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January 5th, 2020

Talking It Over: Stepping Back from Ideological Polarization

Project Recap

“Conflict happens when there is no acceptance. Only through dialogue can we understand the other side. However, dialogue is only possible when there is a sense of security and respect. Hua Dialogue creates a safe space for students of different backgrounds to discuss issues central to them. In doing so, Hua Dialogue allows for more empathy and understanding,” Melissa, undergraduate student and Hua Dialogue participant.

Broader global tensions are fueling an atmosphere of reproachful disengagement and divisive politics on UBC’s campus. Specifically, the Hong Kong conflict is fostering polarization and galvanizing harmful stereotypes within and between ethnic groups. Cassandra Jeffery, a student from the Master of Public Policy and Global Affairs program, conducted a series of interviews with UBC students of ethnic Chinese descent, as well as with UBC area specialists. Sharing key insights and perspectives gathered from qualitative research, this is the final article in a four-part series aimed at highlighting the diversity amongst UBC’s ethnic Chinese community. To ensure the safety and anonymity of the students involved in this project, pseudonyms have been used.

The overarching aim of this project is to illustrate the process of ideological polarization in times of political turmoil and societal tension. Cassandra interprets this process through the exploration of identity constructs, as a mechanism fueling nationalism and escalating conflict within and between ethnic groups. Concluding this series, this article discusses solution building tactics, with a specific focus on the use of dialogue as a tool to understand the myriad of opinions along the ideological and political spectrum. To read all publications in this series, please click [here](#).

Moving Beyond Hopelessness

“I feel helpless, fear, and numbness,” says UBC undergraduate student and Hong Kong native, Danielle. “Rules, structure, and systems are gone. It’s just Beijing oppressing Hong Kong. It’s a police-state now. So, am I going back? I don’t know.”

Regardless of where we land on the ideological and political spectrum, we are not immune to the dismal global climate. Day in and day out, headlines infiltrate our lives with the latest bout of catastrophe. Huge swaths of land are burning, sea levels are rising, the middle class is shrinking, civil unrest is intensifying, ugly populism has gained momentum, rights are diminishing, refugees are fleeing, and privatization of *everything* is the new normal. We are on the brink of a new world order, one fraught with violence forged by virtue of egotistical political leaders—most often men—at the expense of average people. Global inequity, engineered by a history riddled with colonization, persists by way of cultural imperialism. Most of us in Canadian society live within these bounds of global inequity, disproportionately benefiting from this history and continued cultural imperialism. Indeed, the world is unfair, and at every turn, it feels

as though we are moving further and further away from confronting the root cause of the problem.

Feelings of helplessness are normal, at least seemingly so, in today's climate. However, our assumption that we, as individuals, can somehow solve these complex societal problems is grounded in arrogance. In the grand scheme of our existence as a species, our lifetime is a blip on the radar, but that is not to say our lives cannot have meaning. I am not suggesting that we ignore societal problems, nor should we seek clarity for the *sake* of awareness; however, I am suggesting that we acknowledge our positionality within time and space, and work towards obtainable goals.

Dr. Aftab Erfan, *Director for Dialogue and Conflict Engagement with the Equity and Inclusion Office* at UBC, reiterates this sentiment during our conversation on conflict and dialogue in November 2019.

"There's a sense of powerlessness," says Dr. Erfan. "I can think about it and I can talk about it, but then what?"

Confronting the *what* in this equation can be daunting. However, grounding ourselves in our surroundings and checking our biases along the way are great places to start.

"We almost take our power back by bringing the conflict back to a context in which we have agency over," adds Dr. Erfan. "Let's look at how conflict is manifesting here on campus. What is it doing to the people here? What are the local concerns that are connected with that? That's the thing we have agency over."

Dr. Erfan joined the Equity and Inclusion office three years ago and has since been working on the use of dialogue on UBC's campus through a conflict lens, exploring ways to engage in difficult conversations. In our discussion, she explained that her office often partners with student-run organizations, such as [Hua Dialogue](#), to facilitate workshops and events to proactively address conflict through dialogue. The goal of dialogue, however, is to encourage a larger conversation across groups that tend to be siloed, while simultaneously encouraging staff and faculty to participate in a way that does not position them as an "expert," but rather as participants within the larger discussion.

Constructive Dialogue is Difficult, But Not Impossible

Actively participating in dialogue, however, can be challenging. Dr. Benjamin Cheung, *Lecturer and Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator in the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia*, suggests social constructs perpetuate a cycle of anxiety. When confronted with ambiguity and conflict, our biases act as a coping mechanism to categorically quell internal tension. Individuals make sense of the world through molding difference into neat little boxes, ensuring such difference does not disrupt or contest entrenched understandings of one's self and surroundings.

