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Keywords: *cross-cultural dialogue, dialogue norms, dialogue outcomes, dialogue process, inter-group dialogue, Soliya Connect Program*

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This paper examines the link between dialogue mechanisms and potential outcomes. Using the "Soliya Connect Program" as a case study, I focus specifically on dialogue norms, distinguishing between explicit and implicit norms of dialogue, and examine how these norms shape the dialogue space. My analysis suggests that as dialogue mechanisms, these norms both enable and constrain participants' comfort in expressing themselves, and thus can significantly affect the outcomes of the dialogue process.

Introduction

What about the dialogue medium enables – or constrains – learning and empathy building among participants? What are the implicit norms delimiting a dialogue space? This article addresses these questions in an attempt to link dialogue processes to their potential outcomes. I explore one aspect of the dialogue process: the norms, implicit and explicit, shaping the dialogue "space." This article then examines the link between these norms and potential dialogue outcomes: specifically, the way that these norms shape the potential for participant self-expression and learning, during and as a result of the process.

Dialogue has long been a focus of scholars and practitioners interested in its use for addressing divisive conflict at interpersonal and intergroup levels (Schoem and Hurtado 2001). It has been utilized in a variety of contexts and under a wide spectrum of conditions to ameliorate group relations; in areas of acute conflict, dialogue has been central in governmental and civil society efforts to increase mutual understanding, provide legitimacy

for the narrative of the "Other," and improve relationships between majority and minority groups (Kelman 1996, 1997; Saunders 2003). Dialogue has also played a key role in addressing inter-ethnic tensions in the United States, in both local and national forums. In recent years, online dialogue has also proliferated, providing opportunities for individuals around the world to "meet" for discussions about current global issues and tensions underlying inter- and intra-national relations.

As a widespread endeavor and important peace-building tool, dialogue has been the focus of a large body of research. However, much of the scholarship in this field examines either the outcomes of such dialogue, *or* the specifics of group processes. Relatively little is known about the mechanisms linking the two, even as scholars have called for a closer examination of both internal and external mechanisms influencing dialogue processes (Salomon 2011). In this paper, therefore, I make a preliminary effort to fill this gap by highlighting the concept of *dialogue norms* as a potential mechanism connecting the dialogue process to its potential outcomes. Specifically, I examine dialogue norms as a middle ground between group process and individual outcomes. My analysis examines perceptions of dialogue participants regarding the process of an online dialogue, and the importance of that process in relation to individual outcomes. I analyze participants' views of the way that an online dialogue program enables and constrains potential for self-expression and for discussion about difficult issues, and suggest that the degree of self-expression enabled through this medium is significant in terms of the potential learning that dialogue can facilitate.

Existing Research on Dialogue

Much of the early scholarship on inter-group dialogue is rooted in Gordon Allport's (1954) *contact hypothesis*, which suggests that prejudice and hostility between groups in conflict can be reduced, and more positive attitudes result, when certain conditions are met.

Over the years, Allport's theory has been the basis for two major lines of research: scholarship examining the conditions themselves, to assess what is truly sufficient for effectively implementing inter-group dialogue (Pettigrew 1998; Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux 2005); and scholarship examining the predictive ability of Allport's theory, that is, whether relations are indeed improved when these specified conditions have been met.

Research on dialogue outcomes in particular has been the focus of much of the scholarship in this field. Scholars continue to debate whether dialogue and similar programs, such as "contact interventions" (Maoz 2005) or peace education programs bringing together youth from conflict settings (Malhotra and Liyanage 2005; Ohanyan and Lewis 2005), can positively influence their participants, and how. Many studies point to the positive impact of participation in inter-group dialogue programs (Malhotra and Liyanage 2005). Other research, however, delineates the limitations of such programs and its differential influence on participants. For example, scholarship from Israel (Biton and Salomon 2006; Maoz 2000) suggests that powerful and less powerful groups are affected differently by dialogue.

The scholarship focusing on dialogue outcomes suffers from two major limitations. First, early research testing Allport's contact hypothesis took place largely with artificial groups brought together under laboratory conditions, making it difficult to make inferences about various ethnic and other groups in true conflict contexts. Moreover, even recent research has been criticized (Salomon 2011) for its focus exclusively on what happens during or as a result of dialogue, with little attention paid to the external socio-political context or to personal factors that can mitigate, limit, or enhance dialogue's results.

