

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Fogler Library

---

Summer 8-19-2022

## Searching for a Solution to Political Polarization in the U.S. Through a Feminist Ethics of Care

Marissa Smith

University of Maine, [marissa.ann.smith@maine.edu](mailto:marissa.ann.smith@maine.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Other Communication Commons](#), [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, Marissa, "Searching for a Solution to Political Polarization in the U.S. Through a Feminist Ethics of Care" (2022). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 3624.

<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/3624>

This Open-Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).

**SEARCHING FOR A SOLUTION TO POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE U.S.  
THROUGH A FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE**

By

Marissa Smith

B.A. University of Maine, 2020

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

(in Communication)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August 2022

Advisory Committee

Dr. Liliana Herakova, Assistant Professor of Communication, Advisor

Dr. Bridie McGreavy, Associate Professor of Communication

Dr. Judith Rosenbaum-Andre, Associate Professor of Communication

Michael Socolow, Associate Professor of Communication

© 2022 Marissa Smith

All Rights Reserved

**SEARCHING FOR A SOLUTION TO POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE U.S.  
THROUGH A FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE**

By

Marissa Smith

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Liliana Herakova

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in Communication)  
August 2022

American politics have seen growing polarization in the past few years (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Polarization is generally defined as “the distance between opposing political views” (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020, p. 65). With focus on college students, this thesis considers ways to bridge the political divide in the United States and to promote generative engagement with differences across the political spectrum. The specific research questions this study explored were: 1) How do Ethics of Care principles and practices appear in and impact conversations on politically-charged topics among college students? and 2) How does participating in a dialogue on politically-charged topics impact affective polarization among college students identifying with each of the two major U.S. parties?

The project was informed by Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Communication Theory, and the Feminist Ethics of Care to explore effective approaches to communicate and create connection with people with divergent perspectives. Twenty-four students completed a screening

survey to help compose four focus groups with a total of 15 participants, all identifying white and between the ages of 18-44. The focus groups simulated an intergroup interaction by involving students identifying as either Democrat or Republican. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach with the above listed frameworks providing sensitizing concepts.

Findings suggest that with regards to the first research question, participants had a desire to practice Ethics of Care and named intergroup communication strategies that would help achieve that, such as practicing listening to the other, finding connection on other topics, and imagining the other's perspective. Such suggestions notwithstanding, participants were either unwilling or did not know how to effectively engage in an intergroup discussion during the 1-hour focus group session. Moreover, cross-party interactions in this study involving white identifying students at a white serving institution were characterized by a white and western norm of fear and avoidance of conflict (Rudick & Golsan, 2018). In response to the second research question, even just connecting with those from the opposing party about the shared goal of reducing political polarization seemed to slightly increase feelings of warmth and closeness toward the opposing party. Participants surfaced an operational definition of affective polarization and provided their own analysis of social factors that may be contributing to it, most specifically, biased media and argumentative culture.

These findings have implications for educational settings to be more intentional about creating opportunities for political intergroup communication. Providing students with the tools of Ethics of Care may have lasting impacts on institutional structures and personal relationships. To achieve these learning spaces, educators will need additional training to understand how to teach and model care in their classrooms. These trainings should also include media literacy for both instructors and curriculum for students in the classroom to help alleviate the effect of

inaccurate and antagonistic sources that subvert care and reject openness and understanding of differing views (Au et al., 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019).

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
Chapters	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
Sensitizing Perspectives.....	7
Social Identity and Polarization.....	7
Intergroup Communication and Feminist Ethics of Care.....	11
Polarization in Context.....	21
Propaganda, Polarization, and Ethics of Care.....	24
Politics, Polarization, and Higher Education.....	27
2. METHODS.....	34
Data Collection.....	36
Data Analysis.....	38
Researcher Positionality.....	39
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	42
Overview of Results.....	42
Ethics of Care during Polarizing Conversations.....	44
Cultural Norms.....	47
Critical Hope.....	58

Affective Polarization in/and Political Intergroup Communication.....	60
Communication of Identity.....	62
Social Factors Shaping Affective Polarization.....	67
Responding to Polarization.....	71
4. CONCLUSION.....	74
Implications.....	76
Limitations and Future Research.....	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	83
APPENDICES.....	90
Appendix A. Pre-Focus Group Survey.....	90
Appendix B. Post-Focus Group Survey.....	93
Appendix C. Recruitment Flier.....	95
Appendix D. Focus Group Facilitation Guide.....	96
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR.....	98



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Defining Key Terms.....	4
Table 2.	Metacommunication.....	45
Table 3.	Experiencing Affective Polarization.....	61

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure A1. Feelings of closeness measure.....	91
Figure A2. Feelings Thermometer measure.....	91
Figure B1. Feelings of closeness measure.....	93
Figure B2. Feelings Thermometer measure.....	94

## INTRODUCTION

Human desire for connection is seen as fundamental, necessary, and the primary motivation for our everyday communication activities (Murthy, 2020). But what about the environment that is created when people avoid, refuse, or find it impossible to seek connections with others? Or when communication is adversarial? Social divisions supporting structures of power and oppression that pervade every area of our lives – personal, professional, academic, economic, political, etc. – make communication difficult with those with different life experiences and perspectives from our own. The result is more than just a lack of connection; it fosters misunderstanding and widening social and political rifts (Gallois & Giles, 2018).

Relatedly, the American political environment has grown more and more contentious in recent years. Avoidance of engaging differences is evident, as politics have become dreaded topics at family events, and social media algorithms make it easier for users to only interact with content and people they agree with (Au et al., 2021). As issues of environment, race, immigration, and public health have become more urgent in recent years, politics have become more present in our everyday lives. As always, politics are connected to our identities and moral compasses, but in the U.S., such identifications in recent years are resulting in sharp divisions along party lines instead of in supporting the democratic ideal (Lelkes, 2016). Recently, political identity issues are becoming more mainstream in the face of an environment in the U.S. that continues to oppress People of Color, LGBTQ+ people, and women who do not have equal rights to their white-male counterparts and are forced to speak and act out in resistance to their maltreatment and antiquated/anti-progressive policies being instated. In order to realize a democratic society, it is essential to find ways to communicate across differences, especially those that call out injustice and cause discomfort for privileged communities in order to pursue a

future of connection and care for all people. The polarization we currently experience can, at least partially, be attributed to an inability or refusal to challenge dominant western assumptions of care that exclude threats to the status quo and, by extension, ostracize minoritized populations that might embody such threats (Anderson & Accomando, 2020; Gutierrez-Perez & Ramirez, 2019). In response, this research asks if the integration of a more inclusive vision of care and recognition of the complexity of the human experience may improve the politically polarized landscape we currently participate in. Scholars have found that communication across party-lines does improve this gap in connection, or polarization, between partisans (Au et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2020; Williamson, 2016; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020).

