

# Transformative Experience, Conflict Resolution and Sustained Dialogue

Philip D. Stewart & Nissa Shamsi\*

## Abstract

*The roots of conflict, whether international, community or interpersonal, are most often expressed in antagonistic attitudes or perspectives towards 'the other'. Such attitudes frequently are deeply embedded and resistant to change. Yet lasting resolution of conflict is difficult, if not impossible, unless such attitudes of hatred, mistrust and anger can be addressed. This article begins with insights from science that shows that transformation of such perceptions under certain circumstances can occur. We then describe a well-tested but little known approach to conflict resolution whose design embodies these insights to transform conflicted relationships into more constructive ones. It is only through such transformation of perceptions, attitudes and relationships that the parties themselves become capable of constructively dealing with the economic, social and political issues in the conflict. This approach is called Sustained Dialogue. Sustained Dialogue has its roots in a high-level, U.S.–Soviet, now U.S.–Russia, dialogue, known as the Dartmouth Conference, which first met at Dartmouth College in 1960 and held its 137th session in October 2015. Its focus on transformation of relationships enables Sustained Dialogue to be effective in addressing a very wide range of conflicts, from a civil war in Tajikistan, to tensions between Israeli Arabs and Jews, to ethnic and racial tensions on 60 college campuses around the world and to intracommunity and intra-institutional conflicts. Sustained Dialogue identifies **five components of relationship**: identity, interests, power, perceptions, misperceptions and stereotypes, as well as patterns of interaction. Moderators use these five elements not only to understand the nature of a conflict but also to guide the dialogue in ways that encourage transformative experiences. This takes time and occurs throughout the **five stages of the process**: deciding to engage, mapping relationships and naming problems, probing problems and relationships, scenario building as well as acting and learning together. The Sustained Dialogue Institute in Washington DC trains and encourages the use of this method. To provide the reader with a fuller sense of what this transformation process looks like and some of the results achieved, this article concludes with several illustrations from various kinds of conflicts.*

**Keywords:** conflict resolution, transformation, attitude change, adult learning, sustained dialogue.

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## 1 Introduction

A critical challenge in conflict management and resolution work is how to address what are often deeply rooted, generations-long fears, hurts, prejudices and stereotypes that often undermine the most well-intentioned, sophisticated efforts at encouraging the productive, sustainable relationships essential to peaceful management of differences that give rise to conflict. The roots of conflict, whether international, community or interpersonal, are most often expressed in antagonistic attitudes or perspectives towards 'the other'. Such attitudes frequently are deeply embedded and resistant to change. This article begins with insights from science that shows that transformation of such perceptions can occur under certain circumstances. We then describe a well-tested but little known approach to conflict resolution whose design embodies these insights to transform conflicted relationships into more constructive ones. It is only through such transformation of perceptions, attitudes and relationships that the parties themselves become capable of constructively dealing with the economic, social and political issues in the conflict. This approach is called Sustained Dialogue. Sustained Dialogue has its roots in a high-level, U.S.–Soviet, now U.S.–Russia, dialogue known as the Dartmouth Conference, which first met at Dartmouth College in 1960 and held its 137th session in October 2015. Its focus on transformation of relationships enables Sustained Dialogue to be effective in addressing a very wide range of conflicts, from a civil war in Tajikistan, to tensions among Israeli Arabs and Jews, to ethnic and racial tensions on 60 college campuses around the world and to intra-community and intrainstitutional conflicts. The Sustained Dialogue Institute in Washington, DC trains and encourages the use of this method. To provide the reader with a fuller sense of what this transformation process looks like and some of the results achieved, this article concludes with several illustrations from various kinds of conflicts.

## 2 The Science behind Transformational Learning

### 2.1 *What Is Transformation?*

There are myriad definitions of 'transformation' and 'transformational experiences'. Several address transformation on the individual level, which is key in the context of Sustained Dialogue and its conflict-resolution potential.

Transformation involves change in the way we relate to the Other. This relationship, in turn, changes our understanding of ourselves (Hegel, 2009; n.d.: Kindle Locations 910-912).

[Transformation is] the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectations to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991).

While all these touch on the characteristics of transformation that Sustained Dialogue strives to achieve, Mezirow's definition is particularly relevant because of its attention to assumptions, as well as the action component that is critical to transformation (Reiss, 2012).

In Sustained Dialogue (Saunders, 1999; 2005; 2011b), particularly as they struggle with divisive issues, participants are exposed to assumptions at variance with those of their own. Powerful personal stories often lead participants to reflect deeply on their own assumptions. With repeated exposure, profound transformations in assumptions, beliefs and behaviours can occur. As Mezirow affirms, assumptions limit our understanding of others and the world around us. Through awareness, our assumptions cease to be limiting, and a perspective shift takes place.

## 2.2 Transformational Learning

There is no consensus on how transformational learning takes place among the many fields – neuroscience, psychology, educational pedagogy and dialogue – that seek to understand this phenomenon. The good news, however, is that each provides important insights into aspects of the processes through which perceptions can be transformed, as well as the obstacles that inhibit or limit possibilities for deep change.

Jack Mezirow, the father of transformative learning theory, defines transformation in the context of the adult learning environment. For Mezirow, transformational experiences occur through the learning process when reflection, dialogue and action are present (Dirkx, 1998). The key concepts of Mezirow's theory are: (1) a disorienting dilemma or triggering event, (2) critical reflection, (3) rational discourse and (4) action (Mezirow *et al.*, 2009: 4). The disorienting dilemma or triggering event is traditionally described as comprising a crisis that is traumatic and an emotional catalytic response (Pasquariello, 2009). Accumulated life experiences, including the impact of ongoing experience, such as Sustained Dialogue, constitute "the primary medium of transformative learning" (Mezirow, 1999: 1). Our attitudes, perspectives, outlooks and world views are formed over our lifetime as we internalize and give meaning to our experiences. These experiences, then, become the "starting point" for discussions about "value judgments or normative expectations". These, in turn, shape the qualities of our relationships.