Second, much of the scholarship in this field treats dialogue as a black box. That is, research focuses on outcomes but fails to analyze or conceptualize what takes place during the dialogue itself. Indeed, a recent review of the literature on dialogue (Dessel and Rogge 2008) points out that a major limitation of research in this field is its lack of focus on

dialogue *processes.* In particular, the authors note the lack of focus on links between these processes and the outcomes of dialogue programs.

This is not to say that research ignores the link between process and outcome entirely. Ellen Wayne's (2008) assessment of a dialogue program entitled "Operation Understanding DC" examines the program's facilitation processes specifically in relation to the potential for creating learning opportunities for dialogue participants. Likewise, Biren Nagda's (2006) research on a "cultural diversity and justice" course in a US-based university focuses on the way that dialogue communication processes can help explain the impact of dialogue programs. Nagda's analysis of the pedagogical, psychological, and communication processes that take place during ongoing dialogue programs suggests that the processes of building alliances, learning to appreciate difference, engaging oneself and engaging in critical self-reflection are mediating factors between the encounter and the dialogue outcomes. Specifically, Nagda suggests that these processes play an important role in helping participants *bridge differences*, a central goal of much inter-group dialogue.

Analyzing the Process: Dialogue Norms

Still, studies such as those conducted by Wayne and Nagda remain the exception: most scholarship on dialogue processes contains little discussion of how mechanisms might shape outcomes. Among the mechanisms playing a mediating role between experience and outcome in dialogue are the explicit and implicit norms of dialogue groups. These have been the subject of scholarly examination, but primarily in relation to explicit ground rules established at the onset of dialogue processes. For example, Hierbacher (2009) argues for the importance of ground rules in ensuring that all dialogue participants hear and are heard. Likewise, Chasin et al. (1996) discuss how they attempt to prevent or limit "habitual, unproductive ways of relating and communicating about disputed issues" (p. 331). They suggest that this limitation occurs in part through the establishment of explicit ground rules,

including confidentiality agreements and other rules utilized to help create a safe and supportive environment for dialogue.

With few exceptions (Pyser and Figallo 2004), little has been written about the value of ground rules in promoting high quality dialogue and helping achieve dialogue outcomes. Moreover, ground rules make up only one element of the norms that play out in any dialogue process. Dialogue processes are also shaped by *implicit* norms affecting the nature and potential of conversation. Often these norms are similar to guidelines articulated at the inception of dialogue processes. Yet, dialogue norms are rooted far more broadly than just in explicitly stated ground rules. For example, these norms play out in the way facilitators keep conversations highly structured or not; in the time allotted to dialogue sessions; and in initial choices that participants make about the way they interact with others. In a sense, these norms create a dialogue "space" that goes beyond where discussion physically takes place, representing the degree of openness and flexibility enabled by the dialogue.

As my analysis below highlights, these implicit norms are much more malleable than their explicit counterparts, in the sense that their fluctuation throughout the dialogue process can expand, or limit, the space for dialogue. This differentiates implicit norms from explicit ground rules, which are relatively static: while they can (and should) be changed throughout the dialogue process if necessary, generally these explicit norms are decided upon before dialogue begins, and frame the dialogue from its inception until the end of a session or group of sessions.

The Soliya Connect Program

The *Soliya Connect Program* is a 10-week dialogue program implemented for university students in the United States, Europe, and in the Middle East/Arab world. Founded in 2003, the *Connect Program* has to date reached over 3,000 students in more than 25 countries and over 80 educational institutions (Soliya 2011). This program emphasizes

cultural learning and understanding as its overarching goal: as *Soliya's* website notes, "Through a proven dialogue process, students progress from discussing culture and everyday life to delving into controversial topics with the support of trusted group members, ultimately arriving at a better understanding of other cultures and perspectives" (Soliya 2011).

The *Connect Program* works by matching groups of six to eight university students and two facilitators in a video-conferencing medium that enables synchronous dialogue utilizing written, visual, and audio elements. Each group meets for two hours weekly over the course of a semester, discussing issues related to the relationship between the West and the Arab/Muslim world. These "meetings" take place using a virtual forum that enables participants to see and hear one another as well as type comments into a "chat box" visible by all individuals in the "room." Thus, unlike many online dialogues, the *Soliya* program resembles in many ways dialogue conducted in a traditional, face-to-face format.

Soliya dialogue sessions are based on an online curriculum provided to all facilitators prior to the start of the semester. Students participating in this program read a series of common articles prior to each discussion session, thus ensuring a minimum level of shared knowledge within the group about the day's topic of focus. These topics range from identity issues to foreign policy, current events, and religion: "hot button" topics about the relationship between the West and the Arab/Muslim world. In addition, *Soliya* offers students the opportunity to address topics that arise spontaneously during dialogue sessions, such that each group focuses on issues that are of greatest importance to its members.