Some of the research has specifically looked at political ideologies and polarization in college, as this is an important time for both identity development and for widening social circles. For many, college is the first time they have the chance to interact with those who have different backgrounds than themselves (Johnson et al., 2017; Linvill, 2011). A study by Johnson and colleagues (2017) sought to understand how the college campus environment serves students' competencies in perspective-taking and acknowledgement of difference. Their results indicate that the frequency with which students engage in socioculturally diverse conversations and their level of self-awareness are the two leading factors in their openness to perspectives different from their own. Johnson and colleagues (2017) implore further research and pedagogical practices to implement opportunities for discussions that address a wide range of sociocultural issues and self-reflection to see how the college environment can foster students' connection to those different from themselves.

Focusing on the experiences of college students, the research presented in this thesis considers ways to promote generative engagement with differences across the political spectrum.

The project was informed by Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Communication Theory, and the Feminist Ethics of Care to explore effective approaches to communicate and create connection with people with divergent political perspectives. After defining key concepts and reviewing literature about these frameworks and their relevance to political polarization among college students, I describe the current project's process for facilitating cross-party interactions among college students. The methods section also outlines the research approaches taken and the author's positionality as it is relevant to the study design. Next, the analysis I present focuses on elements of the cross-party interactions I observed and on participants' perspectives on political polarization in the U.S.. Specifically, I consider how participants navigate real or perceived polarization communicatively, what approaches they amplify, and with what consequences. Finally, I suggest steps for future research and implementation strategies within academic spaces to help students participate in and lead caring relationships and interactions, and embrace differences of social and political perspectives.

## CHAPTER 1

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Before diving further into the theoretical frameworks informing this research, the table below provides operational definitions of some key concepts, as they are used in the current project. It is worth noting that scholars are equivocal when it comes to these ideas and their applications. The table below offers explanations of terms as they are referenced in the specific study, rather than making a claim for unequivocal definitions.

Table 1. Defining Key Terms. Description and clarification of terms used throughout the thesis.

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition/Explanation of Use in Thesis</b>	<b>Sources</b>
<b>Polarization</b>	“the distance between opposing political views” (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020, p. 65). Often viewed linearly with two sides/extremes.	Au, Ho & Chiu, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019; Lelkes, 2016; Serrano-Contreras et al, 2020
<b>Affective polarization</b>	An oppositional climate/atmosphere of conflict and disconnection resulting from political differences. This often appears as an emotional reaction towards a political ideology or party and that creates distance between members of the parties instead of connection.	Au, Ho & Chiu, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019; Miller & Conover, 2015; Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020
<b>whiteness</b>	In this thesis, “white norms” and “whiteness” are used as descriptors of violent and colonialist histories of privilege that uphold structures and institutions that support power of some and oppression of others. They do not describe individual racial identifications or appearance, but rather refer to dominant structures.	Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017; Gutierrez-Perez & Ramirez, 2019; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Mohajeri & Nishi 2022; Nakayama, T. K., & Krizek, 1995; Rudick & Golsan, 2018
<b>Civility</b>	“...as a means of communicating respectful regard for each other as human beings” (p. 66). This use of civility privileges acts of care that encourages visibility and engagement with Intentionally engaging differences instead of silencing them; works to challenge difference that challenges white privilege and oppression within race, class, gender, and other areas	Makau & Marty, 2013

Table 1 Continued.

	affected by issues of equity, while maintaining a commitment to connection. (different from “whiteness informed civility” - below)	
<b>Whiteness-informed Civility</b>	Communication that privileges conflict avoidance and policing of emotional expression with the purpose of maintaining a sense of comfort and politeness over productive engagement with difference.	Rudick & Golsan, 2018
<b>Propaganda</b>	Some scholars define propaganda as a strategy for a few elite members of society to control the actions of the masses in favor of a democracy which privileges powerful corporations and media providers (Chomsky, 1989). However, this research uses propaganda as a set of techniques utilized to distribute a message to a group of people or the public, not necessarily meant for manipulation of messages or audience and can be used to craft shared messages across social divides.	Bernays, 1928; Chomsky, 1989; Ellul 1964; Lakoff, 2014; Stanley, 2015
<b>Maturity</b>	Based in an Feminist Ethics of Care framework maturity is a practice of care for the self and also for others which understands that identity and morality is flexible. The individual who understands this becomes comfortable with change and challenging their biases and privilege.	Noddings, 2018; Reed, 2018
<b>Justice</b>	Justice (capital J) is a system based in patriarchal privilege and power and presupposes a moral compass of right and wrong based on keeping white men in power.	Noddings, 2018; Reed, 2018
<b>justice</b>	The concept of justice (lowercase j) in Ethics of Care has values of holding individuals responsible for hurtful actions towards others but should include opportunity for learning, growth, and connection.	Noddings, 2018; Reed, 2018
<b>Social justice</b>	Social justice refers to issues of equity within subjects of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability. These issues are important to recognize and fight in support of connection across differences within and beyond these	Fasset & Warren, 2007; hooks, 2014

Table 1 Continued.

	categories to dismantle structures of power and oppression which directly oppose care among people.	
--	---	--

American politics have seen a growing polarization between members of the two main parties, especially in the past few years (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Polarization is generally defined as “the distance between opposing political views” (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020, p. 65). Between the 2016 election of the controversial Republican representative Donald Trump and the role of social media, people in the United States have been feeling the pressures of American partisanship and its impact on everyday activities and relationships. The current research contributes to the ongoing development of our understanding of the ways in which politics shape the relationships and behaviors of those who identify as politically active members of one of the two main parties in the United States.

