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# Building Bridges, and Reducing Anger: Liberal-Conservative Dialogue in the United States

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Building Bridges, and Reducing Anger:  
Liberal-Conservative Dialogue in the  
United States

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### Abstract

In the United States today, liberal and conservative citizens are becoming increasingly polarized in their attitudes of hostility toward one another. This has resulted in a socio-political climate in which liberals and conservatives routinely demonize each other, and political differences are unhelpfully framed as matters of good versus evil. Open and honest dialogue between liberals and conservatives has the potential to improve this situation, but a myriad of cultural, psychological, and societal challenges create significant barriers to liberal-conservative dialogue. This paper explores these barriers in detail through a synthesis of research in moral psychology, cognitive psychology, and sociology. It explains how a fundamental awareness of them can improve liberal-conservative relations and enable liberal-conservative dialogue. Combining research on current liberal-conservative dialogue initiatives with interviews of three dialogue advocates/practitioners, this paper demonstrates how and why liberal-conservative is a promising remedy for addressing problems in our often toxic and emotionally painful socio-political climate.

*Key words: Liberal, conservative, dialogue, United States, morality, conflict transformation, alliances*

The most sexist liberal can think of himself as a feminist while the greediest liberal can think of himself as generous. This is because liberals define themselves as being compassionate, open minded, kind, pro-science, and intelligent not based on their actions or achievements, but based on their ideology. This is one of the most psychologically appealing aspects of liberalism because it allows you to be an awful person while still thinking of yourself as better than everyone else.

-John Hawkins, reporter and  
online columnist

Republicans don't believe in the imagination, partly because so few of them have one, but mostly because it gets in the way of their chosen work, which is to destroy the human race and the planet. Human beings, who have imaginations, can see a recipe for disaster in the making; Republicans, whose goal in life is to profit from disaster and who don't give a hoot about human beings, either can't or won't. Which is why I personally think they should be exterminated before they cause any more harm.

-Michael Feingold, theater critic

### Forward

“But this conflict is different.” With this simple sentence, any conflict can be made to seem uniquely or specially hopeless. Conflict transformation tools, which usually may be used successfully in the direst of conflicts, simply do not apply in this case. While living in Rwanda as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I had occasion to think about this sentiment. From my liberal perspective, bad political news was coming from the United States. What many liberals termed the “war on women”—a series of political initiatives that would have the result of blocking many women’s insurance coverage for contraception, as well as new abortion rights restrictions—was heating up. The Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama’s signature health care reform, was under constant fire from conservative politicians and citizens. Newly won gay marriage rights were under fierce assault from self-identified Christians.

Hearing this news, I became very angry. How could any kind of moral human being say these things, or support these policies? How could anyone calling him or herself a Christian oppose basic civil rights for sexual minorities? The immediate-- and deeply tempting-- answer was that these conservatives were simply immoral, stupid, or evil. In other words, the many

social and political conflicts between liberals and conservatives in the United States appeared to be hopelessly intractable, because conservatives were never operating in good faith.

But is it really possible that roughly half of a country's population is stupid or evil? As exemplified by the quotations above, many Americans across the partisan divide think so—and that is a terrifying thought. It hurts. When I think of the conflict in these terms, I experience emotional pain. Hawkins and Feingold may deeply believe that liberals and conservatives are stupid and horrible people, but if so they inhabit a bleak world. It would certainly come as a relief for there to be an alternative to that kind of thinking.

And why shouldn't there be? In Rwanda, massive numbers of militant Hutus murdered close to a million Tutsis and any Hutus who stood against them—about one tenth of the country's population. Yet despite all the odds, Rwandans began to recover and—somehow—reconcile. While conditions are obviously still difficult, dialogues between genocide victims and genocidaires are—in many cases—leading toward peace and reconciliation. No one in the field of Conflict Transformation would dream of saying that these dialogues are impractical or pointless. So what about liberal-conservative conflict in the United States? Is it more intractable than the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, and countless other bloody conflicts that Conflict Transformation practitioners want to address? Phrased in that way, of course not—but it can certainly *feel* that way. It is only natural that conflicts which we are emotionally close to will feel more personal, regardless of the objective circumstances.

I wanted to learn about possibilities for more positive interaction between liberals and conservatives; but this involves much more than simply suggesting that these citizens should be nicer to each other. It requires investigating why liberals and conservatives often appear so immoral to each other; the many different reasons why coming together in dialogue is so

difficult; liberal-conservative dialogue initiatives that *are* successful; and—I hope—suggestions for liberal and conservative citizens to move forward in a more positive direction.

### Definition of Terms

**American Liberals:** Liberals are people who are generally favorable toward social and political change or reform. They tend to emphasize equality between individuals and groups, and government policies that are perceived as advancing these causes. American liberals are typically, though not always, associated with the Democratic Party.

**American Conservatives:** Conservatives are people who are generally favorable toward maintaining existing conditions. They tend to emphasize stability, hard work and personal responsibility, and government policies that are seen as enabling them. American conservatives are typically, though not always, associated with the Republican Party.

**Identity:** Identity is our basic perceptions of who we are in the world. Identity can be personal, but it often has social roots. We may ground our perceptions of self through categories such as gender, sexual orientation, or social class. Or we may ground them through membership in a group, such as a church or a political party. Because threats to our identities are frightening, we will often react to an attack on the group as if it was an attack on the self.

**Liberal-Conservative dialogue:** Because the word dialogue can mean many different things to different people, it is important to define it precisely. The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (2010) identified four types of dialogue: Conflict Transformation (in which conflicts are moved closer to resolution, and inter-group relations are improved); Decision-Making (in which public policy is influenced and public knowledge is increased); Collaborative Action (in which people and groups are empowered to solve problems and work more closely



together); and Exploration (in which people learn more about each other and their communities). Of these types, Conflict Transformation and Exploration have the most bearing on liberal-conservative dialogue. *I define liberal-conservative dialogue as a learning conversation between at least two people with beliefs and/or positions that differ along liberal-conservative lines. The objective is not to coerce anyone to change his or her position or beliefs, but to explore the participants' experiences and assumptions, and how these have led them to think the way that they do. The goals are to increase understanding of each other, and to reduce feelings of mistrust and anger. Liberal-conservative dialogue is desirable because:*

- Although not intended to change anyone's views, liberal-conservative dialogue creates the space for people to change their beliefs on their own, if they are so inclined—something that is nearly impossible in conventional debate.
- Liberal-conservative dialogue strengthens community by creating bonds between people and groups that would ordinarily rarely come together.
- Anger and hatred between citizens in the same country or the same community is deeply painful. Liberal-conservative dialogue reduces that pain by allowing us to understand that our worst fears about people are usually not true, and providing a way to talk that allows human connection to flourish.

### What this Paper Is and Is Not

This paper represents my work in exploring challenges to grassroots liberal-conservative dialogue, how these can be addressed, current initiatives to address them, and guidelines for moving forward. As such, when I refer to liberals and conservatives, I am exclusively referring to ordinary citizens. This is not a paper about politicians. Nor does it investigate whether or not

there is a “false equivalency” between liberals and conservatives, as some liberals suggest— this is the idea that while liberals are not perfect, conservatives are much *more* responsible for the often toxic social and political atmosphere in the United States. Of course, conservatives could suggest the same in reverse. I do not believe that this kind of thinking is productive. As I will show, beliefs in one “side’s” superiority are typically deeply flawed and problematic. Furthermore, liberal-conservative conflict is often very painful for all involved. We can choose to try to constructively address it through dialogue, or we can choose to continue to point fingers and attack each other—but not both.

### Introduction

On the morning after George W. Bush's 2004 reelection, journalist Joe Bageant (2007) wrote, Democratic voters awoke to "the deepest kind of prozac-proof depression" (p. 1). Conventional liberal thinking suggested that millions of lower class Americans had voted against their own best interests. The reasons for this voting remained open to interpretation-- some suggested that it was naiveté or lack of education-- but reporter Jane Smiley (2004) echoed the thoughts of many bitter liberals with a different theory: Voters who went Republican, she wrote, were motivated by "ignorance and bloodlust"-- a special kind of self-centered brutality bred into them by generations of religious and cultural indoctrination. Some Republican voters, high off their victory, took advantage of the opportunity to mock liberals, thus further fanning the flames of anger (Lincoln 2004).

In 2012, the same thing happened in reverse. The only reason that Barack Obama could have been reelected, many conservatives said, is that his supporters were lazy moochers who wanted more free government services-- shameless cheaters with no respect for family values or

human life (Alexander 2012, Farah 2012, Viguerie 2012). Many of Obama's gleeful supporters—perhaps mindful of their own pain under Bush—returned mockery with mockery.

Is this trend of hostility and anger irreversible? Leading up to the 2008 presidential election, pollster Peter Hart found that over a third of both Barack Obama and John McCain's supporters reported "detesting" the other candidate (Hart, as cited in Seib 2008)— and a good deal of that hatred is clearly also being directed toward the candidates' supporters. United States citizens who feel passionately about policy issues— whether abortion, the gay marriage debate, healthcare, taxation policies, or any number of others— are increasingly feeling anger or even hatred for citizens who disagree with them.

Now more than ever, there is a need for reducing anger and increasing understanding between liberals and conservatives in the United States. I propose that this can be accomplished through dialogue— structured or unstructured— between liberals and conservatives. In these dialogues, no one should be pressured to change or modify his or her positions. The goal is simply to promote empathy and understanding. For them to be effective, however, it is helpful to understand the dynamics of communication in detail, as they relate liberal-conservative conflict. Why is communication so difficult? Why do others frequently seem so unreasonable? And how can understanding this help the situation? Even more foundationally, what is the point of dialogue if "the other side" is not operating in good faith? Liberals and conservatives frequently paint each other as simply immoral. If people on the other side of the ideological spectrum from us hold the positions and support the policies that they do out of a cynical desire to destroy American values, hurt poor people, or increase their own wealth whatever the cost, then there is not much point in dialogue unless the purpose is to "convert" people to our ways of thinking.

Because this belief in the deep immorality of people on the “other” side is so deep-seated among both liberals and conservatives—and poses such foundational challenges to liberal-conservative dialogue— I begin by addressing moral psychology in detail. In particular, many liberal views on the supposed immorality of conservatives are based on a particular model of moral psychology. After exploring this model and why it causes such deep-seated anger on the part of some, I propose a more even-handed and inclusive view of morality that makes sense of conflicting liberal and conservative morality claims. I discuss our use of moral reasoning, and how it can make communication between liberals and conservatives very difficult.

