

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE CONTEXT OF INEQUALITY

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Founded in 2017, CDI is a non-profit organization dedicated to equipping the next generation of Americans with the mindset and skill set to engage in dialogue across differences. At CDI, we seek to help teachers, faculty, and administrators build learning environments that enable students to feel comfortable engaging with challenging topics so that real learning can occur. To accomplish this goal, we translate the latest behavioral science research into educational resources and teaching strategies that are evidence-based, practical, and scalable.

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly 250 years ago, our country's founders devised a grand vision for the great American experiment. That vision rested on the self-evident truth that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The vision of America most of us proudly portray to our children and across the world is one of a thriving multiethnic, pluralistic democracy where individuals of varied backgrounds and beliefs collectively engage in self-government.

In recent decades, division seems to be preventing us from fully realizing this vision. More and more, Americans struggle to agree on the most basic of truths (Pew Research Center 2019). Individuals on both sides of the political aisle increasingly advocate for America to be separated into two countries based on political ideology (University of Virginia Center for Politics 2021). Tolerance for ideological difference is at an all-time low (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). Political division no longer revolves around policy debates; rather, it touches on the most deeply held aspects of Americans' identities, values, and cultures.

The impact of this fissure is profound. Surveys show that 64% of Americans have lost faith in American democracy, and 70% of Americans believe the country is in crisis and at risk of failing (Ipsos 2022). Although the United States currently faces this fragmentation, the country is certainly not alone, as many nation-states around the world have struggled with polarization and extremism in recent years.

In response to this rising polarization, a number of grassroots organizations have formed to bridge the growing political divide. Individuals dedicated to this cause have been called "bridge-builders," and they aim to facilitate dialogue across lines of difference. As authors of this report, we are ourselves bridge-builders. Our respective organizations are broadly committed to facilitating constructive dialogue across schisms. Our approach is rooted in highlighting shared humanity, helping people find common ground, creating spaces for people to listen to those with differing views, and encouraging people to reflect on the roots of their own worldviews. Underlying our work is the shared belief that by repairing broken intergroup relationships, we can contribute to sustaining a thriving multiethnic, pluralistic democracy.

Concerns, questions, and criticisms of bridge-building point to the tension —perceived or real—between efforts to repair intergroup relationships and efforts to correct inequitable structures.

As the field has grown, however, several concerns have been raised about whether bridge-building is a viable solution in the context of systemic inequities. People have asked us, for example: "How can you ask me to have a civil conversation with someone whose views undermine my right to exist?" "Are you suggesting that it's my job, as a member of a marginalized group, to educate my oppressors about my experience?" These concerns, questions, and criticisms of bridge-building point to the tension—perceived or real—between efforts to repair intergroup relationships and efforts to correct inequitable structures.

These concerns, questions, and criticisms also occur in the context of increased visibility of racial inequities. In recent years, high-profile incidents of police brutality against Black Americans have led to a deep reckoning over the persistence of racial injustice (Payne 2021). In particular, the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 set off a sea of protests across all 50 states, resulting in the largest demonstration in

U.S. history (Putnam, Chenoweth, and Pressman 2020). Even as this reckoning has unfolded across many institutions, Americans remain deeply divided over issues of race (Pew Research Center 2021).

In this report, we grapple with the critiques of bridge-building. We do so by broadly reviewing the bridge-building movement’s underlying theory, research evidence, and applications. We also discuss the complexities and limitations of this movement—particularly as it relates to systemic inequities. Finally, we end with a summary of our recommendations for bridge-builders who are dealing with similar issues and seeking to do bridge-building work in an equitable way. Our goal with this report is not to provide a definitive set of recommendations but to put forth our current thinking, with the hope that it will spur sustained discussion within and across the bridge-building and social justice communities.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND BRIDGE-BUILDING

The current field of bridge-building is informed, in part, by a body of work within social psychology supporting the contact hypothesis. The hypothesis is that one of the primary ways to reduce prejudice and build positive relations between groups is via contact, or social interaction. Contact hypothesis was conceived during the 1950s as researchers considered policy and societal implications of increasing interaction between disparate ethnic groups. Throughout the late 20th century, contact hypothesis and the science behind it continued to inform work aimed at improving intergroup attitudes. The following section gives an overview of this research and addresses the intersection between bridge-building and equity work.