The *Soliya* program has clear differences from many face-to-face dialogues. Yet, these differences are relatively small in comparison with the majority of online dialogues that are conducted asynchronously, or when synchronous, via written comments only. For this reason, I do not delve into the particulars of online dialogue when analyzing the *Soliya*

Connect Program. Instead, readers are encouraged to think about *Soliya* as a face-to-face dialogue occurring virtually, rather than a virtual dialogue.

Methodology

The analysis described in this paper is based on interviews with 13 alumni of the *Soliya Connect Program* (seven males and six females), including one European university student, seven students from the United States, and five students from countries in the Arab/Muslim world. All individuals participated in the *Soliya Connect Program* between 2006 and 2008. The 13 participants in this study were drawn from a group of approximately 40 alumni who were contacted about this project, out of the 870 students who participated in the *Soliya Connect Program* between the Fall of 2006 and Spring of 2008. This group of 40 was picked according to maximal variation sampling, such that equal numbers of students from the West and the Arab/Muslim World, and equal numbers of males and females, were contacted about the project. Of these 40 individuals, the 13 interviewed were those who responded to my initial email. Interviews were conducted in English over *Skype*, a software program enabling audio- and video calling over the Internet, and were recorded using a software program entitled *Call Recorder*. Participant names were changed to ensure confidentiality.

The interview itself covered a range of topic domains (Carspecken 1996) agreed upon by me and by staff members from *Soliya*. These domains addressed experiences within the *Soliya Connect Program* as well as a range of issues relating to post-*Soliya* activities, including attitudes about relations between the West and the Arab/Muslim world, networks of relationships, and current activities of program alumni.

To analyze my data, I first transcribed each recorded interview word-for-word and read through the transcripts several times in search of broad themes and patterns. I then coded each interview individually, beginning with low-inference codes and then creating

higher-inference codes (Carspecken 1996), eventually organizing the full range of codes into several broad thematic issues. One element of my analysis addressed the way that interview participants characterized their experiences within the *Soliya Connect Program* and the relationship between these experiences and participants' perceptions of opportunities for self-expression and learning. Thus, while the interviews covered a broad range of issues and experiences, including long-term impact of the program and creation and maintenance of cross-cultural relationships, my analysis here focuses only on this one aspect, as a way of providing insight into and elucidating the process of dialogue and specifically the roles played by implicit and explicit group norms.

To validate my analysis, I dialogued extensively with colleagues about my findings. I also obtained feedback from staff at *Soliya* about my interpretation of issues related to program implementation. Finally, I held ongoing conversations with my interviewees and formally solicited their feedback at two points. First, following initial reading of interview transcripts, excerpts that seemed to be unclear were discussed individually with interviewees in order to obtain clarification on meaning. Moreover, after my initial analysis of the data was complete, I sent a summary of key points to all participants. I was explicit in my request for feedback on this analysis, particularly with respect to the accuracy of my interpretation and its relevance to each participant's experience as part of the *Soliya* program. The feedback received from my interviewees played an important role in the refinement of my analysis and in my final interpretations.

Group Norms: Creating and Constraining Opportunities

In this section of the paper, I focus on how implicit and explicit norms create and shape the dialogue space experienced by participants in the *Soliya Connect Program*. Specifically, I tease out the implicit set of norms followed by participants and analyze how

these norms govern use of dialogue space, as well as how they shape the potential for self-expression and learning.

As in other dialogue settings, two sets of norms are present within the *Connect Program* dialogue space. First, there are ground rules, which are set relatively informally as part of introductory activities during initial dialogue sessions. Participants are guided by facilitators through an activity focusing on their expectations, concerns, and fears regarding the dialogue process; this activity sets the tone for a discussion of ground rules, coming in the form of guidelines suggested by participants (Soliya 2011a).

Here, however, I focus on a second set of norms, implicit norms, as they manifest themselves in the *Soliya* dialogue process. I emphasize in particular two inextricably linked, yet distinct, elements of the virtual space created by *Soliya's* dialogue norms: the space created for *self-expression*, in the form of what participants are comfortable sharing; and the space created for *learning*, both about oneself and others. I discuss how norms create opportunities for expanding this space, as well as how they limit its possibilities.

