2018

Developing Communities of Dialogue

Jonathan R. Cohen
University of Florida Levin College of Law, cohenjr@law.ufl.edu

Recommended Citation

Jonathan R. Cohen, *Developing Communities of Dialogue*, 20 Cardozo J. Conflict Resol. 105 (2019)

DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES OF DIALOGUE

Jonathan R. Cohen*

ABSTRACT

We live in an age where American political discourse has become highly antagonistic. Such hostile discourse may influence not just our politics but also our private lives, for the abrasiveness that we witness in political life can readily spill over into our homes, our schools, and the other realms that we inhabit. How can we resist the spread of such antagonism? This Essay makes two basic claims. First, it is important that we consider dialogue as both an individual phenomenon and as a community-based phenomenon. How we speak with one another is a function of both our individual proclivities and the norms of the communities that we inhabit. Second, we should attempt to cultivate communities of dialogue, islands of constructive discourse that resist the dominant trend in our political world toward increasingly belligerent language. In the short-run, such communities may help people solve problems more effectively and feel more connected to others. In the long-run, such communities may serve as an important foundation for social development.

I. INTRODUCTION

We live in an age where American political discourse has become highly antagonistic.[1] This trend is not new. Two decades ago, linguistics professor Deborah Tannen decried what she called America's rising "argument culture": our tendency to turn conversations into debates and public dialogues into places of verbal combat.[2] That pattern has only worsened in recent years. Part of it may be due to the proliferation of electronic media channels on cable television and the web. Political polarization and entrench-

---

1 *See* Amanda Hess, *Battle Cry*, N.Y. TIMES MAG., Aug. 20, 2017, at 9, 9 (describing numerous examples of "violent" speech in American political life).

2 DEBORAH TANNEN, THE ARGUMENT CULTURE: STOPPING AMERICA'S WAR OF WORDS (1998).

ment get reinforced as members of different political camps self-select their news, thereby avoiding hearing information at odds with their worldviews. Name-calling is now a visible part of our political course, as demonstrated by President Donald Trump's labeling of his political opponents, Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, with the derogatory nicknames of "Lyin' Ted," "Little Marco," and "Crooked Hillary," respectively, during his 2016 presidential campaign.[3] Physical violence is even entering the picture. For example, in 2017, physically "body-slamming" a reporter was not a barrier to a candidate from Montana being elected to the U.S. Congress.[4]

Importantly, Tannen observed this growing pattern of aggressive dialogue not just in the political sphere, but also in our private lives. The abrasiveness that we witness in political life can readily spill over into our homes, our schools, and the other realms that we inhabit. Dialogue styles may be contagious, with public dialogue serving as a role model for private conversations. People may come to mimic the antagonistic communication they see in the political realm. As social psychologists Matthew Fisher et al. commented following the especially insulting, final Trump-Clinton presidential debate in October of 2016:

> [A]s political polarization increases in the U.S., the kind of antagonistic exchange exemplified by the Trump-Clinton debate is occurring with increasing frequency—not just among policy makers *but among us all* (emphasis added). In interactions such as these, people may provide arguments for their views, but neither side is genuinely learning from the other. Instead, the real aim is to "score points," in other words, to defeat the other side in a competitive activity.[5]

---

[3] Colby Itkowitz, *'Little Marco,' 'Lyin' Ted,' 'Crooked Hillary:' How Donald Trump Makes Name Calling Stick*, WASH. POST (Apr. 20, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/04/20/little-marco-lying-ted-crooked-hillary-donald-trumps-winning-strategy (President Trump's nicknaming of opponents extends well beyond these three). *See List of Nicknames Used by Donald Trump*, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_nicknames_used_by_Donald_Trump (last visited Sept. 2, 2018).

[4] Lia Eustachewich & Joe Tacopino, *GOP Candidate Accused of Assaulting Reporter Wins House Seat, Apologizes for 'Mistake,'* N.Y. POST (May 26, 2017), http://nypost.com/2017/05/26/house-candidate-accused-of-assaulting-reporter-wins-special-election/.

[5] Matthew Fisher et al., *The Tribalism of Truth*, SCI. AM., Feb. 2018, at 50, 52 (emphasis added).

