

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Hard to Say, Hard to Hear, Heart to Heart: Inviting and Harnessing Strong Emotions in Dialogue for Deliberation

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This article will examine the nature and place of strong emotion related to deep identity differences that may be part of deliberative processes and dialogue that can augment deliberation by engaging emotion in useful ways. It will discuss the experience of ‘resonance,’ the value of emotional expression in relationships as well the danger that unbounded expression of emotion can pose. It will also cover the ways in which dialogue planning, process and facilitation can support participants’ self-regulation and co-regulation of emotion, enhancing the mutual understanding and connection that are building-blocks of deliberative processes.

Keywords: preparation; facilitation; self-regulation; trauma; emotion; dialogue

What happens in dialogue and deliberation when one person’s truth is another person’s trauma? How do we understand the power of strong emotion and harness it in service of mutual understanding and collaboration? How do we help people ‘listen so that others will speak; speak so that others will hear?’ What openings for self-regulation and co-regulation of emotion can dialogue -and facilitators of dialogue- provide? What does it take for people to feel ‘safe-enough’ to participate?

The eruption of strong negative emotion and the triggering of past trauma experiences can derail deliberative processes. Formal dialogue processes can enhance the effectiveness of deliberation where trauma and strong emotion are likely. According to Escobar (2009),

Dialogue before deliberation can help to construct a safe space for relationship building in the group. ... Such deliberative practices often require high quality of dialogic communication, where the participants feel safe to question their own assumptions and to be open to change.¹

This article will discuss the nature and place of strong emotion in dialogues across deep identity differences, the power of relationships in community and the ways in which dialogue planning, process and facilitation can support participants’ self-regulation and co-regulation of emotion, enhancing mutual understanding, connection and the capacity to participate in a deliberative process.

Case example

In a warm church basement on a hot summer morning eight people had gathered in a circle of folding chairs: a homogeneous group of like-minded souls preparing themselves to meet their opponents who were doing similar work in another room. A ‘mixed’ dialogue to begin repairing a bitterly divided and broken community was scheduled after lunch. As people spoke of their hopes and concerns for the upcoming dialogue, one man began to shake and weep. ‘I can’t go in there with those people!! I can’t bear to hear what they say about me!!’ He had been wounded by years of being on the receiving end of stereotypes about his identity held by some of the folks in the other room. As others in his group tried to offer support they took his side, got indignant in his defense and denigrated ‘those people.’ Voices got louder and anger rose with calls to ‘let them have it’ in the dialogue to come. The outpouring was not useful to this man who was trying to express himself while maintaining a sense of self-control, something he’d been working toward for months. He began to unravel, sobbing now, seeming ever less able to engage. He couldn’t imagine having the strength to walk through the door into the next room. The facilitator must ask: Would it be possible for him to participate in the mixed meeting in a way that would leave him feeling empowered and agentic? How might a structured dialogue process serve him? What could the facilitator do in this moment?

Facilitators of dialogue often get stuck in situations like this. We can be funny about emotion: we often fear it or fan it. Neither option serves a participant well. Our job is to support people as they try to express themselves and their deep feelings in ways that can be heard and taken in by others—not simply defended against—leaving them feeling understood at some depth, empowered, neither infantilized nor shunned by the group or its leader.

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We write as practitioners who design and facilitate long and short-term dialogues among people who are deeply divided by differences and conflicts related to gender, sexual orientation, race, social class, culture, religion and political perspectives in the US and many other countries. These dialogues are not topical discussions, problem-solving or policy-making exercises though they may provide foundations for those activities. According to dialogue scholar Lauren Barthold (2020):

Dialogue ... utilizes narratives based in first-person experience, encourages genuine questions of curiosity to promote deeper reflection and expose gray areas, and aims at mutual understanding. Diana Eck, who developed the Pluralism Project at Harvard, explains the essence of dialogue this way: 'Dialogue is the process of connection.... *Dialogue is premised not on unanimity, but on difference.* (emphasis ours) Dialogue does not aim at consensus, but understanding. Dialogue does not create agreements, but it creates relationships' (Eck 2005, 28).²

Creating -or, usually in our experience, repairing-relationships in communities torn apart by stereotyping, misrepresentation, accusations and attacks is one of the primary purposes of dialogue work. If the goal is relationship repair, the vehicle is structured communication and the raw materials are personal narratives and the meanings they hold. Speaking and hearing those narratives can raise powerful emotions. Sometimes people weep. Sometimes people tremble. Sometimes people project a silence louder than any words. And in the right context, sharing the truth of emotion and having it received can also forge powerful connections borne of being 'witnessed' and understood, changing relationships among friends, families and communities.³ It begins with an invitation.