Dialogue norms and the potential for learning

***"There wasn't really anything that you couldn't say"* (Katie)**

What are the norms governing dialogue within the *Soliya Connect Program*? First and foremost, the program fosters a sense of comfort among group members. One theme emphasized in all of the interviews was the feeling of comfort participants had in sharing thoughts with the group. One student, Katie, said:

> *The cool thing about [the Soliya Connect Program] was that everyone was really respectful, so, I mean there was a general kind of level of acceptance, and I think that people really felt free to speak their minds and, you know, really just say what they were thinking…So, that was one thing that I really appreciated about my group, 'cause I know I talked to other participants who felt a little bit more reserved, but my*

> *group definitely, you know, we felt comfortable talking about everything from, our feelings politically to culturally to different moral issues, we were all pretty open, really, everything…*

Later, Katie added, "*What I really enjoyed was, talking about the topics that are sort of untouchable.*"

Katie suggests here that the level of comfort felt in her group was one enabling participants to talk about any subject at all. In fact, Katie's comments suggest that it was a result of this comfort level that her group members could discuss "everything" during dialogue sessions, including controversial political topics. This sense of comfort was evident in statements made by nearly every other interviewee. For example, Ibrahim, a Middle Eastern male, recounted that "*I had, you know, enjoyable conversations with people, and I never hesitated to speak…and I think that's very, very important thing. I felt comfortable to speak."* "Never hesitating to speak" was a common refrain, suggesting that one of the norms created in the dialogue program was creation of a safe space, or a sense of comfort in sharing perspectives. As one of the Middle Eastern female participants put it:

> *But then when the discussion is so heated, you just, you gotta open that mouth of yours. And just, I felt, it was, it was comfortable to say what's on your mind, because, I mean, let's be honest, most people who come to Soliya, they come with a certain purpose. They wanna connect, they wanna communicate, they wanna talk. And so, I always felt comfortable to say, to say what I think.*

Still, for some participants, this sense of comfort applied only in certain domains. For example, while Katie mentioned the comfort felt in her group to discuss even the "untouchable," Hayat, a Muslim female living in the United States, said,

> *…it just felt like there were a lot of views that people were afraid of expressing, because they felt like it just wasn't the place to do that…I think I also sometimes felt*

like…um, so like in terms of emotionally and like telling my story, I felt comfortable doing that, but from a theoretical perspective and I guess from a more intellectual perspective, I, I wasn't, I didn't engage that as much.

Hayat's comment illustrates a multi-layered perspective on self-expression. Specifically, her comments indicate a high level of comfort with the group that enabled her to speak about personal issues. Yet, Hayat held back when it came to topics requiring a more intellectual discussion – the same issues Katie refers to as "untouchable." Other participants also commented upon having mixed feelings regarding the potential for self-expression, with varying degrees of comfort when expressing views related to controversial topics. Discussions about personal issues and experiences, on the other hand, were characterized across the board by high comfort levels and the sense that no holding back was necessary. Thus, these personal discussions played an important role in creating comfort among participants, with possible, but uncertain, potential for comfort in discussing more contentious issues down the road.

***"Limited by politeness"* (Jane)**

While a number of factors influenced participants' levels of comfort discussing controversial issues, many interviewees echoed Hayat's comment that, "It just wasn't the place…" [to say what they really thought]. Paradoxically, many participants indicated that their hesitation in fully expressing themselves was a result of positive group dynamics: that is, their hesitation came from a fear of disrupting this positive space. Jane made this issue explicit in her interview:

It was a very calm group, and I think for that, that's why… we had really good discussions, but I think that they could have been even more, uh, action packed…And so, they were good, I mean, very in-depth conversations, they were also limited by politeness. And so -

K: *Sorry, they were limited by what?*

Jane: *Limited by politeness. Nobody really wanted to step on anybody's toes. And, I think that if we had had, um, a couple of males in the group that it would have been different…And there were a couple [of my friends at school] that were in male only groups with only one or two females, and the conversations were much more aggressive, much more antagonistic, and, um, not always in a good way, but often in a good way, because they just spoke out what was on their minds, and we didn't really experience that in our group. Um, but there were a lot of really good questions, even though nobody wanted to offend anyone else. Um, we had a really open, very um, comfortable forum to ask questions in.*

For Jane, having an all-female group created a comfortable dynamic, but this comfort also prevented members of the group from saying something that might be construed as offensive. Hayat described a similar dynamic in her group, using the example of a discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

Um, so, we started off talking about, sort of, our own personal involvement with the conflict, our like personal opinions and thoughts or whatever, um, and then, I'm trying to remember, who, someone said something about how Palestinians felt that, what was happening to them, now, was similar, slash, could be compared to, what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust. And the Jewish girl got extremely, extremely offended by that, and, I mean, it was so, I mean, very evident, and she kind of yelled at the girl, um, and, I think the moderators did a good job of just, trying to let the group know that they were just expressing a view that is, you know, commonly felt in that part of the world, um, even, even though the girl herself might not hold that view, it's important to put it to the table, and talk about it, so…