This concern applies both to adults and to children, who can be especially influenced by the forms of dialogue they see on television.[6]

How should we respond to the rise of antagonism we see in public life? One approach is to ask how can we make our discourse on political topics more civil.[7] That approach, while undoubtedly an important one, is not my approach here. Rather, I suggest that we pay attention to how dialogue is practiced in the smaller communities we inhabit and work to cultivate cultures of constructive dialogue within those communities, islands of constructive discourse that resist the dominant trend in our political world toward increasingly belligerent language. Roughly, these are places where people speak with one another respectfully,[8] listen to one another with open minds,[9] and resist seeing the world in exclusively zero-sum terms.[10] In the short-run, such communities may help people solve problems more effectively and feel more connected with one another. In the long-run, such communities may serve as an important foundation for social development.

The structure of this Essay is as follows. I begin by arguing that we need to consider dialogue as both an individual phenomenon and as a community-based phenomenon. Put differently, how we speak to one another is a function of both our individual proclivities and the norms of the communities that we inhabit.

---

[6] *See* TANNEN, *supra* note 2, at 166-207. Consider the words of parenting columnist Armin Brott concerning the related subject of meanness:

> Unfortunately, we live in a world where meanness—often for its own sake—is not only accepted, but also encouraged. In most popular TV reality shows, contestants routinely say the nastiest, most hurtful things to or about each other. Why are we surprised that bullying—in person and in cyber form—is so common? . . . Kids instinctively absorb these interactions and replay them later when they're in similar situations.

Armin Brott, *Ask Mr. Dad: 4 Ways to be a Role Model in Challenging Times*, CIRCLEVILLE HERALD (Aug. 18, 2017), https://www.circlevilleherald.com/lifestyles/ask-mr-dad-ways-be-a-role-model-in-challenging.html.

[7] *See, e.g.*, Carrie Menkel-Meadow, *Why We Can't "Just All Get Along": Dysfunction in the Polity and Conflict Resolution and What We Might Do About It*, 2018 J. DISP. RESOL. 1, 5 (2018); Erik Cleven, Robert A. Baruch Bush & Judith A. Saul, *Living with No: Political Polarization and Transformative Dialogue*, 2018 J. DISP. RESOL. 53, 53–55 (2018).

[8] *See* Jonathan R. Cohen, *When People Are The Means: Negotiating With Respect*, 14 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 739 (2001).

[9] *See* Jonathan R. Cohen, *Open-Minded Listening*, 5 CHARLOTTE L. REV. 139 (2014).

[10] *See* Leonard Riskin, *Mediation and Lawyers*, 43 OHIO ST. L.J. 29, 43–44 (1982) (describing the "standard philosophical map" many lawyers bring to conflict, including a zero-sum mindset); Jonathan R. Cohen, *A Genesis of Conflict: The Zero-Sum Mindset*, 17 CARDOZO J. CONFLICT RESOL. 427 (2016) (describing the influence of zero-sum thinking from biblical times through the present).

Next, I explore what constitutes a community of dialogue, why communities of dialogue are beneficial, and what can be done to promote them. Not only are communities of dialogue pleasant places to inhabit but they are also productive places, for constructive forms of dialogue help people learn and solve problems, tasks essential to social development. Finally, I conclude with some brief reflections on the significance of developing communities of dialogue to long-run social development.

II. Dialogue as Both an Individual and a Community Phenomenon

When thinking about dialogue, it is common to think in atomistic terms and focus on how a particular person behaves. Is he a good listener or a poor one? Does she ramble endlessly or does she make her points concisely? Sometimes we expand this view a bit and view dialogue through dyadic lenses, recognizing that how a conversation unfolds is a function of how both parties approach it. If Alex keeps interrupting Pat when Pat speaks, Pat's ability to listen to Alex with an open mind may rapidly diminish. More subtly—but very importantly—dialogue is also shaped by the communities that people inhabit.

Conversations, by definition, take place between people. Where do we hold those conversations? Mostly, we hold them in the communities in which we live: our homes, our schools, our workplaces, our houses of worship, our online chat rooms, and so on. In my home, do we begin with small talk or do we jump straight to the chase when there is an important issue to discuss? In my workplace, when we pass in the hall, do we greet one another with a warm "hello," a simple nod, or perhaps a blank stare? Among our Facebook friends, how often do people post, and how often is considered *too* often? At our universities, do people actually discuss hot button issues or do they play it safe and avoid discussing them for fear of offending others? How we talk with one another is not just an individual affair. It is also a function of the norms of the communities that we inhabit. What is the discourse in those communities like? What could it be like?

