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Using Peacebuilding Dialogue to Address Sociopolitical Polarization in North America

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Executive Summary

Sociopolitical polarization in North America continues to grow, fueling primarily nonviolent but nevertheless persistent societal conflicts that resist easy resolution. Peacebuilding dialogue, a practice involving carefully planned facilitated contact between hostile outgroups, is one way that peacebuilding practitioners address such conflicts globally, though these practices are not usually applied to Western democracies. Other forms of dialogue have emerged in the North American context. This Policy Brief holds that they can be augmented by international peacebuilding tools and approaches, though practitioners will need to adapt their methodologies to address local needs. In particular, sociopolitical polarization shored up by ideologically-based identities such as *liberal* or *conservative*, will pose unique barriers to dialogue processes. Facilitators looking to initiate processes should look out for these obstacles as well as opportunities for dialogue that emerge from the North American context, particularly liberal discourses of social justice or conservative grievances against cultural or knowledge-producing institutions.

Policy Recommendations

⇒ Allocate time for relationship-building among conflict-affected actors who may be unfamiliar with peacebuilding practices or hesitant to admit that North Americans need to build peace "in their own backyard";

⇒ Identify substitutes for conventional "Track One" processes for dialogues to orient themselves towards, as well as other relevant targets and mechanisms for transfer;

⇒ Become aware of how dynamics on the ground will impact willingness to engage with the other side;

⇒ Create space in dialogue processes for expressing emotion in spontaneous, "non-neutral" ways;

⇒ Facilitators who involve explicit value systems in their work can experiment with intragroup dialogues among communities who hold the same values, or with intergroup dialogues in collaboration with facilitators who hold different beliefs;

⇒ Develop more inclusive language within which to conduct dialogue work with polarized groups.

⇒ Leverage new, especially digital, formats (video communications, podcasts, etc) when designing new dialogue processes.

Introduction

Over the past decade, sociopolitical polarization has become a concern in a growing number of Western democracies, one that is much more than an abstract anxiety. In North America alone, major political events have, perhaps for the first time, prompted large segments of the population to believe entirely different things about the facts on the ground. In January 2021, up to a third of American voters were divided over whether or not Donald Trump won the presidential election (Pew, 2021), a discrepancy made explosively clear during the storming of the US Capitol on January 6th. In Canada, the Freedom Convoy protests in early 2022, initially driven by resentment against COVID-19-related restrictions but ultimately drawing on other long standing political grievances, sent Canadian political discourse into a month-long spiral over what exactly was happening on Parliament Hill. These events sparked outrage, heavy government response and strained relationships among families, coworkers and friends, inspiring dozens if not hundreds of op-eds wondering just how far polarization will go.

Election legitimacy, federal emergency measures and populist discontent are all factors that, in other global contexts, have given rise to violence (Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019). While our political institutions in North America are thought to help insulate us from such outbreaks (Kalmoe and Mason, 2022), there has long been discussion over whether these liberal democratic mechanisms are under strain and need support to continue to withstand crises prompted by deep-seated societal divisions. Peacebuilding practitioners, who traditionally work to consolidate peace in pre- or post-violent contexts, often use a tool called facilitated dialogue to address such divisions. Peacebuilding dialogue involves facilitated encounters between conflicting parties or individuals, often for purposes like relationship-building, joint problem-solving, the identification of common ground or the exchange of opinions, perceptions and narratives (Ropers, 2017). Notwithstanding peacebuilding's conventional focus on armed violence, as well as its primary application in countries outside the Global North, a growing number of North American practitioners are looking to apply conflict resolution insights to polarized societal conflicts in their own backyards, complementing other dialogue approaches more typically used on the ground (Schirch, 2021; Burgess et al., 2022).

This Policy Brief builds upon this process by investigating whether and how peacebuilding dialogue can be used to address the kind of sociocultural polarization developing in North America, and what questions, barriers or opportunities may present themselves to practitioners as they adapt these tools to a new context. The Brief will be informed by existing research as well as my own personal experience as a Canadian facilitator of dialogue processes involving North Americans on contentious issues like the pandemic, the Trump presidency and the Freedom Convoy protests. I've worked with North American colleagues, especially on the ground in Ottawa, running community dialogues and facilitator training sessions, as well as conducting research with members of conflict-affected groups seeking to learn more about their experience of ideological opponents and about the viability of dialogue processes as compared to other strategies for addressing grievances. This report is intended to assist peacebuilders looking to apply familiar tools to new areas, as well as to North American practitioners hoping to better understand the traditions of peacebuilding dialogue as they have developed in international cases. I will first examine the dynamics of sociocultural polarization in the United States and Canada before describing some of the main pillars of peacebuilding dialogue. Then I will discuss potential barriers, opportunities and recommendations for peacebuilders working in the North American context.

Sociocultural polarization in North America

International peacebuilders are all too familiar with polarization along national, racial, ethnic or religious lines. In North America, however, polarization also manifests itself in prolonged societal conflicts between groups aligned with liberal or conservative cultural movements and their related political parties, a societal divide that has intensified in the United States since the 1970s (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). These have evolved into large-group conflicts that are primarily nonviolent in nature but nevertheless can lead to ruptured relationships, political gridlock and a strained social fabric.