College students are an important population for research on partisanship and polarization to consider, as the sample provides participants who are at a flexible time in their identity development and can help us understand the process of identity formation around political attitudes (Bozalek et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2013; Linvill, 2011). To identify what polarization might look like in these generally liberal environments, Linvill (2011) conducted a study that measured students’ political identity on a 7-point scale from very liberal to very conservative, what they perceived their professors’ political identity to be, and how they felt that impacted their education in that class. They reported that students who perceived more political bias that conflicted with their own identities in their professors were less satisfied with their classroom experience. Additionally, the study distinguished between students who were classified as exhibiting “identity foreclosure” and had a normative orientation, and students with



“identity achieved” who tended to be information oriented. Compared to identity achievement, identity foreclosure meant that students were not growth and change oriented, but were constrained by narrow, rule-based definitions of self. Conservative students tended to be more normatively oriented and the perception of bias in their instructor was a defense mechanism that allowed their views to remain unchallenged. Due to these findings, the research suggested a need for a reimagining of college classrooms that not only allows space for students to voice their opinion, but a space where there is potential for students and teachers to learn together through reflection of their and openness to different views during discussions of political issues. Based on college students' experiences of polarization in conversations with those different from themselves, the current study endeavors to identify some potentially productive strategies to accomplish this goal.

Several conceptual and praxis frameworks bear relevance to the question of what such interactions of engaging political differences may look like. In the sections below, I review the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the Intergroup Communication (Gallois & Giles, 2018), and the Feminist Ethics of Care (Gilligan, 1993) approaches. Following the summaries of these perspectives, the literature review puts political polarization in the U.S. social and educational context in order to frame the current study.

### **Sensitizing Perspectives**

#### **Social Identity and Polarization**

The conceptualization of Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a lens through which we can begin to understand how political parties are formed and why their members often have hostile feelings toward people identified with the other party. SIT was first created by Henri Tajfel and John Turner who explored aspects of identity creation and meaning-making through

both individual self-construal, as well as group relationships. They described this theory as a spectrum with individual factors on one end and group interaction on the other, so in a sense, every interaction is a combination of individual and group motivated behaviors and cognitions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Through an SIT lens, group member behavior is motivated by the individual's desire for a positive self-image. In other words, seeking to be liked, individuals work toward acceptance by adjusting to the values, beliefs, or behaviors of the group. Once individuals have solidified their membership in a given group as part of their identity, everyone else who is not a member becomes a part of an out-group. In-group members act in such a way as to elevate and accentuate their own beliefs and values in an attempt to stamp out any competitive ideology or practice that might infringe on the societal status of the in-group. Any out-group attributes that challenge the in-group are evaluated as inherently negative (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT proposes that it is crucial that group members internalize their group membership as a valued part of themselves, can identify other groups whose attributes can be compared to each other, and the comparison must be relevant to the group goals (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The emotional attachment to group membership has been made clear by many scholars studying group identification; however, a few other motivations for membership have been discussed by Hogg (2016) who describes navigating dialectical tensions as key: "People try to strike a balance between two conflicting motives, for inclusion/sameness (satisfied by group membership) and distinctiveness/uniqueness (satisfied by individuality), in order to achieve optimal distinctiveness" (p. 10). Here, Hogg describes the desire for people to feel like they belong to something bigger than just themselves, but at the same time, seek to fill the desire to stand-out as authentic and independent. This part of identity formation is constantly in flux as

messages from different sources in a person's life (family, friends, the media, etc.) tell them how to act in order to gain status in their social world. However, moving between groups is not often accepted as part of this social adaptation process.

Hogg (2016) found that the importance of identity stability and emotional attachment in group membership makes it incredibly difficult for group members to cross over from an in-group to an out-group because it not only threatens the security of their personal identity but the relevance of the group identity as a whole. It is this pressure of group membership as well as the desire to be both included and independent that creates intense polarization of any in-group and out-group scenario in the SIT framework. To keep group members satisfied, groups create an environment where members feel like they contribute to their group and simultaneously encourage members to seek individuality by distinguishing themselves from the out-group. This type of group identification and relationship creates extreme members who effectively widen polarization in any in-group/out-group context (Hogg, 2016).

Tajfel and Turner (1986) based their conceptualization of SIT on the previously established Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RCT) which stated the general cause for intergroup conflict revolves around, "... opposing claims to scarce resources, such as power, prestige, or wealth, [which] generate ethnocentrism and antagonism between groups" (p. 12). Resonating in Makau and Marty's (2013) discussion of competitive debate linked to polarization, it is the RCT framework that cited the desire for some form of societal status to be the centerpiece of intergroup conflict. Extending RCT, SIT developed to explain in what ways these desires manifest in modern-day identity formations.

SIT proposed group differentiation as an explanatory mechanism of "successful" competition for a desired "scarce resource" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In framing the American

political system through SIT's concepts, the scarce resource is power and control of policy. Whichever party has control over the United States Congress has the ability to privilege their ideology over the minority party's. In American democracy, the general population of voters have control over which party gets the resource of congressional power over policy that guides American life. Because of this battle for power, voters must differentiate their ideology through partisanship in order to gain access to the scarce resource of political power over the other party. This process produces the conditions for polarization.

Typically, this competitive spirit of group members results in not only intolerance of out-group beliefs and actions, but also outright aggression due to in-group dissatisfaction with their social status (Hogg, 2016). But why is it that group members feel the need to uphold their group's status through animosity towards others? According to research cited by Michael Hogg (2016), the acceptance of group identity has an emotional component for the member and makes them believe that attacks on the group are attacks on them personally. Essentially, the aggressive response towards out-groups and their members is a self-defense mechanism that works to preserve the ego of the in-group member, leading to affective polarization (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020; see table above for definition).