Here we encounter a challenge: psychologists tell us that changes in attitude sufficiently deep to lead to changes in belief and behaviour are relatively rare and difficult to bring about. Learning new 'facts' does nothing to change attitudes. Nobel laureate psychologist Daniel Kahneman, after reviewing a number of relevant studies, including varieties of the famous 'help' experiment, concludes that from most of these experiments students learn nothing that changes their way of thinking, although they may have learned new facts. Kahneman (2012) finds that "even compelling causal statistics will not change long held beliefs or beliefs rooted in personal experience" (pp. 172-174).

Fifty years ago, Thomas Kuhn (2012) demonstrated that even among those whose professions are based upon facts and 'hard evidence' profound changes in

scientific world views occur very slowly and often only through generational change. In his classic work on the emergence of complexity theory, M. Mitchell Waldrop (1992) retells in chilling detail how the pioneers in this field in the 1980s and early 1990s found themselves harassed, excluded from conferences and denied publication for ideas that questioned the foundations of positivist science, particularly the concept of linearity.

Mezirow's (2011) solution to this challenge is to assume that life experience is "socially constructed," and thus it can be "deconstructed and acted on through a process of dialogue and self-reflection" (p. 4). But this 'deconstruction' is neither simple nor straightforward. Mezirow correctly identifies some "disorienting dilemma or triggering event" as the essential starting point for change. For Kahneman a "disorienting dilemma" is an "incongruity that must be resolved." In 40 years of teaching, he found that these stimuli to rethink and reassess arise "most powerfully" when students "find surprising facts in their *own* [emphasis added] behavior, rather than by hearing surprising facts about people in general" (Kahneman, 2012: 174).

Why is it that changing perspectives, adopting new points of view, changing judgments is so difficult? Mezirow argues that rational assessment through dialogue and critical thinking should suffice once a triggering event is present. Yet Kahneman provides persuasive evidence why these are necessary but often not sufficient. Kahneman posits that our brains are composed of two largely independent yet related systems. In more than 90% of cases, decisions are made by our emotional brain, which he calls "System I". This emotional brain works very fast and makes decisions based upon our accumulated experience. In fact, fMRI studies show that most of our decisions are 'made' before we are even consciously aware of them.

"Paul Slovic eventually developed the notion of an affect heuristic, in which people make judgments and decisions by consulting their emotions: Do I like it? Do I hate it? How strongly do I feel about it? In many domains of life, Slovic said, people form opinions and make choices that directly express their feelings and their basic tendency to approach or avoid, often without knowing that they are doing so" (Kahneman, 2012: 138). Slovic emphasizes that the emotional brain works hard to relieve us of the need to confront challenges to our identity created by triggering events. "The affect heuristic is an instance of substitution, in which the answer to an easy question (how do I feel about it?) serves as an answer to a much harder question (what do I think about it?)" (Kahneman and Slovic, 1982)

What this means in everyday life is that the prejudices, attitudes and outlooks that we have accumulated through our life experiences will always tend to shape our first or immediate responses. The neurological basis for this was identified by Antonio Damasio (1994), "who had proposed that people's emotional evaluations of outcomes, the bodily states and the approach and avoidance tendencies associated with them, all play a central role in guiding decision making" (Kahneman, 2012; 138).

### 2.3 *How Transformation Occurs*

Only with effort can we engage our consciousness (Kahneman's System II) in decision-making. Rational assessment of costs and benefits is not a natural act; rather, it requires self-consciously overcoming the ready-made responses of our emotional brain. Yet, of course, transformations in perspective do occur. What makes this possible is the malleability of the physical brain. Daniel Siegel, in conversation with a broad group of neuroscientists and psychiatrists, identified three key characteristics of the mind/brain as related to change:

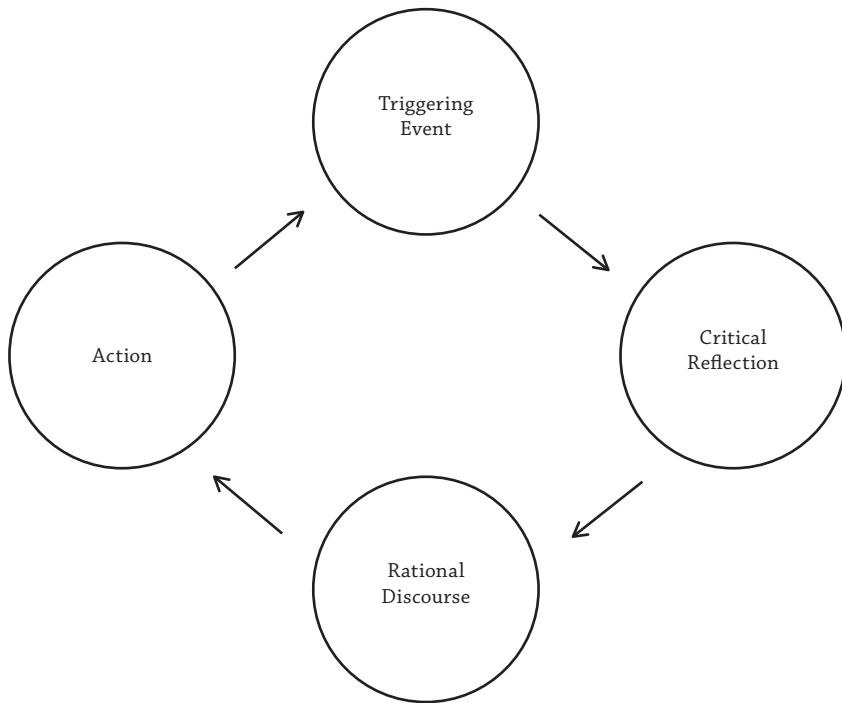
The human mind emerges from patterns in the flow of energy and information within the brain and between brains.