Social scientists have identified two major types of polarization: ideological (or issue-based) polarization, which refers to differences in ideology or policy preferences and is mainly found among political elites, activists and politically engaged citizens, and affective polarization, which describes the degree of emotional hostility one's own group (ingroup) feels towards other groups (outgroups), as well as a willingness to disparage them. Ideological and affective polarization can exist independently of each other, meaning that competing groups who otherwise would be willing to compromise on policy or cultural issues may nevertheless see the other as a dangerous, threatening enemy that needs to be stopped. It is this second type of polarization that is more widespread among the general population in both the US and Canada (Mason, 2018; Merkley, 2021). The lengths that polarized groups are willing to go through to achieve cultural or societal dominance are thought to be largely kept in check by our democratic institutions, though events like the storming of the US Capitol or the Freedom Convoy protests may be signs that these institutions are under severe strain or are seen as illegitimate by a significant minority capable of mobilization.

One factor that makes sociopolitical polarization difficult to address is how easily it becomes meshed with people's sense of individual or collective identity. Identity-based conflict (IBC) practitioners have long claimed that our identities are a source of meaning and belonging, often shaping the deep-rooted values that inform our decisions and life paths. These identities are usually shaped by cultural, religious and societal elements of the contexts we grow up in (Ross, 2001). While this can be a source

of stability, richness and community, it also means that when something associated with people's identities is challenged, individuals or groups can mistake this as a threat to their core self and shift into a cognitive self-defense mode. Accordingly, their views become entrenched and opponents, competitors or outgroups are seen as enemies, making compromise feel akin to betraying one's self, family, value system or community.

IBCs were identified by peacebuilders in the 1990s as an especially difficult kind of conflict to address, but in those years attention was primarily paid to the ways ethnicity or religion informed identity and, accordingly, the likelihood to commit violence. But these mechanisms aren't only triggered by ethnic or religious ties: these dynamics can be triggered by polarizing societal or cultural issues like abortion or affirmative action (Ross, 2001). In fact, labels like liberal and conservative (or, in the US, Republican and Democrat), as well as their attendant symbols, can themselves take on broader, large-group significance in that they bind people together into large groups (which are, for better or worse, sometimes labelled tribes (Hawkins et al., 2018)) fueled by increasingly divergent moral, cultural and societal visions, ones that can be in stark contrast with those promoted on the other side of the aisle.

Becoming locked into the us-vs-them dance of politically polarized identities has major implications for the way we live our lives. Heightened polarization can skew our perceptions, bias our decision-making processes and make us more likely to reject facts that don't line up with our ideological assumptions. When feeling under threat, people may gravitate more towards partisan information sources, creating echo chambers where threatening narratives about the other are reproduced and strengthened. Such partisans are likely to feel increasingly alienated or threatened by the other side (Legge, 2019). While "liberal" and "conservative" identities used to be large tents that held together highly diverse constituents, a process known as social sorting, where ideological groups (and the parties that represent them) become gradually more socially and culturally homogenous, has picked up speed in recent years. This means that racial, religious, education-based or geographical identities have become more "aligned" with ideological identities: in the US, for example, blacks, Hispanics and secular whites are more likely to identify as liberal, while Christians and rural residents are more likely to identify as conservative. This has led to the consolidation of two large "mega-identities" that serve as coalitions for various societal groups (Mason, 2018). As these mega-identities grow more internally similar, they're thought to become more isolated from each other, which may contribute to increased misunderstanding, animosity and even hatred.

The implications for dialogue work are clear: highly polarized societies are likelier to support disengagement with the other side, heightened degrees of stereotypes and prejudice and a tendency to "embrace distorted and skewed views of their political rivals" or assume "irrationality or depravity of those with whom they disagree" (Aikin and Talisse, 2020, p. 20). Affectively polarized partisans can even lose "perspective on the differences between opponents and enemies" and give rise to

"a desire for victory that...exceeds [the] desire for the greater good" (Mason, 2018, p. 6). This rejection of the other side's legitimacy, or even their capacity for rational thought, can lead partisans to prioritize resisting ingroups to clarifying facts in high-risk situations, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, where liberal-conservative gaps regarding attitudes towards mask-wearing or hygiene practices were highly correlated with affective polarization in US counties with low case counts (Druckman et al., 2021). Ideological polarization has been identified by various scholars as perhaps the most salient social cleavage in the present-day United States, overtaking race, religion, class or other traditionally divisive markers (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). This finding does not equate even extreme discrimination against liberals or conservatives as the nation's most destructive type (violent instances of racial, gender or religious-based discrimination exist and often dwarf political extremism, though this is an area that requires additional research), but that the average citizen is more likely to hate political outgroups than other groups. Ideological identities are not "protected" in the United States in the same manner as religious, ethnic or racial identities – there is no taboo on discriminating against political outgroups, a form of discrimination that can in fact be actively encouraged (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015).

While most of these findings were initially made in the American context, the primacy of sociopolitical hate over other forms of animosity has been found in other countries in the Global North. Signs of increased affective polarization have been found in Canada as well, even in the absence of sharp issue polarization or America's more divisive two-party system (Merkley, 2021). Furthermore, dramatic events like the storming of the US Capitol and the Freedom Convoy protests make it clear that polarization has reached a point that significant segments of the North American population feel threatened enough to choose disruptive strategies in order to address their grievances. In such a world, it behooves us to think about what peacebuilding dialogue may have to offer groups in this kind of situation.