I (Stains) was invited to speak in a panel kicking off a multi-day conference on ending polarization in civic engagement. The end-goal was to recommend enhancements to, or new models of, public engagement on issues critical to community life. This was shortly after Ferguson erupted and the import of the conference was magnified by local protests and shut-downs. The organizers designed the conference with relationships, as well as policy discussions, in mind. All of us panelists were asked to speak for five minutes on what experiences had brought us to our passion for engagement. None of us knew what the others would say and I knew no one at the table. Black Lives Matter had just been formed and the local leader, a black man in his 20s, was seated next to me and spoke first. He said the seminal event for him was when his father had been shot and killed. After some more speaking, he faced me to pass the turn along. His story was so wrenching and powerful that I wished I didn't have to speak. I spoke of my mother dying when I was two years old as my threshold experience that set me up to be seen as 'different,' and 'other.' Grief and sadness were in the air. The turns passed along the table. At a break, the young man sought me out to talk with me about our experience of losing parents. He called me 'brother from another mother' because, though

our circumstances were radically different, we both knew the pain of losing a parent. It was a special moment; one we couldn't have intentionally arranged. This is the kind of thing that often happens when powerful feelings are shared in a dialogue: resonance. We may not have had the same experience, but the feelings from and about our experiences resonated with each other. We felt a heart-connection that no amount of advocacy, rational discussion or policy deliberation could have evoked. This is the power of inviting people to speak of experience and feeling: curiosity, connection and relationship.

Focusing on relationships is important for personal and community life. Jean Baker Miller, Judith Jordan (2010) and colleagues at Wellesley College's Stone Center have produced decades of research demonstrating the centrality of relationships for our sense of well-being in the world.

We grow through and toward relationships. In such relationships, disconnections will always occur. Empathic failures are ubiquitous in all relationships. If the disconnection can be addressed, however, stronger connections result.⁴

Failures of empathy are embedded in division, whether in a couple or a community. As Jordan notes, however, addressing disconnection and repairing empathic failures can deepen connection. For our purposes, empathy is not 'walking a mile in each other's shoes.' There's no way we could ever begin to understand what someone else's shoes even look like, let alone the paths they've walked. But we are touched by others' stories when told from the heart—when emotions are allowed to be expressed. So perhaps a better word for this way of connection and repair—is 'resonance:' heart-resonance that sparks genuine interest in the other's life and world. Like when the strings of one instrument vibrate in response to the plucking of another instrument, so too are people moved in resonance with others who are expressing something meaningful and moving to themselves. Emotions facilitate this resonance. Hearts that have been untouched by emotion are rarely resonant. Inviting and expecting emotion—even strong emotion—in dialogue is the critical energy that moves people to resonance and then to curiosity and then to caring.

We must also be cautious. We want resonance, not wildfire, within and between people. Emotions can be incendiary. They can be destructive. They can traumatize both speakers and listeners. As seen in the case example above, being in the presence of a real or imagined enemy can evoke powerful emotions: fear, rage, and sadness chief among them, whether in the present moment or leaping out from past experiences. Without the proper boundaries and support, things can go horribly wrong and both listeners and speakers can be wounded. Why? According to neuropsychologist Rick Hanson (2016), our brains are wired to be 'velcro for the bad; teflon for the good.' It's about survival. Hanging on to the good memories of last night's mastodon steak perfectly seared on the cave fire will not create the focus needed for today's foray into lion country. For that we need the terror from the times we were

chased to flood our brains with the kinds of chemicals that help us hear the twig snapping before the creature is on us. Add to this the fact that strong emotions—especially negative strong emotions—can be contagious: when our pre-disposition to negative/protective emotion mashes up with mirror neurons (Kilner & Lemon 2013), trouble is on the horizon. (Mirror neurons: try it now. Yawn in front of someone.) What starts as a spark can flame up quickly, bouncing around the room as brains start to mimic one another in a contagion of emotion.

Four major reasons for the over-provocation of strong emotions are: stereotyping, the ‘Tend and Befriend’ response to threat, perceived threat to identity, feelings from past trauma that arise. When these arise in dialogue, facilitators must be prepared for the escalation of strong emotions that will likely follow.

Stereotyping. When people are on the receiving end of negative stories and descriptions of their identity group as an undifferentiated mass of people with ingrained character flaws and nefarious motives, they get angry! If they experience stereotyping in a session, they may lash out. Sadly, they may respond with their own stereotypes of ‘the other,’ setting a pattern in motion that is hard to interrupt.

