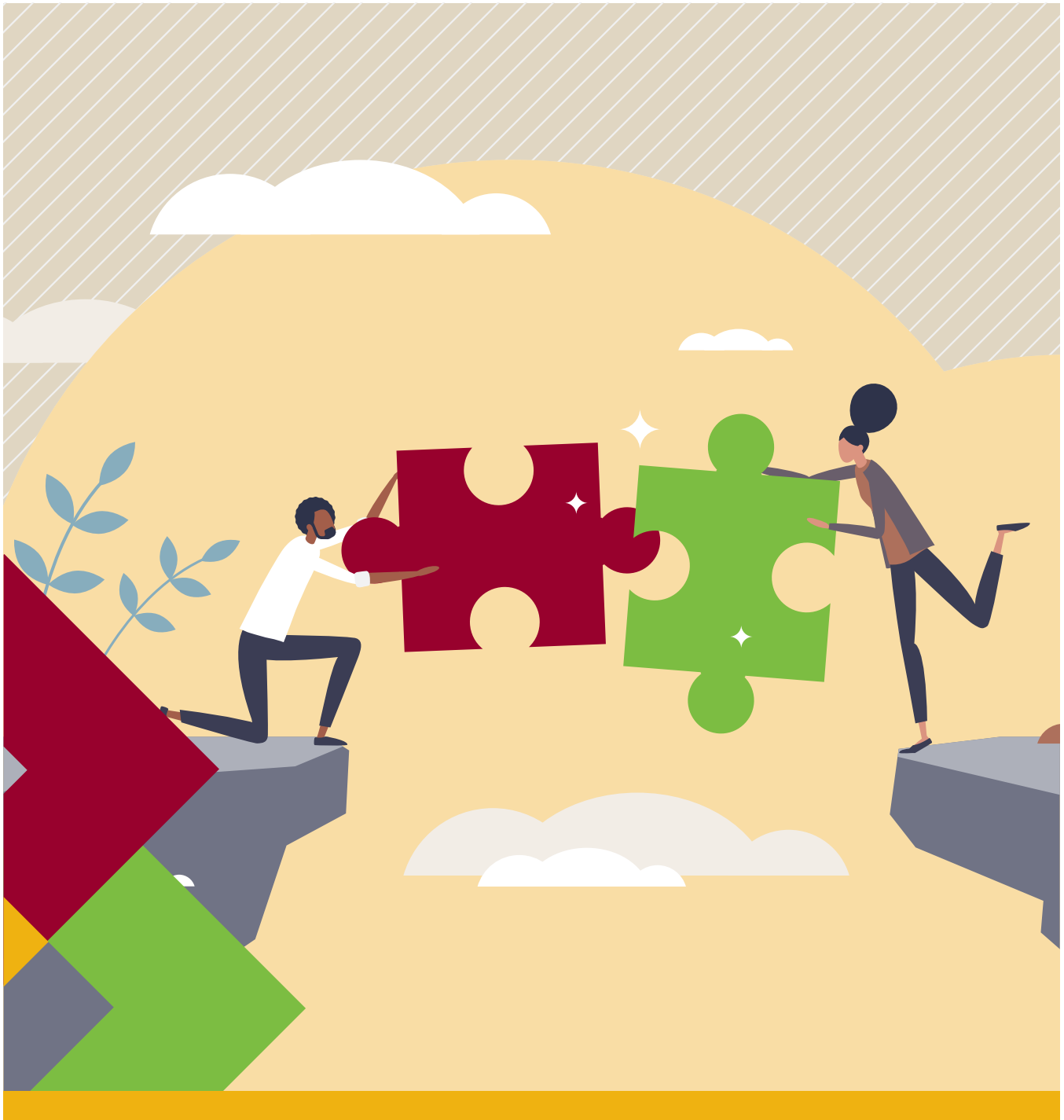


LITERATURE REVIEW

Courageous Dialogues: Moving Beyond Polarization





Researchers: Jennie Barron, Jayme Jones, Andrea Korens, Diana Twiss, Pablo Pastor

Student Researchers: Leeza Perehudoff, Jane Agyeman, Zabir Montazar

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Introduction

Courageous Dialogues: Moving Beyond Polarization is a three-year applied research project being carried out by Selkirk College, Vancouver Community College, and Capilano University. This project is taking place in partnership with Decoda Literacy Solutions, the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL), New Stories, and the Continuing Education & Training Association of British Columbia (CETABC).

The goal of the project is to understand polarization as it is manifesting in our communities and our work in the public and community education sector, and to explore a range of interventions that may be adopted by educators and community development workers to mitigate polarization and facilitate constructive dialogue across divides.

This report summarizes the literature and other media we reviewed in the first year of the project pertaining to the nature of polarization, its causes or drivers, and the capacities, skills, and habits of mind that we, as a society, need to develop to move beyond it.

This report points the way to some already-existing tools we can employ, and suggests others that may yet be developed. For more detail on each of the sources referenced in this review, we refer readers to a pair of annotated bibliographies we have produced in conjunction with this report. Access the project materials here: https://sc.arcabc.ca/innovates_courageous_dialogues.

In the second and third years of the project, we will take a deeper dive into the interventions we have identified, and experiment with them in the contexts where we experience polarization. The goal is to match interventions to the needs and opportunities of each of the partners in the project. To follow or get involved in this work, please contact the Mir Centre for Peace at mircentre@selkirk.ca.

Thank you for reading. We hope you will gain understanding and ideas that will help you in your own efforts to overcome polarization and build greater understanding and social cohesion wherever you live, work, and play.

What is polarization?

Polarization is a complex social dynamic. It occurs when an issue that involves many different people, concerns, and opinions is reduced to two opposing sides – ‘for or against’, ‘us versus them’, ‘good versus evil’. Polarization typically involves an over-simplification of complex social and political problems and a divergence and hardening of beliefs. This means that more people move to one or the other side on an issue and the moderate middle ground starts to shrink or even disappear. The Canadian Digital Democracy Project defines polarization as “the segmenting of society into increasingly isolated and mutually incomprehensible political tribes.”¹

Polarization goes well beyond ordinary disagreement. In fact, it can lead us to avoid debate or consideration of others’ ideas completely. When we believe that we alone hold the truth, we may see differences of opinion, values, and beliefs as threatening and intolerable. These dynamics disrupt effective patterns of home and workplace communication. Instead of navigating difference and making conflict constructive, we allow polarization to create painful divisions that are hard to overcome.