Research Evidence

In 1954 Muzafer Sherif, a social psychologist, conducted what came to be called the Robbers Cave experiment (Sherif 1961). The research team drove a group of twenty-two 11- and 12-year-old boys to an outdoor camp and randomly assigned them to two teams that were pitted against each other in a series of competitive games. The boys named themselves the Eagles and the Rattlers. Although teams were chosen completely at random—an Eagle could have easily been a Rattler had the coin landed on the other side—the boys nevertheless grew to truly dislike members of the opposing team. They traded insults, burned the opposing team’s flag, and even raided the others’ cabin.

The first takeaway from this experiment—which has since been repeated using less dramatic methods and with adults—is that it is not difficult to activate a mentality of “us versus them.” Humans, having evolved in small, close-knit, cooperative tribes, are wired to look out for their own and defend against intruders. And how someone decides who is “their own” and who is an “intruder” can be based on the flimsiest of differences, including the result of a coin toss (Billig and Tajfel 1973).

But what Sherif was ultimately interested in was not how to divide people but how to unite them. To see if they could mend relations between groups, the researchers staged a shared obstacle: *a superordinate goal*. The Eagles and Rattlers awoke one morning to find their water supply cut off; Sherif and his assistants had piled rocks on the water valves. The boys quickly realized that they stood the best chance of solving the problem if they worked together. They formed a chain, passed the rocks down the line, and worked as one team. Notably, Sherif and his team had staged other experiences—sharing meals and watching movies together—but these activities only made tensions worse. Meals devolved into food fights, and the two groups argued fiercely about which movie to watch. Only by working together on a shared problem were the boys able to resolve their conflict.

Building on this experiment and other related work, another psychologist, Gordon W. Allport (1954), hypothesized that it was possible to make members of two opposing groups get along, but four conditions were needed:

1. The members of the two groups must have equal status.
2. The members of the two groups must have common goals.
3. The members of the two groups must work cooperatively: “Only the type of contact that leads people to do things together is likely to result in changed attitudes” (Allport 1954).
4. There is institutional support for the contact (for example, group leaders or other authority figures must support the contact between groups).

Though Allport himself gave these conditions only limited attention in his writing, they became widely accepted for decades. Then, in 2006, two psychologists—Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp—summarized the data from 515 studies of intergroup contact. The findings were encouraging. Across a range of identities and settings, 94% of those studies found that more contact meant less prejudice, as long as the contact was positive in nature. Furthermore, the reduction in prejudice was relegated not just to specific individuals with whom participants interacted but to the entire group. And, perhaps most important, Allport’s four conditions were helpful (they led to a greater reduction in prejudice), but they were not required for intergroup contact to have a beneficial effect.

In fact, some experiments showed that surprisingly little contact is required to improve intergroup attitudes, at least in the short term. Researchers have shown positive results with online chats (White and Abu-Rayya 2012); media portrayals of groups getting along and working constructively together (Gómez and Huici 2008); and seating students near— but, interestingly, not exactly next to—each other (van den Berg and Cillessen 2015). One line of research simply prompts individuals to imagine having a positive interaction with an outgroup member. If you were a white male participating in one of these “imagined contact” studies, you might be asked to close your eyes and imagine that you were meeting a Black woman for the first time and to visualize the interaction as positive, relaxed, and comfortable. That simple exercise measurably improved participants’ feelings about outgroup members (Crisp and Turner 2009).

A large body of research shows that interacting with members of other groups reduces prejudice.

What is it about interacting with members of other groups that reduces prejudice? Some of the answers to this question are intuitive. Such interactions help us see the “outgroup” as individuals and make us realize that not all outgroup members are the same (Crisp and Turner, 2009). We also recognize that members of our ingroup are not all the same. We are reminded of what we have in common and realize that perhaps the two groups are not so different after all (White and Abu-Rayya 2012). We gain appreciation for the outgroup perspective and develop a sense of empathy, understanding, and rapport (Banas, Bessarabova, and Massey 2020).

Another reason why intergroup contact reduces prejudice is that it reduces our anxiety about other group members (Islam and Hewstone 1993). This anxiety grows out of concerns about how we should act, how we might be perceived, and whether we will be accepted (Blascovich et al. 2001). The anxiety can stem from having been discriminated against previously or from fear that we will unintentionally say something offensive. With some experience under our belt, we feel more confident and comfortable interacting with outgroup members, leading us to form more positive attitudes about these groups (Crisp et al. 2009).