Dialogue: peacebuilding at home

Dialogue, broadly speaking, is an activity that brings people together as individuals or as representatives of groups (intergroup dialogue) for "the meaningful and meaning-creating exchange of perceptions and opinions" (Ropers, 2017, p. 5). This can include sharing experiences, comparing narratives, building relationships, coming to consensus, deciding on joint action or engaging in creative problem-solving (Rothman, 1997). While any two people can engage in dialogue independently, so long as they possess the desire, the right tools and a healthy dose of good faith, peacebuilding dialogue is often organized with the help of a facilitator specially trained to assist participants shape the process in a desired direction. The role of the facilitator is especially important in these types of interactions. Research has shown that, unassisted, people in deep-seated conflicts tend to engage in destructive exchanges when left to their own devices. It is the role of the facilitator to gently steer them into more productive, reflective and analytical modes of interaction in

order to "get at" the deeper issues between them in a constructive and positive way (Jones, 2015).

The practice has taken many forms in North America and has a particularly storied history in the United States. While this is not an exhaustive list, dialogue has taken forms like bridge-building, which improves relationships between polarized or hostile groups (Argo, 2019), critically-informed intergroup dialogue, which seeks to identify and address social issues (Dessel et al., 2006), or deliberative democracy, which develops more participatory governance structures that aim to impact public policy (Menkel-Meadow, 2011). In comparison to these forms, peacebuilding dialogue is typically applied to pre- or post-violent contexts with an aim to prevent re/occurrences of armed conflict. All of these may be informed by research on intergroup contact, a field that identifies and studies the socio-psychological dynamics of how such contact works (Paolini et al., 2021). While all of these approaches intersect in various ways with regards to their goals, strategies, tools and philosophies, it is important to note that each has their own origins, historical development, literature and often a specific "language" used to describe dialogue tools and strategies. Historically speaking, most practitioner and academic materials produced in each sphere tend to interact more with their own traditions than with the others, though there are increasing attempts to create more linkages between them, especially in North America. Recent examples include the National Day of Dialogue, a yearly event bringing together American representatives of all dialogue streams, the Beyond Intractability website's recent "hyperpolarization" conversation series between peacebuilders and advocates of deliberative democracy, or my colleagues here at Ottawa Dialogue seeking to use peacebuilding tools to address public health concerns (Bharwani et al., 2022) or bringing peacebuilding and Indigenous and dialogue practitioners together to help inform each others' work (Ottawa Dialogue, 2022; Dedyukina, 2022).

Peacebuilding dialogue, the focus of this Policy Brief, brings unique elements to the table. First is the understanding that dialogue takes place on a number of levels, known in the field as tracks: Track One refers official negotiation processes, for example between heads of state or their diplomatic representatives; Track Two typically involves informal, facilitated dialogue processes attended by influential elites, community members or policy makers; Track Three dialogue take place at the grassroots level, often with a much broader range of participants than the other tracks (Lederach, 1997; Jones, 2015). Each level has its own approaches and methodologies, and processes initiated at different levels may coordinate with each other, though the mechanics of how exactly to do this is a regular point of discussion and debate.

Peacebuilding facilitators use a diverse range of techniques and frameworks, many of which are shared by facilitators in other spheres. These types of dialogue include:

- positional, where participants learn about and acknowledge each other's positions;

- needs-based, which seeks to identify underlying needs motivating positions, behaviours and attitudes;
- identity-based, where deep-seated values, long-term grievances and influential cultural mindsets are acknowledged and incorporated into the process;
- narrative-based, where participants deconstruct conflict-conducive stories about each other;
- process-based, which creates space for more intuitive or extra-rational processes;
- and, importantly, problem-solving, which seeks not only to bridge divides, but also develop creative ideas, solutions or ways forward in specific conflicts.

The problem-solving workshop (PSW) is a specific tool developed for such processes – often set up over several days, and repeated over time, PSW participants are gently led by a third party facilitator who guides the process in a direction that empowers attendees to set their own agenda and work through the deeper issues relevant to the conflict at hand (Mitchell, 2001).

Traditionally, peacebuilding practitioners apply these approaches to conflict-contexts in different ways, including organizing "pre-negotiation" dialogues in hopes that they lead to official processes, using these tools to strengthen the capacities of influential key institutions, or developing the skills of peace workers, community members or other actors. While many facilitators are careful not to overpromise the potential of dialogue, they nevertheless point to a long list of documented benefits known to emerge from successful processes:

- producing fresh ideas that revitalize negotiation processes;
- influencing decision makers; reducing the prejudice of participants who may eventually enter governing bodies;
- or the production of joint statements, action plans or documents that lead to a better understanding of the conflict and its actors (Jones, 2015)

But if there are already various types of dialogue already in use in North America, what role can peacebuilding dialogue play – especially in contexts that are primarily nonviolent? I would argue that it complements a number of these other dialogue approaches. Deliberative democracy has developed a large number of tools aimed at building consensus in fraught contexts, but it pays less attention to tricky identity dynamics that peacebuilders have worked with for decades. Critical-theory informed dialogue points out issues of power and privilege, but it comes with a built-in worldview that will likely alienate key parties to polarized conflicts. Much bridge-building work helps heal polarized relationships, but community practitioners may be less aware of how their individual processes can contribute to broader social change. There is plenty of room for fruitful collaboration and mutual impact between peacebuilding dialogue traditions and those long at work in North America and, in fact, such collaborations have already begun.

That said, peacebuilders may face resistance to the thought that peacebuilding dialogue is an appropriate framework for countries in the Global North – nations like Canada and the US are not typically classified as "conflict-affected," which means that North American peacebuilders may need to expend extra effort to legitimize the application of these necessary tools and approaches "at home" (Schirch, 2021). This also means that burgeoning peacebuilders are more likely to find guidance on how to work abroad rather than in their own backyard. Which begs the question: how can we promote peacebuilding dialogue as a response to controversies over public monuments, vaccine hesitancy, campus activism, religious freedom or hate speech? Many of us have been answering these questions on our own, experimenting with adapting tools or formats, seeing what works, identifying which paradigms or techniques are appropriate (or not). A comprehensive answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this policy report, but the following sections explore three themes that have consistently emerged in my own work and that of my colleagues. My hope is to contribute to the ongoing conversation of how best to apply peacebuilding tools to this "new" context, and to provide support to others asking themselves similar questions.