The mind is created within the interaction of internal neurophysiological processes and interpersonal experiences.

The structure and function of the developing brain are determined by how experiences, especially within interpersonal relationships, shape the genetically programmed maturation of the nervous system. (Badenoch, 2008: Kindle locations 5956-5957; Siegel, 1999)

Bonnie Badenoch, a neurotherapist, draws out the implications of these principles for understanding how perspectives, attitudes and prejudices can be transformed. "What is immediately striking about these principles is the view that the mind is no longer contained within the individual brain; instead, its emergence is intimately linked to processes in other brains" (Badenoch, 2008: Kindle locations 1100-1104). *In short, the mind is open to change through relationships with others.* Our minds become more open to constructive or positive change when we are in particular kinds of relationship with others.

Mezirow typically refers to the disorienting dilemma/triggering event in a more negative sense, as something that disorients an individual's core assumptions and beliefs (Pasquariello, 2009: 26). Disorienting dilemmas/triggering events can be experienced either as one event or as a series of dilemmas that cause reflection. For many participants in Sustained Dialogue, the exchanges in the dialogue itself serve as the triggering event (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** *Mezirow's transformative learning theory*

Critical reflection, then, is the cognitive response wherein individuals reflect on their assumptions and beliefs. But individuals must actively choose to utilize these triggering events for reflection in order for a transformational process to unfold. It is common for several people to undergo the same disorienting event, while only those that actively and critically reflect upon it are transformed. This has implications for those in conflict who do not have a space to reflect, and for the critical role of Sustained Dialogue and similar processes as spaces to provoke and encourage processing of potentially triggering events (e.g., incidents on campus or in community, racial, ethnic, religious and other conflicts). Through critical reflection, individuals seek to find the sources of assumptions they hold (Pasquariello, 2009: 194). Critical reflection and self-examination are imperative to the transformative process because it is at this stage that individuals begin to examine the validity of their assumptions and beliefs within the context of the disorienting dilemma/triggering event.

Once a triggering event has initiated the transformational process and an individual has begun to reflect critically on assumptions and beliefs, the realization that others have different assumptions and beliefs will prompt both rational and somatic or emotionally based discourse about various issues relating to the triggering event and others' beliefs or perspectives. In fact, this is the essence of Sustained Dialogue. Rational discourse, as defined by Mezirow, is the use of dialogue in search of a common understanding. But, as Kahneman demonstrated,

long-term attitude change requires getting at the underlying somatic or emotional, experience-based sources of belief. Along with the critical assessment of assumptions, understanding comes from drawing upon collective experience. Through critical reflection and self-examination, the individual has realized that her/his assumptions, role, relationships and actions must begin to fit her/his newfound understanding. The insight and experiences shared in such settings as Sustained Dialogue enable and help contextualize the transformative process within new relationships; it is a humanizing process (Brown, 2008: 2). Throughout the transformative process, the individual comes to realize that change is needed. In order for change to occur, an old perspective must be negated or integrated with a new perspective. First, an individual must acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed for implementation and become comfortable within new roles and with using new perspectives. Second, the individual must act upon these new assumptions and beliefs until a high level of competency is reached. Reintegrating these new beliefs into one's life is the final step in the transformational process. "Perspective transformation", as Mezirow calls it, happens when an individual's actions are changed because the meaning of his or her beliefs or habitual form of self-expression has been transformed. He defines this transformation as "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectations to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings" (Mezirow, 1991: 167). The transformational process described by Mezirow involves a transformation of the lenses through which an individual perceives herself/himself, others and the world.

#### 2.4 *Transformation: From Theory to Practice*

Sustained Dialogue is a conflict transformation process conceptualized by Hal Saunders from two sources: his experiences as diplomat, including as a key participant in Kissinger's 'shuttle diplomacy', following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and as principal author of four peace agreements, including the 1979 Camp David Accords, and more than thirty years of participation in the U.S.–Russia dialogue (Saunders, 1985; 2011). The author has been a partner with Saunders in this latter effort since 1981. Some examples from our experience in Sustained Dialogue may make clear the obstacles and challenges to transformation created by our accumulated experiences and the evaluations associated with them, all of which reside in our largely subconscious somatic system, or emotional brain. We will then see how Sustained Dialogue is designed to encourage transformation.

In Tajikistan over many decades of Communist rule, elite positions and opportunities for advancement appeared to systematically benefit those from one particular region of the country. Repeated frustration with denial of opportunity, irrespective of talent, became so strong that when the Communist regime broke up in 1991, many in these groups took up arms to secure what they felt were their rights. The resulting civil war created more than 50,000 casualties in a country of only 6 million. When Sustained Dialogue was invited to attempt to create a basis

for negotiation, participants from the various sides held such deep anger that they could not sit in the same room together (Saunders, 2005: 123-144).