Having addressed these important foundational issues, I discuss both psychological/ internal, as well as external/cultural factors that make liberal-conservative dialogue difficult. It is easy to commit to the concept of liberal-conservative dialogue, only to find our own psychology making it almost impossible. Furthermore, we might want to engage in dialogue, only to wonder why it is so difficult to find real people whom we disagree with. That is why it is important to be conscious of the specific nature of both internal and external challenges to liberal-conservative dialogue.

Before jumping into a discussion of liberal-conservative dialogue itself, I will address a common pitfall of liberal-conservative dialogue: The idea that through a good dialogue process, people “should” change their beliefs in line with the goals of the dialogue facilitators. Finally, I will discuss the benefits of current liberal-conservative dialogue initiatives, and conclude with recommendations. Although the paper is specifically geared toward liberal-conservative dialogue, it is also a synthesis of different types of information that I believe will be useful for anyone concerned about why the current socio-political atmosphere in the United States is so deeply adversarial at times, and wondering if there might be an alternative.

### Conventional Moral Psychology

*We* supported liberal policies because we saw the world clearly and wanted to help people, but *they* supported conservative policies out of pure self-interest (lower my taxes!) or thinly veiled racism (stop funding welfare programs for minorities!). We never considered the possibility that there were alternative moral worlds in which reducing harm (by helping victims) and increasing fairness (by pursuing group-based equality) were not the main goals. And if we could not imagine other moralities, then we could not believe that conservatives were as sincere in their moral beliefs as we were in ours.

-Jonathan Haidt, moral psychologist

Modern western moral psychology was primarily founded by Lawrence Kohlberg, in the 1960s (Haidt & Graham 2007). Kohlberg performed a series of interviews with children at various developmental stages, which led him to the conclusion that there is a universal, linear moral progression which people pass through. Children begin with an obedience and punishment orientation: in this first stage, authority is absolute and the primary goal is to avoid punishment. They eventually realize that different parties have different conceptions of right and wrong—and so they simply do what is best for themselves (stage two)—but eventually they begin connecting morality with living up to social (stage three) and societal (stage four) expectations. In stage five, individuals learn how to view society and one's place in it critically. People realize that an ideal society is a society that grants everyone basic rights, which transcend specific societal codes. At this stage, people would hypothetically be more willing to work for social change, since they can see the shortcomings in their societies. At stage six, people would perfect the practice of envisioning themselves in each others' roles, and thereby fully realize that moral laws must apply universally—although Kohlberg ultimately doubted his ability to accurately measure the difference between stages five and six in subjects (Kohlberg as cited in Crain 1985). Ultimately, fairness to individuals— with or without societal sanction— was the highest moral value.

Importantly, Kohlberg believed that these stages are universal. This is because they do not refer to specific beliefs, but to underlying modes of reasoning. Crain explains:

One culture might discourage physical fighting, while another encourages it more. As a result, children will have different beliefs about fighting, but they will still reason about it in the same way at the same stage. At stage 1, for example, one child might say that it is wrong to fight when insulted because "You will get punished for it," while another says that "It is all right to fight; you won't get punished." The beliefs differ, but both of the children reason about them in the same underlying way (p. 12).

Although there were six stages, not all people progress to the later stages, with many advancing only to stage three or four. The scheme is very individualistic— people in non-individualistic cultures tended not to score as highly— although Kohlberg suggested that this was because in their cultures, they were not being given the chance to question what they had been told. It also assumed that humans are intensely rational, and that this is how we morally progress:

As we get into discussions and debates with others, we find our views questioned and challenged and are therefore motivated to come up with new, more comprehensive positions. New stages reflect these broader viewpoints. We might imagine, for example, a young man and woman discussing a new law. The man says that everyone should obey it, like it or not, because laws are vital to social organization (stage 4). The woman notes, however, that some well-organized societies, such as Nazi Germany, were not particularly moral. The man therefore sees some evidence that contradicts his view. He experiences some cognitive conflict, and is motivated to think about the matter more fully, perhaps moving a bit toward stage 5 (Crain p. 9).

Kohlberg was criticized by Carol Gilligan, who suggested that his model was overly masculine, and incomplete. Since Kohlberg originally developed his model by interviewing only boys, she suggested that it underemphasized concerns about care and nurturing, which women were more likely to strongly feel. While not disputing a moral progression, Gilligan argued that women progressed through confronting situations of conflicting responsibility, rather than Kohlberg's conflicting fairness claims (Gilligan as cited in Woods 1996).

These positions are important to understand if we are thinking about liberals and conservatives, because they are still so widely accepted in academia. This is perhaps not surprising, since most academics are liberals— and these moral schemes would implicitly rate most liberals as more moral than conservatives. After all, liberals— who tend to devote more energy to social causes like equality between groups and direct care for the most vulnerable members of society, than conservatives— will naturally score more highly on a moral spectrum on which these are the explicitly privileged criteria. This presupposition about the nature of morality is so strongly embedded that it can lead to seething liberal contempt for conservatives— as in this example from psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2007):

At a recent conference on justice research . . . a well-known researcher began her talk by stating categorically that affirmative action was the morally and politically correct policy. She dismissed the reasons conservatives sometimes give . . . and then enumerated the self-serving mechanisms that gave rise to their delusions. For this speaker, affirmative action embodies justice and care, end of story. In her moral worldview, that's all there is (p. 101).

There's another, more fundamental challenge that accepting Kohlberg and Gilligan's views poses for honest dialogue between liberals and conservatives. If liberals in general hold moral views that are more advanced than conservatives, then we would expect that they could still understand conservatives' views, even while disagreeing with them. But the opposite would not be true: someone with a simplistic moral worldview would not be able to fully and emotionally grasp a moral outlook that was fundamentally more sophisticated than his or her own. One of the basic tenets of dialogue— that *everyone* possesses a truth that is worth sharing and hearing— would be fundamentally undermined. In that case, dialogue between liberals and conservatives might only be worthwhile if there is an implicit assumption that through dialogue, people with conservative views will become more liberal (or morally advanced, on Kohlberg's scale). In fact, we will see later that this is exactly what is happening in some American dialogue

initiatives. For now, it is enough to ask if there is another, more even-handed, view of morality that is more inclusive of different perspectives.

### Jonathan Haidt and Moral Foundations Theory

As we have seen, the idea that morality is mainly focused on the individual (through protecting his/her rights and treating him/her fairly), and rational (by forming through individuals' moral reasoning about harm and fairness) was for some time the unchallenged view. Elliot Turiel, a student of Kohlberg, built on this research by defining morality as "prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other" (Turiel, as cited in Haidt, Koller, & Dias 1993). Pivotal to his theory was the idea that children can, from a young age, distinguish between acts that are wrong, but only as a matter of social convention (such as wearing shorts to a school with a uniform code), and acts that are universally and morally wrong. Children recognize these universally wrong acts, Turiel argued, as only acts that are in some way unjust or harmful to people—and this is true in all cultures, regardless of specific beliefs that would mediate what was considered unjust or harmful.

Haidt and Koller (1993) wanted to see how universally this translated into cultures which were more socio-centric—that is, more focused on social groups and less focused on the individual. If people living in these cultures are presented with scenarios that, while violating accepted social norms, clearly do not harm anyone, Turiel predicted that— while they might personally object to them— they would recognize them as social constructs that are not universally wrong. To test this, Haidt wrote a series of brief stories about a person/people doing something that— while shocking and/or disgusting— clearly did not hurt anybody. He then presented these stories to American respondents and Brazilian respondents (who live in a much



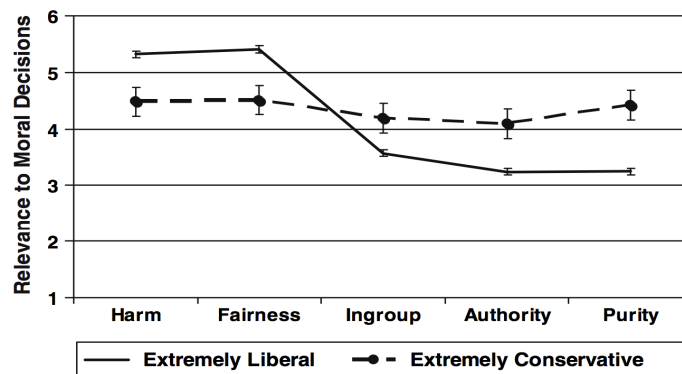
more socio-centric culture), and recorded their responses. For example: "A family's dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They had heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog's body and cooked it and ate it for dinner. Nobody saw them do this;" or: "A woman is cleaning out her closet, and she finds her old [American or Brazilian] flag. She doesn't want the flag anymore, so she cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her bathroom" (p. 617).

Haidt and Koller's findings were unambiguous. Brazilian respondents, as well as lower class American respondents, frequently described the acts in the stories as morally and universally wrong, even though they recognized that no harm was done— far more so than American upper class respondents. In other words, while it is true that respondents across cultures can differentiate between an action that they see as universally wrong, and an action that is merely wrong as a matter of social convention, the idea that for everyone matters of universal right and wrong are only based on care and fairness is simply not true. One's culture and station in society is crucial in influencing how one makes these judgments.

These findings have important implications for anyone trying to work toward liberal-conservative dialogue in the United States. Liberals in particular often dismiss conservative issues, such as opposition to gay marriage or a preference for supply side tax cuts over funding for social programs, as signs of bigotry or short-sightedness— certainly they sometimes don't appear to have much to do with morality, when morality is defined as equality, or direct support for vulnerable people. But if some of these issues might still have legitimately moral underpinnings for conservatives— as opposed to the cold-heartedness which liberals often ascribe to them— it could substantially open up the possibilities for honest dialogue.

This was the topic that Haidt and Graham (2007) investigated. Based on previous studies of evolution and moral psychology, they hypothesized that there are five foundations upon which

people can base moral impulses. The first two foundations are harm/care (the urge to prevent harm to living creatures and alleviate suffering), and fairness/reciprocity. These are the moral foundations which Kohlberg and Gilligan suggested that moral development universally moves toward; however, Haidt and Graham hypothesized three further foundations: ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (the urge to purify oneself and others, and avoid contamination, both physical and spiritual). They asked liberals and conservatives: "When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking?" Respondents then answered the question for fifteen items, three of which corresponded to each moral foundation— as in the following examples: "Whether or not someone was harmed" (harm/care); "Whether or not someone acted unfairly" (fairness/reciprocity); "Whether or not someone betrayed his or her group" (ingroup/loyalty); "Whether or not the people involved were of the same rank" (authority/respect); and "Whether or not someone did something disgusting" (purity/sanctity) (p. 108). Participants rated the importance of each item in weighing the rightness or wrongness of the situation, from 1 (not relevant at all) to 6 (always relevant). Below are the responses, averaged by moral foundation:



**Fig. 1.** Moral relevance by foundation for extreme liberals and conservatives. 1 = not relevant at all, 6 = always relevant.