Focusing on how discourse occurs within a particular community differs from how scholars often analyze discourse. As mentioned, it is common to look at discourse through an individualistic lens, asking the microscopic question of what approach or style a

particular person takes toward conflict. Analytically, we assess individual participants using words such as "competitive" versus "cooperative" or "problem-solving" versus "adversarial."[11] Prescriptively, we offer advice about how individuals can negotiate more effectively. On the other hand, sometimes we analyze conflict in a macroscopic way, as when teaching people about how to negotiate with members of different cultures (e.g., the United States vs. Japan).[12] Analyzing how dialogue occurs within particular communities calls for an intermediate level of analysis, neither so microscopic as the focus on individual behavior nor so macroscopic as examining broad cultural swaths.

III. COMMUNITIES OF DIALOGUE

What precisely is a community of dialogue?[13] I won't offer an exact definition, but what I have in mind are places where people exchange ideas respectfully. In such communities, participants try to learn from one another. This does not mean that people will never disagree—to the contrary—but that their disagreements should be more principled and less personal, and more about ideas and information than about ego. In such communities, people attempt to arrive at common understandings and, when they cannot, for such is not always possible, remain civil and respectful. These are communities where people can assert their views without becoming aggressive and listen to one another's ideas without being presumed to be weak. In our homes, this is how members of

---

[11] *See, e.g.*, Andrea Kupfer Schneider, *Shattering Negotiation Myths: Empirical Evidence on the Effectiveness of Negotiation Styles*, 7 HARV. NEGOT. L. REV. 143 (2002); GERALD R. WILLIAMS, LEGAL NEGOTIATION AND SETTLEMENT (1983) (showing leading empirical studies of legal negotiations taking a largely microscopic approach).

[12] Kevin Avurch, *Culture and Negotiation Pedagogy*, 16 NEGOT. J. 339 (2000) (describing a critical view of such teaching).

[13] Some might ask whether "community of constructive dialogue" would be a better term to use than "community of dialogue"? I like the simpler term "community of dialogue," for the definition of the word "dialogue" includes a connotation of constructiveness. Dialogue is not merely "conversation," but conversation pointed toward mutual understanding and finding solutions. For example, Merriam Webster defines "dialogue" as both "a conversation between two or more persons" and "a discussion between representatives of parties to a conflict that is aimed at resolution." *Dialogue*, MERRIAM WEBSTER ONLINE DICTIONARY, http://www.merriam-webster .com/dictionary/dialogue (last visited Aug. 31, 2018).

healthy families talk with one another.[14] In business, this is part of how cutting-edge innovations emerge to produce better results.[15]

What is the opposite of a community of dialogue? There is no single opposite. Sometimes people function in *communities of avoidance*. These are places where silence is the norm or discussing pleasantries is used to avoid discussing serious issues. Sometimes people live in *communities of closed-mindedness*. In these places, people do enter conversations about substantive issues, but they enter those conversations with no willingness to modify their views. People's minds are already made up. They tend to argue but not to listen. Polarity and binariness characterize people's thinking. Most troubling is when people live in *communities of attack* in which insults, threats, and intimidation are the primary currency.

Why should we build communities of dialogue? One reason is that communities of dialogue tend to be productive. When problems arise, finding solutions is generally easier when people work at listening to one another rather than focusing on accusing one another. So, too, many discoveries have been made when people share ideas openly, safely, and freely, both in our universities and in our businesses. Another reason is that it is pleasant to participate in such communities. Participating in a community of dialogue helps people feel connected. I like it when others listen to what I have to say and treat me with respect. I enjoy treating others with respect and listening to what they have to say. Indeed, how we *communicate* with one another is a foundational piece of what forms a *community*. The etymological linkage between those words is telling. Both are derived from *commûnis*, the Latin adjective meaning "common."

An advantage of trying to shape consciously the dialogue in the particular communities that we inhabit is that it is more bottom-up rather than top-down. I may have little power (though not none) to influence how political discourse is practiced in Washington. Yet, I may have much more power to influence how we, in my particular sub-worlds, communicate. As harsh, adversarial dialogue becomes increasingly modeled in our general political cli-

---

[14] Susan M. Heitler, From Conflict to Resolution: Skills and Strategies for Individuals, Couples, and Family Therapy (1993); Susan M. Heitler, The Power of Two: Secrets to a Strong and Loving Marriage (1997) (both stressing the importance of communication skills to healthy family relationships).