During the 16 hours of Sustained Dialogue over 8 months at an Oakland temple, undertaken to address issues of subtle discrimination and alienation, one man in his sixties said not a word. But he always attended and listened carefully to the stories being told. These included many personal stories by the temple school's lesbian administrator, by an Italian lesbian Catholic convert to Judaism, by an African-American convert and by a mature couple with multiple sclerosis. When at the end one of the authors asked him what brought him to the dialogue, he replied that he was a former board member at the temple, and when asked by the young Rabbi who organized the dialogue, he felt obliged. However, he explained, "As a life-long liberal, I did not expect to learn anything new, nor to change my outlook at all. I felt I did not need this" (Stewart, 2011).

A middle-aged African-American man who more than 10 years ago served three months on a felony charge of possessing marijuana, in telling his story to the Columbus (Indiana) Community Sustained Dialogue, noted that, although he had had no violations since and was gainfully employed, he was continually being harassed by the Columbus police department. To address this issue, the local police chief was invited to meet with him one on one. However, the anger within him, built up over a decade, was so strong that he feared he would blow up rather than be able to have a constructive conversation, so he cancelled the meeting. The Sustained Dialogue agreed to invite them both to a future meeting in the hope that in this environment this issue could be productively addressed (Stewart, 2015).

The common thread running through each of these examples is how deeply embedded assumptions, perceptions and especially world views become in our sense of identity, of who we are and what is important to us. In Sustained Dialogue we identify five concepts that define how we relate to others: identity, interests, power, perceptions and stereotypes and previous patterns of interaction. Of these, the most resistant to change is identity.

The implications of these examples and the neuroscience behind them are:

- Powerful experiences impacting the rational but particularly the emotional brain are essential to stimulating lasting, sustained transformations in attitudes, perceptions and outlooks.
- The most impactful experiences often arise through the personal stories of others that present a profound challenge to our existing beliefs.
- It may take considerable time and appropriate conditions for people to feel safe telling such stories, and for others to be ready to 'hear' them.

Badenoch's work demonstrates that neuro-therapy is one effective approach to enabling transformation to occur. However, this approach is impractical for most social conflict, including the kinds of examples already noted. Daniel Yankelovich (1999) finds that the conditions for transformative dialogue arise as if by magic. William Isaacs (1999) observes that transformations do happen through dialogue, but primarily as a by-product of creating safe spaces. Roger Fisher's (1997) approach focuses only on interests. All of the various approaches to conflict reso-



lution reviewed by Ronald Fisher either lack an explicit strategy for transforming conflictual attitudes, or essentially underplay their centrality. To our knowledge, Sustained Dialogue is the only conflict resolution approach to explicitly recognize the centrality of relationships among conflicting parties and embodies a strategy for their transformation.

### 3 Sustained Dialogue: A Strategy for Transformation in Conflicts

#### 3.1 *What Is Dialogue?*

Hal Saunders defines dialogue as “listening deeply enough to the other to be changed by what you hear”. This suggests that the very essence of dialogue is ‘change’ within ourselves and among those in the group. The purpose of dialogue is not just civil talk; it is to create opportunities for each of the participants to be open to inner change and change in relationships with others, and thus to facilitate the resolution of issues in conflict. Unfortunately, we are not always ready for deep listening, nor are we often open to really ‘hearing’ the other. Building on David Bohm’s (1996) foundational thoughts about dialogue, a number of ways to structure and conduct dialogue have been tried. Ronald Fisher (1997) chronicled many of the key historical efforts, from John Burton’s successful use of dialogue to bring an end to the decades-long struggle against the British in Malaysia, to Herb Kelman and Ed Azar’s efforts. In 2001, David Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado (2001) at the University of Michigan edited a major volume on methods for inter-group dialogue, seeing dialogue as a contribution to deliberative democracy. But, in terms of understanding the conditions necessary for effective dialogue, William Isaacs’ (1999) contribution stands out.

#### 3.2 *Creating a Dialogic Space*

Isaacs identifies four qualities as being essential to building what he calls a “dialogue container” capable of encouraging change (Isaacs, 1999: 239-261). These conditions are “listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing”.

- 1 **Listening:** As with Saunders, Isaacs sees listening as “the heart of dialogue”. Listening requires not only hearing the words, but a readiness in each to “embrace, accept and gradually let go of our own inner clamoring”. Listening means not only to others, but also to ourselves. As our exploration of the obstacles to transformation has shown, our inner tendencies are always to “project our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses”. Under these conditions, our normal state, “we hardly listen at all”. As Krishnamurti concludes, “One listens and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence, in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet...” (Isaacs, 1999: 84).
- 2 **Respecting:** Only when we actively adopt the practice of respect is it possible to see another as “a whole human being”. For inquiry and exploration of ideas and challenges to have “any real effect”, participants must bring “a stance of deep respect and inclusion”. This means explicitly recognizing each person as “legitimate”, even when we may not like what they think or do. When respect

is present, no one tries to convince others of the correctness of their own position; there are no accusations, nor is there blaming. Respect makes possible honest and deep inquiry into others' experiences and ideas (Isaacs, 1999: 110-113).