The results are revealing. While liberals rated both harm and fairness concerns extremely highly, they put dramatically less emphasis on the other three foundations. Conservatives, on the other hand, rated them all about equally. While they did indeed place less emphasis on the harm and fairness foundations, they placed considerably more moral emphasis on the other three. Of all of the foundations, purity sees the greatest gap between liberals and conservatives.

If liberals do not understand that conservatives have sincere moral concerns beyond harm and fairness; and if conservatives do not understand that while liberals truly do not care as much about some of their key moral concerns, they care exceptionally highly about others— then understanding will be difficult. These findings are significant, because they allow us to cast conversations between people with different ideologies in a new light. Instead of framing the divide as between moral people and immoral people, we can begin thinking of it in terms of good people across the political spectrum, who simply have different moral perspectives. Our world becomes less frightening if we can begin to stop casting people who think differently from us as monsters— even when we are talking about emotionally loaded issues.

### Moral Reasoning

Haidt (2012) made one more contribution that is important for our understanding of morality, and that is regarding the role of moral reasoning. It has long been assumed that we arrive at our moral positions based on logical moral reasoning. After all, we can generally cite moral reasons for why we believe what we believe; it seems obvious that we must form our moral orientations based on these beliefs. Indeed, Kohlberg's framework took our rationality in approaching moral situations for granted. But now, compelling evidence suggests that this may not always— or even usually— be the case. Once again, Haidt wrote a series of (bizarre) stories

designed to provoke disgust, but in which there was no possible victim. The objective was to test the degree to which people use gut feelings, or logical reasoning, when morally evaluating a difficult situation.

In one story Mark and Julie, a brother and sister in college, were traveling together and staying alone in a cabin. One night, they decided to have sex. They both used birth control, and while they enjoyed it, they decided not to do it again. Furthermore, they kept it a secret between them, which made them even closer. This story immediately provokes shock and disgust, and not surprisingly, almost all of the respondents said that what the characters in the story did was morally wrong; however, when pushed they were unable to provide rational reasons— the stories had been written in such a way as to make this essentially impossible: neither Mark nor Julie was hurt, there was effectively no chance of pregnancy, no one else knew about it, and the experience actually improved their relationship. Study participants sat with a researcher, whose job it was to challenge everything that they said in order to get at a "rational" reason for it. Below is a representative transcript of an interview following the Mark and Julie story:

EXPERIMENTER: So what do you think about this, was it wrong for Julie and Mark to have sex?

SUBJECT: Yeah, I think it's totally wrong [for them] to have sex. You know, because I'm pretty religious and I just think incest is wrong anyway. But, I don't know.

EXPERIMENTER: What's wrong with incest, would you say?

SUBJECT: Um, the whole idea of, well, I've heard-- I don't know if this is true, but in the case, if the girl did get pregnant, the kids become deformed most of the time, in cases like that.

EXPERIMENTER: But they used a condom and birth control pills—

SUBJECT: Oh, OK. Yeah, you did say that.

EXPERIMENTER: — so there's no way they're going to have a kid.

SUBJECT: Well, I guess the safest sex is abstinence, but, um, uh . . . um, I don't know, I just think that's wrong. I don't know, what did you ask me?

EXPERIMENTER: Was it wrong for them to have sex?

SUBJECT: Yeah, I think it's wrong.

EXPERIMENTER: And I'm trying to find out why, what you think is wrong with it?

SUBJECT: OK, um . . . well . . . let's see, let me think about this. Um—how old were they?

EXPERIMENTER: They were college age, around 20 or so.

SUBJECT: Oh, oh [looks disappointed]. I don't know, I just . . . it's just not something you're brought up to do. It's just not-- well, I mean I wasn't. I assume most people aren't (laughs). I just think you shouldn't— I don't— I guess my reason is, um . . . just that, um . . . you're not brought up to do it. You don't see it. It's not, um— I don't think it's accepted. That's pretty much it.

EXPERIMENTER: You wouldn't say anything you're not brought up to see is wrong, would you? For example, if you're not brought up to see women working outside the home, would you say that makes it wrong for women to work?

SUBJECT: Um . . . well . . . oh, gosh. This is hard. I really— um, I mean, there's just no way I could change my mind but I just don't know how to— how to show what I'm feeling, what I feel about it. It's crazy! (p. 46-47)

The lesson of the experiment is this: when we make moral judgments, we often (if not necessarily always) make them very quickly— and then use our moral reasoning skills to explain our position after we have adopted it. This is typically a split second process, so that we do not notice ourselves doing it. But when the situation is artificially slowed down (by evaluating stories that have been written with the express purpose of denying our moral reasoning) we can see it taking place. The subject above was in fact reasoning very hard, but she<sup>1</sup> was doing it to support a position that she had already adopted. If Turiel was correct, respondents might still react with shock and disgust at hearing these stories; however, they would recognize that while the action might have been wrong, it was only wrong in a culturally bounded way— and not universally *morally* wrong. This and many other experiments confirmed for Haidt the following principle: "Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second" (p. 82). This is not to say that it is impossible to change our minds through moral reasoning— but it is harder, and it happens less often, than we might realize.

This might seem insignificant, but in the realm of liberal-conservative communication, it is hugely relevant. Imagine that a conservative who opposes gay marriage and believes that

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<sup>1</sup> No gender was given, so I arbitrarily choose one for the purpose of referring back to the interview.

abortion is morally wrong says that gay people should not get married, because it will destroy the institution of marriage. I affirm that I believe abortion should be legal, because it is none of my business what a woman does with her body. Logically, both of our arguments have gaping holes: There is no evidence that gay marriage will destroy the institution of marriage, and if someone says that something is morally wrong, the fact that someone else is doing it and not me is not even relevant to the case. My hypothetical conservative discussant and I might both marvel at the poor reasoning by which liberals/conservatives reach their convictions. But if Haidt is correct, then we are approaching it backwards. Neither of us reached our positions— me that abortion ought to be legal, and he that gay marriage ought not to be— because of our moral reasoning. Rather, we quickly formed our views first, and then we used our moral reasoning to defend them.

When people think about politics, they often fume at the stupidity of liberals/conservatives upon hearing reasoning that does not even appear to be based on real moral concerns. In these cases, it may be helpful to remember that moral concerns vary: conservatives place emphasis on moral foundations that liberals do not think about as much, and liberals often value conservatives' moral concerns much less— or not at all. Even after recognizing that, it is hard to remain patient when our ideological opponents justify their positions with arguments that simply don't make sense to us. But if we can remember that these moral arguments are often not the *primary reason* for people's beliefs— and if we remind ourselves that we make questionable arguments in justification of pre-existing beliefs too— that it is simply part of being human— then we might learn to be a little bit more forgiving of each other.

### Internal Challenges to Liberal-Conservative Dialogue

Even remembering that morality differs between people with different cultural lenses, it's often difficult not to feel very upset when thinking about people and groups with whom we have deep partisan disagreements. These emotions can make it hard to even contemplate sitting in dialogue with these people, so we should understand what it is about their perspectives that prompt us to feel this way. Why do we feel so strongly, and why is it sometimes so hard to reign in feelings of hostility toward people with whom we disagree?

Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) described the psychological process that take place in these situations. Essentially we all have stores of available information about the world, based on what we see, what we are told, and what we experience. But none of us are free to be completely objective, simply taking in the information impassively. We have so much available information that we need to prioritize and interpret it in order to make the world comprehensible. These interpretations may help to inform our outlook on the world, but they themselves are informed by our earlier observations and experiences. Taken as a whole, our interpretations of all of the information that we perceive point toward a worldview, or a personal story that we tell about the world. This is complicated by the fact that while our different available stores of information, observations, and interpretations ensure that we end up with— in some cases— very different personal stories, we tend to assume that our personal stories are the "universal"— or "correct"— ones. Stone et al. illustrate how this works with a simple story:

Doug took his four year old nephew, Andrew, to watch a homecoming parade. Sitting on his uncle's shoulders, Andrew shouted with delight as football players, cheerleaders, and the school band rolled by on lavish floats. Afterward Andrew exclaimed "That was the best truck parade I've ever seen!" Each float, it seems, was pulled by a truck. Andrew, truck obsessed as he was, saw nothing else. His uncle, truck indifferent, hadn't noticed a single truck. In a sense, Andrew and his uncle watched completely different parades . . . Of course, neither Doug nor Andrew walked away from the parade thinking, "I enjoyed my particular

perspective on the parade based on the information I paid attention to." Each walked away thinking "I enjoyed *the* parade." Each assumes that what he paid attention to was what was significant about the experience. Each assumes he has "the facts" (p. 32).

This dynamic is inconsequential if we are simply thinking about an amusing story. But we can easily imagine how difficult it makes communication between people with whom we have emotional disagreements. For example, I might see a young man holding a sign that says "Abortion Is Murder." I myself was raised in a liberal household, and I remember friends and family voicing support for legalized abortion, from a young age. I also have female friends who feel very passionately on a deeply personal level that abortion should be legal— not to mention friends who have had abortions— and these things determine the story that I tell about the world. I know immediately that I disagree with this man. Equipped with a moral intuition that he is wrong, I use my moral reasoning to defend my position by attacking his: *He's obviously not even sincere. If he actually believed that abortion is murder, he would be obligated to advocate and engage in violence to prevent the slaughter. Since he isn't, he clearly doesn't really believe what he's saying* (whether or not my reasoning is "good" is beside the point). Based on my interpretation— and similar interpretations on other issues and about other people— I conclude that social conservatives are not sincere people, who should not be trusted. This becomes part of my personal story that I tell about the world: *Liberals are good and conservatives are bad*. When I look at this protester, I see another example confirming it. Of course at the same time, my conservative counterpart is making his own interpretations and conclusions based on his own experiences— and he might well be concluding something along the lines of: *Liberals are so obsessed with the appearance of social altruism that they would even condone the killing of unborn babies to preserve it*. When he looks at me, he sees another example confirming it. We



have not even spoken together, but based on our inner psychological processes, we already feel deeply antagonistic toward one another.