Complexities and Limitations

Despite the large body of research, several complications exist when applying social psychology to foster intergroup dialogue. First, intergroup contact reduces prejudice only when that contact is positive in nature; in fact, negative contact can backfire. Sylvia Graf and her colleagues found that negative contact can have an even stronger influence on attitude than positive contact (Graf, Paolini, and Ruben 2014). Some instances of this negative contact included consuming media that portrays outgroup members in stereotypical ways and seeing conflict or competition between groups—both of which are replete in American media (Conzo et al. 2021).

Limits of intergroup contact:

- 1) Contact reduces prejudice only when that contact is positive in nature; negative contact can backfire.**
- 2) Intergroup contact tends to be more effective for members of the numerical majority.**
- 3) Positive intergroup contact can reduce marginalized group members' drive for social change.**

A second complication is that intergroup contact tends to be more effective for members of the numerical majority. In a large survey of almost 5,000 white and Māori New Zealanders, Barlow and colleagues (2013) found that having a greater number of Māori friends consistently improved white New Zealanders' views of the Māori as a group, no matter what kind of neighborhood white participants lived in. For the Māori participants, however, this finding was not always true. For Māori participants who lived in predominantly Māori communities, more contact with white friends indeed improved their intergroup attitudes. But for those Māori participants who lived in predominantly white neighborhoods, more contact with white friends did not seem to make a difference in their intergroup attitudes. The researchers called this the wallpaper effect—that is, by virtue of being the numerical minority, the Māori are exposed to white New Zealanders more often than the reverse, and outgroup contact is no longer a novel or remarkable event that could shape one's perception of the outgroup. These types of findings have led some scholars to critique social psychological research on intergroup contact as focusing on the perspectives and experiences of historically advantaged groups (e.g., Dixon et al. 2010).

And perhaps most troubling, some research suggests that positive intergroup contact can reduce marginalized group members' drive for social change. In an experimental test of a contact intervention in South Africa, researchers found that contact between white

and Black South Africans improved the racial attitudes of both groups; however, this same contact also diminished both recognition by Black South Africans of persisting post-apartheid racial discrimination and their support for policies to dismantle this racial injustice (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2007). Other researchers have facilitated positive contact by focusing members of differing groups on their commonalities, only to find that this experience led marginalized group members to accept hierarchical power relations more readily (Saguy and Chernyak-Hai 2012). There is some evidence of spillover also: Latin American participants who had more contact with whites expressed less willingness to work with Blacks for a common political cause (Glasford and Calcagno 2012). Some researchers have labeled this a sedative effect, and they point out that intergroup *harmony* is not always the same as intergroup *equality*—and that improving the former may, in fact, worsen the latter (Cakal et al. 2011).

This sedative effect is particularly concerning given that there is a long line of well-controlled experimental studies to show that individuals are treated differently based on their race and gender. The most compelling line of evidence comes from a collection of studies known as correspondence studies. The design of these studies is simple. In one study, for example, two identical résumés are drafted, except for one detail. One of the résumés has a stereotypically “white-sounding” name (say, Emily Walsh or Greg Baker), while the other resume has a stereotypically “Black-sounding” name (say, Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones). Other than the names, the résumés are identical: They include the same education and same work experience. These two résumés are sent out to thousands of prospective employers, and the researchers measure how often “Emily” receives a call compared with “Lakisha.” The results are consistent in showing sizable disparities. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), for instance, found that applicants with white-sounding names received 50% more callbacks for interviews than did applicants with Black-sounding names. Variations of this study have shown discrimination against Black individuals and women on a variety of outcomes, including renting a property, securing a home loan, the final price of a car, and the price buyers are willing to pay for a house previously owned by Black versus white families (see Bertrand and Duflo 2016 for a review). In the context of these persistent disparities, it is important that bridge-building does not undermine efforts to correct systemic inequities.

Summary

The research on the contact hypothesis points to great promise for repairing intergroup relations and also to some complexity when these intergroup relations are embedded in a larger system of unequal power structures. On the one hand, a positive interaction with someone from another group will, on average, boost one’s attitude toward that group, even in less-than-ideal conditions. The interaction does not have to be intense or prolonged to lead to short-term but measurable changes in attitudes. The key is that the interaction needs to be accompanied by positive emotions. That said, some recent research suggests that there are side effects to these improved attitudes, including a reluctance to recognize systemic injustices and to correct them. This side effect is particularly concerning given the consistent evidence that individuals receive differential treatment based on their race and gender. In the next section, we discuss the implications of these research findings on our bridge-building work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BRIDGE-BUILDERS

The deepening social and ideological divides in American society pose an existential risk to our democracy. Not only does rising polarization lead to political gridlock, but it is also resulting in a rise in political violence (Kleinfeld 2021). According to polls from 2021, 41% of Biden voters and 52% of Trump voters favor their states seceding to form their own country (University of Virginia Center for Politics 2021), and nearly half of Americans (46%) believe a civil war is likely (Gale and West 2021). In response to these deepening chasms, we and other organizations have initiated efforts to build bridges across divides. The premise of bridge-building work is that by challenging misperceptions about the “opposing side” and bringing together individuals who hold different views, we can humanize these “others” in ways that lead to more constructive public dialogue and ultimately enable us to address the pressing social issues of our time.