Polarization may occur at the level of the individual or the group where a “gap in ideology, outgroup attitudes, or ingroup identification between parties” occurs.² It may be *ideological* or *issue-based*, wherein “people don’t just disagree, they do so strongly.”³ Alternatively, it may be *identity-based*, also known as *affective* or *social polarization* wherein people hold extreme prejudice or hostile views of one another because of their divergent beliefs.⁴ American political commentator Fareed Zakaria asserts that partisan differences are increasingly seen in moral terms: “People on the other side of the divide are not just wrong and to be argued with. They are immoral and must be muzzled or punished.”⁵

¹ Digital Democracy Project, “DDP Research Memo #3: Polarization and its Discontents,” Public Policy Forum, September 12, 2019, 2, <https://ppforum.ca/articles/ddp-research-memo-3/>.

² Jeffrey Lees and Mina Cikara, “Understanding and Combating Misperceived Polarization,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 376, no. 1822 (February 2021): 2, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2020.0143>.

³ Stephen Bird, Monica Gattinger, and Erick Lachapelle, “On Energy and Climate, We’re Actually Not So Polarized,” *Policy Options*, January 8, 2020, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/january-2020/on-energy-and-climate-were-actually-not-so-polarized/>

⁴ Lees and Cikara, “Misperceived Polarization”; Lilliana Mason, “Ideologues Without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. S1, 2018 (March 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfy005>; Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (Fall 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038>.

⁵ Fareed Zakaria, “The Country is Frighteningly Polarized. This is why,” *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-dont-just-think-the-other-side-is-wrong-anymore--we-think-theyre-immoral/2017/06/15/f218c3e4-5207-11e7-be25-3a519335381c_story.html.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was little evidence to suggest that Canadians were becoming more extreme in their ideological or policy beliefs; however, this may be changing. Crosby argues that ideological extremism has been observed by Canadian security agencies since 2017.⁶ However, it is clear we are becoming more *affectively* polarized (i.e., we dislike each other more).⁷ Researchers assess affective polarization using measures of the *warmth gap* (comparing levels of like/dislike toward ideological allies as compared to opponents); the *affect gap* (which indicates how strongly positive or negative words are associated with a respondent's own group vs with another); and *social distance* (how comfortable respondents would be having someone from a different social group as a friend, neighbour, or in-law).⁸

Polarization creates unhealthy social dynamics and impairs cultural development. Our systems of communication are interrupted by biases and judgements because we blind ourselves to the perspectives of others through the stances we take against them.⁹ As a result, we often lack patience and have a general unwillingness to consider the views of others.¹⁰ Sometimes we enter a mode of fight or flight, because we don't feel safe to approach those with differing views for fear of harm to our personal safety, argument, or "being invalidated, shut down, or ostracized."¹¹

When society experiences intractable conflicts, we frequently dehumanize and demonize the others involved.¹² Samantha Moore-Berg, Boaz Hameiri, and Emile Bruneau cite research from the United States (U.S.) showing that "...on both sides of the ideological spectrum [political partisans] attribute more animalistic traits to political outgroup members and explicitly view political outgroups as less than fully

⁶ Andrew Crosby, "Policing Right-Wing Extremism in Canada: Threat Frames, Ideological Motivation, and Societal Implications," *Surveillance & Society* 19, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v19i3.15007>.

⁷ Eric Merkley, "Polarization Eh? Ideological Divergence and Partisan Sorting in the Canadian Mass Public," May 26, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/cnzer>; Christian Paas-Lang, "Canadians are Polarized, and Intense Party Loyalty Could Be to Blame: Study," *Global News*, September 12, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/5892865/canada-polarization-study/>.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ James Hoggan, *I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean It Up* (New Society Publishers, 2019).

¹⁰ David R. Brubaker, Everett N. Brubaker, Carolyn E. Yoder, and Teresa J. Haase, *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization* (Fortress Press, 2019).

¹¹ Richard C. Harwood, "Civic Virus: Why Polarization is a Misdiagnosis," The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, February 3, 2022: 3, <https://theharwoodinstitute.org/civic-virus-report>.

¹² Sara Davidson, "How to Talk to an Anti-Vaxer," *Life at This Age* (blog), Dec 2, 2021. <https://www.saradavidson.com/blog/2021/11/how-to-talk-to-an-anti-vaxer.html>.

human”; and that “dehumanization is strongly correlated, among both Republicans and Democrats, with support for spiteful activities associated with toxic polarization.”¹³

James Hoggan writes about psychological “inaction and denial cycles” that come with polarization and prevent us from effectively problem-solving together.¹⁴ These include the “advocacy trap” (progressively seeing others as our enemies), cognitive dissonance (holding onto old beliefs because letting go hurts our ego), confirmation bias (finding information to affirm our beliefs), motivated reasoning (ignoring information contradictory to our beliefs), and tribalism (teaming up with some and pulling away from others). When we isolate ourselves in cliques of like-minded communities, we are not only shielded from conflicting views but remain unaware of the reasons, arguments, and evidence supporting those conflicting views.¹⁵ This can lead to sub-optimal decision-making.

While polarization in the U.S. may have reached a new apex with the Trump presidency, Carol Schersten Lahurd notes that it has been steadily increasing for at least 50 years.¹⁶ Historically in Canada, polarization has been noted around issues such as racism on university campuses,¹⁷ climate change,¹⁸ pipelines and the carbon tax,¹⁹ and more recently, various dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁰

What causes polarization?

According to author-scholar David Brubaker of Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, one of the primary drivers of ideological polarization is economic inequality.²¹ This may be because a sense of injustice or unfairness drives discontent,²² or it may derive from insecurity related to economic inequality

¹³ Samantha Moore-Berg, Boaz Hameiri, and Emile Bruneau, “The Prime Psychological Suspects of Toxic Political Polarization,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (August 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.05.001>.

¹⁴ Hoggan, *I’m Right and You’re an Idiot*, 26.

¹⁵ Matthew L. Stanley, Alyssa H. Sinclair, and Paul Seli, “Intellectual Humility and Perceptions of Political Opponents,” *Journal of Personality* 88, no. 6 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12566>.

¹⁶ Carol Schersten LaHurd, “Fifty Years of American Polarization and the Changing Roles of Faith Communities,” *Q* 57, no. 1 (March 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12373>.

¹⁷ Frances Henry and Carol Tator, “Racism in the University,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 26, no. 3 (1994).

¹⁸ Hoggan, *I’m Right and You’re an Idiot*; Tzaporah Berman, “Listen to Learn: We Need to Stop Choosing Sides and Start Choosing Progress,” *Alternatives Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2016).

¹⁹ Bird, Gattinger, and Lachapelle, “We’re Actually Not So Polarized.”

²⁰ Timothy Caulfield, Tania Bubela, Jonathan Kimmelman, and Vardit Ravitsky, “Let’s Do Better: Public Representations of COVID-19 Science,” *FACETS* 6 (March 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0018>.