### Our Identities and How We Defend Them

In the interaction described above, I think of myself as someone who stands in support of women's rights. I also see myself as the kind of person who is sophisticated enough to see past other people's false pretenses. My counterpart may see himself as a good Christian, and the kind of person who can resist social pressure in order to do what is right. These self-perceptions are important, because collectively they make up our identities. Stone et al. define identity as "our sense of who we are in the world" (p. 112). Hopkins (2008) identified additional levels of identity: "The self may be defined at different levels of abstraction. Sometimes it may be defined in terms of individual uniqueness, at other times in terms of a specific group membership, and this psychological shift from personal to social identity is the basis for a behavioral shift from inter-individual to inter-group action" (Turner, Hogg, etc. as cited in Hopkins p. 364). In other words, the social levels of identity may lead us to react to perceived attacks on the group (for example one's church or political party) as if they were attacks us.

Identities are important, because they keep us psychologically grounded: we feel secure and comfortable with ourselves, despite the uncertainty that we face in the larger world. While any number of issues can call different identities into question, Stone et al. identify three major ones: Am I competent? Am I a good person? and Am I worthy of Love? (p. 112). When our identities are questioned in this way, it can be a terrifying experience. This is why we sometimes become very defensive or upset at seemingly inconsequential things; we may not be cognizant that we are reacting in defense of our identities, but it happens all the same. For example, if I did

talk with the abortion rights opponent in the above example, I might suggest that he is not being sincere (perhaps calling his sense of his commitment as a Christian into question). He might suggest that my support of women's rights is not genuine (thus calling my sense of myself as a supporter of vulnerable people into question). The argument could become quite heated very quickly.

The psychological importance of ensuring that one's identity (or one's group) is not called into question is likely one reason for our confirmation bias. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) demonstrated that when we hold incorrect beliefs that support our pre-existing stories about the world (as described by Stone et. al), corrections of these beliefs are ineffective. For example, in 2006, study participants were shown a 2004 statement by John Kerry, in which he falsely suggested that there was a ban on embryonic stem cell research under George Bush— a widely held misconception (in fact while Bush limited federal funding, he did not ban it, and he placed no limitations on private funding). They were then shown a correction story. While it was effective in correcting the misperceptions of politically moderate and conservative participants, it did not correct the false beliefs of liberal participants. The same effect was found— in reverse— for conservatives. Participants were shown a news article in which George Bush falsely suggested that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD), followed by a correction. While liberals and moderates were persuaded that there had not in fact been WMD, conservatives who read the correction were, on average, *more likely* to believe that Iraq had possessed them after reading the correction. Nyhan and Reifler suggested that this is due to a "backfire effect": "If people counter-argue unwelcome information vigorously enough, they may end up with 'more attitudinally congruent information than before the debate,' which in turn leads them to report opinions that are more extreme than they otherwise would have had" (p. 308).

Americans' partisan identities, it seems, are often so strongly felt that we will vigorously deny information that does not fit in with our personal stories about the world— regardless of its factual merit. This is not encouraging, and the challenges to honest communication may go further still. Americans may in some cases actually be *motivated* to perceive each other as monsters, as the following study suggests.

Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild (2010) showed that perceiving one's self as having powerful enemies may have psychological benefits. Study participants who had been given a survey designed to make them feel anxiety about their personal levels of control over their lives, were divided into three groups and shown one of three different news articles about the terrorist network Al-Qaeda. The first article portrayed Al-Qaeda as malevolent, but weak and incompetent. The second portrayed it as powerful, but in a clearly understandable way: its whereabouts, goals, plans, and capabilities were well known. The third article portrayed Al-Qaeda as powerful, but in a much more ambiguous and frightening way: it was painted as a group of shadowy masterminds who could strike at any place and at any time; all efforts to locate them or even begin to understand them failed. After the news articles, all of the respondents were given surveys to measure their feelings of control in their lives, and their outlooks on the future. Paradoxically, the participants who had read the news article about Al-Qaeda as ambiguously powerful— clearly the scariest of the three portrayals— felt that they had the *highest* level of control in their lives, and they held the brightest outlook on the future. How can we explain these findings? Sullivan et al. suggest a solution:

An ambiguously powerful enemy— one whose powers are only vaguely known and who might strike at any moment— can be viewed as responsible for many of the diverse hazards in one's environment . . . perceiving ambiguously powerful enemies should be a uniquely effective means of reducing chaotic risks in one's environment and therefore bolstering perceived control (p. 443).

In other words, if we don't perceive any limits on our enemies' power, or any logic to their actions, it would be easy to imagine that they are responsible for any number of bad things that happen-- because even if that explanation doesn't make much logical sense, we already think of our enemies as mysterious.

If there is a psychological benefit to perceiving oneself as having shadowy enemies, then it would go a long way toward explaining some of the more extreme rhetoric that American liberals and conservatives direct at each other. The images of liberals as godless baby killers and conservatives as sadistic monsters bent on hurting poor people are not exactly inspiring, but these findings do suggest a possible answer for why they are so often thrown around. Indeed, on the eve of the 2008 presidential election, Sullivan et al. found that participants who were primed to have their feelings of control over their lives threatened (through the same survey described above) were more likely to believe frightening conspiracy stories about the "other side's" candidate (Barack Obama for Republicans, and John McCain for Democrats) rigging the election.

### The Two Levels of Why

So far, we have established that our identities are based on our perceptions of ourselves and our relationships. The reason we hold the perceptions that we do, is that from a young age our observations and experiences, and our interpretations of them, have collectively pointed toward a worldview, or an overarching story that we tell ourselves about the world. When our identities are called into question, it can be terrifying— so much so that we will often disregard information that seems to undermine them. In our need to maintain our identities, we may even exaggerate the power and malice of our "enemies."

Viewed in light of this information, we can make additional sense out of Haidt's findings that people often simply use moral reasoning to justify pre-existing intuitions. It might sound disheartening to realize that we are not as rational as we have previously thought, but it is actually psychologically necessary. Recall the interview transcript with the interview subject who was trying to find a reason to condemn Mark and Julie's incest. She specified that she was religious, and so had likely been raised with clear sexual norms and expectations that rendered such an act unthinkable. In addition, whenever incest comes up in our broader culture, it is strongly condemned. Finally, we have evolved with a biological imperative not to engage in incest that is very hard to break. Within her personal story about the world, an act of incest was not just personally objectionable—it was immoral and evil. Our identities grow up over time, and so it is unreasonable to think that listening to one story would prompt someone to alter her identity—even if the story was cleverly written to remove any possibility of harm. In fact, it is probable that pressuring someone to change a major part of her identity would be psychologically harmful. The experience would be deeply unsettling, and could lead to increased resentment and anger. She may have struggled to produce a reason for her position that sounded satisfactory, but she *did* have deeply rooted reasons for believing it.

Putting the evidence together, there is strong reason to believe in a dynamic that I will call "The Two Levels of Why." The first level is the moral reasons that we typically quickly give when asked why we believe something. For example, Haidt's study participant attempted to give genetic deficiencies and the age of Mark and Julie as reasons to condemn their incest. These are first level reasons. First level reasons are not necessarily bad—they may be strong, or they may be weak; but they are often not the "real" reason that we believe what we do. The second level is the primary, but harder to grasp, reason. It involves how one was raised, the experiences and

relationships that one has had, and the messages that one has received-- all the factors which shape how people create their personal stories about the world. For example, the study participant appears to have believed that incest is wrong based on some combination of a certain type of religious upbringing, and other cultural messages regarding incest. These constitute her deeper, or second level reasons for condemning their incest.