“A big part of our high need for closure is for certainty, and a big emotional correlate with uncertainty is anxiety. Anxiety and fear are two of the most manipulatable emotions for the purpose of persuasion,” says Dr. Cheung. “I think that people just want to relieve themselves of any sort of anxiety. It’s something that is simple, it is something they feel is comfortable, something they feel they have some level of certainty over. Having to connect with another perspective or another view is uncomfortable.”

Normalizing the use of harmful assumptions emboldens the adoption, and sometimes the exploitation, of specific identity constructs. For example, nationalism as an exclusionary mechanism during periods of social and political turmoil. This process pushes our biases towards the radical ends of the ideological spectrum, effectively anchoring presumptions in absolutes regardless of fact and nuance.

“It’s really hard to train someone to relinquish their biases. You’re asking people to have to include this aspect into their identity of not generalizing, of not categorizing, when it seems to be such an easy and natural way of looking at the world. It takes so much practice and experience to not do that,” adds Dr. Cheung.

Indeed, political turmoil and international instability gaslight underlying cognitive biases, which are socially constructed and embedded within one’s identity. Our social inability to accept ambiguity and uncertainty accentuates cultural difference, sometimes rendering our similarities as human beings indistinguishable. Dehumanization and extremism festers in the realm of labelling, neatly categorizing difference as inferior or superior.

“There’s a fundamental mechanism to find correspondence bias and look for information that pertains to or supports your idea, and in doing so, thinking your ideas are more supported, says Dr. Cheung. “And therefore, finding reason to take greater pride in your stance, and having that being built so much into your identity.”

From Closure to Cognition

Finding a solution to this age-old problem will not be easy on our campus communities today, and I won’t pretend to have the answers. However, I wonder if there is something to be said for the exploration of socialization? Is it possible to analyze the role of society in cultivating our behaviour, in comparison to our innate biological predispositions? Who are we outside the confines of social conditioning? How can we collectively cultivate a culture that finds comfort *in* and learns *from* the unknown? Is it possible to accept difference without seeking agreement, and what does that mean for progressive solution-building? Perhaps I am overly optimistic, but I do believe it is possible to develop a society where high levels of cognition are fostered through the collective exploration of ambiguity and uncertainty. A culture where biases are confronted instinctively and without condescension, leaving room for critical thinking, learning, and thoughtful communication.

“To teach people to have a high need for cognition, and to steer away from our high need for closure, to have an expansive search for information, and more of a motivation to want to search for information, I think would be a good place to start,” concludes Dr. Cheung.

“We have an education system that teaches facts, one that is not as focused on teaching perspectives,” adds Dr. Erfan. “We’re supposed to get some of that training in university, but the system itself doesn’t reward the development of multiple perspectives. You tend to get rewarded for having a well-formed, strong, hard-lined view on something. It’s a very competitive process, it’s not a collective process.”

Unquestionably, it is important that we form our own opinions and advocate for our beliefs. And yet, it is equally imperative to simultaneously challenge absolutes, articulate assumptions using well-researched facts, and acknowledge our positionality within any given context. In other words, we have to ask ourselves, are we contributing to a holistic solution, or are we perpetuating the status quo? A status quo riddled with misguided presumptions and an ingrained superiority complex.

“I think it’s fair to say that most Chinese Canadians want to be a part of the solution, but when we look around, these voices are not being represented. I would say they are a valuable resource that is underutilized,” reflects Li Qiang, a graduate student from UBC. “In this time of tension, we should be speaking more with Chinese Canadian communities to use their connections and understandings of China to help alleviate political tensions. Sadly, what we see is that Chinese communities are increasingly sidelined.”

Detering Polarization Through Dialogue

Dr. Erfan says her office assists students in the re-framing process, fostering a more humanizing approach to addressing complex subject matter.

“The purpose of these dialogues is to humanize each other. I don’t try to talk about the regional politics, but rather discuss how it may be impacting UBC students more specifically,” explains Dr. Erfan. “Generally, there’s no change or resolution in these conflict zones, so we have to focus on contextualizing the problem at a local level.”

I should reiterate that it is unrealistic to presume dialogue will fundamentally change an individual’s opinion. However, the process of creating a space where individuals may share their views and ask questions will alleviate the pull from opposing ends of the ideological spectrum.