K: *Right. And, what were other, other participants' reactions?*

> ***Hayat:*** *I think the American participants, the non-Jewish participants just didn't want to touch it. Like it wasn't, um, the thing that they wanted to get themselves into. I felt like they were kind of trying to move the subject, like move it along to something else.*

Hayat's comment suggests that when the conversation started to shift towards more contentious issues and disagreement, her group made a conscious effort to return to topics that would allow for consensus and a positive dynamic. Charles also stated this about his own group:

> *…it's funny, because everybody was having such a good time connecting that when, you know, serious issues would come up, and, and people knew that there were, uh...that there were going to be differences, people were kind of hesitant to get into it, you know, so to speak.*

The paradox of dialogue as enabling and constraining is doubly highlighted in Charles' comments. On the one hand, his comment indicates that *Soliya* succeeded in creating a space where participants were able to connect and interact positively. On the other hand, this very connection acted as boundary line, effectively limiting the potential for expressing views that might disrupt the positive, supportive dynamic within each of the groups.

"*It's going to look bad"* (Ibrahim)

Several participants indicated that group norms of dialogue in particular served to restrict the potential for self-expression, especially when discussing more controversial issues. Political correctness, for these participants, was defined not just by the norms of what might be considered appropriate statements in a typical conversation, but specifically by the medium of dialogue characterizing *Soliya* discussions. For example, Ibrahim said:

> *If you ask people to say what they are thinking, they will probably not say it, because, probably they are shy or they, you know, they don't want to offend people, but if they*

do, if you really give them the opportunity to express themselves in a real manner, and they do take that opportunity, it's going to look bad, and it's going to sound bad, too, it's not going to go over, you know, in an educational program…

Likewise, Hayat added:

I just felt like it wasn't presented as a space – I mean, if you present it as a space for dialogue, I think it completely, different atmosphere happens, then when it's a different space. Because, ***there****, people are just so much more prone to, really express themselves, but, people might just not feel comfortable doing that, um*

K: *There, in non-dialogue settings, you mean?*

Hayat: *Yeah, in non-dialogue settings, exactly.*

Thus, it seems that because of its focus on creating a comfortable space for dialogue – one in which participants were able to ask questions and listen deeply to one another – the *Connect Program* hindered opportunities for expressing opinions or views that involved making statements not in line with dialogic norms. Paradoxically, norms created within the dialogue in order to foster honest and civil discussion thus prevented full honesty.

Other participants also expressed their perception that the dialogue medium in particular was restrictive. For example, Badra, a Middle Eastern female, said,

I noticed being part of Soliya, people from the Middle East are afraid to voice their opinions, lest they be thought of, uh, like extremists, or not open-minded, or sometimes they just want to, they don't want to go through the hassle, you know, uh, they don't want to ruffle feathers.

Likewise, Ibrahim felt the conversation "never went off line," stating,

Most of the people say that, ok, you understand that Muslims aren't all the same, we understand that terrorists are small minority of Muslims who, who aren't really Muslims, who were rejected by the Muslim community, or, or see Islam in another

way. So, [Muslim participants] always try to not defend that, I would say, and to remain politically correct, and uh, it's rare that I hear people saying, even, straight opinion about Islam…

As Hayat stated later, it was a fear of being discredited that led individuals to refrain from expressing opinions that might reflect upon them poorly. She explained her perception thus:

They might be afraid that their views on one issue will discredit them in the eyes of their peers on that issue as well as other issues. Like, "oh, this person can't be trusted when it comes to Israel-Palestine, he thinks that all Muslim women should wear the hijab." I think it's fears like these that keep people from being completely honest and frank in this space.

Despite the sense of comfort experienced by nearly all participants, the space created for self-expression – especially about more contentious issues – was constrained to a large degree. In addition to the implicit norms limiting these opportunities – of politeness and political correctness, for example – participants expressed frustration with other issues that they felt impeded their learning ability in the group, many of which were directly linked to the *Connect Program* being a space for dialogue, rather than for other kinds of conversations. For example, several participants expressed frustration with the level of structure in the dialogue sessions:

Our moderator, um, kept things very structured, and um, sometimes I felt that it was a little restricting… we would always, um, we would always end up addressing the specific questions that the moderator would give, it would never, um, get a lot past that. (Evan)

> *…it's definitely a facilitator, um, facilitator's call, but sometimes, the discussion were too regulated, um, and we didn't really have a chance to go beyond what we were supposed to be talking about* (Jane)

The frustrations expressed about dialogue moderation indicate that within the *Soliya* space it was difficult to push past certain levels of discussion or move beyond specific, pre-determined topics. This structure may have contributed to a perception that the dialogue forum was not conducive to presenting views outside the mainstream, thus instilling the sense of fear that Hayat described.