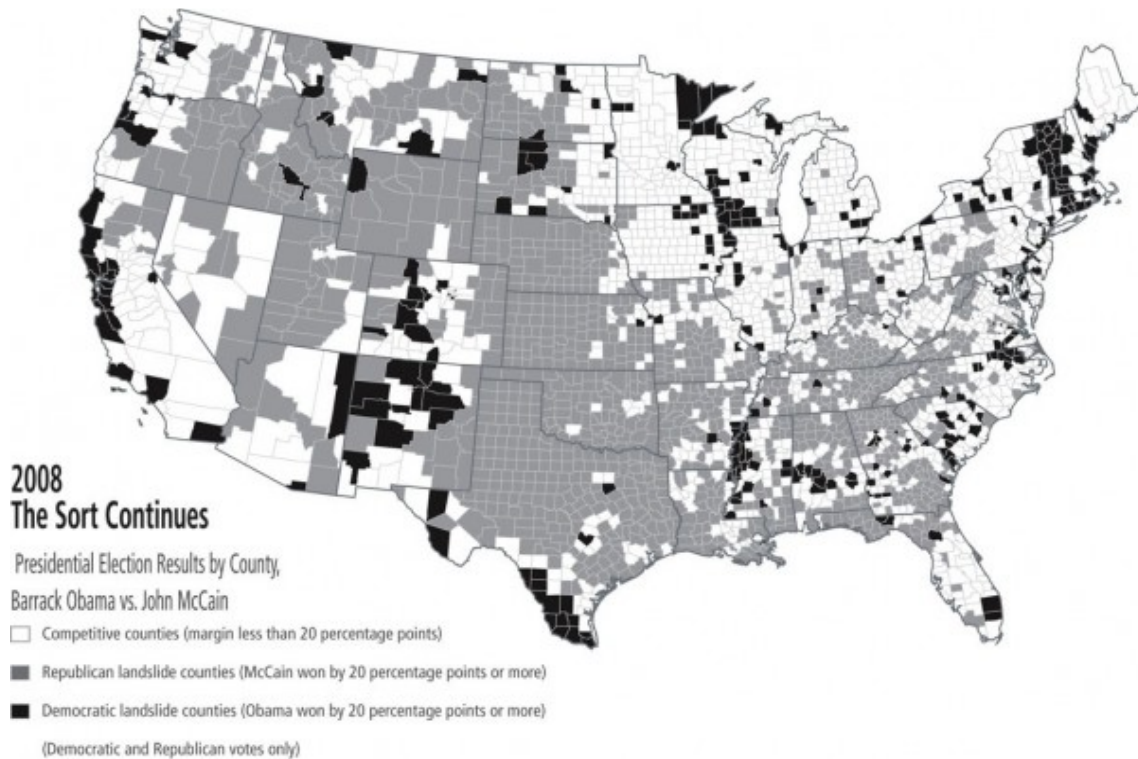
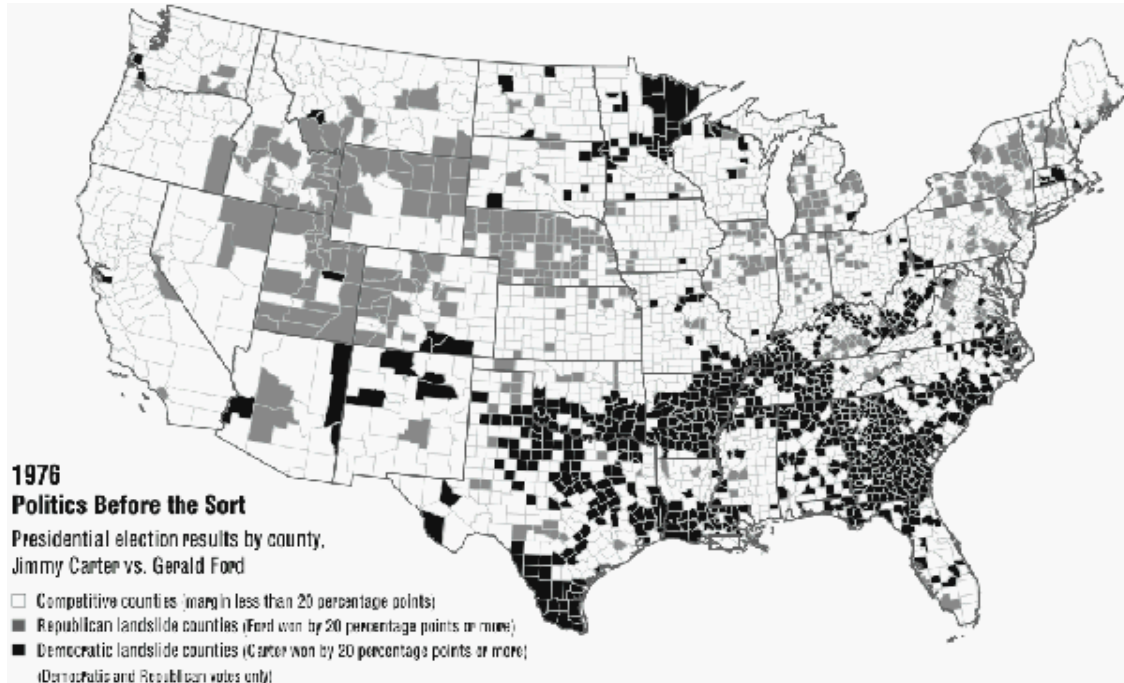
Communicating on the second level will involve time, trust, and probably some storytelling of the type ideally found in liberal-conservative dialogue. It is not necessarily easy, but if we do not try then we are liable to keep arguing on the first level. No one will be persuaded— because we are not addressing the real substance of our disagreement— but we will likely come away angry and more convinced than ever of our own righteousness and our opponent's wrongness.

### External Challenges to Liberal-Conservative Dialogue

Imagine we have decided that we want to communicate more constructively with the partisans with whom we disagree. We have acknowledged that our righteous anger is not helping, and we want to try to find a better way. Even then, it will not be easy. This is in large part because in addition to our own psychological processes, we find external barriers to communication. It is important to name them if we are going to proceed.

Bill Bishop (2009) was analyzing demographic patterns, when he observed a startling pattern. He started noticing migrations. Over years and decades, people with differing levels of income and education appeared to be sorting themselves into different counties and cities. This sorting did not at first seem to have much to do with politics, but when looked at in electoral terms, the data were astounding. In the close 1976 presidential election, only 26.8% of voters

lived in landslide counties— counties in which the outcome was decided by twenty points or more. In 2008, that number had grown to 47.6%. The electoral maps are reproduced below.



These trends are created not by intentional political shifts, but by a wider cultural settling. As Americans on average have greater control over where to settle, we naturally look for places that make us feel comfortable. We prefer an area in which we can readily make friends, enjoy our leisure time, and raise families— and it so happens that the sorts of places in which we find these things tend to contain a lot of politically like-minded people. Bishop explains:

The Big Sort included an element of personal discretion. People still moved to find good jobs, excellent schools, and safe neighborhoods. But an expanding economy, rising levels of education, and the breakdown of older social groupings had injected more personal choice into the selection of where to move and how to live. Amenities became more important as people sought out a particular kind of church or a special music and art scene . . . Americans could move to places that reinforced their identities, where they could find comfort among others like themselves. These weren't political choices, but they had political consequences (p. 42).

The most significant consequence for our purposes is that as the sort continues, we are less likely to interact with people whom we disagree, unless we specifically seek them out. Indeed, Huckfeldt, Carmines, Mondak, and Palmer (2006) found that in 2000, 41% of Democratic voters and fully 47% of Republican voters perceived that everyone in their social networks supported the same candidate.

There is something very comforting about being with like-minded people-- so much so that people seek out like-minded views wherever they are. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) demonstrated that when people are shown random news articles that are falsely attributed to various news sources, conservatives overwhelmingly prefer to read Fox News stories— regardless of headline or subject matter— while liberals prefer CNN or NPR (the effect was not as dramatic for liberals, perhaps because CNN and NPR do not have the same reputation for liberalism that Fox has for conservatism). Mutz and Mondak (2006) pointed out that people do not typically encounter different social beliefs in church, because people choose to attend



churches that are culturally similar to them. The same could be said for clubs, shops, and schools. In fact SIT is an example of an institution that attracts a very homogenously liberal student body. This is not its fault, any more than elite business schools are at fault for attracting deeply conservative student bodies, but it is important to be aware of— especially in light of a universal principal in social psychology.

### Homogeneity Creates Extremism

When largely like-minded people are put together, they become, on average, more extreme in their beliefs. The specific content of the beliefs doesn't matter: liberals become more liberal, conservatives become more conservative, racists become more racist, and risk takers take greater risks (Myers and Lamm, and Moscovici and Zavalloni, cited in Bishop 2009). There are a few explanations for this. Confidence in oneself leads to more dramatic thought and action, and social corroboration of a position increases confidence (Baron, Hoppe, Kao, Brunzman, Linneweh, and Rogers 1996). A second reason is social: people can boost their standing by strongly voicing certain beliefs. For example, if I am part of a social group in which atheism is approved of, I might gain special admiration by expressing particularly strong atheistic views— while simultaneously ensuring that no one would mistake me for a non-atheist (Baron, as cited in Bishop 2009). Finally, there is an informational element: If I oppose gay marriage in a group of like-minded people, I will have my own reasons; others, however, may have reasons that I haven't thought of, and hearing them will bolster my own thinking.

How might this dynamic play out if groups of like-minded people are discussing politically charged subjects? Schkade, Sunstein, and Hastie (2007) tested this by recruiting pools of liberal and conservative leaning citizens, dividing them into five small liberal and five small

conservative discussion groups, and asking them to come to a consensus on the issues of global warming, affirmative action, and civil unions for gay and lesbian citizens— if they were able. The instructions were to take their time talking about the issues, and make sure that every member of the group had a chance to speak. Most of the groups came to consensus on all three issues, but their conclusions were actually *more* strongly liberal or *more* strongly conservative than the individual members had been at the beginning of the experiment. In the end, there was a wider ideological gulf between the liberal and conservative groups than had existed before the discussions.

Once we are in a largely like-minded group that expresses its dislike of certain people and causes (such as political or social advocacy groups), this process will likely become even more self-reinforcing. In one experiment, the words that people hear were shown to influence their perceptions and memories. Subjects were shown a video of a car accident. A week later, they were asked questions about the accident using different language: some were asked to recall "About how fast were the cars going when they bumped into each other," while others were asked "About how fast were the cars going when they crashed into each other?" They were also asked if there was broken glass (there was none). Subjects who were asked the latter question estimated the cars as going faster, and incorrectly "remembered" broken glass (Loftus and Palmer, as cited in Tannen 1998). The lesson for liberal-conservative relations is clear. When we spend a lot of time around people who condemn our ideological opponents in strong or hyperbolic language, we are likely to perceive, or think about them, in ways that are extreme and often inaccurate. We will simply take it for granted that these inaccuracies are "objective reality," and so not be prone to examine them. Bizer and Petty (2005) demonstrated that simply conceptualizing one's preferences as opposing something, rather than supporting something else

(such as opposing the Republican Party rather than supporting the Democratic Party), makes one more resistant to persuasion or counter messages.

As we become more extreme, and we increasingly perceive those with whom we disagree as more different than they really are, we lose our ability to empathize with them. O'Brien and Ellsworth (2012) measured the effects of ideological similarity or dissimilarity on people's ability to feel empathy. Study respondents were approached in winter-- either at a bitterly cold bus stop, or inside a warm library— and asked to read a story about a hiker who got lost in the dead of winter, with no food, water, or extra clothing. In half of the stories, the hiker was a liberal Democratic campaign worker, and in the other half he/she was a conservative Republican campaign worker (respondents read about the same gendered hiker as themselves). After reading the story, the respondents were asked what was most difficult for the hiker (hunger, thirst, or cold), and what he/she most regretted not bringing (food, water, or extra clothing). Respondents at the cold bus stop who reported themselves to be *ideologically similar* to the lost hiker, were much more likely to answer that the cold was most difficult (94%), than respondents indoors (57%). This reflects a well-known psychological phenomenon: we tend to project our own feelings onto others, allowing us to empathize with them. For example, study respondents who felt cold themselves were more likely to empathize with the hiker's cold. However, when the study respondents were *ideologically dissimilar* to the lost hiker (conservative respondents reading about a liberal hiker, or vice versa), this effect vanished. In other words, people can often use their own states to empathize with others— but not when the others are ideologically dissimilar.

On average, by sorting ourselves into like-minded groups— a massively widespread phenomenon— we are becoming more extreme, more likely to adopt excessively negative

perceptions of those whom we disagree with, and— if we listen to negative rhetoric about our opponents— less likely to be open to messages that counter our hardening beliefs. These trends are also undermining our ability to feel empathy for people who are very ideologically different from us— liberals or conservatives. Dialogue can be very positive, but we need to be clear on the objective of the dialogue— especially in light of these findings. For example, if we are having a gender dialogue comprised of largely liberal participants, we can expect that the simple interaction between the members will lead them to more liberally extreme gender positions than the group average. This might not be a bad thing; for example, if our goal is to increase a specific sentiment, then we might choose to hold a dialogue between ideologically similar people. But if our goal is to increase understanding of different points of view— such as different political or cultural points of view— then a dialogue between like-minded people might actually be counter-productive.