Capitalist norms in the United States foster a competitive culture in which people believe that they must win-out over others in some way in order to succeed as a respected member of society (Makau & Marty, 2013). Such norms have had negative influences even on seemingly supportive practices, such as academic mentoring, as discussed further below, in shaping college students' identities (Goerisch et al., 2020; Herakova & Congdon Jr., 2018). According to Makau and Marty (2013), this competitive culture is a major reason why we are seeing an increase in polarization. Centering a communication perspective, they reference a cycle of "judgment, blame

and defensiveness” (Makau & Marty, 2013, p. 61) as the model to which most Americans subscribe when engaging in political debate. This model fosters individualistic motivations as these debates rely on simply what will benefit and sustain the preferred image for each individual involved in the argument.

Social Identity Theory is a mostly sociological theory which can be used as a tool to draw connections to existing knowledge of American political identities and attitudes. It offers a helpful distinction between in-group and out-group and the mechanisms for supporting and even enhancing differentiation. The consideration of in-/out-groups relates to Intergroup Communication Theory (IGC), which further focuses on specific interactional dynamics.

### **Intergroup Communication and Feminist Ethics of Care**

While Social Identity Theory can help explain why a sharp political divide exists in the first place (Greene, 2004; Hogg 2016; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), IGC provides an insight into how interactions among members of opposing parties, when appropriately structured, may contribute to reducing the political divide (Bond et al., 2018; Gallois & Giles, 2018; Gower et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2020). Taken together the two theories lend a perspective on communicating across differences, while honoring group identifications. IGC brings a communication orientation to my exploration of interactions among people with different partisan identifications. IGC seeks to understand how group membership and specifically power structures and relationships of different groups affect interpersonal interactions (Gallois & Giles, 2018). Gallois and Giles (2018) reference “miscommunication” as a way to contextualize IGC. With this, they suggest that individuals involved in differences of opinion resist understanding of other views and prefer to blame the other for the discrepancy. They posit that this type of interaction is a manifestation of a fight for power through means of

lowering the validity and status of the other. This is consistent with Makau and Marty's observations in "Dialogue and deliberation" (2013),

As we've seen, these hyperindividualistic beliefs and behaviors are reinforced by claims that life entails a relentless striving for survival, to be 'won' by only the 'fittest'. It is no surprise, then, that this 'reality' demands that people pit themselves against one another in endless power struggles. (p. 61)

By framing U.S. political polarization as a struggle for power, IGC can be applied to the relationships observed between self-identified members of the Republican and Democratic parties.

Previous research using IGC seeks to understand in what situations is cross-group communication effective or ineffective at reducing negative attitudes towards different others. Studies focusing specifically on political polarization find that intentional listening and consideration of the other and their humanity may contribute to reduced sense of divisiveness (Bond et al., 2018; Gower et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2020). Bond and colleagues (2018) conducted a study, using a remote messaging service for participants to converse with either someone in their own party or with someone from the opposing party. They found that though, in general, participants stably showed loyalty to their personally identified party or in-group, after discussions with out-group members, their negative perceptions of the other reduced.

Gower and colleagues (2019) examined a similar topic when they facilitated intergroup discussion through techniques such as "go-round" or an allotted time of silence between points to allow participants to gather their thoughts before contributing. They suggest that these interactions reflected "transformative dialogue" in the way that participants used "thoughtful speaking and careful listening" (p. 208). They facilitated such interactions through developing

communication rules like only speaking for themselves as individuals and not generalizing, telling stories, and not seeking to persuade or even find common ground. This way, the conversation was focused less on the outcome and more on the relationship that would be formed through the communication. These techniques are what I am defining as an Ethics of Care framework for communicating across ideological differences.

Whereas some scholars have considered the impact of actual intergroup interactions (e.g., Bond et al., 2018; Gower et al., 2019), Warner and colleagues (2020) found that even imagining the other helps reduce polarization. Their study asked self-identified partisan participants to view tweets constructed to intentionally trigger divisive attitudes in each participant based on their identified political party. In the condition when participants were asked to write a narrative about the person who wrote these tweets (intelligence was assumed as at least equal to that of the participant), participants reported a substantial amount more perceived similarity with the tweet author than when participants were only asked to write a narrative about themselves. Echoing IGC, it was observed that this activity of narrative writing for a perceived opposing person brought about a feeling of closeness for the participants to those they wrote about. Warner and colleagues (2020) suggest that continued trials of intergroup interaction which fosters closeness over argument have the potential to bridge political polarization gaps in individual attitudes.

In the current project that seeks to envision possibilities for transforming political intergroup conflict, IGC informed how I constructed intergroup communication opportunities in the focus groups and how I measured changes because of these interactions. Previously mentioned research projects which have pursued similar questions found that both direct contact with a member of an individual's out-group (Bond et. al, 2018) and imagined contact with an out-group member (Warner et al., 2020) improved reported affect towards the out-group. Bond

et. al (2018) also found that in-group members remained just as well-liked which points to a clear shrinkage in affective polarization in these individual participants. These findings highlight the importance of both awareness of the self and the other in situations of political dialogue, and relate to the praxis-oriented Feminist Ethics of Care model (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Gilligan, 1993; Reed, 2018).

Applying a Feminist Ethics of Care framework may affect the attitudes in and outcomes of intergroup communication, especially in intense political situations. To begin to understand this, I looked to Makau and Marty's (2013) examples of "civility" (p. 79) in dialogue in both political and non-political contexts. They conceptualize civility as allowing different sides and positions the chance to be truly heard and understood by the other with an open mind and without the expectation of a combative response. Given that the concept of "civility" in the United States has been criticized as being linked to dominant social and communication norms shaped by whiteness (Rudick & Golsan, 2017), it is important to note that Makau and Marty's use of the term does not focus so much on how one should behave, but on an orientation toward mutuality and connection. Concepts of civility rooted in whiteness can be mistaken for care (Rudick & Golsan, 2017). For example, practices of color-blindness seem to be morally right, as they purport to "treat everyone the same, regardless of race;" however, disregarding the social impacts of race, is only possible for those in privileged positions and serves white people because it makes it easier for us to ignore the systems that we benefit from and others are oppressed by. Seeking to erase race without first addressing those inequities contributes to ongoing structural racism, where BIPOC will continue to suffer, while white people will continue to avoid their responsibility in participating in long standing systems of racism (Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017; Nakayma & Krizek, 1995). Such considerations are a reminder



that communication norms and discourses should be regarded in their contexts of use and invocations, rather than being nominally evaluated as right/wrong, particularly when related to socially consequential topics, such as political polarization.