Adapting peacebuilding dialogue to primarily nonviolent contexts

Peacebuilding dialogues often take place in the shadow of violence, often in hopes of preventing the start or recurrence of armed conflict. Polarized societal conflicts in North America, however, typically involve deep-seated value-based disputes, which feature little or no violence, compared to that found in an armed conflict. While these disputes can lead to negative consequences like marginalization, discrimination, censorship or heightened feelings of threat, they are not typically as destructive as instances of mass, direct violence. It is often the level of destruction involved that leads to what is called the mutually hurting stalemate, which refers to a moment when both sides realize the fighting hurts them too much, incentivizing them to come to the table and begin an exploration of whether a negotiated end to hostilities is possible. When a mutually hurting stalemate emerges, the conflict is said to be "ripe" for settlement, with both sides open to finding a way out, one that preferably won't involve losing too much face (Zartman, 2000). Polarized societal conflicts over racism, health policies or indigenous reconciliation may never reach such a point because they are often waged in ways that don't cause acute physical or economic damage, notwithstanding the chronic, pernicious effects of such conflicts or even dramatic moments like the storming of the US Capitol or Ottawa's Freedom Convoy protests. Such dramatic events, however, have so far been isolated in nature. It's likely that a number of these societal conflicts, while widespread, only deeply impact a limited part of the population. Compared to relatively more urgent problems, like the pandemic or its economic aftermath, such societal conflicts, and the grievances driving them, may not be prioritized for resolution, nor might the actors driving the conflict feel incentivized to change their conflict-conducive behaviour. But while these issues may exhibit less immediate violence, leaving them unaddressed facilitates the corrosion of the fabric of our institutions and public support for democracy.

As mentioned above, these conflicts often draw on sectarian identity group dynamics that prompt highly polarized partisans to see the other side as an existential threat. This leads some actors to frame the outgroup's ideological eradication or social marginalization as a non-negotiable goal, even as damage is inflicted on both sides (Mason, 2018; Aikin and Talisse, 2020). This will likely pose a challenge for dialogue practitioners, as recruitment strategies drawing on mutually hurting stalemates may not prove relevant in such circumstances. However, practitioners may find comfort in how highly polarized actors are not representative of the total population. Though partisans are often prominent influences on societal conflicts, work has shown that, at least in the United States, there is an exhausted majority tired of polarized rhetoric and more open to dialogue with ideological outgroups (Hawkins et al., 2018). This exhaustion may act as a substitute for mutually hurting stalemate with regard to promoting dialogue and recruitment of participants, and as practitioners we may need to explore opportunities like this. Our recruitment strategies and dialogue design, however, will likely need to adapt depending on whether we seek to engage partisans or this exhausted majority.

Another concept to adapt is transfer, which is the process by which the new ideas, relationships, attitudes or behaviours developed in a dialogue move beyond the participants and start to affect either political leadership, society at large, or both (Jones, 2015). Planning for eventual transfer is often a significant part of both Track Two (influential elites) or Track Three (grassroots) dialogues, with many processes deciding to target official Track One negotiations. With many North American societal conflicts, however, there are few clear, Track One-style processes to orient towards. Important decision- or policy-making discussions could arguably stand in for more a conventional Track One process, especially if there are high-stakes negotiations involved. For example, Canada's 2008-2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) could have been a target for transfer, as could a hypothetical commission set up by public health authorities to address vaccine skepticism. These would be rather innovative targets for Track Two or Three dialogues, however, and so more research would have to be conducted to understand how impacting these processes may differ from attempts to influence conventional Track One talks.

But Track One processes aren't the only possible target for transfer. Peacebuilding practitioners have long acknowledged that, while high-level decisions need to be made to address structural and institutional dimensions of conflict, large segments of the populations are also deeply affected (Lederach, 1997). Some dialogue processes aim for scale, training hundreds of facilitators to provide as many people as possible with the opportunity to participate. Others facilitate more narrow interventions to impact key areas, such as the educational system, religious communities or media outlets, leveraging these institutions' capacity for transfer to the broader population. Depending on whether facilitators seek to impact the nation, their region or a specific city, there will be plenty of site-specific transfer mechanisms to be identified (social media

platforms, neighbourhood groups, community associations, etc.). Practitioners will need to identify the groups they desire to impact and determine the most relevant mechanisms to do so.

Even in the presence of extreme polarization, actors in war and post-war contexts typically share an understanding that the conflict affects society at large. This may not be the case for North American societal conflicts, where relevant actors may not immediately see sociopolitical polarization as a top issue that needs addressing, though incidents like the storming of the US Capitol or the Freedom Convoy protests may highlight the need for this work. As mentioned above, effort is needed not only to legitimize peacebuilding dialogue as a tool to address sociopolitical polarization, but also to legitimize the idea that Western democracies need peacebuilding at all. For many people, peace work is something that happens "over there," beyond our own backyards (Schirch, 2021).