²¹ Brubaker et al., *When the Center Does Not Hold*.

²² John Wood Jr., interview with Steven Pinker, May 26, 2021, in “Cancel Culture, Communication, & the Quest for Humanism,” *Braver Angels*, podcast, MPEG-4 video, 58:46, https://youtu.be/QxkU_Rsgn8c.

when our fortunes appear to be changing. Research by the Canadian Digital Democracy Project shows that nativist (anti-immigrant) sentiments in Canada are highest among those who feel the economy, or their personal finances, are getting worse.²³ Economic inequality and social class also produce very different life experiences and worldviews, as do differences in geography, race, gender, ethnic origin, and sexual orientation.²⁴ Sean Speer & Peter Loewen suggest that Canadians may perceive socio-economic issues differently depending on their geographic location (i.e., urban vs. rural) and that a "spike in regional alienation" can contribute to polarization.²⁵ They note "a growing sense that different groups and places have distorted perceptions of one another's circumstances and perspectives" and they suggest that public policy can be used to combat this phenomenon through the reduction of inequalities (e.g., investment and opportunity in rural and low-income communities).²⁶

Social and geographic sorting – wherein people socialize, or even locate their homes, exclusively among those who live and think like them – can also drive affective polarization. Such sorting is often economically driven since property values tend to be similar within neighbourhoods, and social circles are often career related. Political or partisan sorting may follow. Researcher Eric Merkley notes that this raises concerns about "biased information processing, heightened demand for partisan news, more social distance or alienation between partisan groups, and perhaps more contentious political discourse."²⁷

Identity and threats to identity constitute another key driver of polarization. Scholar Rebecca Saxe of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology explains that identities are "an act of imagination" and at any point, any single dimension of identity can be the basis for connecting with others, or not.²⁸ She argues that while our proclivity to innately care for those close to us is laudable, it can also lead to parochialism – caring only, or preferentially, about those we consider part of our own communities.

Whereas in a healthy social system we might agree with certain people on some issues but disagree or debate with them on others,²⁹ in a polarizing system, Brubaker argues that we may take sides "based on pre-existing affiliations rather than on a process of discernment".³⁰ In other words, we form tribes,

²³ Digital Democracy Project, "DDP Research Memo #4: Talking Past Each Other on Immigration," Public Policy Forum, September 26, 2019, <https://ppforum.ca/articles/ddp-research-memo-4/>.

²⁴ LaHurd, "Fifty Years of American Polarization."

²⁵ Sean Speer and Peter Loewen, "Perceptions and Polarization: Measuring the Perception Gap Between Urban and Rural Canadians," Public Policy Forum, February 2, 2021: 4, <https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PPF-Perceptions-and-Polarization-Measuring-the-Perception-Gap-2021-EN.pdf>.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ Merkley, "Ideological Divergence," 15.

²⁸ Rebecca Saxe, "The Psychology of Tribalism," interview by Steve Paikin, *The Agenda*, TVO Today, February 1, 2018, video, <https://www.tvo.org/video/the-psychology-of-tribalism>.

²⁹ Lees and Cikara, "Misperceived Polarization."

³⁰ Brubaker et al., *When the Center Does Not Hold*, 121.

camp, or team, and our drive to belong to the tribe or team comes to shape what we think. Consequently, Canadian scholar David Berreby notes that polarization has less to do with factuality and more to do with “what you’re signaling to other people about who you are.”³¹

Political scientist Lilliana Mason of Johns Hopkins University agrees, saying that “the ideological roots of...polarization are largely based in our social attachments to ideological labels, not...to thoughtful collections of opinions.”³² Likewise, Merkley cites U.S. research indicating that that people will change their beliefs or positions on policy issues to bring them in line with their partisan preferences more often than the other way around; their identity as a Republican or Democrat comes first.³³ His own research finds the same to be true of Canadians, though we are less likely to do so when it comes to immigration, same-sex marriage, and income inequality. Consequently, it is not surprising that maintaining a sense of belonging often requires that we suppress any doubts or disagreements we may have, because challenging the orthodoxy of ‘our side’ may bring social disapproval.

Mason noted in 2018 that affective polarization was occurring in spite of relatively low levels of disagreement on social and political issues that had remained more or less unchanged for decades.³⁴ This was very much apparent in Donald Trump’s “post-ideological” campaign, which was “relatively devoid of coherent policy prescriptions.”³⁵ Mason attributes “value-free” social distance more to a sense of inclusion/exclusion and finds that it is “the ‘otherness’ of ideological opponents, more than issue-based disagreement, that drives liberal-versus-conservative rancor.”³⁶ She cites Achen and Bartels who argue that “identities are not primarily about adherence to a group ideology or creed. They are emotional attachments that transcend thinking.”³⁷

The media are another driver of polarization. Author and veteran journalist Matt Taibbi describes how American news journalism has moved from ostensible objectivity – an illusory objectivity, given the ubiquitous biases and subjectivity inherent in curating, reporting, editing and presenting the news – towards a business model based on addiction, profit-seeking, and consumer ratings.³⁸ The media today, says Taibbi, cultivate audiences that accept and expect journalists to openly cheer for one political side or the other, something that would have been seen as anathema even two decades ago. Francesca Polletta

³¹ David Berreby, panelist, “The Psychology of Tribalism,” *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, posted February 1, 2018, on TVO Today, <https://www.tvo.org/video/the-psychology-of-tribalism>.

³² Mason, “Ideological Identities,” 885.

³³ Merkley, “Ideological Divergence.”

³⁴ Mason, “Ideological Identities.”

³⁵ *ibid.*, 867.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*, 869.

³⁸ Matt Taibbi, *Hate Inc: Why Today’s Media Makes Us Despise One Another* (OR Books, 2019).

and Jessica Callahan point out the pedagogical role political commentators across the political spectrum have taken in instructing viewers how to interpret the news, thus replacing conversation among real people, which has become more and more fraught for those on right and left alike.³⁹ Polletta & Callahan cite literature showing how rumours produce solidarity and group identity while encouraging people to engage in “blunt expressions of anger.”⁴⁰ They write,

When we see the options only as people being duped by Fox News or speaking from their lived experience...[w]e miss the fact that people often interpret outrageous stories as evidence of a broader phenomenon; that stories about the way the world used to be often conflate history and nostalgia; that people’s relationship to media commentators affects what they take from the stories they hear; and that stories may have political impact less by persuading than by reminding people which side they are on.⁴¹

Fortunately for us in Canada, the Public Policy Forum’s Digital Democracy Project at McGill University finds that very few Canadians get most of their news from “partisan-congenial” sources.⁴²

With regard to social media, while it might seem to be driving polarization, scholars suggest the relationship is more complex. Dutton asserts that “panic over fake news, echo chambers and filter bubbles is exaggerated, and not supported by the evidence from users across seven countries.”⁴³ Similarly, in 2019, the Digital Democracy Project found that Canadian Twitter users *do* create ‘filter bubbles’ for themselves, but these echo chambers do not extend far beyond that platform.⁴⁴ Media are then better understood not as drivers but as “electronic accelerators” of polarization,⁴⁵ with increasing incentive to amplify divisions.⁴⁶

³⁹ Francesca Polletta and Jessica Callahan, “Deep Stories, Nostalgia Narratives, and Fake News: Storytelling in the Trump Era,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5 (July 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-017-0037-7>.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 12.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 14.