Makau and Marty (2013) use civility in a way that directly subverts white norms of avoiding and ignoring difference (Rudick & Golsan, 2017) and require participants in an interaction to address differences through mutual understanding of each individual. Building on this understanding, they use the term “dialogue” to put civility in juxtaposition with “competitive debate:”

Competitive debate listens for flaws and to develop counterarguments. Dialogue listens to learn and understand... Competitive debate seeks closure by gaining compliance with one’s views and position. Dialogue comes to closure when participants experience being heard and responded to meaningfully (Makau & Marty, 2013, p. 69).

In essence, Makau and Marty (2013) argue that the act of care for one another can transform the polarization that typically comes with debate. They also address the fact that this practice does not discourage disagreements, it instead reimagines the way in which differences are engaged with through a dialogue that cares for the recognition of both parties’ concerns and works to find a solution for the common good.

The Ethics of Care framework is a promising place to start in imagining avenues to reduce political polarization, as it prioritizes connection- and relationship-building rather than focusing exclusively on the content of interactions. Carol Gilligan (1993) coined the Feminist Ethics of Care approach in response to the overtly patriarchal and privileged value of “justice.” Justice vies for a product of fairness that is as unaffected by bias as possible (an impossible feat for humans) and prioritizes consequence of wrongdoing over fostering the learning from and

through our harmful practices. Connecting back to Makau and Marty (2013) justice stops at the cycle of blame and does not consider reparations and relationship building as a healing process for both the perpetrator and the victim in an interaction lacking care. Similarly, white norms of civility reflect the tenets of patriarchal justice that seek to separate humanity or identity from interactions (Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Makau and Marty's (2013) dialogue approach to civility aligns better with care practices by making understanding of each other's identities essential to creating and sustaining meaningful relationships across differences. It is essential for Ethics of Care that all parties in an interaction have the opportunity to reciprocally learn and teach care in a reflexive process in order for it to survive and continue influencing other relationships and interactions (Goerisch et al., 2021; Noddings, 2018). This is not to say that justice cannot be present in a Feminist Ethics of Care approach, but it highlights the strength of care practices where the justice thought process fails. Ethics of Care chooses to embrace humanity and the biases that come with it to challenge ourselves to not only understand ourselves better but others as well, especially those who are different from us in some way (Gilligan, 1993).

It is the emphasis on relational understanding of the self in the context of those around us that makes Ethics of Care a critical and feminist framework. Only by criticizing the regimes of power and oppression, that we both participate in and are limited by, can care be enacted fully (Foster & Janco, 2020; Gilligan, 1993; Goerisch et al., 2020). Foster and Janco (2020) explain, "... women's social education as caregivers have oriented them towards thinking of themselves, morality, and ethics relationally, in the context of what it means to provide and nurture life in others" (p. 50). In empowering and recognizing women's contribution to an environment and

model of acceptance and love, we resist the patriarchal assumption that care for others signals a weakness in the self.

The Ethics of Care framework argues that care for the self is equally important to that of care for others. Cawston and Archer (2018) suggests this is possible through recognition of the self in relations of difference as part of a community the same way the opposing party is part of a different community. Basically, opponents can more easily level with each other to practice Ethics of Care through dialogue when they acknowledge a similarity at least through the importance of community and the recognition that communities we identify with are strong influences and supports in our lives. Communication guided by an Ethics of Care framework will value each party and allow for a deeper understanding of one another, while engaging differences between them in meaningful ways.

It is important to note here the critique of dialogue around difference especially in a classroom setting. In her qualitative study, Jodi Kaufmann (2010) found that white students tend to take over dialogic spaces since their experiences and identity are so normalized, they feel more comfortable speaking out about them. Additionally, when students of color get the chance to share their experiences or opinions, white students often respond with an example of their own experience which they see as connecting, but in reality it is centering the white experience instead of that of the student of color. “A Crack to Speak Out From” by Gutierrez-Perez and Ramirez (2019) is an autoethnographic account of such an experience from the perspective of those who were silenced in such a purportedly “dialogic” space. Such research is a needed reminder that imagining a classroom as “dialogic” in a positive way is never enough. A dialogic space combined with the Feminist Ethics of Care framework would encourage critical practice of calling in such behaviors of what Gutierrez-Perez and Ramirez (2019) refer to as “white

bonding” where white students who take over dialogic spaces are doing so in an attempt to alleviate the discomfort of calling attention to their whiteness as a culture of violence and aggression towards other races and cultures. They (we) do this by telling stories about injustices we have felt in other areas of our lives or about situations of racial injustice that make us look and feel like better white people (Gutierrez-Perez & Ramirez, 2019). Naming this behavior and encouraging white students to show and learn care through listening and asking questions is in line with the previously defined conception of Ethics of Care and would help to center those voices that are so often silenced by white and western cultural norms.

Ethics of Care scholars like Gilligan (1993) and Noddings (2018) reject the critique of care as potentially detrimental to the carer. Instead, they argue that the effect that relationships based on an Ethics of Care have rely on the reciprocity and transference of the practices. So, those who receive care in their relationships will learn to mimic these practices, not only in that relationship, but in other relationships in their lives as well. While this effect would rely on the care-receivers to be open and committed to maintaining the relationship with the care-giver, this further proves the point that people who practice Ethics of Care have the maturity to recognize their caring capacity.

The element of maturity that one has to possess in order to practice Ethics of Care gets to the heart of why this framework has the potential to transform our communicative sphere around political and social differences, particularly in the context of college education. In their Master’s thesis, Reed (2018) used Friere’s (1996) Pedagogy of the Oppressed to more clearly illustrate this use of maturity,

According to Freire, the ability to care for another individual is something that can only come from a free individual. The oppressors, and the oppressed, can ultimately only care

for themselves. Also, the effort to liberate the oppressed also means that the liberated become self-sufficient and mature (Reed, 2018, p. 3).