The frustration expressed is particularly interesting given *Soliya's* perspective on facilitation and the facilitator role. According to the *Soliya* curriculum, the top tips for effective facilitation are: promoting a feeling of ownership over the process and being flexible (Soliya 2011a). Providing structure is also listed as a tip; however, the curriculum adds that this structure should focus on letting students know in advance what will be discussed at each session – in other words, providing an overall template for the semester. *Soliya's* goals, thus, run counter to the experiences of students interviewed, whose statements suggest that rather than enabling honest discussion, facilitators were a part of the limiting structure of the dialogue medium. In other words, while facilitators may have kept students talking about "what we were supposed to be talking about," in Jane's words, they also constrained self-expression, limiting the potential for voicing all points of view.

Group norms and learning opportunities

The norms discussed above effectively delimit the *Soliya Connect Program* dialogue space. In doing so, these norms serve as a mechanism linking the dialogue process to potential outcomes: specifically, *Soliya's* goal that each participant learn from others and about oneself. All participants interviewed discussed the transformative learning that took place, both in terms of <u>what</u> they learned and <u>how</u> they learned it. Creation of a space

characterized by high comfort levels enabled participants to hear different perspectives on issues, thus presenting an opportunity for participants to gain greater awareness of their own culturally bounded perceptions. For example, Katie indicated that it was due to the level of comfort felt among all her group members that they could discuss "untouchable" issues such as sexuality and gender, and she pointed to these dialogue sessions as helping deepen her understanding these topics and realize the productivity of engaging in difficult conversations.

Katie also illustrated the space for learning created through *Soliya* in her recounting of a discussion about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict:

> ***Katie:*** *Well, I mean, just, kind of, like, overcoming some of those issues, like, the one that stood out the most to me was probably the one where, this Palestinian girl was talking about all of the family she had lost, and she was really passionate about the conflict, and really, kind of, full of hatred toward Israel…And, the girl from Germany just could not understand it and she kept on saying, like, I just don't understand how you can hate. And I just thought that was like a really interesting dynamic to, like, the fact that they were so, I don't know, it was kind of cool to watch that play out.*
>
> ***K:*** *What was your own, like, how did you contribute to that, do you remember?*
>
> ***Katie:*** *Well I mean, I'm more, pro-Palestine, but I was kind of, you know, I was trying, I guess, to help [name of student], that was the one thing where we differed, kind of helping her to see, well, obviously this girl's going to have really passionate feelings, because, she's been through a lot clearly (laughs)…*
>
> ***K:*** *Right*
>
> ***Katie:*** *But … it really, to me that kind of exemplified the way that Westerners just, sometimes and probably myself too, we just don't* ***get it****, but, it's, it's kind of neat to see, just to be exposed to that.*

Katie's comments suggest that hearing others share their perspectives provided an opportunity for critical self-reflection. In this sense, the dialogue space enabled learning about oneself; most importantly, it enabled participants to learn from one another. In the quote above, Katie mentions that it was through hearing the personal experiences of another individual that she was able to see that Westerners "just don't get [the emotion attached to certain issues]," and thus understand more about her own culture and background.

Participants' comfort in discussing their personal experiences seemed essential in enabling learning to occur. For example, Jane said,

> *…they're just very, um, touching stories and they don't leave your head, you know, you can't really get away from them. Um, because to get away from them is to leave behind the human experience that [the students were] telling us about, and um, I definitely do think that, those conversations, those stories, um, have become part of my thought process when discussing, um, Egypt for example, or the government there, or more importantly, not more importantly perhaps, but more significantly, Palestine, and issues around that and Israel.*

Hearing others' experiences was also important for Jane in validating her own perspective:

> *…I think, that one, all those experiences made me, um, appreciate and be prouder of my own experiences…so absolutely, uh, the sense of acknowledging one's own history and, um, character, that's something that's quite important that I took away from Soliya.*

Thus, for Jane, hearing others' stories made a significant impression on her regarding both the topics discussed and her own sense of self. As her interview shows, these discussions were ultimately a significant learning experience that Jane has carried well past her participation in *Soliya*.