⁴² Digital Democracy Project. “Talking Past Each Other.”

⁴³ William H. Dutton, “Fake News, Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: Underresearched and Overhyped,” *The Conversation* (Canadian edition), May 5, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/fake-news-echo-chambers-and-filter-bubbles-underresearched-and-overhyped-76688>.

⁴⁴ Digital Democracy Project. “Talking Past Each Other.”

⁴⁵ Brubaker et al., *When the Center Does Not Hold*, 21.

⁴⁶ Anne E. Wilson, Victoria A. Parker, and Matthew Feinberg, “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape,” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 43 (August 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.07.005>.

Everyday communication can drive division because of the polarizing limits of language.⁴⁷ Polarization can also be driven by the emotions and values we emphasize when framing an issue. Our framings can contribute to hateful and divisive messages or can help people to create new opinions and beliefs.⁴⁸ While the stories we tell have the power to “reinforce collective identities and ‘us vs them’ binary thinking,”⁴⁹ we can challenge ourselves to tell stories that acknowledge both our blind spots and the validity of others’ viewpoints.⁵⁰ We can tell stories that have no ‘them’ – only ‘us’.

Political leaders can and do drive polarization, as recent examples from around the world attest (e.g., in India, Poland, Brazil, Turkey, and the U.S.)⁵¹ Politicians run campaigns that attack opponents and reinforce biases held by partisans on both sides.⁵² Opposition leaders also make flames, as well as responding with antidemocratic and confrontational tactics of their own.⁵³ Still, Brubaker notes that “countries do not elect highly polarizing leaders unless they are in a highly polarized, or desperate, state.”⁵⁴ Leaders give voice to grievances and capitalize on divisions that serve their interests: “*Threat* is...the necessary precondition, and *fear* is the mechanism that polarizing leaders employ to seize power.”⁵⁵

Finally, the U.S.-based Harwood Institute has carried out research that shows that social and psychological conditions are more impactful than ideological differences as drivers of polarization.⁵⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated feelings of anxiety, anger, fear, confusion, isolation, loss of control, helplessness, and hopelessness. Anne Wilson, a scholar at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, notes that “our tendency to hunker down increases under situations of threat...It’s when we are under threat that we go to the tribe.”⁵⁷

In sum, the roots of polarization are many, and issues of equity and identity figure large in the dynamic.

⁴⁷ Brubaker et al., *When the Center Does Not Hold*.

⁴⁸ Hoggan, *I’m Right and You’re an Idiot*.

⁴⁹ Polletta and Callahan, “Deep Stories,” 11.

⁵⁰ Hoggan, *I’m Right and You’re an Idiot*.

⁵¹ Harwood, “Civic Virus”; Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, “How to Understand the Global Spread of Political Polarization,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 1, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/01/how-to-understand-global-spread-of-political-polarization-pub-79893>.

⁵² Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology.”

⁵³ Carothers and O’Donohue, “Global Spread of Political Polarization.”

⁵⁴ Brubaker et al., *When the Center Does Not Hold*, 24.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Harwood, “Civic Virus.”

⁵⁷ Anne Wilson, “The Psychology of Tribalism,” interview by Steve Paikin, *The Agenda*, TVO Today, February 1, 2018, video, <https://www.tvo.org/video/the-psychology-of-tribalism>.

What capacities are needed to transcend polarization?

Reversing polarization is no small task; it will likely require de-polarizing political leadership and making institutional reforms in the political and legal/judicial realms.⁵⁸ In the socio-cultural realm, to arrest the deterioration of public discourse, we must look not to political leaders, but to the “mediating institutions” that occupy the middle ground between the individual and the state – namely, family, community, and civil society.⁵⁹

Within civil society, there are many organizations and institutions dedicated to education – public schools, post-secondary institutions, libraries, alliances for literacy. Each provides supports for learners to help them move to higher levels of competence in facing life’s tasks in all their complexity. A system that supports individuals moving to progressively higher levels of independent functioning is one that can scaffold learning, such that foundational pieces are laid down first and built upon thoughtfully with the goal of arriving at what Inglis & Steele call “complexity intelligence” – an integration of reasoning ability, emotional maturity and social cognition.⁶⁰ All are needed to overcome polarization.

Such a system also allows for what Commons & Goodheart call “downward assimilation” of new norms and patterns of behaviour, spreading from originators through a population via language – e.g., “rhymes, poetry, songs, writing, manuscripts, libraries, books, printing, news media, broad access to education, higher education, computers, and the Internet.”⁶¹ Transcending polarization requires cultural support for capacity-building at all levels of informal and formal education. There is a great array of specific capacities we can nurture and build.

To bridge our divides, Jonathan Haidt recommends finding opportunities for positive interactions with the ‘other’ and cultivating empathy, while seeking understanding of the underlying moral dimensions behind a conflict.⁶² Featherstone also calls for radical empathy and reminds us that expanding our empathy can reduce self-righteous behaviour that pits us against others in an ‘us-versus-them’

⁵⁸ Carothers and O’Donohue, “Global Spread of Political Polarization.”

⁵⁹ Levin, as cited in Brubaker et al., *When the Center Does Not Hold*, 25.

⁶⁰ Jan Inglis and Margaret Steele, “Complexity Intelligence and Cultural Coaching: Navigating the Gap Between Our Societal Challenges and Our Capacities,” *Integral Review* 1 (2005), https://integral-review.org/issues/issue_1_inglis_and_steele_complexity_intelligence_and_cultural_coaching.pdf.

⁶¹ Michael Lampion Commons and Eric Andrew Goodheart, “Cultural Progress is the Result of Developmental Level of Support,” *The Journal of New Paradigm Research* 64, no. 5-7 (2008): 412, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02604020802301360>.