Practitioners may consequently need to spend extensive amounts of time building trust with actors and institutions who will eventually serve as partners, participants or appropriate conduits for transfer. Building legitimacy within new contexts like this will highlight a number of issues that have faced practitioners since the early days of peacebuilding dialogue, including the lack of standard facilitation methodologies, professional certification and the difficulty of measuring dialogue impact on society. Innovative formats will need to be developed to adapt these processes to the North American context – new "Track One"-style processes need to be identified, perhaps as well as entirely new targets and modes of transfer. Organizations seeking funds for projects from municipal or regional donors unfamiliar with peacebuilding practices may face additional scrutiny for innovative proposals. Practitioners will have to take these factors into account when planning, recruiting participants and seeking funding.

Accounting for sociopolitical polarization, ideological identities and threat dynamics

As mentioned in the above, a major element that may pose a barrier to dialogue processes are the ways in which North American polarization has become tied up with identity. The intensification of affective polarization in both Canada and the United States has meant that constituents with relatively similar positions on a wide variety of issues nevertheless get drawn into fierce conflicts where the other is seen as a "them" that must be neutralized. While no data has been collected on social sorting in Canada, in the United States the rise of increasingly homogenous liberal and conservative "camps" or "mega-identities" has been linked to increased animosity, disdain and even hatred between two sides that increasingly have little to do with each other and little contact to speak of, leading to groups that are "less tolerant, more biased and feel angrier at the people in their outgroups" (Mason 2018, p. 61). Social scientists theorize that, the more homogenous these mega-identities are, the more emotionally involved their members will be in the fight, creating a greater sense of elation in victory and humiliation in defeat at the hands of the outgroup.

A major dynamic of this new identity politics is that ostensibly non-politicized elements of life, such as clothing, lifestyle choices or even diet, become imbued with political meaning. Certain trends become associated with the other side as something that "they" do (DellaPosta et al., 2015). While associations of ball-caps with conservatives and man-buns with liberals is for some a source of humour, these dynamics can have major implications when it comes to polarized "culture war" issues. For example, while certain health policies may have previously seemed politically neutral, we now see intensifying public discourse that associate (or "sort") COVID-19 skepticism or vaccine resistance with rural and white identity groups (Farmer, 2021), even to the point where elected officials called anti-mask protests "thinly veiled white nationalist supremacist...protests" (Connolly, 2021). Dialogue practitioners working with highly sorted societal conflicts need to be aware that these associations can not only impact actors' willingness to engage with the other side, but it may even "contaminate" seemingly innocuous objects, habits or words in the eyes of conflict-affected populations.

These associations may even "taint" the dialogue process itself. For example, I've noticed in my practitioner work that words like "diversity," "neutrality," "inclusion" or "civility," each of which are championed by dialogue advocates in different ways, are often associated with either liberal or conservative norms in different ways. This means that well-intentioned (but ill-informed) conversations with prospective participants on diversity or civility can backfire, sometimes explosively, with accusations that facilitators are themselves "on the other side." This can potentially delegitimize dialogue as a practice. In cases when certain values become deeply associated with outgroups, resistance to them can itself become part of one's ingroup identity. This has been noted in peacebuilding research: specific values that seem neutral to conflict specialists can appear hostile to conflict-affected groups to the point that they are seen as an existential threat (Çuhadar, 2020). Dialogue practitioners working with the North American context will need to watch for such dynamics and design their processes to account for them, especially during recruitment of participants for such dialogues.

Partisans often encourage ingroup members to delegitimize the other side's needs, grievances or point of view, making it difficult to justify traditional dialogue in an increasingly polarized context where the parties are already primed, psychologically speaking, to see the other side as wrong, unjust, evil or even depraved (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018). In such contexts, values like neutrality seem particularly suspect – if the other side appears dangerous, treating them as neutral can itself seem naive, wrongheaded or complicit in their misdeeds. As practitioners, we need to be aware of what values we promote when recruiting participants. Additionally, during sessions practitioners may want to create space for expressions of "uncivil" engagement that will nevertheless be channeled by the dialogue process – identity-trained dialogue specialists emphasize the need to surface such grievances early in the process (Rothman and Olsen, 2001), which some practitioners

compare to "blowing off steam." While much peacebuilding dialogue was developed in the liberal era of conflict resolution, which typically values a value-neutral language, North American facilitators may find inspiration in more recent models such as agonistic engagement, where dialogue isn't seen as a space to "gloss over" differences so much as create a space for contestations to exist and be expressed in ways that don't degrade the other or chip away at democratic norms (Strömbom et al., 2022).

That's not to say that the way participants express strong emotion won't present additional barriers to dialogue. Ideological divides can easily fuel righteous fury against groups who hold the "wrong" values, prompting ingroup loyalty against the outgroup and potentially framing contact with the other as morally reprehensible. Partisans may even be encouraged to "cleanse" their social spaces from what are perceived as contaminating ideas and worldviews (Haidt, 2012). These attitudes can become internalized as unchallenged norms, preventing community members from seeing the other as a legitimate partner with whom dialogue can even occur (Çuhadar, 2021). These factors place additional burdens on facilitators brokering dialogue between polarized, socially sorted communities, making it necessary for them to understand and speak multiple "moral dialects" (Boghossian and Lindsay, 2019) so as to address relevant communities appropriately. It is key here to note that this does not mean that groups don't have legitimate or understandable reasons for acting this way. Highly polarized communities have reasons to see the other side as a threat – both to themselves and, often, to human flourishing generally. While peacebuilding practitioners may shirk at the thought of delegitimizing, deplatforming or disengaging with the other side, it will be useful to see such behaviour not solely as a conflict strategy, but also as a deeply-felt effort to make the world a safer place or as an ingroup defense mechanism that comes from particular experiences of fear or marginalization.