In recent years, however, there has been criticism that building bridges across divides is, at best, well intentioned but ineffective and, at worst, contributing to the maintenance of systemic inequities. The concerns we have heard have an underlying theme: Does bridge-building help to maintain the status quo?

Despite these criticisms, it is clear to us that those who have voiced these concerns are motivated by a vision similar to our own: a multicultural, pluralistic society where diversity is celebrated, every individual is treated with dignity, and America's founding ideals of liberty and justice are actualized. This is not to say there is no substance to these concerns. They raise questions about the relative value of dialogue versus disruption, intergroup harmony versus systemic reform, collaboration versus dismantling inequalities.

In writing this report, we came across a prominent conflict resolution theory by Adam Curle (1971). It proposed that intergroup conflict has four stages: education, confrontation, negotiation, and sustainable peace. In this way, both disruption (confrontation) and bridge-building (negotiation) play a role in achieving sustainable peace. The question that remains for the field, then, is not "Which method of effecting change is correct?" but rather "How can we integrate confrontation and negotiation to best advance a pluralistic democracy?" In writing this report, we also came to better understand the critiques of the bridge-building movement, and we grappled with the matter of how bridge-building can promote, rather than undermine, efforts to correct unjust systems. We share our initial reflections below.

1. Make space for personal identities in their full complexity.

Although bridge-builders share a goal of elevating people's humanity, in practice, we can at times have blind spots that obscure the complexity and depth of people's identities and lived experiences. One criticism is that dialogue in bridge-building forums can be positioned around abstract ideas while ignoring personal experience. This leads to a tendency to privilege calm and emotional control in discussions of highly charged issues—without the recognition that some individuals have more at stake. It is easier, for example, to remain calm when engaging in dialogue about transgender rights when one is cisgender; there is simply less to lose.

To address these concerns, practitioners can be intentional about the following practices:

- **Recognize power imbalances.** Power affects who speaks, for how long, and what they share. In many spaces of civil discourse, participants are reckoning with imbalances, both real and perceived. Scientists understand power as determined by both a person's characteristics (CEOs hold power) and immediate environment (a CEO may still not be able to get her teenage daughter to change her outfit; Coleman, Deutsch, and Marcus 2014). Power also determines the rules of engagement, including the norms of dialogue (Voronov and Coleman 2003). As such, practitioners should consider these questions: What are the power dynamics underlying this interaction? As a facilitator, what can I do to redistribute power to even the playing field? How do I share the power to set the norms with participants?
- **Avoid sweeping narratives and prioritize personal realities.** Research shows that group differences exist on a variety of measures, and research also confirms that the difference within groups far exceeds the difference between groups. These seemingly contradictory facts are difficult to hold simultaneously, but holding this complexity is precisely the task of both bridge-builders and social justice advocates. By leveraging what social justice work does exceptionally well—elevating the lived experience to build empathy and understanding—and applying this practice to all individuals, regardless of their background, bridge-builders can create an environment where all participants are fully recognized as complex people who transcend simple labels and are worthy of respect.

One way to steer clear of stereotyping and demonizing particular groups is to make space for individuals to share personal stories. In fact, research shows that the conversations that shift our deeply held beliefs are not intellectual debates; rather, they are human stories (Deep Canvass Institute n.d.). Sharing personal experiences allows individuals to connect, to see someone who disagrees with them as fully

human, and to understand the complex personal and cultural experiences that shaped another's opinion. This context lets participants understand not only the nuances of others' opinions but also the context in which those views were formed. Thus, humanizing these issues can ultimately lead to richer and more meaningful conversations.

2. Engaging across opposing views is worthwhile, but it must be done thoughtfully.

There are many benefits to engaging in conversations with people who have opposing views. Three primary advantages include filling in one's blind spots, communicating more effectively, and building diverse coalitions.