⁶² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Vintage, 2012).

dynamic.⁶³ We can “[look] at disagreements on a continuum, and [place] ourselves on that continuum along with others... [Empathy] helps us to argue more agreeably, protecting our relationships in a polarized and polarizing society.”⁶⁴

Empathy may help us overcome false polarization - which Tim Kenyon defines as an “interpersonal bias on judgement, the effect of which is to lead people in contexts of disagreement to overestimate the differences between their respective views.”⁶⁵ Kenyon argues that both polarized beliefs and a false perception of polarization can reduce the chance of finding common ground and engaging in productive discussion.⁶⁶ False polarization can occur when we see others as biased, dishonest, or coy (not coming out and articulating extreme views).⁶⁷ To counter false polarization Kenyon suggests emphasizing “the judgement, rather than the agent.”⁶⁸

Another important capacity is that of intellectual humility.⁶⁹ When we are in conflict with someone, we might think that a simple fix is an exchange of facts (i.e., that we just need to share what we know and/or negotiate). As Rebecca Saxe says, “It’s much harder for people to take seriously the possibility that we can, in really good faith, have different perspectives on the same situation. So, we ...[write them off as crazy and] suppress [them].”⁷⁰ The alternative is to cultivate intellectual humility, defined by Tenelle Porter & Karina Schumann as “a willingness to recognize the limits of one’s knowledge and appreciate others’ intellectual strengths” – and to relate it to openness to contrary viewpoints, particularly in socio-politically charged discussions.⁷¹ Stanley, Sinclair and Seli define it more simply as “the recognition that personal beliefs might be wrong.”⁷² They describe high intellectual humility manifesting as even-handed,

⁶³ Liza Featherstone, “We’re All Crazy in Someone Else’s Eyes,” *The New Republic*, January 27, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/165167/were-crazy-someone-elses-eyes>.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Tim Kenyon, “False Polarization: Debiasing as Applied Social Epistemology,” *Synthese* 191 (March 2014): 2529, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-014-0438-x>.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 2530.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 2531.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 2534.

⁶⁹ Harwood, “Civic Virus”; Stanley, Sinclair, and Seli, “Intellectual Humility”; Julia Dhar, “How to Disagree Productively and Find Common Ground,” filmed November 19, 2018 in Toronto, TED video, 14:47, https://www.ted.com/talks/julia_dhar_how_to_disagree_productively_and_find_common_ground#t723531; Tenelle Porter and Karina Schumann, “Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View,” *Self and Identity* 17, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2017.1361861>.

⁷⁰ Saxe, “Psychology of Tribalism.”

⁷¹ Porter and Schumann, “Intellectual Humility,” 140.

⁷² Stanley, Sinclair, and Seli, “Intellectual Humility,” 2.

extensive deliberation over the strength of evidence for factual claims along with an interest in listening to the reasons and arguments that favor opposing views.⁷³

Porter & Schumann report on an experimental study in which researchers primed participants with the idea that a growth mindset is a path to higher intelligence, to see if that could motivate them to inquire and interact with greater humility.⁷⁴ The researchers observed higher IH scores, more respectful attributions by participants (i.e., reasoning about why others might disagree), and more openness to opposing ideas. They concluded that intellectual humility can be enhanced by reducing people's motivation to be 'right' or intellectually superior to others. Stanley, Sinclair and Seli conclude by saying that "promoting intellectual humility as an epistemic virtue worth cultivating and informing the public about research on intellectual humility has the potential to reduce social extremism, polarization, and the frequency of unresolvable disagreements over time."⁷⁵

In addition to social influences on behaviour, another principal mechanism that underlies group polarization is our limited "argument pools" and the directions in which those limited pools lead group members.⁷⁶ Consequently, Cass Sunstein suggests that we need to structure processes of deliberation so as to ensure that people are exposed, not to softer or louder echoes of their own voices, but to a range of reasonable alternatives.

This aligns with the call of many thinkers to revive a culture of free speech and pluralism. Author David French suggests that divisions in social discourse and the cultural changes that are feeding polarization can be mitigated with a re-boot of the idea of pluralism, both to prevent oppressive factions from seizing control, and to restore a culture of kindness, decency, tolerance, and grace.⁷⁷ In a similar way, Irshad Manji calls for an embrace of moral courage so we may "learn how to transform high defences about 'the Other' and low expectations of ourselves into the opposite—higher expectations of ourselves and lower defences about 'the Other'."⁷⁸ Speaking as one of the faithful to a largely Muslim audience, she says that we need gutsy thinking: "Muslims and non-Muslims who live in democracies have to develop the spine to expand individual liberty, not stunt it, because without the freedom to think and express there can be no integrity—of the self or society."⁷⁹ Manji advocates pluralism that does not devolve into relativism – falling for anything because we stand for nothing. She says that Muslims must not give in to fearfully

⁷³ *ibid.*, citing Deffler, Leary, & Hoyle, 2016; Leary et al., 2017; and Porter & Schumann, 2018.

⁷⁴ Porter and Schumann, "Intellectual Humility". The concept of the growth mindset comes from Carol Dweck.

⁷⁵ Stanley, Sinclair, and Seli, "Intellectual Humility," 34.

⁷⁶ Cass R. Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," University of Chicago Law School, John M. Olin Law & Economics Working Paper no. 91, December 7, 1999, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.199668>.

⁷⁷ David French, *Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation* (Macmillan, 2020).

⁷⁸ Irshad Manji, *Allah, Liberty & Love* (Random House Canada, 2011), 17.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 15.

thinking that “questions only make matters worse, especially in an already polarized environment.”⁸⁰ She suggests that Muslims must instead break with dogma and conformity and become more open about expressing the diverse “palette of views” they already hold.

Are there tools and methods that can help us overcome polarization?

In addition to *capacities*, which are broad and pervasive skills, attitudes, and orientations – essentially ways of *being* that we wish to cultivate – we can employ more concrete interventions – *tools* and *methods* – to help overcome polarization.

Renowned conflict-resolution expert William Ury teaches negotiation in three steps, beginning with pausing and consciously “observing, not participating.”⁸¹ By slowing down and putting aside our own moral certainty and judgement, we are less likely to push someone away. Ury calls the second step “building a golden bridge” – making it as easy as possible for them to take a step in the direction you’d like. This step is about listening with intention and creating space for vulnerability. The last step is activating what Ury calls “the third side” – the larger community, extended family, colleagues and friends who have the power to help de-escalate and transform a conflict when two parties alone cannot. Ury’s process involves “reaching out to someone [we] disagree with... someone who disagrees with [us] on fundamental things”. Once we put ourselves in their shoes, Ury says we must “listen with curiosity, openness, and compassion.” He suggests that it's not about outcome, it's about process. “If we focus on outcome, we'll be disappointed. But if we focus on process, we see how impossible situations can shift.”⁸²

Another approach is to become aware of and correct our cognitive distortions or biases – e.g., *confirmation bias*, in which we tend to find or notice information that confirms what we already believe, and *disconfirmation bias* (aka ‘motivated skepticism’) in which we spend more time attending to discrepant information, scrutinizing it, and generating arguments to refute it. Through disconfirmation bias, we become more critical of information we dislike than of information that confirms our beliefs.