Dialogue practitioners often gravitate to traditional dialogue structures: in-person, facilitated meetings where conflicting sides sit face to face to share their experiences. But highly polarized identity dynamics, with their resulting strong emotions, attempts at delegitimizing the other side and narratives framing contact as ingroup betrayal, may make such meetings extremely difficult to organize with competing partisans. Partisan resistance is not a mere "barrier" to be surmounted by savvy facilitators – as noted above, some communities have powerful reactions against engaging with the other, often for understandable and legitimate reasons. They may fear for their own safety, disbelieve the others' ability or willingness to engage constructively, express concerns about manipulation by bad faith actors, hesitate to legitimize allegedly dangerous parties, suspect being taken advantage of, etc. These may reflect very real facts on the ground – and even in cases when a group's understanding of danger may be heightened, they are nevertheless an expression of peoples' lived experience, which dialogue practitioners would be unwise to ignore.

In fact, such resistance presents an invitation for practitioner reflection. We can ask ourselves: why exactly do we want to organize a conventional dialogue process? Why do we think that these tools and methods are what is most needed at this very moment? Asking these questions have led some peacebuilders to develop an approach that highlights participant agency – if the parties don't want contact, this isn't seen as an "obstacle" to be overcome during the recruitment process (Cleven et al., 2018). In such cases there is still other necessary work to do: facilitating dialogues within rather than between communities, for example, as well as helping conflict-affected actors renew depleted psychological resources or developing methods of exposure to the other side (or their ideas) that feel less high-stakes or triggering.

Addressing competing moral claims

Like with many other polarized contexts, North American societal conflicts are greatly shaped by competing values, moral frameworks and worldviews. These will likely impact how groups perceive dialogue processes, but these perceptions usually differ greatly depending on the side involved. These sides cannot be reduced to "conservatives" or "liberals" – rather, both of these sides are actually coalitions containing a number of smaller constituent groups with different values, approaches and priorities. Fiscal libertarians and evangelical Christians may both identify as conservatives, for example, but their positions reflect rather different lived realities. Facilitators looking to design dialogue projects need to be aware of the group in question they want to work with, as well as what narratives or moral frameworks will impact their willingness to engage with the other side. I have known facilitators (myself included) who were quick to assume that a traditional dialogue session was the obvious solution in a given context, completely ignoring the reasons why conflict-affected groups were hesitant to participate. Making things more complicated, these reasons may not be immediately apparent, or the resulting dynamics may change spontaneously as the conflict develops, making it critical for facilitators to keep a regular finger on the pulse of the communities they work with. While a comprehensive list of such dynamics is beyond the scope of this policy report, I wish to explore one set from each side of the liberal-conservative continuum that will likely impact peacebuilders' efforts to design and implement dialogue processes in Canada or the United States today.

Liberal discourses of social justice and equality

Over the past decade in North America, we have seen the consolidation of liberal discourses of social justice that seek greater inclusion for historically marginalized populations that occasionally view certain elements of dialogue with suspicion (Aikin and Talisse, 2020). Conventional "ground rules" for dialogue, such as civility, orderly turn-taking and active listening (Jones 2015), have been challenged in the public sphere for their perceived role in marginalizing vulnerable populations (Rohrer, 2019). These criticisms have focused on how historically underprivileged groups, such as women, Indigenous, black,

queer or trans communities, can be marginalized by powerful actors who appropriate the language of civility and dialogue in order to preserve an oppressive status quo (Schirch, 2021). In such cases, minorities and their allies are told to "calm down" if they want their needs to be taken seriously (Aikin and Talisse, 2020). This is thought to place an undue burden on communities described as "not having the luxury" of remaining calm. In such an environment, attempts at dialogue that ask participants to tone down accusations of oppression may be seen as further marginalizing these voices. Dialogue itself may come to be perceived not only as ideologically suspect, but perhaps even an unwitting tool of the oppressor (Schirch, 2021). In cases like this, dialogue practitioners will need to spend time understanding and addressing the needs and grievances of those who suspect dialogue may be appropriated, or even weaponized, against them by partisan opponents.

In my own work I have known facilitators who resist these allegations, framing resistance to dialogue as a barrier that needs to be overcome in order to "do the real work" of depolarization. This tension is, arguably, a localized expression of the age-old "justice vs. peace" debate, where engagement in the name of long-term stability, reconciliation or healing is confronted with necessary, though potentially destabilizing, calls for justice and minority protections (Parlevliet, 2011). Those who suspect that "peace" may come at the cost of "justice" point to data suggesting that, in some cases, dialogue can indeed lead to better relationships between representatives of oppressor and victim groups, but that this improved atmosphere may enhance participants' feelings about their personal relationships while leaving unjust political, economic or societal factors unchanged (Dixon et al., 2010).

But while this tug-of-war between positive relationships and justice is sometimes framed as a zero-sum struggle, especially in North America today, this need not be the case. Peacebuilding dialogue approaches have faced similar criticisms before and have adapted to take into account these grievances. One such major shift took place in the 1990s, when practitioners responded to feminist criticisms that conflict resolution practices failed to adequately take into account power asymmetries or issues of safety (Kriesberg, 1997). Facilitators can draw upon a rich tradition that frames dialogue as a practice that creates safe spaces for threatened groups and, especially through the guidance of an experienced third party facilitator, minimizes feelings of imminent or existential threat. Some experts also warn against launching processes that try to mediate settlements when there are starkly asymmetrical relationships, and similar commitments to addressing perceived asymmetries may prove necessary when promoting dialogue within polarized communities (Cleven et al., 2018). Recent work on dialogue in the context of US racial tensions seeks to find ways to integrate bridgebuilding approaches with community organizing and social justice activism (Schirch, 2021). Other practitioners draw directly from critical theory-based discourses of power, privilege and oppression, using dialogue as a way to draw attention to these dynamics, raise awareness among participants of their respective victimization or complicity in

oppression and discuss how to address these dynamics in society at large. For some practitioners, raising critical awareness and encouraging activism to address perceived injustices is not merely one use for dialogue, but that the promotion of social justice should be dialogue's main goal (Dessel et al., 2006).