Decades of psychology research have produced an enormous body of evidence demonstrating how cognitive biases can color one's thinking and warp one's reasoning. Engaging in conversations with people with opposing views can help to counteract these biases. Because we are all human, we are all prone to these predictable errors in reasoning. However, we also share the same inability to detect these biases in *our own* thinking. Exposing ourselves to different opinions and sources of information is one of the most effective ways to broaden our perspectives and fill in blind spots. It can bring our attention to information and ideas that were previously hidden from view, providing a more complete picture of complex issues and their impact on the parties involved.

Beyond improving one's own thinking, engaging across differences can also sharpen one's communication skills. The ability to express views in a clear and compelling way increases the likelihood of being heard and understood. It is especially crucial if one cares deeply about a social issue and wants to communicate their views in a manner that will resonate with others. Speaking with people who challenge one's own views affords an invaluable opportunity to strengthen these communication muscles. Taking the time to truly listen to opposing views can unlock empathy and help foster mutual understanding. Furthermore, listening to arguments from the other side can help one better understand the source of the disagreement; this may lead to developing more informed, nuanced, and compelling arguments to explain one's own views. It can also open opportunities to uncover shared values and goals that enable cooperation.

Finally, the most challenging issues in society can be tackled only through collective action. The tougher the issue, the more important it is to build a broad and diverse coalition in which individuals work alongside people who see things differently. Bridge-building efforts are necessary for building these diverse coalitions, and history has demonstrated the effectiveness of such strategies. Many of the greatest leaders and social justice activists pursued this approach. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. and the late Congressman John Lewis, both devoted Christians, built broad multifaith coalitions with Jewish and Muslim leaders. Forging relationships with people of different backgrounds, beliefs, and values can serve as a powerful mechanism for building a diverse coalition to achieve large-scale social change.

Despite these benefits, in this moment of deep reckoning with systemic inequities, the thought of bridging over differences raises important challenges. Bridge-building activities often ask people to be vulnerable and share with strangers deeply cherished or guarded experiences. These activities also ask people to listen—fully and without judgment—to others expressing opinions they may find deeply offensive. Some may wonder whether bridging differences requires papering over injustices, sacrificing moral values, or accommodating hateful views.

In engaging across opposing views, practitioners should be mindful of the potential pitfalls mentioned here and take recommended steps to mitigate them:

- **Be clear that interacting is not necessarily endorsing.** In the current political climate, many people fear the judgment of their own ideological circle for conversing with members of the “other side.” People worry that by listening to someone with an opposing view, whether by attending a lecture, listening to a podcast, or participating in a conversation, they are necessarily endorsing that view. In certain cases, an individual may worry that participating in a conversation with someone with whom they disagree will normalize views or dynamics that perpetuate harm.

It is important to explicitly name and challenge this misperception and emphasize that having empathy for or listening to someone does not equate with endorsement. In fact, rather than normalizing opposing views, when the right conditions are met, engaging in a respectful conversation with someone with opposing views can actually do the opposite. It can provide an opportunity for each party to empathize with and humanize each other—and to meaningfully challenge the views of the other person and expose them to new ideas and information that could change their thinking.

We can learn this lesson from Dylan Marron, a gay writer and activist who hosts the podcast *Conversations with People Who Hate Me*. In his program, Marron speaks with people who wrote him hateful messages on the internet. In a TED Talk, Marron shared, “Empathizing with someone you profoundly disagree with does not suddenly compromise your own deeply held beliefs and endorse theirs.... It just means that I’m acknowledging the humanity of someone who was raised to think very differently from me.” Marron acknowledges how vulnerable it can feel to speak or empathize with someone with whom you strongly disagree, but at the same time, he explains that these types of conversations can humanize both parties to one another and thereby chip away at stubborn prejudices.

- **Set clear norms and give participants an escape chute.** As described earlier, when the right conditions are met, engaging with someone with opposing views can help to break down prejudices. Practitioners can take a variety of steps to create these conditions. Before any interaction, participants should first affirmatively opt in. An individual’s decision to opt in should be based on personal interests rather than outside pressures. Participants should also commit to a set of shared norms for the duration of the interaction. By committing to a set of clear norms, participants have an understanding of what is expected of them and what they should expect from other participants. These agreements serve as a tool; in the case that the interaction gets off track, they can be referred to as a method of course correction. Some examples of norms are to commit to being fully present, to respond rather than react, and to keep the conversation confidential.
- **Acknowledge the emotional labor associated with bridge-building.** Sharing personal experiences may require recounting painful or traumatic experiences, causing emotional distress (Tiayon 2020). This kind of sharing is a form of emotional labor, and it can lead to exhaustion. Further, asking members of marginalized groups to be vulnerable can reinforce unequal power dynamics.