“You don’t need to agree to anything, but somehow if you stay in conversation you understand a little bit more where someone is coming from, and sometimes we understand our own views a little bit more,” adds Dr. Erfan. “Regardless if anyone changes their mind, there is still a lot of learning to be had in the process. Plus, if we get used to the process, we build the muscle to then continue using these learned behaviours and skills.”

Moreover, learning how to be comfortable in this space of difference may help to cultivate more well-rounded and long-term solutions to conflict both on UBC campus, and within the wider geo-political sphere.

“Where are the points of overlap, where are the differences, and where can’t we see eye-to-eye? Why is that we see [the situation] so differently? Everything we do to further understanding is going in the opposite direction of war,” explains Dr. Erfan, in reference to geo-political relationships. “There will always be people on the extremes showing up to be heard, but there’s still learning because everyone listening can judge for themselves how those opinions construct their own thought process.”

Concluding Remarks: Using the Tools We Have

So, what are obtainable goals? What can we, as students at UBC, do to help address the complex issues dominating the international political stage? I am not sure there is any one safeguard answer to this question. Nevertheless, learning how to confront and challenge our own internal dialogue, by genuinely listening and learning from other perspectives, might be a good place to start.

The [Equity and Inclusion](#) office at UBC organizes a wide variety of workshops and events, aimed at providing students and staff with the necessary skills and tools to create a socially sustainable community. Often partnering with student-run organizations on campus, Dr. Erfan and her team help to facilitate structured discussions on contextualized controversial subject matter. To check out their upcoming events and workshops, click [here](#). Regarding the Chinese diaspora more specifically, UBC’s [Hua Dialogue](#) is another organization that provides a platform for students from different communities to exchange their ideas. The student club is dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding of contentious issues concerning the Hua community on campus. Using dialogue, the organization addresses social division with respect and integrity.

In a conversation with some of the leading members behind the Hua Dialogue organization, they explained some of the key methods used during their events. Moderators facilitate dialogue by indirectly discussing controversial subject matter through a neutral lens. For example, one of their most recent conversations centred around the use of media as an influential tool often polarizing opinions. Hua Dialogue also likes to break out into small groups, allowing students to thoroughly engage with the material and find commonalities with other group members.

“All of our moderators have gone through bias training to ensure all conversations are open and neutral. We help students recognize their own biases and how to respectfully and constructively challenge those biases,” explains the Hua Dialogue executive team. “We provide a space where people can be heard, where people can listen to alternative perspectives, and where people can grow as individuals.”

Hua Dialogue also aims to deconstruct controversial questions, working to understand points of division.

“Our greatest challenge is ensuring we use well-designed questions,” says the Hua Dialogue team. “A really good dialogue should foster conversation from different sides of the debate. People are hearing the extreme opinions, so we want to provide a platform where you can hear about the middle ground and form your own opinion based on a diverse set of perspectives.”

“Hua Dialogue is a way to challenge stereotypes,” adds the team. “You start to understand where people are coming from and what their viewpoints mean to them. It was heartbreaking to see growing segregation within Chinese communities, so we wanted to contribute to a space that provides room for growth for people from all types of backgrounds. Learning about individual experiences, and how they might influence an individual’s thoughts and values, is essential to understanding ourselves and processing our own experiences.”

To read all publications in this series, please click [here](#).

About the Researcher and the IAR

Cassandra Jeffery is a graduate student at the *School of Public Policy and Global Affairs*. She is currently working with Dr. Timothy Cheek and Dr. Paul Evans on a series of projects focused on policy development through the *Institute of Asian Research*. Most recently, Dr. Evans and Dr. Cheek hosted an event through the Institute titled, *China Choices: Recalibrating Engagement in a Turbulent Era, Canadian and Australian Views*. The two-day seminar welcomed UBC faculty, Asia specialists from across Canada and the world, and Canadian political representation. The primary premise of the seminar was to encourage dialogue between various vantage points in the face of growing China-Canada tensions. One specific focus was to discuss the impact these political tensions have had on Chinese communities in Canada. This research project spun from this specific focus, as a means of eliciting and showcasing Chinese voices and perspectives on the subject matter. Moving forward, the challenge is to bridge the gaps identified between Chinese Canadian communities and other Canadian communities, especially in the policy process, and to address the gap between area/China studies and ethnic studies. This goal will hopefully encourage universities to usefully contribute to the strengthening of democratic life in our Chinese Canadian communities in the face of PRC government pressures and the Canadian media misperceptions.