However, while such an approach may do much to legitimize dialogue among liberal or left-leaning groups and create inclusive spaces with regard to certain communities, embedding progressive values in dialogue practices may unintentionally exacerbate ideological polarization, potentially intensifying the kind of dynamics that lead to heightened animosity, disgust with or disparagement towards ideological outgroups. This can result in a major irony: practices meant to address discrimination and hatred towards certain groups can, in contexts of extreme polarization, consolidate cycles of hatred towards others. This does not mean that such work should not take place, but that facilitators should be aware of how competing needs, narratives and dynamics interact with each other – some practitioners frame this approach as *strategic peacebuilding* (Schirch, 2021).

Conservative grievances of ideological marginalization; the loss of credibility in mainstream institutions

In addition to liberal ethics of justice and equality, conservative narratives have recently intensified concerning perceptions of ideological marginalization and exclusion from particular spheres of public life, namely academia (especially the social sciences and humanities), legacy media and popular culture. Conservative figures decry alleged liberal bias in these informational and cultural institutions, with social scientists finding evidence suggesting asymmetries favouring progressives in terms of hiring practices, subtle discrimination and what values are presented as normative in these spheres (Grossman and Hopkins, 2016). This feeds into debates over the existence or value of cultural power or cultural privilege, a slippery set of terms that have been used to refer to phenomena ranging from the perceived ability to shape cultural norms (what some refer to as "shaping minds and hearts") to whether one feels represented in public, cultural spaces. Struggles over cultural power/privilege manifested perhaps most famously in the "culture wars" of the 1990s, which have continued in various forms into the present day (Hartman, 2019).

Many conservative groups promote the narrative that they are losing cultural power/privilege and perhaps are even being culturally marginalized. Academics, journalists and creators of popular culture are seen as becoming increasingly liberal, which leads, for some, to a severe distrust of the mainstream institutions that act as alleged "gatekeepers" of cultural power and privilege. In the US, this distrust prompted the creation of alternative spaces like conservative TV channels (especially Fox News), talk radio and think tank networks (Grossman and Hopkins, 2016). These feelings can also express themselves in explosive populist movements aimed at disrupting allegedly liberal-aligned governments or public institutions, which may

include the American Tea Party movement, the storming of the US Capitol or Canada's Freedom Convoy protests. A noteworthy paradox of these movements is how activism fueled by perceived disparities in cultural power and privilege may indeed prove successful – the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency is arguably the most famous recent example – but even such political victories are often unable to address perceived cultural asymmetries (Hartman, 2019).

Peacebuilding itself may add to these perceived asymmetries. As compared to fields like political science or international relations, progressive ideas shaped peacebuilding from the start: Johan Galtung, who popularized the word peacebuilding and is considered the founding figure of peace and conflict studies in the 1960s, was himself a leftist thinker, though his ideas weren't institutionalized in mainstream liberal peacebuilding initiatives until the 1990s. His approach attracted conservative criticism for privileging progressive theories of conflict onset, like structural violence, over conservative theories focusing on restricted freedoms, rational actor theory or individual agency (Sharp, 2020). Peacebuilding's liberal pedigree may make some conservatives suspicious of dialogue initiatives, especially if practitioners claim neutrality while embedding progressive approaches in their work. This may be exacerbated further in cases when intergroup dialogue practitioners inform their projects with critical theory or other post-Marxist approaches, which many conservatives view as especially threatening to their idea of human flourishing.

Nor is this tension limited to conservatives: divisions have emerged between facilitator communities that see dialogue as a tool for addressing historical inequalities and those who use it to restore a damaged social fabric or resist the more pernicious effects of affective polarization (Legge, 2019; Schirch, 2021). Practitioners who engage with these dynamics may do well to take inspiration from previous generations of peacebuilders who worked to overcome these binaries and find ways of addressing these key, though different, needs in conjunction with each other. This is already happening on a theoretical level, with recent work framing the need for social justice and for repaired relationships as equal components (along with nonviolence) in a broad agenda for positive peace. While this work affirms that positive relationships without social justice may leave structural inequalities intact, social justice without developing positive relationships may also risk utilizing coercive methods and further entrenching legitimate grievances and polarized conflict dynamics (Standish et al., 2022).

Offering more practical advice, prominent peacebuilders have suggested that facilitators frame their projects using less explicitly liberal language than some may be used to, as this may exacerbate polarization in the North American context, thereby increasing chances of intergroup hate and disparagement (Burgess et al., 2022). This may pose an internal conflict for some peacebuilders who, long informed by progressive values, may be uncomfortable utilizing a different moral language themselves, or who affirm that the absence of polarizing terms (civility, social justice, etc.) may be seen as just as harmful as

their presence (Schirch, 2021). Peacebuilding theory offers two ways of justifying this kind of shift and mitigating its potential negative impact. The first involves conflict sensitivity, which refers to an awareness of how interventions may exacerbate conflicts, either by taking a side or through ignorance concerning local conflict dynamics (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012). The second involves the value of inclusion, which seeks less to endorse the views of other parties than to comprehend their concerns, their worries and work out how to address them without causing harm to other community members (Kuttner, 2017). If peacebuilders find themselves rooted in specifically liberal or conservative traditions, these two values may help them broaden their practices and reduce their contribution to polarization and hate.