- 3 **Suspending:** When we give in to our normal urges to rush to judgment, when we are sure we are right, our views incontrovertible, we cannot take in new ideas. Energy in the dialogue dissipates. But when we suspend judgment, that is simply "acknowledge and observe our own thoughts and feelings and those of others as they arise", we strengthen the ability of each to really hear. Suspending is what makes possible analytic discussion of even the most divisive issues. Suspension is not natural, but it can be learned. Useful questions to ask oneself include: "Why are you so certain?" "What is leading you to hold on to that perspective?" "Might there be positive payoffs for letting go?" "What are the risks?" "What do you fear?" Clearly, learning to suspend our judgments, beliefs and prejudices takes time in dialogue while others are also working towards suspending (Isaacs, 1999: 134-148).
- 4 **Voicing:** Voicing means to "speak your own truth" regardless. But, for each of us, finding that true voice is "perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of genuine dialogue". Voicing requires us to learn to listen "not only to your internal emotional reactions and impulses...but to yourself". Finding one's voice and speaking it begins with "a willingness to be still". This means to become conscious of when to speak, to learn to "let what is in you take shape before giving words to it". This requires and develops "self-trust" (Isaacs, 1999: 159-162).

### 3.3 *Sustained Dialogue*

As this brief review of the essential conditions for dialogue makes evident, meaningful dialogue, and transformative dialogue in particular, requires time and experience. Of course, when these conditions are present, personal transformation may occur, but if so, it is likely to be an unanticipated by-product. This is doubtless especially true when people with sharply divergent experiences, backgrounds, viewpoints and expectations are brought into dialogue. But, as Siegel and Badenoch developed effective therapies to address attachment and other disabilities using the power of relationship, so Hal Saunders developed a strategy for transforming relationships among people unable to work constructively together, or even in deep conflict.

### 3.4 *Centrality of Relationship*

One of Saunders' key insights is the centrality of relationship to transformation and sustainable change. Perspectives, attitudes, world views can be modified, even transformed, by bringing together in dialogue those with conflicting experience, views and outlooks (Saunders, 2005). Assessing the reasons for the failure of peace to ensue from the efforts of the US diplomatic teams that negotiated six Arab-Israeli agreements between 1974 and 1979, of which he was a key member, Hal recognized that while governments can make treaties, peace becomes possible only when the relationships among the actual peoples in conflict are transformed.

Governments can make agreements, but only people can make peace (Saunders, 1985).

In Sustained Dialogue, the concept of relationship is both a conceptual and an operational tool. Conceptually, it provides the moderator with powerful tools to identify and understand the nature of the differences among those in the dialogue. Operationally, the five elements provide a framework for moderator questions that can lead to stories that become triggers for transformation. Note the congruence of this insight with Siegel, quoted earlier: “The structure and function of the developing brain are determined by how experiences, especially within interpersonal relationships, shape the genetically programmed maturation of the nervous system” (Siegel, 1999). Transforming relationships can physically alter the brain, for example, thinning out the nerves associated with distrust, or prejudice, while thickening those related to trust and acceptance (Badenoch, 2008: Kindle location 3553).

Hal’s three recent books substantiate and elaborate these ideas and report on its application in a wide variety of circumstances in many parts of the world, from Iraq to Russia; from South Africa to the U.S., as well as on 60 college campuses in the U.S. and around the world (Saunders, 1985, 1999; 2005; 2011). In what follows we provide a very brief summary to make clear the foundations of Sustained Dialogue’s strategy for transforming relationships that enable productive change.

### 3.5 *The Five Elements of Relationship*

Building on his subsequent experience as a private citizen moderating dialogues with Soviets, Tajiki, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Iraqis and others, Hal was able to identify the key elements of relationship that make it possible not only to get to the underlying relational sources of differences, but to actively intervene to encourage their transformation. These five elements are: Identity, Interests, Power, Stereotypes and misperceptions and Patterns of Interaction. This process, at the heart of which are five elements of relationship and five stages, he called Sustained Dialogue.

#### 3.5.1 *Identity*

Identity consists of the entirety of the life experience of each person. Identity is first formed in family, and then through culture and social structure. Embedded in and constituting much of the emotional or somatic brain (LeDoux, 1996: 67), every experience is valenced as positive or good/negative or bad. Critically, the crucible in which identity is formed is relationship – with parents, friends, associates and those ‘not like us’. As Saunders (2005) states, “From the combination of physical circumstances and unfolding experience and growth, individuals and groups come to a sense of who they are – a sense of identity” (p. 67). Most easily visible in the Middle East, though generally prevalent everywhere, most conflicts are clashes of identity. People will fight and die to protect their identity.

Implications for transformative change:

- As identity is deeply embedded in the somatic brain, it is highly resistant to change or transformation.

- Because identity is formed through relationship, then through dialogue with those very different from me, identity can be modified and broadened to encompass new perspectives, ideas and peoples.

In Sustained Dialogue, as seen in the examples above and below, when differences or conflict are seen as identity-based, participants are encouraged to relate their personal stories. When told by those with whom I profoundly disagree or whom I perceive as threatening my identity, if not survival, these stories often invoke cognitive (I understand where you are coming from) and then emotional (I feel what you are feeling) empathy for the storyteller, resulting, over time, in a broadened sense of identity capable of accepting, at one end of response, and of embracing at the other (Goleman, 2011). Saunders (2005) captures one of the key reasons why this process works: “Interactions form dependencies and rediscovered interdependence” (p. 68).

### 3.5.2 *Interests*

“Interests are defined on different levels. Some are essential to survival; some reflect what groups value for historic, political, ideological, or religious reasons; others are defined as a function of the relationship – what we need from others to achieve what we want or what we want to deny others” (Saunders, 2005: 72). Interests become clarified and contextualized, in large part, as people relate their personal stories to specific issues.

Implications for transformative change:

- Possibilities for change emerge as we come to understand why and how each person or party defines its interests.
- As people come to understand others’ deeply felt interests and hurts – real or imagined – relationships begin to change, and interests may broaden to include more of ‘the other’s’.
- Sustained Dialogue creates the environment and frames the questions that make possible the kind of deep, open and honest exchange around interests that can lead to transformation of perspectives and relationships.