Miguel Alejandro Silan argues that individuals who are more politically sophisticated, liberals and conservatives alike, are more prone to cognitive distortions (and subsequent attitudinal polarization) because they have the cognitive capacity and knowledge resources to defend their existing beliefs.⁸³ Jonathan Haidt agrees that intelligence only improves our ability to argue our own position, but he

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 199.

⁸¹ Davidson, “How to Talk to an Anti-Vaxer.”

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Miguel Alejandro Silan, “Debiasing and Political Polarization,” University of the Philippines Diliman, December 2017, unpublished paper.

believes that diversity of perspective, under conditions that allow for respectful collaboration, is the path towards true truth-finding.⁸⁴ Silan suggests trying to reframe issues by appealing to the moral foundations and values of the listener (i.e., opponent).⁸⁵ It is possible, he says, to change behaviours without necessarily changing attitudes, morality or identity. He calls for humanization and dialogue that seeks human connection without any goal of persuasion.

Gilberto Montibeller & Detlof von Winterfeldt write about biases and debiasing techniques that are relevant to group polarization in the context of decision-making and risk analysis.⁸⁶ In addition to confirmation and disconfirmation biases, these include affect-influenced bias (“an emotional predisposition for, or against, a specific outcome or option that taints judgements”); optimism bias (occurring when “the desirability of an outcome leads to an increase in the extent to which it is expected to occur”); and its opposite, pessimism bias (occurring when there is “a desire to be cautious, prudent, or conservative in estimates that may be related to harmful consequences”). Confirmation bias can be countered by “challeng[ing] probability assessments with counterfactuals” and “prob[ing] for evidence of alternative hypotheses.” Affect-influenced bias can be countered by avoiding “loaded descriptions of consequences.”⁸⁷ De-biasing strategies also involve referring to multiple experts with alternative points of view - for instance, curating news and other reading from politically diverse sources.

Another tool for conscious debiasing is “dialogue journalism”. Eve Pearlman reports on a project in which she and a fellow journalist brought together U.S. citizens on opposite sides of deep socio-political divides - 25 liberals from California and 25 conservatives from Alabama - to talk about contentious issues in a closed Facebook group for one month.⁸⁸ The journalists started by asking participants what they thought the ‘other side’ thought of them; participants began to see the “simplistic and often mean-spirited caricatures they carry.” People came to the conversations with anger but in the end were glad and relieved at the chance to put down their arms and were grateful for the opportunity. Pearlman reports that it was “difficult and challenging work” to “listen around and through our own habits of minds and biases.” Qualities and practices that helped were restraint, self-awareness, curiosity, and an emphasis on discussion, not debate.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Haidt, “The Righteous Mind.”

⁸⁵ Silan, “Debiasing.”

⁸⁶ Gilberto Montibeller and Detlof von Winterfeldt, “Cognitive and Motivational Biases in Decision and Risk Analysis,” *Risk Analysis* 35, no. 7 (April 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.12360>.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 1235.

⁸⁸ Eve Pearlman, “How to Lead a Conversation Between People Who Disagree,” filmed January 16, 2019 in Doha, TED video, 9:00, https://www.ted.com/talks/eve_pearlman_how_to_lead_a_conversation_between_people_who_disagree?language=en

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

Beyond debiasing, there are other cognitive skills we can teach for holding opposing truths in mind and dealing with ambiguity. Specific cognitive skills include recognizing propaganda, scapegoating, and issue framing. In the realm of interpersonal communication, we can cultivate skills of conflict transformation. Commonly taught conflict-resolution techniques include teaching people to recognize the difference between positions and interests in order to find “win-win” solutions. William Ury, the master of the “win-win” solution, also suggests a kind of facilitated dialogue in which people who are adversaries on a polarized issue are asked “to tell a story about themselves, [and] to talk about what activated them to come into the public square” as a means of beginning to find common ground.⁹⁰

Emotionally intelligent relationship-building may also hold a powerful key to overcoming polarization.

While it has become common to “call out” (i.e., publicly shame) persons in high positions of power for egregious behaviour such as sexual abuse and racist harassment, the use of such tactics comes at great cost to interpersonal relationships and does little to build bridges or foster understanding. Black feminist scholar and activist Loretta J. Ross suggests that instead of calling out, we “call in” those with whom we care to continue in relationship.⁹¹ Calling in occurs privately and respectfully, rather like an act of love, and involves three components: conversation, compassion, and context. It does not condone or ignore the harm, slight, or damage caused by insensitive behaviour or language. Instead, it sees such instances as opportunities for growth and leverages the power of caring relationships to bring about change.

Nisha Anand also knows a lot about intelligent relationship-building from her experience bridging divides in the realms of criminal justice reform and peacebuilding. In an inspiring TEDx talk in 2020, she speaks of the power that can be generated when we are brave enough to reach across the aisle; large-scale change requires broad-based movements, after all.⁹² Anand says we need to love those people who might not love us back. Our goal should be to find our shared humanity, our ability to be there together with each other in shared space - physical, civic, and political – to steward the commons - those resources we inherit and create together.

Canadian environmentalist Tzeporah Berman has done exactly that. An ardent defender of forests, she has become a leader in inclusive climate activism built on listening to everyone. We need the ability, she says, to talk to “engineers and boiler makers in the oilsands...[we need] energy incumbents, big oil, gas and coal executives turning their formidable minds to driving investment capital...to low-carbon

⁹⁰ Davidson, “How to Talk to an Anti-Vaxer”.

⁹¹ Loretta J. Ross, “Don’t Call People Out – Call Them In,” filmed August 4, 2021, in Monterey, California, TED video, 13:56, https://www.ted.com/talks/loretta_j_ross_don_t_call_people_out_call_them_in.