Other participants likewise indicated that the existence of norms enabling individuals to express themselves was fundamental for their own learning. For instance, Charles said that before participating in the *Connect Program* he knew little about issues related to the US-Middle East relationship. What he did know came from reading and watching mainstream media. As a participant in the *Soliya* program, however, Charles indicated that the space for sharing – as enabled by the sense of comfort among his group members – helped him engage in a much deeper learning process:

> *…it took me speaking to people, face to face, uh, to really kind of develop an educated, uh, opinion, or point of view, you know…I really had to hear something from, from people face to face…to really start…kind of changing how I felt…*

This suggests that Charles' learning occurred as a result of hearing about the personal experiences of individuals from different parts of the world, rather than just reading about issues or seeing them discussed on television. In fact, this distinction was emphasized by nearly all of the individuals interviewed. Daniel, an American male, stated that

> *I hold a degree in international relations and, and even though I have a second degree, I never, you know, had a real chance to experience the, the Middle Eastern culture and discuss much about it as we had with the… members of the group…*

Finally, Nizar, an Egyptian male, pointed out how hearing others' perspectives helped him understand the justification behind points of view other than his own:

> *But, it's not enough, as I was saying, to know that someone has a different thought process or different opinion, because you don't know the thought process that goes into it, and the whole justifications and the reasoning behind it. And like, that's the essence of like, understanding a different point of view … Because, we can just agree to disagree, you know, right at the spur of the moment, oh, you believe this and I believe that and that's it. But you never get a chance to understand or know, or even*

> *put ourselves in another person's shoes and understand why and how and why you're even thinking like this. Um, I think this really helped, open the door for me in kind of, that way, you know what I mean…and that, I was just more able to understand, you know, people don't just believe things, people don't just have random opinions, there's reasons for it, there's justification.*

The space created for self-expression was thus clearly significant in enabling participants to learn from one another, helping Soliya meet its objective of participants arriving at a "better understanding of other cultures and perspectives." As Damien, a participant from the USA put it, "*By listening more, we gain some grounds for understanding.*" Yet, just as the space was constrained by norms that emphasized a particular type of conversation, the potential for individuals to gain a deep understanding of different worldviews depended upon the degree this space allowed for expressing opinions about controversial topics at the heart of the conflict between the West and the Arab/Muslim world. Hayat's comment that "*from a more intellectual perspective, I, I wasn't, I didn't engage that as much*," suggested that her group's dialogue had limited potential, or what she referred to at one point as limited *value*, as a learning opportunity.

Likewise, Alex, a European male, pointed out,

> *We agreed, we agreed all the time and so, I don't know, I think you learn, you learn more when you hear about, when you hear different people's opinions and…you can learn from them and maybe even change your mind.*

His statement implies that constant agreement among group members prevented learning from taking place, both cognitively and in terms of possible self-reflection, which might have enabled a deeper change in worldviews.

Dialogue Norms and the Potential for Change

The possibilities for dialogue, and the limitations, discussed above, present the *Soliya Connect Program* as enabling comfort with discussion of certain issues, but in other ways restricting participants from fully voicing controversial or unpopular views. These constraints – structure created by facilitators, the desire not to ruffle feathers and to remain politically correct – might be viewed as *Soliya* dialogue norms that effectively placed limits, not only on self-expression, but on the ability of *Soliya* participants to learn from another in deeper and more meaningful ways. In other words, the constraints limited the possible outcomes of dialogue, due to the importance participants placed on one another's views as learning mechanisms.

Yet, these norms were not set in stone: in fact, several students expressed a belief that they could change relatively easily. Thus, they felt that the space for self-expression – and consequently for learning – could have been expanded if certain limitations were addressed. For example, Jane noted that one thing she would have liked to experience in her group was more time for establishing personal connections:

> *I think that if there was even one more additional session, there would be time for one more discussion (laughs). What I think we missed was, um, our last session, we spent about half the time, just, talking about silly things, like what's your favorite food, what's your favorite, you know, type of movie, just stuff like that. And it seems really trite and trivial, but um, it was really, really fun. And we all, you know learned something really funny and, and very personal about each other. Um, and that created more of a, a real, human connection, you know…You can talk and tell your stories all you want, but you know, it's the little things like that that…make a friendship, or make somebody really know you, you know. So, more time, um, like*

that, or maybe a dedicated session that's all about, um, getting to know one another and uh, the minutia in our lives.

In other words, Jane noted the importance of having more time devoted to getting to know one another. For her, as for other students, the amount of time available for discussion was a limiting factor in terms of potential dialogue outcomes: her comments suggest that given more time, greater comfort levels and thus a larger space for self-expression might have been created.

