Doing this work well requires resilience. If you are stepping into hard situations as a facilitator where you are different from the people with whom you are working, you have to be particularly attuned to the fact that you may receive pushback. Remain open to stakeholder

preferences and do not make assumptions about them, even if they seem surprising or counterintuitive, yet understand where you draw the line (as in the example above where clients' gender preferences had no bearing on the facilitators' ability to lead engagements).

- Consider that participant behaviors you experience as difficult or confusing could be connected to one or more identities that they cannot or do not want to share explicitly, but that nevertheless drive their views and opinions.
- Continually look for opportunities to demonstrate competence and good faith across difference.

Above all, we suggest facilitators remember that few of these recommendations are black and white — context is everything! Our work in the U.S. and internationally often takes place in contexts that are politically charged and nuanced. Effective facilitation must consider the larger cultural milieu and the particulars of both the situation and the people at hand. That said, we believe the facilitator's identity is a factor in *all* processes whether or not it is expressly acknowledged. Effective facilitation thus requires raising our awareness around this reality, considering its impact, and addressing it with transparency, nuance, and integrity.