### 3.5.3 *Power*

Sustained Dialogue’s notion of power as a component of relationship begins by recognizing how small, committed nationalist groups have so often overthrown far more ‘powerful’ empires. Think of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Tahrir Square, the Maidan. In these cases power lay not in physical or military might. Power derived from shared ideas, from relationship. Power in these cases was generated through an interactive process. We act on the proposition proposed by Saunders (2005): “The creative conduct of the process of continuous interaction between parties may in itself generate more effective power in this sense than economic or military resources” (p. 72).

Implications for transformative change:

- The power to change relationships may emerge as people interact in different ways.

- Transformed relationships can become a source of power enabling citizens to realize the solutions to challenges they have defined.
- As relationships transform through Sustained Dialogue, participants often feel greater personal capacity to create change (individual political efficacy), but, even more importantly, recognize that together, working across lines of difference, what was not possible yesterday may become possible today (collective political efficacy).

People usually enter a Sustained Dialogue with the hope that it can create change. Yet in the early stages, when the airing of differences necessarily predominates, a feeling of powerlessness often arises. As relationships become transformed, however, issues become not 'mine' or 'yours' but 'ours'. Once a problem is redefined as 'ours', strategies for solutions become possible and often emerge. There is overwhelming evidence that power to act is created by these interactions, and various examples can be cited: critically important contributions to both a peace settlement and rebuilding of Tajik society (Saunders, 2005: 123-144); the design of a common framework for peace between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, over 6 years and 12 three-day meetings (Saunders, 2011); a 19-point plan for national reconciliation in Iraq; a new public transportation plan enabling many low-income, unemployed people to acquire and hold well-paying steady jobs in Columbus, Indiana (Stewart, 2014b; 2014c); profound change in the climate in a temple, a day-school and a family and children's services organization in Oakland, California (Stewart, 2011); and multiple action plans on college campuses to address racial, religious and other campus issues (Saunders, 2011: 225-248).

### 3.5.4 *Perceptions, Misperceptions, Stereotypes*

As part of learning who we are and who we are not, stereotypes of others are passed on and take root. These may be accurate or not. Nearly always they are incomplete. But they determine how we interact with others. Addressing stereotypes is critical to transformation; however, since our somatic system will automatically urge a response consistent with learned misperceptions, permanent change can take considerable time. When stereotypes are addressed, often the newly emerging relationships will become highly valued, particularly when they enable the solution of problems not otherwise seen as solvable. This then becomes a force for permanent change in perceptions and attitudes.

Implications for transformative change:

- As people interact in safe spaces, such as Sustained Dialogue, misperceptions and stereotypes are replaced by "pictures of others as human beings with legitimate interests, and fears, and legitimate reasons for suspicion and even hatred" (Saunders, 2011: 73).
- Learning how one's own acts have appeared to others can cause one to rethink attitudes and actions.

### 3.5.5 *Patterns of Interaction*

Sustained Dialogue defines patterns of interaction as "a continuous and reciprocal multilevel process among whole human beings" through which a shared body

of experience and even norms of behaviour emerge (Saunders, 2011: 75). Focusing on the process and patterns of interactions provides insights into the ways these encourage change or reinforce unproductive attitudes and behaviours. A simple formula for analysing such patterns is to ask the following two questions: Do the observed patterns encourage empathy, compassion, understanding, friendship, love? Or do they encourage distance, indifference, distrust, enmity, even violence?

Implications for transformative change:

- As relationships are probed in Sustained Dialogue new practices, a new sense of limits may emerge.
- As participants, through dialogue, become aware of the consequences of the existing pattern of interactions for values, objectives and aims they hold in common, the motivation to develop new patterns may emerge.
- Changing limits in practical and meaningful ways can build trust and transform relationships (Saunders, 2011: 78).

### 3.6 *Five Stages of Sustained Dialogue*

Hal recognized that neither change nor transformation occurs quickly. Moreover, some things have to happen before others are possible. This led to the identification of specific stages. Specifying the tasks that have to be accomplished at each stage enables the participants and moderators to have a sense of direction. Importantly, recognizing stages helps avoid rushing to 'solutions' as effective and sustainable solutions must emerge from and be responsive to the most pressing concerns of all participants. These concerns, then, must be fully aired before any solutions can be considered.

We identify five specific stages through which dialogue moves.

- 1 **Decision to Engage:** In conflict situations, this is often the most difficult, time-consuming stage of all. Of particular importance for successful outcomes is including in the dialogue from the beginning those whose influence and engagement will be essential for securing the support in the larger community of any proposals or actions emerging from the dialogue, as we will note concerning Stage 5 below.
- 2 **Mapping Relationships and Naming Problems:** Two tasks must be accomplished in this stage. First, participants share their views on the nature and sources of the problem that brought them together. In highly conflictual situations, this often consists of what seems like simple 'venting' – of anger, of frustration, even of hatred. To the extent possible, moderators encourage participants to speak of how the larger issue has impacted them personally. These exchanges, but particularly the personal stories, accomplish two things. They help the moderator understand the nature of the conflict in relationship terms and thus inform his strategy. For example, is it identity, interests or power that is really at stake? As importantly, with time and modelling by the moderators, these exchanges gradually enable each side to actually 'take in', to 'hear' the concerns of 'the other'. This fosters the empathy that, again gradually, moves the problem from 'theirs' to 'ours', opening the way to substantive, analytic discourse on possible ways forward.