### Liberalism and Dialogue

If we are determined to address these challenges to inter-personal dialogue between liberals and conservatives— and suggest means of overcoming them— then we still need to understand how and why Americans are using dialogue. Some types of dialogue are helpful when considering the possibilities for liberal-conservative dialogue, but some are not. In particular, it does not seem reasonable to expect that conservatives would have much interest in participating in dialogues about social issues, when many dialogue initiatives embody an implicit assumption that people who participate in them will become more liberal as a result.

In recent years dialogue has become a technique in many institutes of higher education for advancing liberal social causes. Beginning in the 1980s, intergroup dialogue became

increasingly used on college and university campuses as a means to address the social-- and particularly racial-- upheaval taking place (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, and Cytron-Walker 2007). These dialogues focused on dynamics of social group affiliations— based on race, sexual orientation, religion, and others— and the accompanying social inequalities that can come with them. In the National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation's model of separate dialogue streams, they most resemble the Decision-Making and Collaborative Action Streams; students dialogue to explore how they can collaborate more closely together to improve social situations that they see as problematic, and possibly influence decision-making.

While the principles of dialogue still generally apply, these dialogues embody an implicit assumption that— while the participants will not explicitly try to persuade each other of positions— they should *become* more liberal through the dialogues. For example, Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, Gurin-Sands, and Osuna (2009) measured what they saw as the effectiveness of campus dialogues on race and gender. Criteria included measuring the extent to which participants agreed, after the dialogues, that racial profiling is a "serious problem in our society;" that there "should be stronger legislation against hate crimes;" and that the "biases built into the legal systems contribute to the inequality in our society." They were also measured on their "post-college commitment" to justice, as perceived by the authors-- that is, the importance which they ascribed to "influencing social policy;" "helping to correct social and economic inequalities;" and "working to achieve greater gender equality" (p. 5). This type of approach is widespread in higher education, though it is not confined to it. After studying a series of community dialogues, DeTurk (2006) suggested that "the indeterminacy implied in open systems prohibits assurance that change will be in the direction intended by the program organizers" (p. 33). In one telling example, she wrote:

Kryisia . . . came into the dialogue program espousing the mainstream American belief that anyone could achieve the American Dream if only they would 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps.' Although her participation in the program raised her awareness about discrimination, it also reinforced her underlying individualism . . . I feel safe in assuming that the reproduction of Kryisia's views was not the hope of most of the organizers (p. 47).

Situating these examples in our discussion of morality, we can see that the facilitators in these dialogues were operating within conventional Kohlberg/Gilligan paradigms of morality. Fairness (defined as group based equality, in this case between racial groups) and care (society's direct assistance of individuals who cannot "pull themselves up by their bootstraps") were taken for granted as the goals—the moral foundations which liberals overwhelmingly emphasize. Respect for, and a desire to trust and work with, authorities; and reverence for American society with a desire to preserve key aspects of it (conservative moral emphases) appear to have been largely ignored. Within the realm of higher education, these were the sorts of dialogues criticized by Iannone (2008) as "efforts to promote deep distrust of American society, promotion of identity politics, and an aggressive focus on racial grievance" (p. 1). One can see why conservative critics such as Iannone would be reluctant to participate in dialogues that implicitly rate their moral concerns as inferior to more liberal concerns. If liberals' moral concerns are taken seriously while conservatives' moral concerns are not, and if the facilitators' objective is to further liberal social causes, then real liberal-conservative dialogue will be impossible.

In sum, liberal-conservative dialogue can happen— but it needs to be firmly differentiated from dialogue for social change. Facilitators and others who are interested should remember Haidt's model of multiple moral foundations. When greater commitment to liberal social causes is pre-supposed to be one of the goals of dialogue, those who are not already at least somewhat sympathetic to these causes— conservatives— would have little reason to participate. Here, I remind the reader of my definition of liberal-conservative dialogue. It is "a

learning conversation between at least two people with beliefs and/or positions that differ along liberal-conservative lines. The objective is not to coerce anyone to change his or her position or beliefs, but to explore the participants' experiences and assumptions, and how these have led them to think the way that they do. The goals are to increase an understanding of each other, and to reduce feelings of mistrust and anger." As we will see, this is eminently possible.

### Liberal-Conservative Dialogue Initiatives

I'd say probably most people in both parties share [this] fear: Let's not waste our time, we need to get out and make policies, fight for our agenda, and combat the stupid agenda of the other side. And then there's a second group in that pot that also pulls from both sides of the political spectrum, where people are *tired* of that, they're not inspired by it anymore, it doesn't feel like a politics that's sustainable, it doesn't feel like a politics that's enjoyable. It's demonizing, and it's pushing us away from each other. So I believe that there are people . . . who are coming to this: "Hey, is there another way? Because this way that we're doing it *hurts*."

-Jacob Hess, author and  
advocate of partisan dialogue

In 1994, a gunman walked into a Planned Parenthood Clinic and another women's health clinic and opened fire, murdering two and injuring five. In addition to the immediate grief caused by the tragedy, tensions ran high. Those in favor of abortion rights were horrified and furious, and those opposing them were upset and concerned about the effect that the violence might have on their cause. In response to calls for dialogue, six non-profit and religious figures— three in support of abortion rights and three in opposition— began meeting for over five years in private dialogues. The goal of the conversations was not to convince anyone to change their beliefs or to compromise, but rather to enhance mutual understanding at a time when anger and mistrust ran high (Fowler et al. 2001). The dialogues were facilitated by the Public Conversations Project (PCP), and over time— despite significant challenges— they were successful. Liberal and conservative dialogue participants, on both sides of the abortion issue, reported:

When we face our opponent, we see her dignity and goodness. Embracing this apparent contradiction stretches us spiritually . . . We are more knowledgeable about our political opponents. We have learned to avoid being overreactive and disparaging to the other side and to focus instead on affirming our respective causes (p. 8).

PCP is only one of a growing number of organizations and initiatives that—among other things—conducts dialogues that often have a liberal-conservative element.<sup>2</sup> In 2010 Joan Blades, one of the founders of Moveon.org, partnered with conservative activist and community organizer Amanda Kathryn Roman to "create a structured intimate conversation format to empower every day citizens to have conversations about important issues with friends that had differing political affiliations" ([livingroomconversations.org](http://livingroomconversations.org)). The result is Living Room Conversations: In these small settings, co-hosts with very different views about a subject—typically liberals, conservatives, or libertarians—invite two friends each for a friendly, informal, dialogue. In describing the need for these initiatives, Blades wrote:

I have faith in the good will, intelligence and power of citizens. It is time to rebuild respectful civil discourse while embracing our core shared values. Adversarial solutions will not create the solutions to the big challenges we face this century. We must learn to engage in collaborative problem solving-- holding the tension of our differences while working together with respect and an open heart, I believe we can create solutions that are better than any group alone could devise ([livingroomconversations.org](http://livingroomconversations.org)).

Other voices for liberal-conservative dialogue are emerging. In 2008, the Transpartisan Center was founded. Transpartisanship is "an emerging field that advocates pragmatic and effective solutions to social and political problems, transcending and including preexisting political ideologies . . . Transpartisan solutions emerge out of a new kind of public conversation that moves beyond polarization by applying proven methods of facilitated dialogue, deliberation, and conflict resolution" ([transpartisancenter.org](http://transpartisancenter.org)). In 2011 radio host Krista Tippett began the

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<sup>2</sup> PCP is involved in many different kinds of dialogue work. Their mission is "To prevent and transform conflicts driven by deep differences in identity, beliefs, or values." Since they work with clients who approach them with dialogue requests, many-- but by no means all-- of their dialogues feature liberal-conservative elements.



Civil Conversations Project, a series of programs modeling respectful conversations between Tippet and other liberal and conservative voices ([onbeing.org/project/civil-conversations-project/1960](http://onbeing.org/project/civil-conversations-project/1960)). At the University of Arizona, the National Institute for Civil Discourse-- in addition to focusing on restoring civil discourse at the political level-- is calling on ordinary citizens to commit "to participate in a thoughtful national dialogue" (<http://nicd.arizona.edu/mission>). And the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, a network of thousands of dialogue practitioners, includes resources about dialogue across the partisan divide.

While the movement toward liberal-conservative dialogue in the United States is small, it appears to be growing. The current climate of anger and distrust between Americans with different political and social views is "demonizing, and it's pushing us away from each other" (Hess, personal communication, March 2nd, 2014). Liberal-Conservative dialogue is deeply refreshing, because it creates a safe space for people to change their beliefs or positions if they want to, it creates bonds between unlikely people and groups, and it reduces pain by allowing us to understand that our fears about liberal/conservative "others" are typically not true, and providing a way to talk that allows human connection to flourish.

#### Liberal-Conservative Dialogue Gives People Room to Change Themselves

In 2009, the Salt Lake City council considered ordinances aimed at protecting gay and transgender residents from housing and employment discrimination. Tensions were high between the city's gay community and the Church of Latter Day Saints, and conventional wisdom would have suggested that the ordinances would either not be approved, or approved over the opposition of Mormon leadership. However, not only did the measures pass unanimously, they

did so with the support of the LDS Church (Canham, Jensen, and Winters 2009). The move came after two months of dialogue between LDS leaders, and leaders from the gay community. While the dialogues were not aimed at forcing anyone to relinquish his or her beliefs, they did improve relations and increase understanding. Gay activist Jim Dabakis recalled that the sessions were tense at first, because “these were two communities living in the same town that just had no understanding of each other” (p. 2). As understanding grew, so did the human connection. Former Councilwoman Deeda Seed described the changes that took place: “What everyone found is that we really liked each other. There was a good rapport. It reaffirmed to me the power of people talking to each other— even if you have incredible differences. You start to see the humanity” (p. 3).

One principle of liberal-conservative dialogue is that no one should be pressured— either explicitly or implicitly— to give up deeply held beliefs. While it may have appeared that the LDS leaders in the dialogues did exactly that— giving up their convictions against homosexuality— this was not the case. Church spokesman Michael Otterson explained:

The church supports these ordinances because they are fair and reasonable and do not violate the institution of marriage. I believe in a church that believes in human dignity, in treating people with respect when we disagree— in fact, especially when we disagree (p. 1).