‘Tend and befriend.’ While Cannon’s (1932) ‘fight or flight’ biological response to threat is very well-known, Shelly Taylor’s (2012) work on the social mechanisms of threat response is not. According to Taylor, humans have an autonomic response to threat that is different from and occurs alongside ‘Fight-flight-freeze:’

The Tend and Befriend theory builds on the observation that human beings affiliate in response to stress. Under conditions of threat, they tend to offspring to ensure their survival and affiliate with others for joint protection and comfort.⁵

If people already feel some sense of threat, feelings of fear are likely to escalate, the need to ‘protect our own’ intensifies and perceptions of the other are seen through ever-darkened and distorted lenses. This is what keeps facilitators up at night.

Closely related to this dynamic is what happens when participants’ sense of identity is threatened. People derive their sense of identity in part from the groups they affiliate with (Tajfel & Turner 1986). The stakes are high and the possibility of wounding is great when people experience their identity group being challenged or maligned. Feelings of deep fear and expressions of protective anger may result.

Trauma history. Most people who come to dialogue have experienced some pain in the course of their lives. Some, however, have gone through traumas and abuse because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, family dynamics or war. In a dialogue, they may be in the presence of people who remind them of their traumatic experiences. Emotions from those times may be triggered by feelings and statements expressed by others: their own traumas, their emotional reactions to things said in the session, etc.

Being exposed to strong emotions that arise can overwhelm a participant leaving them feeling out of

control and too vulnerable to fully engage. In response, they may shut down or lash out. Someone in this state of emotional dysregulation (Van der Kolk et al. 1996) who is overly-sensitized and scanning for danger (Perry 2006) and has lost the ability to regulate the strength and duration of feelings is ill-equipped to engage difference in dialogue.

To get the benefits of honest emotion, participants must be able to regulate its experience and expression, neither being overwhelmed nor overwhelming others. According to Perry (2004–2019), ‘you can’t relate until you can regulate.’ This capacity for self-regulation comes both from the inside and the outside: emotion management skills along with support from others and the context.

So, if we want the kind of resonance in dialogue that only comes when emotions are present—even intense emotion—what can we do to invite and keep the right level of feelings in the room? How can we help participants moderate their inner state and regulate their expression of emotion? What do we do (and refrain from doing) if things get out of hand? We are trying to create a space that is ‘safe enough’ for the deep end connected heart stories to emerge and resonate with others.

Several practices support dialogue participants’ enhanced sense of safety, connection and self-regulated expression and experience of strong emotion: facilitator connection to participants, co-creating communication agreements, focusing on purpose, predicting and preparing for challenges, providing a highly-structured, predictable format and connected, compassionate, boundaried facilitation. The Reflective, Structured Dialogue approach created by the Public Conversations Project and carried forward by Essential Partners is a good example. An extensive and practical field manual of RSD practices (Herzig & Chasin 2006) is available at: www.whatisessential.org.

The facilitator’s human connection with participants is probably the most important factor that helps them to speak and listen from their hearts in a dialogue session. From the first connection with a participant, before a meeting, the facilitator is providing ‘witness:’ engaging with genuine interest and curiosity, inviting the participant to speak widely and deeply about themselves, their ‘opponents’ and their experience of their division or conflict. As the participant speaks, the facilitator is engaging in ways that leave the participant feeling seen, heard, and cared for. In trauma-treatment language (Bath 2008), they are ‘co-regulating:’ caring in the midst of distress, modeling attention, consistency and constancy. Participants then know that they have a person who cares for them when they enter the dialogue circle with feared others.

Facilitators can offer opportunities for reflection, preparation, prediction and rehearsal, all leaving people feeling better-resourced and more able to speak from the heart and listen with resonance and resilience. Giving people reflective tasks (questions to ponder, material to read, journaling, etc.) before a session helps them to surface their hopes and concerns, focus on their purposes and to remember their resources once in the meeting. Giving them meeting-related work to do in advance (proposing communication agreements, suggesting questions for group consideration, generating meeting

design ideas) enhances ownership of and respect for the process while providing many opportunities for choice-making and co-creation, or ‘empowerment,’ a la Bush and Folger (2005). Working with clients to rehearse a variety of responses to feared words and stereotypes, either individually or in ‘like’ groups builds resilient listening, lessens reactivity and leaves people less vulnerable to the undertow of group process if challenges do arise.