Where this maturity approach to relationship building succeeds is also where we can relate back to the failures of the justice approach. Instead of morals being based on an individual's conscience, people who practice Ethics of Care can understand themselves and their own needs in relation to others, thus continuing the cycle of care for themselves and others. Ethics of Care recognizes and values that people are fallible and works within this constant re/de/construction of morality, while justice relies on previously set guidelines that may not serve as the best solution under different circumstances and simply punishes an individual without providing resources for active future amends.

It is through the works of these scholars and beyond that we can begin to define what a practice of Ethics of Care actually looks like in active intergroup interactions. Drawing from scholars previously mentioned as well as Cawston and Archer (2018), I operationalize Ethics of Care interactions as those that represent a commitment of parties in an interaction to enhance respect and space for their opponent, as well as for the self. This can be done in a multitude of ways, including listening to understand instead of to respond, and being willing to receive and share personal narratives related to the topic of interaction.

Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Communication Theory, and the Feminist Ethics of Care frameworks all work together to create a basis from which the politically polarized landscape among Americans can be examined and addressed. SIT broadly paints a picture of how we organize ourselves based on identity formation within groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). We find similarities and create connections with similar others. In a struggle for status and power, we deem those in different communities of identity from our own as competitive others

(Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT provides the framework for how we categorize ourselves and others and how our behaviors reflect this value of group membership. In the U.S. political context, this helps us to understand how people determine their identification with the two main parties, Republicans and Democrats, and why they may be in such opposition to each other as they battle for status and power over policy that directly affects the members life experience and maintenance of their identity as a partisan.

IGC builds on the context of our identity in our surroundings of different others provided by SIT and focuses on how that influences the way we communicate or miscommunicate with one another. When we “miscommunicate,” we fail to understand and address the goals of our interaction and the structures that govern them and instead blame the other in the interaction for our differences (Gallois & Giles, 2018). IGC also addresses the role individuals play in the power systems we live in and suggests that our communication across groups and differences has the power to dismantle oppressive norms (Gallois & Giles, 2018). We can apply this critical hope (Frizelle, 2021; Grain, 2016) to the phenomenon of affective polarization between Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. and encourage cross-party interaction.

Finally, the Feminist Ethics of Care framework critiques communication practices that currently pervade interactions of different individuals and provides specific action-oriented steps toward encouraging communication across difference with the goal of creating more understanding and empathetic individuals and relationships (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Gilligan, 1993; Makau & Marty, 2013; Noddings, 2018). These suggestions include embracing all aspects of identity in our interactions, receiving all aspects of other people’s identities, model care for both the self and others, and allowing opportunities for reparation of wrongdoings. If partisan identifying individuals can learn to communicate across differences, polarization may reduce and

begin to dismantle systems of power and oppression that continue to pervade all areas of the American experience and beyond.

### **Polarization in Context**

Although there is some debate about both the presence and the operationalization of political polarization, it can broadly be defined as the distance between the two main parties in the U.S. (Lelkes, 2016; Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020). Conservative Republicans hold down the right side of the political identity spectrum, while liberal Democrats hold down the left. As the two parties stretch farther apart in their views and understanding of one another's values, the distance between the two expands, and therefore, polarization increases (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020).

With the effects of social and mass media, the polarization that has been observed most frequently in civilian interactions is coined "affective polarization" meaning the cause for such separation of members who identify with one of the parties lies in the emotional manifestation of a specific "dislike and distrust" from one party to the other (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020). Affective polarization has nothing to do with opinion extremity, only attitudes towards people.

Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party's members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines, or even to partner with opponents in a variety of other activities. This phenomenon of animosity between the parties is known as affective polarization. (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 130)

While we tend to view political polarization to be entirely negative, Iyengar and colleagues (2019) pose the positive side that disdain for and competition with the opposing party encourages active political participation. However, they conclude that it goes too far when voters value party over characteristics of the representative of their party and this practice is a direct threat to

representative democracy. Iyengar (2019) suggested that by making political alignment less salient in a situation and asking Republicans and Democrats to recognize each other as Americans, the aversion toward one another lessens. I believe this has become more complex in recent years as even patriotism has become an area of partisan divide (Goldberg, 2018). Instead, making the individualistic nature of party identification less salient may prove to be more effective. For example, through techniques such as personal narrative (as explored by Warner and colleagues (2020)) that seek to draw out empathy for differences in individuals instead of attempting to shift their attitudes closer to one another. There could even be potential for increased interest in political discourse if people felt that these types of interactions became more pleasant when they felt understood and closer to the opposing viewpoint.

One of the places where the intergroup conflict aspect of SIT can be observed is in American politics. Since the system is based on two main parties, Democrat and Republican, those who come to identify with one of the two create their perspective of their in-group and out-group. This situation follows the SIT guidelines as the two parties are comparable because their goals are the same, which is to control national policy. Secondly, in order for either of them to achieve their goal, they must win over the other party resulting in an elevation of the party status. Though these two parties are always in conflict, the intergroup attitudes tend to spike during election years and dissipate in between elections (Huddy & Bankert, 2017).

To explain this fluctuation of attitudes, a return to the SIT discussion of emotional attachment to group membership could have an important contribution. During election cycles, identification becomes more salient as citizens find themselves bombarded with information about each candidate and the pressure to vote for one of them (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Since the result of the election will likely impact the voter's life experience and needs in some way, the



voter is compelled to support candidates whose policies will benefit the voter. As the time draws near to make this type of decision, many people choose to align with one of the two parties who most closely represents their needs and beliefs. Once this alignment is established, the voter creates a strong emotional bond and accepts it as a part of their social identity in order to feel as though they are making the right choice, which in turn creates an identity that tends to last throughout changing administrations (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). This phenomenon is further supported by Huddy and Bankert's (2017) discussion of the "expressive model" (p. 3) in which people vote with their identified party for the sole reason of improving or sustaining its social standing. This model is supported by an empirical observation that found almost half of the respondents cited election success as more important than policy (Miller & Conover, 2015).