These approaches don't necessitate dialogue projects to be framed as "neutral" or "civil," but that a new language and mindset will likely need to be developed as projects move forward, depending on what communities are involved. Practitioners whose work embodies a set of values that are seen as threatening to the other side can nevertheless address polarization by working within groups that match their approach, especially in ways that resist disparagement of the other side, or they may facilitate intergroup dialogue in collaboration with facilitators who possess different values but share a commitment to addressing deeply polarized societal conflicts. Schirch (2021), speaking about dialogue in contexts of US racial tensions, notes that in addition to depolarization, dialogue can be used to build like-minded coalitions or deradicalize extremists in ways that don't contribute to hatred or affective polarization. In other words, no matter a facilitator's willingness to use or avoid specific language, there will nevertheless be work to do on all fronts. Peacebuilding, as it were, is no stranger to adapting to meet the needs of the times.

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive list of suggestions for practitioners looking to use peacebuilding dialogue to address the negative effects of affective polarization in North American societies. Prominent peacebuilders also advocate for confidence-building measures, face-saving courtesies, non-partisan fact-finding interventions, the empowerment of low-power groups to address asymmetries of privilege and other strategies (Burgess et al., 2022). Major barriers facing practitioners involve scaling up peacebuilding processes that typically only involve small groups of people, as well as dealing with bad actors incentivized to exacerbate polarization dynamics for their own benefit. There is also a need to conduct this work in spaces where people already gather, both online and offline. All of these require further research and experimentation to develop useful interventions that meet deep-seated needs, address legitimate grievances and do not further exacerbate societal conflicts.

The goals of all these potential processes, along with the tools and strategies used to reach them, will likely be diverse: those in the "exhausted majority" may be ready for more traditional

dialogue formats and problem-solving workshops, but increasingly polarized actors (who may in fact have disproportionate influence on the conflict itself) will likely to be less willing to do so, requiring more dedicated recruitment processes, approaches that correspond to their values. New formats may need to be developed altogether. These and other factors will pose unique challenges for dialogue practitioners looking to apply peacebuilding tools to North American societal conflicts. Our work, to put it lightly, is cut out for us. Part of what makes this complicated is that addressing these issues (and the needs underlying them) will likely mean rethinking what dialogic encounters may look like. While exploring new forms of dialogue lies outside the scope of this policy report, I will close with some examples that point to directions for potential research and experimentation.

In armed conflicts there are cases when the different parties may not be able to be in the same room, possibly due to logistical difficulties, psychological capacity or participant unwillingness – when this happens, shuttle diplomacy addresses this by having a go-between, sometimes a trained facilitator, who goes back and forth between them as a mediator, slowly developing a conversation (Brahm and Burgess, 2003). Given the hesitance of highly polarized groups to engage with each other, practitioners may do well to think of novel forms of shuttle diplomacy, utilizing new technologies. For example, the ubiquity of video communication tools following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has legitimized online dialogue formats, especially in cases where circumstances prevent physical meetings between groups (Nolte-Laird, 2021; Hirblinger, 2022). In instances where hosts promote dialogue principles rather than polarizing rhetoric, podcasts have also emerged as a powerful and popular new paradigm, with speakers conversing for hours at a time with representatives of one side in a dispute. This is sometimes followed by a conversation from someone on the other side, with single episodes sometimes reaching over a million views. While some hosts explicitly frame their work as dialogic, for others the creation of a dialogue space is merely a side effect of seeking to engage, listen and understand. Recordings from these processes can then serve as permanent resources for people not only looking to familiarize themselves with different sides of an issue, but also to see something human in a person they might find threatening in a face-to-face encounter. This can also provide entirely new forms of transfer, as episodes can reach hundreds of thousands of viewers who would never have otherwise had access to more traditional dialogue spaces.

As practitioners, we should explore such possibilities and not be afraid to dream up new formats, even if they may not look like the tools we've grown used to. While some actors, particularly donors who understandably wish to invest in tried-and-true methodologies, may privilege intergroup dialogue and problem-solving workshops as a "golden standard" for practitioners to aspire to, new formats may need to be designed that better accommodate the needs of the moment. This will require not only originality of vision, but also steady work to legitimize these new approaches and, of course, receive funding for them.

Recommendations

⇒ Allocate time for relationship-building among conflict-affected actors who may be unfamiliar with peacebuilding practices or hesitant to admit that North Americans need to build peace "in their own backyard";

⇒ Identify substitutes for conventional "Track One" processes for dialogues to orient themselves towards, as well as other relevant targets and mechanisms for transfer;

⇒ Become aware of how dynamics on the ground will impact willingness to engage with the other side;

⇒ Create space in dialogue processes for expressing emotion in spontaneous, "non-neutral" ways;

⇒ Facilitators who involve explicit value systems in their work can experiment with intragroup dialogues among communities who hold the same values, or with intergroup dialogues in collaboration with facilitators who hold different beliefs;

⇒ Develop a more inclusive language within which to conduct dialogue work with polarized groups.

⇒ Leverage new, especially digital, formats (video communications, podcasts, etc.) when designing new dialogue processes.

About the Author

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About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world.

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