Georgia, another student from the USA, made a similar comment, but addressed the time provided for each session rather than focusing on the number of sessions, stating,

I think they kind of need to, um, make the discussions go longer. Like many times we have, um, a discussion, and it's so heated, and we're so active, and, then, the time is, like, we finished our time. We have our two hours, and, like, we can't go after our two hours. Even if we are like discussing and are active and want to discuss more, we can't do that any more.

Finally, Badra pointed out the difficulty of creating a space where individuals felt comfortable expressing themselves when several participants missed multiple sessions over the course of the semester:

Badra: …*And you know the problem with Soliya, I mean, I love it, but the problem with Soliya, with the people within Soliya (laughs), is that some of them, they don't attend a lot of, uh, sessions. And so that sometimes, that just, I, I mean, if we're meeting for, let's say, eight – 6, 7 weeks, and they're showing up only twice. What's, what's the point of that?*

These comments suggest that perhaps Soliya's largest constraint was the amount of time available for dialogue, including time where the whole group was present. In other words, longer sessions, a longer semester, or a guarantee of participation by the full group in

all sessions would have enabled participants to get to know one another better, feel more comfortable with one another, and as a result, move into deeper and more honest conversations. Instead, as Hayat indicated, *"We didn't really know each other well enough to like really feel, like, if someone said something that was like, didn't sit well with us at all, I don't know if we felt comfortable enough to really challenge them."* Perhaps this comfort would extend to facilitators, as well, enabling them to let go of a need for structure and instead letting the group "own" the conversation, thus expanding the potential for high comfort levels and, subsequently, the learning potential among group participants.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study serves as a starting point for addressing a major gap in the scholarship on dialogue, specifically, the issue of dialogue mechanisms and how they can facilitate or inhibit positive change. My analysis makes three main points in regards to dialogue norms as one such mechanism. First, I highlight the way that these norms, both implicit and explicit, can shape the potential for learning that occurs in dialogue encounters. Second, I delineate the seemingly paradoxical nature of the dialogue medium as a forum for enabling open, reflective discussion and simultaneously limiting total honesty between participants, thus limiting the depth and level of learning that might occur. Finally, my analysis suggests that these norms are not set in stone – changes in the structure of a dialogue intervention or in its framing can shape the course of the dialogue process and ultimately its consequences.

The relatively small number of individuals interviewed potentially limits the generalizability of my findings in the broader context of inter-group dialogue. Moreover, the generalizability of this project is limited by its focus on a single dialogue program rather than multiple dialogue projects. However, my findings provide an important starting point for addressing additional research questions. For example, further research might examine the way that implicit and explicit norms differentially shape the "space" for dialogue in face-to-

face and online contexts, or in dialogues that focus on contentious issues rather than those that emphasize cross-cultural learning. Additional research might also focus on the extent to which training or instruction of individual facilitators might facilitate or constrain self-expression among participants. Finally, similar studies should be conducted with multiple groups in order to determine the extent to which findings from this project are both specific to the *Soliya* process and generalizable to broader dialogue projects.

Despite its limitations, this analysis highlights several implications for the theory and practice of dialogue. At a practical level, it suggests that the way dialogue is framed plays an important role in how participants view the process and the way that they participate. This corroborates work of other scholars (Schoem et al 2001) who point to the importance of pre-dialogue processes and their importance in "setting the stage" for a candid and honest discussion during the dialogue process itself. This analysis thus points to the need for greater attention to be given to the language utilized to frame dialogue for participants.

In addition, a significant implication of this analysis is its highlighting of the importance of time in shaping potential dialogue outcomes. This is by no means a novel concept – scholars have long pointed to the importance of ensuring that dialogue processes take place over extended periods, particularly with respect to creating opportunities for individuals to get beyond initial positions and prejudices (Schoem 2003; Zúñiga, Naagda and Sevig 2002). However, I argue that time is important in a different way: this analysis indicates a close connection between temporal factors and dialogue norms, both implicit and explicit. In implementing dialogue, therefore, we need to think not only about extending dialogue processes over multiple sessions. We should also address the way that the structure and timing of each session, and the dialogue process as a whole, can impact whether and how much participants are comfortable expressing themselves, and consequently the degree to which dialogue spaces can enable or constrain potential learning opportunities.

Finally, at a theoretical level, this analysis highlights the degree to which process and outcome must be better linked in scholarship on dialogue. We need to continue to explore the various processes that make up the "black box" of dialogue and the way these processes are linked to the outcomes we assess.

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