While voters may turn to partisan ideologies based on the systematic and social pressure of the American two-party system, they must alleviate the uncertainty of choosing the wrong party, so they use differentiation techniques to maintain their sense of independence as well as the positive evaluation of their chosen party (Hogg, 2016). Though differentiation through intergroup conflict is more obvious in situations of out-group discrimination, Greene (2004) argues that partisan conflict arises from in-group favoritism instead. Here, extremist ideologies and attitudes are developed by members of each party as a way to simultaneously increase confidence in their partisan identity and distance themselves from the opposing party's image.

From this theoretical background, we know that groups such as the political parties are formed between people with perceived similarities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), maintained through a competitive culture among other groups (Huddy & Bankert, 2017;) strengthened by individuals' emotional attachment to the group (Hogg, 2016; Huddy & Bankert, 2017), and blurred distinctions between support for the party and support for representation of party values (Greene,

2004; Hogg, 2016; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Miller & Conover, 2015). Feminist Ethics of Care suggests that people who are open to exploring identities with others will reduce the harshness and animosity between groups (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Noddings, 2018). So, how do we convince people whose identity is deeply connected with their party identification and in opposition to those without that identification, to begin communicating across differences and party lines using Ethics of Care techniques? Surprisingly, a propaganda perspective may provide insight in addressing groups of people and individual identities.

### **Propaganda, Polarization, and Ethics of Care**

Propaganda often gets assigned a negative connotation and is related to terms such as manipulation, force, and war. While it is true that propaganda has been employed by people and in ways without good intentions, this does not mean that propaganda is in complete opposition to affecting good change and creating a more empathetic public. By integrating Feminist Ethics of Care techniques, propaganda can help reduce political polarization. In this way, we can apply techniques drawn from propaganda to help people empathize and communicate across party lines.

To start reframing propaganda into a tool that can be used to encourage care, I contextualize Ethics of Care in what Jaques Ellul (1964) termed “horizontal propaganda.” Horizontal propaganda can best be described in comparison to vertical propaganda. Vertical propaganda is when one person or small group of people in power disseminate a message to the public. In the case of politics, we might think of this as the president and his cabinet telling the public that vaccines save lives (yes, an example of true propaganda), or corporate companies like Listerine manufacturing the condition “halitosis” to entice buyers. However, horizontal propaganda is when messages are created by people who spread them throughout groups of their

same social standing. This was observed in the fight for abortion rights in Ireland with the use of personal narratives.

*Abortion and Ireland* by David Ralph (2020) spoke to how personal stories can hold a lot of weight in political debates and policy change. Through the use of personal communication and larger cultural stories such as hashtag movements that spoke to the urgency of the abortion issue in Ireland, Ralph illustrates an example of horizontal propaganda (Ellul, 1964) and its effectiveness in not only normalizing but also reframing women's abortion experiences more positively in order to create national policy change. In his own words, "In the chapters that follow I detail this transformation in Ireland's abortion culture. In doing so I show how it had a direct bearing on the direction of the vote in May 2018 to allow women to decide whether and when they should have a child, or not" (p. 8). Techniques outlined by Ralph (2020) can help us understand the role an Ethics of Care framework can play in reducing polarization on contentious issues. For example, he notes that storytelling helped normalize abortion by creating a sense of contact and forming counternarratives in the public consciousness.

While the sharing of personal narratives certainly reflects an Ethics of Care framework, Ralph's (2020) concluding call for using more radical claims and strategies to create change may stray from its approaches. Ethics of Care states that understanding will come when both parties in an interaction feel heard (Gower et. al, 2019). By dominating the discussion with radical stories that flood the media, the target audience of those who do not agree with abortion may feel silenced and become averse to the other side of the argument because of that. In the United States, this issue has become so pronounced that liberals and conservatives have entirely different genres of media they consume to justify their views, as suggested by Dannagal Young (2019) in the book *Irony and Outrage*.

Young (2019) explores the distinction between the role of political commentary media on both the Democratic or liberal end as well as the Republican or conservative end of the United States political ideology spectrum. Throughout the book, Young argues that irony or political satire skits, such as Stephen Colbert and *The Daily Show*, are geared towards liberal audiences, while outrage or talk show programs, such as Rush Limbaugh and *Hannity*, are more appealing to conservatives. The end of the book clarifies that while irony and outrage exist for the different ends of the spectrums in a similar sense, they are not two sides of the same coin. Instead, it is more about who has control over these media that defines the values of the parties. Young argues that people looking for political power can easily control the narratives of outrage media while it is the individual satire artists who can pull off effective satirical political entertainment.

While it is not specifically about personal narratives, Young's analysis points out the way that radical stories (at least in the U.S.) can further polarization instead of accelerate change. Instead, propaganda techniques may be able to utilize these genres to reach across party lines. Using the preferences that already exist, partisans may be able to more easily understand a different side of the issue than their own and be open to dialogue about a common solution. Lakoff (2014) illustrates this through the effective framing of the gay marriage issue. Instead of focusing on the issue itself, connect an issue that the other side already cares about like how supporting gay marriage can represent liberty of individuals over government mandates.

Edward Bernays (1928) said, "The public has its own standards and demands and habits. You may modify them, but you dare not run counter to them..." (p. 86). With this in mind, the question remains: Does the public want civility and dialogue and a reduction of polarization? According to recent surveys, they do (Political Polarization in the American Public, 2019), although this has been debated (Adams, 2020). It is important to be reminded here that it is

*affective* polarization that propaganda can seek to reduce, so the focus is on people's actions and perceptions of the opposing party, not necessarily their attitudes or opinions on policy. Consistent with Jaques Ellul's (1964) conceptualization of propaganda, Ethics of Care practices may serve as most useful and effective as propaganda of integration. This would be accomplished through education that emphasizes emotion and difference in the classroom to increase understanding, community, and dialogue among future generations. Noam Chomsky (1989) supported this notion saying, "He who mobilizes the elites, mobilizes the public" (pp. 46-47).