In other words, members of the LDS church were not required to give up or weaken their religious identities. Rather, they chose to expand those identities, and support the anti-discrimination measures because of them, rather than in spite of them.

This example nicely illustrates another aspect of liberal-conservative dialogue: While participants should not be pressured— even implicitly— to alter their stances on a subject, they may choose to do so; indeed, they are more likely to do so than through argumentation. People are not likely to change their minds due to having their moral arguments countered, because they

typically did not arrive at their positions due to moral arguments. Rather, moral arguments are more commonly used to defend already known positions. We have seen that people's confirmation biases make them highly resistant to information that corrects falsely held beliefs, in part because of this reason. Haidt (2012) understood this: "You can't make a dog happy by forcibly wagging its tail. And you can't change people's minds by utterly refuting their arguments" (p. 57). Rather, when people feel a human connection— accompanied by the safety of not feeling coerced in any direction— they are more likely to feel free to change their minds. These are the sorts of conditions found in liberal-conservative dialogue.

One major critique of dialogue between liberals and conservatives is the argument that since conservatives/liberals are hurting people and/or ruining the country— often through stupidity or malice— it is pointless to "waste time" on dialogue. We have seen in detail why this view of liberals and conservatives is incorrect. Now we can answer our hypothetical dialogue skeptics more fully: Liberal-conservative dialogue is positive in part because conventional messaging— spreading "the truth" with the intention of changing people's minds— simply does not work. While liberal-conservative dialogue is not about changing people's minds— indeed, we will explore in more detail how people in liberal-conservative dialogue often do not change their positions— it opens up change as a possibility.

#### Liberal-Conservative Dialogue Creates Bonds Between Unlikely People and Groups

The aforementioned Salt Lake City dialogue helped alter the position of LDS Church leaders, in a way that liberals would generally approve of. But what about dialogues that don't? After all, a crucial aspect of liberal-conservative dialogue is the idea that no one be coerced to change his or her positions or beliefs— so although it could always happen, it would be wrong to

go into a dialogue with that agenda— and this has the potential to be problematic in situations where people on different sides of an issue feel very passionate or emotional.

Oriented to Love is a regular facilitated dialogue periodically held by Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA) about sexual diversity in the church. The topic is a deeply divisive and emotional one. Although all participants in these dialogues are all Evangelical Christians, the differences are intense; ESA works to recruit both gay and lesbian Evangelicals who have been hurt by the church, and others who oppose gay marriage rights and are fearful of the church's future. Obviously the topic contains the potential to be enormously painful, and if any dialogue in which people are not expected to change their views could be unhelpful or counter-productive, it would be this. One participant in the 2014 dialogue who opposed gay marriage rights wrote that "I prayed that my fellow participants would let go of false labels like 'bigoted' and 'hateful' that so many place on conservatives like me"— and she did not change her beliefs as a result of the dialogue (Vicari 2014, p. 1). But for many liberals, this issue is simply non-negotiable: Opposition to gay marriage rights, no matter how nicely stated, or accompanied with professions of love for gay people, is bigotry by definition (for example, Ford 2013)— a stance that would seem to leave little room for dialogue. What good is dialogue then? Lesbian blogger and feminist Evangelical Marg Herder (2014)— who participated in the Oriented to Love dialogue with Vicari—recounted her experience:

As a lesbian, I knew I would be misunderstood by those who are uncomfortable with my homosexuality . . . I wanted to do anything except sit down in the middle of this huge and awful knot of misunderstanding. I thought words were all we would have. I was wrong. What I learned at the Oriented to Love dialogue is that people of faith are called to resolve this misunderstanding in a different way . . . I'm talking about saying, "I don't agree with you, but I fully love and support you anyway." And don't be confused. *Both sides must be able to say this*. I must be able to say to someone unable to fully admit my equality, "I don't agree with you, but I fully love and support you" (p. 1, italics mine).

Herder was reluctant to enter into the dialogue precisely because she had experienced pain around being rejected for her sexuality. Nothing could seem more incongruous than genuine love and support between an outspoken lesbian feminist Evangelical, and an Evangelical with conservative beliefs on homosexuality. Neither Vicari nor Herder altered their beliefs about homosexuality— however, it seems that their differences became less defining in their relationships with each other. Dave Joseph (2014), of the Public Conversations Project, noted that "When people are in a polarized relationship with regard to the issue, they tend to focus primarily on the single aspect of identity on which they differ, and that becomes the sum total of their relationship" (personal communication, January 31st, 2014). People who only think of each other in terms of a key difference are not likely to get past that difference. But if their relationships are expanded beyond that one issue, through dialogue, they might get around the issue and form a bond, regardless of their continuing disagreement.

Once a liberal begins to comprehend a conservative more fully as a human being— or vice versa— the results may extend beyond only their relationship. Batson et al. (1997) demonstrated that the experience of feeling sympathy for a single member of a stigmatized group (the groups used in the experiment were homeless people, HIV-positive people, and convicted murderers) makes people more empathetic toward members of the group as a whole. Study participants who heard personal testimonies from a single (supposed) member of these groups were more likely to report increasingly positive attitudes toward, and support helping, members of the stigmatized group in general— especially when they had been instructed to try to imagine themselves in the place of the person giving testimony. While this study does not compare directly— as groups go, HIV-positive people are not analogous to liberals and conservatives in

general— it does have similarities. Within liberal circles conservatives are often stigmatized, and the same is true in reverse. Joseph (2014) provides a good example:

One of the things that I count myself very fortunate to have is the friendship of someone who I'm relatively confident never voted as I did but whom I deeply respect. And what was fascinating was to hear how he could be extremely principled, caring, committed, and just come down in very different places, and what it taught me in part is that there remain a lot of people with whom I disagree politically, a number of whom I don't respect and a number of whom I find very offensive. But that's not everybody with whom I disagree (personal communication, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014).

Listening to even one or two people whom we disagree with— real listening, in the sense of trying to understand their personal stories— could improve our feelings toward the group in general, but given the increasing sorting of like-minded people in American communities, this is less likely than it might seem. Left-wing activist Joan Blades (2014) observed: "We've teased apart our friendships and our community, so that many people will say 'I don't have any friends that are progressive,' or 'I don't have any friends that are conservative.' Which is bad. We don't learn from that kind of division" (personal communication, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014). Bishop concluded that "Knowing a real-life Republican might settle the nerves of a Democrat. In fact, exposure to a wide array of views increases tolerance. But Americans are increasingly unlikely to find themselves in mixed political company" (p. 74).

Thanks to the cultural dynamic of sorting that Bishop described, a degree of intentionality is often needed when seeking dialogue; because we increasingly don't live in the same communities or move in the same social circles, we need to seek each other out. When liberals and conservatives do dialogue with each other, however, the results can be striking. In January 2013, Joan Blades met with Mark Meckler, a co-founder of Tea Party Patriots-- an entity that many liberals would consider impossibly unreasonable-- for a dialogue on crony capitalism (capitalism in which success of businesses is determined by different forms of government

favoritism, rather than merit). Blades and Meckler each brought two friends to the dialogue as well, as part of the Living Room Conversations Project. The dialogue was a success, and by the end all six had agreed that they would support reinstating the Glass-Steagall act, a law curbing the power of commercial banks that was repealed in 1999 (Garofoli 2013). Blades wrote: "There is so much that Mark and I may fundamentally disagree on, but he is smart and kind, and I just want to learn more about where he is coming from" (Blades, as cited in Garofoli).

These collaborations emerge after dialogue for a couple of reasons. As we have seen, people who personally experience each other's humanity are more likely to be favorable toward people who are ideologically different, even if they still very much disagree with them. Second, in the absence of real information, liberals and conservatives simply do not have correct information about each other. Graham, Nosek, and Haidt (2012) tested stereotypes along liberal conservative lines. Study respondents were shown the "moral relevance" survey used by Haidt (2007)—on which respondents rated how morally relevant they considered it if, for example, "someone was hurt" or "someone did something disgusting." They were also shown a series of statements to agree or disagree with (for example, "It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself" (p. 3). Some respondents were asked to take the survey giving their own responses, and some were told to answer as "a typical liberal/conservative" would. In this way, data was collected about how liberals and conservatives perceived each others' moral concerns. While respondents were broadly aware of moral differences between liberals and conservatives— they correctly predicted the concerns that liberals and conservatives would care more about— they generally overestimated the ideological extremity of liberals and conservatives (for example, conservatives rated liberals as more extreme in their liberal beliefs than they really are, and vice versa). Strikingly, respondents overestimated the extremity of their

own groups, as well as of others (liberals rated the "typical liberal," and conservatives rated the "typical conservative," as more extreme than they actually were). Although all respondents tended to exaggerate in their estimations, self-described liberals were the least accurate—perhaps reflecting the fact that liberals tend to focus on fewer moral foundations than conservatives.

Based on these findings, we can reasonably infer that when liberals and conservatives come together for dialogue, they discover that people who think differently are not as extreme or unreasonable as they had assumed. One college student who had participated in a liberal-conservative dialogue course, reported that "I learned that I am not so different from those that don't have the same views." Another noted that "I found more common ground than expected" (Hess, Rynczak, Minarik, & Landrum-Brown 2010, p. 161). Jacob Hess, a prominent religious conservative proponent of partisan dialogue, engaged in a series of dialogues with liberal atheist professor Phil Neisser (Neisser and Hess 2012). While dialoguing on the subject of trust/where to properly place one's trust, Neisser related that he placed trust in personal relationships, clear thinking, and positive human potential. Hess replied:

Thank you, Phil. I've heard other conservatives speculate on this question, but never asked someone with your beliefs myself. Do you want to hear what you are supposed to be trusting, Phil, as a secular dude? Money, sex, power, and popularity— or some other combination of these objects of societal worship and adoration. Yet I hear you saying that you trust loving relationships, honest exploration and learning, and the underlying goodness and potential of human beings. Wow. You almost sound like the conservatives who were speculating about you (p. 29)!

Hess illustrates another important point: We are sometimes so isolated in our own ideological communities that much of our "information" about people who think differently comes from speculating with other like-minded people about them. When we *do* ask them about their views, the results can be surprising.