[15] Charles Duhigg, *What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team*, N.Y. Times Mag. (Feb. 25, 2016), https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html.

mate, taking responsibility for the nature of dialogue in the communities we inhabit becomes increasingly important.

Some may ask, "How does one go about constructing a community of dialogue?" and, "how does one take a dysfunctional community (e.g., a community of avoidance, close-mindedness, or attack) and transform it into a community of dialogue?" I do not believe that there is a single, magic prescription, for communities vary so in nature and history, but let me offer a few suggestions.

First, as an individual, one can pay attention to how one conducts oneself in dialogue and try to develop good dialogue habits. I may not be able to change the behavior of the politicians whom I see on television, but I can try to listen to others with an open mind and with an ear towards what I can learn from them rather than with an ear towards how to rebut their words.[16] In my own speech, I can try to be polite, refraining from interruptions, insults, and malevolent innuendo. Examining one's personal dialogue habits is not a substitute for addressing dialogue issues at a community-based level, but it is an important place to begin.

Next, we can talk with one another about how we communicate. We can set ground rules (e.g., no personal attacks) for difficult conversations, and, more fundamentally, aspire to approach such conversations as opportunities for learning rather than for winning or blaming.[17] We can set limits on our social media pages about what sorts of comments we will accept, and we can talk about what processes we will use to discuss complex problems, including designing mechanisms to handle disputes when they arise. In our schools, we can try to teach children good communication skills: a subject in my view that should be both modeled implicitly and taught explicitly. In the high-tech business world, where team-based work is increasingly needed to respond to the complexity of projects businesses now undertake, we can ask, "What makes a team work well?" We can then look to answers researchers have found, such as "equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking" and high levels of social sensitivity (e.g., recognizing when a team member is feeling left out).[18] At times, we may need to bring

---

[16] Cohen, *supra* note 9, at 152–53 (expressing that during conflict, listening to others with an open mind can be especially difficult but especially valuable, too. "[T]he person one needs to listen to most carefully is not the person with whom one agrees but the person with whom one disagrees."); *id.* at 143.

[17] *See* Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Shelia Heen, Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most (2000).

[18] *See* Duhigg, *supra* note 15. The benefits of good internal communication for business extend well beyond the high-tech sector. *See generally* Kathryn Yates, *Internal Communication*

in outside trainers to teach new approaches to dialogue, as the California prison system has done to teach prisoners conflict resolution skills, valuable both for handling in-prison disputes peacefully and potentially valuable, too, in preventing recidivism.[19] The paths from dysfunctional communication to healthy communication are many.

This plurality of approaches notwithstanding, two key factors for improving dialogue within a community are *awareness* and *intentionality*. We need to take stock of how we communicate within our communities and, if needed, intentionally try to shape how we communicate. "How is it that we talk with one another? How do we want to talk to one another?" If we can put those questions on the table in the different communities that we inhabit, we will have taken a very significant step toward fostering healthy dialogue within those communities. Additionally, talking about these issues "in advance" can give us guideposts for returning to healthy modes of conversation, when, as is natural, our dialogue at times becomes strained.

IV. Conclusion

Where problems exist with the nature of the dialogue in our communities, improving those patterns will not happen overnight. However, if we put our minds to it, I am optimistic that significant progress can be made. Indeed, investing in our dialogue infrastructure may be one of the greatest gifts we give both to ourselves and to future generations. In the short-run, such an investment may yield returns by helping us solve current problems. In the long-run, it may change the course of social development in a myriad of ways, ranging from "simple" issues such as whether new ideas are resisted or embraced to complex issues like how diverse groups within our society interact. In both the short-run and the long-run, participating in a community of dialogue may have significant experiential benefits, such as helping people feel respected and connected. At a time when discourse in the political realm is reaching

---

Effectiveness Enhances Bottom-Line Results, 25 J. Organizational Excellence 71 (2006); Karen Mishra et al., *Driving Employee Engagement: The Expanded Role of Internal Communications*, 51 Int'l J. Bus. Comm. 183, 183 (2014).

[19] *See* Laurel Kaufer, Douglas E. Noll & Jessica Mayer, *Prisoner Facilitated Mediation: Bringing Peace to Prisons and Communities*, 16 Cardozo J. Conflict Resol. 187 (2014).

new lows, we need to take stock of how we communicate in the smaller communities that we inhabit. Not only is this an important responsibility, it is also a great social opportunity.