During a dialogue session, the facilitator is ‘fence-minding:’ constantly monitoring the boundaries laid out by communication agreements and structure, perhaps tweaking the design along the way. If people break an agreement, say ‘to refrain from statements of condemnation or judgement,’ the facilitator shifts to ‘fence-mending:’ working with the group to notice, name and repair what has been broken before they move on. In this process, too, the facilitator is engaging with compassion and care with everyone involved. When a competent facilitator does this, it has a calming effect on the whole group. When the facilitator avoids engaging or does so with fear or anger, they may lose the trust of many and the emotions that have arisen may take over the process.

What happened next in the case example cited above illustrates how each of these practices can work; how they can support peoples’ movement into a successive phase of engagement. Seeing that the participant—we’ll call him Henry—was unable to gather himself and that the group was making things worse while trying to be supportive, the facilitator (Gina) called for a break. Gina sat side-by-side with Henry and reassured him that the power was in his hands: he didn’t have to move on to the next session. He could choose to ‘pass’: it was in the communication agreements he had helped to create as part of a planning team. Gina asked about Henry’s purpose for being involved and wondered with him if there were other ways to achieve it. As it happened, there were not. This pilot session was the culmination of months of planning and there was no guarantee that it would be extended; no other venue available. Henry wanted to participate; he just wasn’t sure he would be able to without ‘breaking down.’ So Gina engaged him in some joint speculation: what—if anything—might make it possible for him to go on to the next session? When in the past had he heard the kinds of things he feared and didn’t break down?⁶ What resources did he find in himself then? What assurances beyond the agreements might he want from the group? There were none, because Henry recalled that everyone had already pledged to refrain from judging, condemning, name-calling, etc. Gina asked about what Henry was afraid might happen: what might he be challenged to hear, what might his untoward reaction be, what could he do and how could Gina be helpful? Mostly, he said, he didn’t want to cry in front of other people and appear weak. Gina: ‘And what if you do start to cry; how can I be helpful?’ Henry: ‘Move things along. Get me out of the spotlight.’

When the homogeneous group re-convened after the break, Gina worked with the members to recall to their purposes for the upcoming dialogue. She also speculated with them about the effects that the kinds of speaking they had been engaging in about ‘them,’ might have

on achieving their dialogic purposes. She then worked with them through role-plays and coaching to try out alternatives for expressing their real emotions in ways that would be more likely to be taken in and heard by members of the other group.

Henry did participate in a satisfying (to him and others) way in the mixed-group dialogue which was co-facilitated by Gina and Sam, the facilitator from the other homogenous group. It was highly-structured with pre-arranged questions for all, time for reflection, turn-taking, and time limits in answering. Henry and others gave voice to their feelings of fear, anger and care for others. The structure gave shape and boundaries to the very powerful feelings that were expressed; the facilitators’ person, presence and actions were also crucial. Gina offered a human connection that served as a ‘witness’ to Henry’s experience of pain and to his aspirations and resources. Both facilitators provided Henry and his group with a vehicle for co-regulation of the strong emotions in the room, helping the members deepen awareness, recall resources and develop capacities that supported them to regulate their emotions and express them in ways that led to resonance, deeper mutual understanding, and caring, and the decision to move from the pilot session to a greatly expanded program.

Formal dialogue can be a valuable on-ramp to deliberative process where emotion is likely to be high, especially when identity issues are at the fore. Emotion is a key factor in successful dialogue across deep differences. When we create ‘safe-enough’ space for expression and reception of strong emotion in dialogue we expand the possibility of mutual resonance, deepened understanding, enhanced relationship and the ability to engage in deliberation. We can effect this through the compassionate, witnessing presence of the facilitator and keen attention to the kinds of participant preparation and process design that help people regulate their experience and expression of feelings.

Notes

- ¹ Escobar, O. (2009). The Dialogic Turn: Dialogue for Deliberation, 4 IN-SPIRE J. L. POL. & SOCS., No. 2, December 2009, 42, 62.
- ² Barthold, L. S. (2020). *Overcoming polarization in the public square: Civic dialogue*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 81, 82. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45586-6_4.
- ³ John Gottman’s (2001) decades of empirical research is as relevant to community functioning as it is for family and friend relationships.
- ⁴ Jordan, J. (2010). Recent developments in relational cultural theory. In J. Jordan (Ed.), *The power of connection: Recent developments in relational cultural theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2.
- ⁵ Taylor, S. Tend and befriend theory. In *Handbook of theories of social psychology*. P. Van Lange, A. Kruganski, and E. Higgins (Eds.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012, 32.
- ⁶ Research on stereotyping by Powers, et al (2016) indicates that practitioners can support peoples’ resistance to stereotypes’ effects by reminding them of their strengths and resources.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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