- 3 **Probing Problems and Relationships to Set a Direction:** In much more disciplined exchanges, participants probe specific problems – (1) to deepen their definition of the problem they agreed to focus on at the end of Stage 2; (2) to uncover the relationships underlying these problems; (3) to identify possible ways into those relationships to change them in lasting ways; (4) to weigh those possibilities and crystallize a sense of direction to guide next steps; (5) to weigh the consequences of moving in that direction against the consequences of doing nothing and (6) to decide whether to try designing actions. “Stage Three can end only when each side internalizes the other sides’ deepest concerns and will work with them. This is the key to the transformation of relationships and to genuine dialogue” (Saunders, 2005: 27-28).
- 4 **Scenario Building:** Once participants reach a sense of direction, that is agree on the broad parameters of desired end-states and the changes necessary to bring them about, the dialogue moves to design practical steps that can address the broken, conflicted relationships that brought about the problem. Note that we see transforming relationships as the key to sustainably resolving conflicts. So in this stage, they ask five questions: “(1) What resources do we have to deal with this problem?; (2) What are the obstacles to moving in the direction we have chosen?; (3) What steps could overcome those obstacles?; (4) Who could take those steps? and (5) How could we sequence those steps so they interact – one building on and reinforcing another – to generate momentum and broaden participation behind the action plan?” (Saunders, 2005: 28).
- 5 **Acting and Learning Together:** Participants identify ways to bring their ‘scenario’ to those who can act on it. Our experience demonstrates that this is most effective when trusted, but non-official persons close to those with authority to act are part of the dialogue from the beginning. Under these conditions, those with authority, at least indirectly, have been informed about and doubtless influencing the substance of the dialogue from the beginning, and thus there is a far greater probability that they will ‘buy into’ the scenario than when it is sprung ‘whole’ on them as a *fait accompli*. Further, if persons influential in critical parts of the affected communities have been part of the dialogue, then they are already motivated to mobilize the relationships essential to building support for the agreed upon scenario. By returning periodically to the dialogue ‘room’ and sharing insights into what has worked and not worked and exploring why and what now, two things happen: new opportunities for acting emerge, but most importantly, relationship building skills and the problem-solving approaches have a realistic chance of changing how problems in the community are addressed. Deliberate reflection and learning can change the culture that contributed to the conflict in the first place.

Together, analytical and operational use of these five elements of relationship, as the dialogue progresses through each of the five stages, allows participants in Sustained Dialogue to recognize their new capacity to accomplish things together that neither could accomplish alone. This recognition and subsequent joint

actions provide powerful stimuli that help deepen and sustain over time the transformations that occurred during the dialogue.

## 4 Outcomes of Transformational Experiences

Now that we have demonstrated why and how Sustained Dialogue makes possible transformative change, let us examine some concrete evidence of such changes. For lack of space, we draw only one example from three dimensions of our work: international, community and campus. However, many more examples are available in the case studies of Sustained Dialogue in a wide range of conflicts reported in Saunders' works (Saunders, 1995; 1999; 2005; 2011b).

### 4.1 *International*

As the story of the role of Sustained Dialogue in ending the civil war in Tajikistan has been published several times (Saunders, 1999: 147-170; Saunders, 2005: 123-144; Saunders, 2011: 103-134), here we focus on evidence of transformed relationships. From the first meeting in March 1993 until March 1994 "participants moved from being barely able to look at each other to playing a significant role" in creating conditions for UN-mediated peace negotiations. From tense discussions that were little more than an exchange of accusations in an atmosphere of deep suspicion and even fear, just prior to the onset of official negotiations in March 1994, the dialogue participants produced the first of many joint memorandums. Titled 'Memorandum on the Negotiating Process of Tajikistan' it outlined key issues to be addressed and proposed approaches to their resolution. That the Sustained Dialogue was able, in the course of 6 three-day meetings, to overcome the very deep divisions among the opposition over religious, regional and ethnic issues, as well as between the opposition and the government, marks this effort as one of the most powerful demonstrations of the capacity of Sustained Dialogue to transform relationships. Among the keys to this achievement was a deliberate focus on encouraging participants to identify larger interests shared by most participants, as well as providing time and opportunity for reflection and private discussion. That these transformations were lasting is reflected in the fact that three dialogue participants – one from the government, a second a leader of the opposition and the third an 'independent democrat' professor – joined together to form a new NGO to promote democracy in Tajikistan, and that the dialogue was continued for more than 10 years and 33 sessions.

### 4.2 *Community*

During the 16 hours of Sustained Dialogue over 8 months at an Oakland temple, undertaken to address issues of subtle discrimination and alienation, one man in his 60s said not a word. As noted earlier, he explained, "As a life-long liberal, I did not expect to learn anything new, nor to change my outlook at all. I just did not need this."

"But," continued the gentleman, "what this dialogue taught me was how blind I really have been. As I listened to each story the scales gradually fell from my



eyes, and now for the first time in my life discrimination is not just an abstract concept for me. It is real living tragedies for which I must bear some responsibility. I know that I will never see the world or people the same way again. My eyes have been opened" (Interview conducted by Philip D. Stewart, 10 December 2011).

*Columbus, Indiana:* In March 2014, the Columbus Area Community Sustained Dialogue held its eighth monthly session, at which everyone experienced a powerful demonstration of Sustained Dialogue's designed capacity to transform individuals and relationships. The intention of the moderating team was simply to create conditions in which those who had experienced ill-treatment by the local police could share their concerns directly with the police chief, himself a man deeply committed to fairness and justice. The focus was on one person in particular; a person who had served his time long ago but continued to experience harassment. The dialogue began by inviting the police chief to share whatever he would like to say. He focused on evidence of crime reduction and the development of a community-policing programme in the lowest-income neighbourhoods. When others asked about programmes to reintegrate ex-felons into the community, the chief and the former sheriff focused on success stories of those who had turned their lives around. All good, but I, as moderator, began to feel that this was not creating a safe opening for those with deeper concerns. So, I asked, what about those who do not make it or who need lots of support?