⁹² Nisha Anand, “The Radical Act of Choosing Common Ground,” filmed March 16, 2020 in Berkeley, California, TED video, 15:49, https://www.ted.com/talks/nisha_anand_the_radical_act_of_choosing_common_ground_mar_2020.

infrastructure.”⁹³ Sadly, we are choosing sides before the conversation has even begun. Berman reminds us that there are “good people everywhere – good people who sometimes make bad decisions.” To make better decisions, we need to give each other a little credit. That starts, she says, with listening.⁹⁴

Deep listening is also the basis for the idea of *deep canvassing*.⁹⁵ Developed by LGBTQ rights organizer, Dave Fleischer, deep canvassing is a door-to-door technique that uses a mixture of “active, effortful processing... [and] perspective-taking [or] imagining the world from another’s vantage point” to help transform prejudices.⁹⁶ Canvassers first ask residents for their opinions on a subject like trans rights or irregular immigration and then really listen to their answers. Canvassers then ask residents to recall a time when they were discriminated against, or when someone showed them compassion when they really needed it. Canvassers help residents connect their existing values and the positions that canvassers hope they will support. Political scientists David Broockman and Josh Kalla say that the process of exchanging narratives and having a truly non-judgmental, two-way conversation helps participants feel safe and understood, while giving space for them to come to their own conclusions.⁹⁷

Another category of approaches is related to collaboration. This includes the conditions we create to make collaboration more possible and the spaces and practices we cultivate to work across divides.

Harwood urges us to give thought to how we might consciously and deliberately construct community spaces where people can “come together across real and perceived differences. These spaces must be safe, where people feel able to express themselves, especially views that may not be fully formed.”⁹⁸ Conversations that start with shared aspirations can lead to united actions, like working together on community projects that help us bridge our divides.

Where those divides are not incidental but central to the work at hand, Adam Kahane advocates “stretch collaboration.”⁹⁹ Where conventional collaboration assumes agreement on the problem/solution and requires a controlled execution of the plan, “stretch collaboration” requires that we abandon ideals of consensus and control and embrace the messiness of diverse truths. Stretch collaboration requires us to accept and appreciate the connection and the discord amongst the group; to experimentally test

⁹³ Berman, “Listen to Learn.”

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ David Broockman and Joshua Kalla, “Durably Reducing Transphobia: A Field Experiment on Door-to-Door Canvassing,” *Science* 352, no. 6282 (April 2016): 220, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aad9713>.

⁹⁶ Brian Resnick, “How to Talk Someone Out of Bigotry,” *Vox*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing>

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Harwood, “Civic Virus,” 58.

⁹⁹ Adam Kahane, *Collaborating With the Enemy: How to Work With People You Don’t Agree With or Like or Trust* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017).

possibilities together; and to abandon ideas of how others must change and instead invest ourselves fully, with an openness to be changed. To work with people we don't "agree with, like or trust," Kahane says we must be prepared to act even in the absence of agreement.¹⁰⁰ This means "crossing the river by feeling for stones," testing small steps and framing mistakes as learning experiences.¹⁰¹ Skills required for stretch collaboration include listening with intention, being curious and unflinchingly self-reflective, and embracing our fallibility, remembering that we are all "practicing being human, together."¹⁰²

Kahane also argues that transformative facilitation is what is needed for groups that are stuck to move forward together.¹⁰³ Transformative facilitation is a dance between vertical facilitation (organized hierarchically, relying on expertise and authority) and horizontal facilitation (organized equally, relying on autonomy and variety). Kahane suggests there are five questions that all collaborations must address in order to move forward together:

- 1) How do we see our situation?
- 2) How do we define success?
- 3) How do we get from here to there?
- 4) How do we decide who does what?
- 5) How do we understand our role?

By paying attention to the needs of the group while answering these questions, the facilitator cycles back and forth between five pairs of "outer moves" (between them and the group) and five "inner shifts" (internal to the facilitator). Coinciding with each of the collaborative questions, the outer moves are inquiring/advocating, advancing/concluding, discovering/mapping, accompanying/directing, and standing inside the group/standing outside the group. The facilitator simultaneously makes internal shifts: opening up, discerning, adapting, serving, and partnering. This helps the collaborating group move forward together while navigating barriers and polarization. It also removes the obstacles to love, power, and justice:

Love is the drive towards unity that in a collaboration manifests as connection among the participants and between them and their situation. Power is the drive towards self-realization that manifests as the contributions that participants make to their collaborative work and to their situation. Justice is the structure that enables and directs love and power and that manifests as equity within the group and, through their work in the situation.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰³ Adam Kahane, *Facilitating Breakthrough: How to Remove Obstacles, Bridge Differences, and Move Forward Together* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021).

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 144.

As a helpful complement to any effort at collaboration across divides, we may question our perceptions of polarization itself. Anne Wilson, a scholar at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, asserts that we are actually getting less tribal in some ways (e.g., around racial integration, religious pluralism).¹⁰⁵ Some of our sense that polarization is increasing is imagined; people overestimate how different they are from people on the ‘other’ side. On the issues that are most important to us (e.g., racism, free speech) we often assume that everyone on the other side holds the most extreme version of the belief we feel runs counter to our own. In reality, there is only a small percentage of people on both sides that agree with those ideas. “We often end up disliking people not because of what they actually believe, but because of what we think they believe.”¹⁰⁶

Similarly, research by Moore-Berg, Hameiri & Bruneau notes that we often over-estimate how different we are from other people, how extreme ‘they’ are, and how much ‘they’ hate ‘us’.¹⁰⁷ Sadly, these meta-perceptions (inaccurate intergroup beliefs) can reinforce a cycle of *misperceived* polarization and lead to *actual* polarization.¹⁰⁸ This may be “particularly evident for vivid, extreme, and egregious opponent positions that characterize the worst of the other side, and less pronounced for more mundane policy views.”¹⁰⁹ Wilson & her co-authors argue that the incentive to amplify polarization is increasing “among political elites, partisan media, and social media.”¹¹⁰ Feedback loops are reinforced by three things: cognitive dissonance, distrust and avoidance of those with opposing views, and the selection of and reward for those who “express extreme and outrageous views.”¹¹¹ However, research shows that meta-perceptions are “reliably exaggerated and demonstrably false” so they may be “susceptible to correction.”¹¹²

To overcome our biases and fears, many people see real promise in dialogue. Canadian climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe urges us to start conversations by asking ourselves what we might have in common with those who disagree with us.¹¹³ If we don’t know, we can begin by asking them. Hayhoe draws from cognitive psychology by suggesting that sharing our lived experiences is more important than sharing

¹⁰⁵ Wilson, “Psychology of Tribalism.”

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, “Psychology of Tribalism.”

¹⁰⁷ Moore-Berg, Hameiri, and Bruneau, “Toxic Political Polarization.”

¹⁰⁸ Lees, and Cikara, “Misperceived Polarization,”

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, Parker, and Feinberg, “Political and Media Landscape,” 6.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 7.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 13.

¹¹² Moore-Berg, Hameiri, and Bruneau, “Toxic Political Polarization,” 5.