In conclusion, we have observed that unlikely bonds and alliances can form from liberal-conservative dialogue, because it expands our potential to see each other more fully— rather than defining each other based only on our differences. Once we form a bond with a small number of people who think differently than us, this can lead us toward a better view of liberals/conservatives as a group. Because we tend to move in ideologically homogenous groups and interpret the actions of others based only on the logic of our personal stories, having incorrect perceptions of people with whom we disagree is the norm— and so we will probably have to unlearn some of our old attitudes. Once we do, one result can be the forming of unlikely bonds between liberals and conservatives.

#### Liberal/Conservative Dialogue Decreases Anger and Reduces Pain

We're going to win the White House, we're going to win big in the Senate, and we're going to rack up big gains in the House. Republicans know this and are preparing for the worst. Now think of 2004— we *really* thought Kerry was going to pull it off. Remember that? And remember how utterly devastated we were when Bush pulled it off? The pain was so much worse because we expected to win. So with conservatives bracing for the worse, they won't experience the kind of pain we did. Not unless we deliver a defeat even worse than their worst nightmares. And I'll be honest with you— I want them to hurt as much as we did. I want their spirits crushed, their backs broken.

Markos Moulitsas, founder of  
liberal activism community  
blog "DailyKos"

Markos Moulitsas' language may have been extreme, but his sentiment is hardly unusual in American politics. Many Americans, liberal and conservative, feel genuine hatred and contempt for their ideological opponents. Moulitsas' battle cry came on the eve of the 2008 elections, and the Democratic Party succeeded in achieving the overwhelming victories that he hoped would "reject conservative ideology, leaving it utterly discredited" (Moulitsas 2008). Despite the election results, "conservative ideology" easily survived; liberals' jubilation was short-lived, as Republicans came back with large victories in 2010. Finding one's self on the

losing side of any election is difficult enough; it is much more difficult— and frightening— if one believes that one's opponents are motivated by stupidity or malice. People who are frightened are more likely to hate each other, or to lash out. Moulitsas was hardly alone in wanting to hurt the people who hurt him; he was merely more honest than many. We have seen how perceiving people as being ideologically different creates barriers to empathy. Moulitsas was more than capable of empathizing with the pain of his fellow liberals, but much less so— if at all— with conservatives. Such feelings are not confined to liberals. Many conservatives passionately profess to believe that liberals and Democrats support murdering babies (in the name of abortion; for example, Davis 2012). But believing that half of the United States population are cold-blooded murderers is a terrifying way to live.

This points to the most emotionally imminent— though perhaps hardest to quantify— benefit of liberal-conservative dialogue: The socio-political climate in the United States hurts. Believing the worst about one's ideological opponents is painful, but as we have seen, there is a constant tendency to do so. Should Moulitsas and others like him give up and stop advocating for their beliefs and positions? By no means. Nonetheless, it hurts to live in a constant state of fear about people who are ideologically different— and when we declare that people take the positions that they do out of stupidity or evil, we are doing exactly that. We have seen that there is ample reason to understand that people do not in fact adopt their positions and beliefs based on these things, but without actually coming together in dialogue it is difficult to intuitively understand it. Joseph (2014) explained the benefits of this coming together, from his years of dialogue facilitation experience:

We're going to have a better world if people can have the lived experience of recognizing that every person who disagrees with them is not someone who's evil, ignorant, or stupid. I think that it's not our differences that divide us, I think we can retain more of a sense of community if we're able to see each other as more

complex, multi-dimensional, as people with whom I may not agree with on x number of subjects, but people with whom I might share some concerns (personal communication, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014).

Once we begin to have that lived experience, the pain of constant fear of, and anger toward, people who are ideologically different begins to dissipate. Jonathan Haidt (2012) described his feelings after having spent time living in India (in a much less individualistic culture than the United States) working to understand alternative moral orientations:

When I returned to America, social conservatives no longer seemed so crazy . . . They want more prayer and spanking in schools, and less sex education and access to abortion? I didn't think those steps would reduce AIDS and teen pregnancy, but I could see why Christian conservatives wanted to "thicken up" the moral climate of schools and discourage the view that children should be as free as possible to act on their desires . . . I had escaped from my prior partisan mindset (reject first, ask rhetorical questions later) and began to think about liberal and conservative policies as manifestations of deeply conflicting but *equally heartfelt* visions of the good society. It felt good to be released from partisan anger. And once I was no longer angry, I was no longer committed to reaching the conclusion that righteous anger demands: we are right, they are wrong (p. 127; italics mine).

Haidt's example illustrates a couple of things. First, he did not need to alter or lessen his convictions in order to no longer feel anger. Rather, he expanded his ability to think about conservatives, by having the "lived experience" of living and working toward understanding of different moralities, from inside of a socio-centric culture. Second, the issues over which he stopped feeling anger toward conservatives are not insubstantial. In many liberals' eyes, abortion rights are synonymous with women's rights; more, not less, sex education is a key to a better society in which poverty is reduced. Nonetheless, understanding that conservative Americans (as with liberal Americans) are, for the most part, acting in good faith, reduces the amount of painful anger that liberals and conservatives feel toward each other. Intellectual knowledge of the different moral foundations, and the psychological processes by which we make our judgments of people, is a good place to start. But in order to help ourselves toward an intuitive

understanding of these things, non-superficial interactions and conversations— such as the sort that liberal-conservative dialogue can provide— are called for.

On the most basic level, Haidt illustrated that it simply *feels good* when one is able to overcome partisan anger. One liberal student in Hess' dialogue course shared the sense of relief that he/she felt after sitting down and dialoguing with conservatives:

Before this class, I went through the logic of conservatives and would think, "They have to be *crazy!*" From this experience, it's great to know half the world is *not nuts* . . . From this class, I better understand now the conservative logic; I may not agree, but it makes more sense (2010, p. 160).

79% of students in the class responded positively to the evaluation question: "Did you learn to value new viewpoints because of this course." If public life is seen as a war between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, then there is nothing to value in the "other side," and in fact doing so could be harmful to advancing one's own cause. But in fact, liberalism and conservatism focus on different virtues, and through the practice of dialogue— when we are able to see our differences as simply sincere differences, rather than as part of this war, when we are "no longer committed to reaching the conclusion that righteous anger demands: we are right, they are wrong"— we can honestly acknowledge that liberals tend to emphasize positive reform and change, while conservatives tend to emphasize stability and the value of traditions. Both have their places, and it is emotionally liberating to let go of "righteous anger" long enough to acknowledge it. In the words of Hess (2010), "Can we say *anything* nice about each other's ideologies at all? And why would we care to, anyway? . . . My first answer is because it's fun! So much more enjoyable than trashing our opponents all the time!" (p. 67).

When tension and pain is sufficiently reduced between people with liberal and conservative outlooks, alliance building can begin. Hess (2014) illustrates how this happens:

I hope as time goes on, this group will continue to grow— this group of people that says: "I'm tired of how people say I should talk to those liberals, I actually want to listen to them and hear them out, and figure out where they're coming from" . . . there is another way. And when I share this with people in my own home state [of Utah], lights go on. Almost universally, people are drawn to it, and I would say people are hungry for it. People are hungry to understand their neighbors— whether they're gay or straight, or liberal or conservative, or religious or not, or black or white— I don't care what the difference is, I don't care how sensitive it is, this work can build bridges (personal communication, March 2<sup>nd</sup>).

Reducing pain is inextricably linked to the other two aspects of liberal-conservative dialogue.

People need to be able to let go of feelings of anger and hatred of "the other" in order to build bonds with them. And people will never be able to even consider altering their views on a subject, if they believe that people on the other sides of an issue are their enemies. Liberal-conservative discourse is relatively new in the field of dialogue, but if it continues to be pursued and aspired toward, as the evidence suggests is happening, it has a bright future.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Stepping outside of our comfort zones is never easy. Doing so in a socio-political atmosphere where it seems that a lot is at stake is even less so. Nonetheless, there is much to gain, and—besides perhaps some feelings of comfort at first—little to lose. The way many liberal and conservative citizens currently interact with, or think about each other, simply does not work. It erects barriers between us, it leads us to become more extreme in opposition to one another, it makes it all but impossible to change one's mind on anything, and it hurts us. There is nothing desirable about this situation.

By contrast, coming together in dialogue and building connections with one another feels good. It requires no personal concessions, it allows us to expand our identities to include tolerance for people who have different beliefs, and it gives us the safety to change our minds—

if we are so inclined— without fearing negative judgments for doing so. While this paper has covered a lot of material, it is possible to distill it into a few recommendations for both liberals and conservatives who are interested in pursuing dialogue with one another:

- When we are tempted to label each other as stupid or evil, it is well to remember the different moral foundations. Liberals and conservatives can be equally heartfelt in their moral concerns, but because we weigh various moral concerns differently, we are bound to take stances that at first glance appear immoral to each other.
- We all tend to falsely assume that our own personal stories about the world are the objective, or “true,” stories. When we cast negative judgments, we are usually observing that a person acts or believes differently than *we would*, given the internal logic of our own stories. Therefore, it is beneficial to hold off our judgments for a moment, while we remember that personal stories do not all operate on the same logic.
- Immediately using evidence to try to refute each other’s positions can be tempting, but it is almost completely ineffective. This is because the reasons that people give are often not the deepest reasons—and in any case, if they sense that their identities, are being hostilely questioned, they will resist. Remembering our “Two Levels of Why” framework, it is typically more beneficial to try to learn about the second, and deeper, level.
- In practice, this means cultivating the habit of not immediately attacking someone who says something that sounds ignorant or stupid to us. It is better to ask questions to learn more about their position—and listen to understand, rather than listen to try to refute what is being said.

- For the most part, the social groups that we find ourselves in are fairly homogenous, unless we actively work to expand them. Trying to understand others' beliefs by discussing them with like-minded friends (for example, trying to understand conservative beliefs by discussing them with other liberals) will almost certainly lead to increasingly inaccurate—and frequently negative—beliefs about the other in question.
- It is not uncommon for people to go into a dialogue with the expectation that other people will radically change their beliefs or positions on the basis of the dialogue. This could be true for both liberals and conservatives, but it is perhaps more so for educated liberals, who have inherited a view of morality that privileges them simply for being liberal. These attitudes should be consciously checked at the door.

Finding opportunities for liberal-conservative dialogue is frequently difficult, but as we have seen, it is worthwhile on several levels. Even if we cannot find people to formally enter into dialogue with, the above recommendations are still helpful for gaining perspective and beginning to rein in our righteous anger. Conflict Transformation is focused on understanding the roots of conflict in order to lessen violence and tension. For American practitioners, home in the United States is one of the best places to start.

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