Bridge-builders can help participants make informed decisions about whether to engage by making clear ahead of time what will be asked of participants and by explicitly stating the purpose and potential benefits, to the participant and to society, of this engagement. Facilitators should state at the outset what personal reflection will be expected, allow participants to choose with whom and when they share their stories, and empower participants to opt out of any activities they believe are not beneficial for them. Participants should be given the opportunity to weigh these risks against the potential benefits of engaging in the activities.

3. Embrace the power of small steps to achieve big change.

Research from a dynamic systems perspective suggests that changes in our deeply held beliefs operate similarly to phase transitions in physical systems (Coleman 2021). For example, when water is heated, it slowly warms up but then abruptly begins to boil, changing from liquid to gas. In the same way, people's deeply held convictions usually do not seem to change incrementally; rather, people may hold on to a particular belief for years and then suddenly make a dramatic swing to the other extreme (Latané and Nowak 1994). As with the gradual heating of water, the dramatic change we see on the surface often obscures the gradual exposure people had to ideas that influenced their sudden change of mind.

Social changes often follow a similar pattern: A new attitude catches on and slowly replaces the old attitude within a society. The change can appear instantaneous, but it belies the small actions that eventually built up to a tipping point. The path to transformational change, then, is by pursuing small changes, one at a time, repeatedly and relentlessly. Following are some ways practitioners can leverage these findings.

- **Encourage calling in over calling out.** In current political discourse, it is common to call out actions or ideas that one finds distasteful. The belief is that a zero-tolerance policy and public exposure of an error will get someone to change their ways. This forceful communication style typically reflects a desire to rapidly change people's current ways of thinking and has been identified with "cancel culture." Unfortunately, research demonstrates that such tactics are ineffective in changing beliefs and behavior (Grant 2021). In fact, these actions can actually make people resentful and even more resistant to change. Rather than calling out, we can promote calling in, a technique developed by Loretta Ross, a racial and reproductive justice activist (Bennett, 2021). Calling in is similar to calling out in that it asks for accountability on the part of the person who has erred, but it is communicated privately, with compassion and patience. Although calling in may seem too subtle for some people, these moments of feedback and learning can lead to someone changing their actions and views over time.
- **Focus on people's zones of acceptance** (Berger 2020). Another useful tactic is to moderate communication to meet audience members where they are—as opposed to not engaging them until their belief is closer to your own. According to psychologists, for every issue, each individual has a range of attitudes beyond their own view that they may find reasonable, even if they don't agree with them. When we encounter an argument that is far from our existing views—that is, outside of the zone of acceptance—it is very unlikely that we will be persuaded by it. However, if the argument is within our zone of acceptance, we will be much more likely to engage with the perspective and even adopt it (Sherif 1963; Levendusky 2018). This has implications for how dialogues can be most effectively structured. Encouraging participants to seek mutual understanding rather than encouraging participants to try to change each other's minds can paradoxically lead to more minds being changed. This insight also points to the wisdom of building short bridges first. By first building rapport and discussing beliefs that are less deeply held, participants will be better equipped to engage trickier or more divisive topics as a next step.

The work to make society more just and equitable seems, at once, both urgent and daunting. When what is needed is fundamental change, it can be easy to discount small, incremental steps; however, dramatic changes are often the cumulative result of countless subtle shifts.

CONCLUSION

For those individuals working to bridge divides, create inclusive communities, and promote cohesion, the challenges can feel daunting and insurmountable. Against a backdrop of deep social fragmentation and stark systemic inequities, both interpersonal and systemic interventions are needed. However, some people perceive a trade-off between these efforts. Does promoting dialogue across differences of opinion mean compromising on what change is being advocated? Does pushing for change mean sacrificing relationships with those who disagree?

This report explored these questions by examining the literature that informs the bridge-building field, particularly as it intersects with systemic inequities. It is our position that bridge-building can and should be responsive to the diversity of experiences and identities in the room. Although this report provides some initial recommendations for bridge-building in more culturally responsive ways, we hope that members of the bridge-building field will continue to explore these questions and build on these recommendations. We also hope that these efforts will spur more direct and sustained collaboration between individuals and groups advancing bridge-building and those promoting systemic equity. By engaging with practitioners from other fields, we can develop shared best practices to center personal identities, engage opposing perspectives responsibly, and establish shared expectations for defining and measuring progress. This kind of collaboration is key to realizing the pluralistic democracy that has long been envisioned by all Americans.

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