¹¹³ Katherine Hayhoe, *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World* (One Signal Publishers, 2021).

facts. Once we know what we each care about, we can articulate issues to the others' values. The language of values, rather than opinions, can be helpful.¹¹⁴

Julia Dhar suggests, somewhat counter-intuitively, we can find common ground by re-learning the art of respectful face-to-face debate.¹¹⁵ She says that "people who disagree the most productively start by finding...the thing that we can all agree on and go from there." By creating a shared reality, they provide a platform to talk about conflict and create an antidote to "alternative facts."¹¹⁶

Changing other people's views of issues, or of us as perceived adversaries, is not straightforward or easy. This can be attested to by anyone who has tried to change the minds of online forum participants. In fact, Christopher Bail and his co-authors found that introducing American partisan Twitter users to opposing views (as presented by bots) might be "not only ineffective but counterproductive—particularly if such interventions are initiated by liberals."¹¹⁷

There is, however, some support for the idea that direct face-to-face encounter may decrease polarization. Dhar points to research that shows that the sound of the human voice is literally humanizing.¹¹⁸ Face-to-face encounters can also help us separate our ideas from our identities and create a shared reality. While Elizabeth Lesser suggests we take the 'other' to lunch, others caution that there must be longer and more carefully structured processes of relationship-building, not just one-off conversation.¹¹⁹

When it comes to facilitating community dialogue around contentious issues, numerous practical guides already exist.

Canadian author Paul Born is an expert in community engagement, poverty reduction, and collaboration. His 2012 best-seller, *Community Conversations*, offers practical techniques for building community by

¹¹⁴ Hoggan, *I'm Right and You're an Idiot*.

¹¹⁵ Dhar, "Disagree Productively."

¹¹⁶ *ibid*.

¹¹⁷ Christopher A. Bail, Lisa P. Argyle, Taylor W. Brown, and Alexander Volfovsky, "Exposure to Opposing Views On Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 115, no. 37 (August 2018): 9920, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>.

¹¹⁸ Dhar, "Disagree Productively."

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Lesser, "Take 'the Other' to Lunch", filmed December 15, 2010, TED video, 10:40, https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_lesser_take_the_other_to_lunch; Jan Inglis, "'Holistic Democracy' and Citizen Motivation to Use a More Holistic Approach to Public Decision-Making," *Integral Review* 72, no. 2 (October 2011), https://www.integral-review.org/issues/vol_7_no_2_inglis_holistic_democracy_and_citizen_motivation.pdf.

bringing together a diverse array of people to define and work towards common goals.¹²⁰ Born explores the four building blocks of great community conversations: conversing, engaging, collaborating, and casting a vision. For example, in the section on “conversing,” Born discusses the nature of dialogue and the need to suspend our assumptions. In the second part of the book, ten stories of community conversations illustrate the techniques involved. Examples include Conversation Cafés, Open Space conversations, Peer to Peer Conversations, and Appreciative Inquiries.

Ken Cloke is an internationally recognized mediator and prolific author in the field of conflict resolution. His 2018 book, [*Politics, Dialogue and the Evolution of Democracy: How to Discuss Race, Abortion, Immigration, Gun Control, Climate Change, Same Sex Marriage and other Hot Topics*](#) is an expert manual in transforming conflicts and advancing democracy.¹²¹ It offers excellent techniques for designing, organizing, and facilitating effective dialogues on hot political topics.

For those looking for immediate, practical steps they can take to overcome polarization within families, non-profit organizations, government offices, businesses, and private organizations, Lisa Schirch & David Campt’s [*Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*](#) is a hands-on guide for organizing dialogues at smaller scales.¹²² It compellingly illustrates the potential for change that can come from listening, finding common ground, and exploring differences in a safe way.

Ron Kraybill & Evelyn Wright’s [*Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics*](#) is another excellent book that provides tools for facilitating meetings when the temperature of the group rises, or for structuring meetings where polarization may be anticipated.¹²³ It is rich in anecdotes and practical techniques - such as role-reversal presentations - that can build empathy and understanding within a divided group, especially where decisions need to be taken.

In addition to books, there are civic engagement organizations that support hosting conversations of import; some teach techniques for managing polarity. [New Stories](#) provides services to groups and communities using participatory processes to create new visions and new strategies for action. [Art of Hosting](#) is both an organization and an approach to leadership that scales up from the personal to the systemic using personal practice, dialogue, facilitation, and the co-creation of innovation to address complex challenges.

¹²⁰ Paul Born, *Community Conversations: Mobilizing the Ideas, Skills, and Passion of Community Organizations, Governments, Businesses, and People* (BPS Books, 2012).

¹²¹ Ken Cloke, *Politics, Dialogue and the Evolution of Democracy: How to Discuss Race, Abortion, Immigration, Gun Control, Climate Change, Same Sex Marriage and Other Hot Topics* (Goodmedia Press, 2018).

¹²² Lisa Schirch and David Campt, *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects: A Practical, Hands-On Guide* (Good Books, 2015).

¹²³ Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright, *Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot* (Good Books, 2007).

There are programs that have been designed intentionally for overcoming polarization. For example, the U.S.-based [National Issues Forums Institute \(NIFI\)](#) promotes public deliberation on campuses and communities through online and face-to-face forums. The NIFI has partnered with charitable foundations, media outlets, and public radio networks to produce helpful guides for discussing issues of social and political import. As a partner in the [Hidden Common Ground Project](#), they co-produced “[Strange Bedfellows](#),” a set of stories of ordinary Americans with very different views who reached across divides to interrupt violence, forge interfaith collaborations, and solve problems.

[Essential Partners](#) (formerly, the Public Conversations Project) leads courageous conversations about topics such as race, faith, and guns in America. Their goal is to use the lever of relationships to make change possible. They have offered training to staff of Facebook with the goal of reducing polarization online and have trained Black Lives Matter activists and police officers in North Carolina to come together in dialogues about race and justice.

[Living Room Conversations](#) teaches a model for effective conversations. They have produced at least 150 conversation topic guides on diverse subjects including cancel culture, abortion, and mental health. They champion conversation agreements and offer trainings, a tip sheet, a conversation host toolkit, and a certification program.

In the second year of this research project, we will explore these, and other, interventions using a methodology that employs social labs combining action research and experiential learning, leading to social innovation.¹²⁴ The goal will be to assess the fit and effectiveness of various interventions in relation to the specific contexts and needs of project partners and the communities they serve.

¹²⁴ Job Timmermans, Vincent Blok, Robert Braun, Renate Wesselink, and Rasmus Øjvind Nielsen, “Social Labs as an Inclusive Methodology to Implement and Study Social Change: The Case of Responsible Research and Innovation,” *Journal of Responsible Innovation* 7, no. 3 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2020.1787751>; Zaid Hassan, *The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2014).

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