This encouraged one person who had gone through similar problems to tell his story. Essentially, he said, "I simply got to the point where I decided I had to change, and I had positive incentives to do so, such as my new wife being pregnant." I then gently pushed him, asking, "Beyond these factors, was there anything else that was critical to your turnaround?" "Yes," he replied with deep emotion, "I forgave myself for my past, and this permitted me both to forgive others and to take full responsibility for my own life." One of his younger 'mentees' who had attended three previous sessions without uttering more than his name, then spoke up and told a similar story of self-forgiveness, adding that having a mentor who was always there for him, even when by his actions he deeply hurt and disappointed that mentor, was also crucial. By now, time was running out for the dialogue. I worried that our friend, a middle-aged black dishwasher with long dreadlocks, might not feel ready to speak. However, at the last minute, he burst forth.

Here is the essence of what he said: "For the past several weeks, since I was informed that the police chief would be here, I have worked on what I would say here. I even tried writing it out. I spent whole nights worrying through my ideas. Then I came here, and I was angry. I was ready to blame everyone. But, then, I heard these stories about forgiving oneself, and you know what? They transformed me. I am now a different person. I am no longer angry. I have forgiven myself and all of those who have harassed me." He then calmly reported the details of that harassment, adding, "However, that was before Jason became police chief, and I know things are now getting better".

But it was not just our friend who was transformed. The thoughtful silence in the room made clear that everyone there now saw not only our friend, but, by analogy, all those who struggle, not as 'clients' or 'perps', but rather as whole

human beings, people walking paths that, but for the grace of God and good luck, could be our own (Interview conducted by Philip D. Stewart, 24 June 2014).

#### 4.3 College Campuses

The undergraduate experience marks a pivotal time in an individual's growth. As a student, an individual goes through a myriad of learning and cognitive changes, psychosocial changes, attitudinal and value changes and develops her/his moral identity (Diaz, 2009: 1). Studies show that the outcomes of transformative learning and the transformational experiences that make up the overall learning include perspective change, the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, confidence, self-awareness, emotional development, autonomy, values and a framework for leadership (Gabriel, 2008: 5). These all add to a student's ability to interact and perform in the workplace, community and political environment after undergraduate life.

As Bernie Ronan demonstrates in *The Civic Spectrum* (Ronan), dealing with difference is a significant attribute of an effective citizen. A student's undergraduate experience is an opportune time to learn how to interact with difference. Transformative experiences, through Sustained Dialogue, can lead to internal and external reflection on the part of the student. (Sustained Dialogue) The new knowledge and way of being that the transformative experience creates aids a student in becoming a citizen and political actor in the wider society. Here we present just one example of such a transformation among many more documented through interviews by the author (Stewart, 2014a).

*Jessica:* Jessica is currently a second-year medical student who took part in Sustained Dialogue during college. As with many others who are deeply impacted, Jessica participated in Sustained Dialogue throughout her college career.

Jessica recognized a clear distinction between 'intellectual' or 'academic' learning and what she calls the 'personal mind', or what we would call, following Kahneman, the emotional brain. She recognized that engagement at the personal, emotional level is essential to transformation, just as Yankelovich sees emotional working through of trade-offs essential to stable opinion (Yankelovich, 1991). "I found that Sustained Dialogue provides a powerful outlet for individuals to come as equals and have important conversations about things on a personal, as contrasted with the academic level. There is a separation between your academic and personal mind. Sustained Dialogue allows for true transformation to happen. I enjoyed helping those experiences to occur and to equip others help make that happen."

Jessica provides an instructive example of a Mezirow "triggering moment", or an experience that transforms one's outlook profoundly. "There are a couple of key factors that lead to transformation. As a freshman we had intense disagreements about the role of the Black Student Union on campus and whether or not it was necessary at a small liberal arts school. What was fascinating for me was that one of the students most opposed to this was black and had not had good experiences with the BSU. As a freshman, having grown up in a predominantly white environment, this forced me to question my assumptions of what race meant. I didn't agree with all whites. But, I had assumed that every black would be OK

with the BSU. So, having this very vocal individual created an abrupt crisis in acknowledging my own prejudices about race, and this was very transformative for me and for many in the group. Many people often noted, 'I had assumed,' but this was a major experience within our group."

These examples not only provide the reader with a feel of the lived experience of transformation through Sustained Dialogue, but they also illustrate how and why Sustained Dialogue works in a wide variety of conflicts and settings.

## 5 Conclusions

This article has examined four fundamental questions:

- What is the neurological basis for transformation of perspectives and behaviour?
- How does Sustained Dialogue promote such transformations?
- What evidence is there of actual transformative experience through Sustained Dialogue?
- How do such transformative experiences impact the capacity of those in conflict collectively to address the sources of conflict?

To address these questions we have examined a range of literature to understand what transformation is and the neurological, psychological and structural factors that inhibit as well as enable transformation. We then explored in detail the elements in Sustained Dialogue designed to encourage deep-seated transformations in relationships, perspectives and outlooks. Finally, we have examined selected examples from Sustained Dialogue activities around the world to illustrate how Sustained Dialogue addresses the fundamental psychological barriers and thereby opens the door to collaborative work on designing and realizing more productive, peaceful futures.

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