Year to year, issues tend to eb and flow in intensity and it is important to note that personal narratives may not be effective in every situation. Often it is a combination of generalized scientific facts, personal narratives, and community connection that are needed to reach either side of the political spectrum. As has been discussed above, propaganda takes time to effectively affect change in public discourse and behaviors, so constant adjusting to the demands of the public at all times will be necessary to help build a future of interactions, relationships and leaders with a basis of Ethics of Care. For more immediate action, committed volunteers such as teachers and instructors are needed to begin the transformation of education into a system that recognizes and values emotions of individuals and communities.

### **Politics, Polarization, and Higher Education**

While divisive discussions of political nature can show up in many areas of our lives -- social, familial, academic, etc. -- the higher education classroom could serve as a controlled environment for students to practice cultivating Ethics of Care competencies for interactions they will have in various other contexts. To transform a classroom into the space needed for these discussions, teachers would need to adjust their pedagogy to effectively facilitate this activity. In *Philosophy of Education*, Nel Nodding (2018) outlines four steps to facilitating a caring

classroom environment, “modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation” (p. 230). Modeling posits that teachers should have an established care for the self and others and be willing to bring that to the classroom environment for the students to observe. Additionally, students would be asked to engage with what they observe through modeling as well as class materials. This step is termed “dialogue”. Students should be asked to remodel or practice their understanding of care in their relationships both in and outside of the classroom and the teacher should recognize these efforts as confirmation of the development of care in the students. This development of care in people is named “maturity” throughout this work and is defined by the ability to maintain relationships through care for one another. This directly matched with Carol Gilligan’s definition of Feminist Ethics of Care and addresses criticisms that Ethics of Care as opposed to justice leaves carers vulnerable to exploitation of others. Instead, carers model the care in their relationships and aid the other to mature with them in building their relationship, otherwise, the relationship cannot be sustained. This is relevant to classroom pedagogy as it encourages teachers and students to break down the power dynamic and recognize each other as both teachers and learners in a reciprocal service of one another.

Part of this reflexive student/teacher relationship depends on the willingness of the teacher to be open and vulnerable about their personal identities and life experiences as they are asking their students to do the same (Bozalek et al., 2010; Herakova & Congdon Jr., 2018; Sykes & Gachago, 2018). This practice is supported by what Sykes and Gachago (2018) call the “relational web of caring” (p. 89) that is formed when students and teachers are able to bond through personal story sharing. This kind of storytelling and its relational function are also central to the Critical Communication Mutual Mentoring model proposed by Herakova and Congdon Jr. (2018) as an equitable approach to academic thriving in the 21st century. Identities

such as race and sexual orientation often spark heated political debate which is why it is important that the classroom environment helps students to learn to talk about identity and difference with care (Bozalek et al., 2010). Additionally, once the instructor has successfully modeled and fostered this relationship with their students, the goal should be for the student to begin to lead as many, if not more, of those practices than the teacher (Yamauchi, 2016). All of the scholars previously referenced agree that acknowledging student and teacher identities like race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and others and how they impact their life experiences, the stories they share, and their values is an essential part of enacting care in the classroom.

Authors Foster and Janco (2020) used a transformative pedagogy that included the Ethics of Care principles as well as the combination of oral histories and digital technologies. In their course, they discussed the way that war has become the norm for their lifetimes and challenged each other to envision a world where the counter-narrative of peace was valued more than war and political power. Students were taught as co-creators of the course curriculum which allowed them to use the model of their instructor's guidelines and adjust them to fit their own curiosities. The course was also project-based which the researchers found allowed for more space for students to reflect and discuss not only the content of their course but also their own feelings about the course content. For the project, students were asked to interview someone from the American Friends Service Committee, an organization of peace activists formed during World War I. Students constructed their own interview questions with a partner based on what they wanted to know about war and peace through their interviewee's perspectives. Students expressed upon completion of the project the value they found in interviewing members of the AFSC and also seeing the benefits of being open to getting different answers than they expected and feeling like a part of a community due to their part in the project.

Foster and Janco's (2020) classroom is a great example of how curricula should be transformed to center Ethics of Care elements like community relationship building, breaking down of power structures through student/teacher curriculum co-creation, focus on emotional course elements (as opposed to purely technical or academic elements), and steer away from additive approaches which favor power structures such as lead investigator/instructor setting expectations for the rest of the team/students. These types of approaches tend to overwhelm students and keep classrooms from becoming fully supportive and effective environments for student emotional and academic growth (Foster & Janco, 2020).

Instructors who seek to move the classroom towards a more transformative pedagogically guided space may find themselves feeling unsure of not only how to model Ethics of Care, but how to address behaviors and conversations that oppose these principles in a way that allows them to maintain care for all students, encompassing the spectra of political or moral alignments. A concern that may come up for instructors or facilitators of politically-charged discourse in the classroom may be for students who would find themselves defending their humanity in a discussion with someone who does not hold that identity and holds one that directly threatens and dominates theirs. Leonardo and Porter (2010) focused their research on racial identity and how these discussions will never be a safe space for racial minorities. They argue that this concern is actually rooted in the violence of whiteness and the tendency of white and privileged identities to shy away from conversations about oppression to not disturb their own privilege. So, when addressing issues of identity in a group of mixed ideologies, it is important to recognize that those who are privileged may be expecting a "safe space" to voice their opinion, but in fact, these safe spaces are only further protecting privileged identities and hurting those with oppressed identities. These discussions should be uncomfortable for privileged students and



learning to be uncomfortable is how oppression and privilege can be effectively addressed (Sykes & Gachago, 2018).

In issues of political nature that revolve around students' identities, some instructors may feel as though they do not have an adequate enough understanding or experience to facilitate these discussions in their classrooms, especially if their identities are different from and privileged compared to those of their students (hooks, 2014; Yamauchi et al., 2016). To address this concern, we can learn from scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2013) who suggests, "Differences in power constrain our ability to connect with one another even when we think we are engaged in dialogue across differences" (p. 129). She goes on to describe a classroom environment that not only asks students to co-create curriculum with the instructor but also interrogates their own senses of power and privilege with each other in a way that makes them teachers and learners for each other as well as the instructor through open sharing of personal experiences. It is important to note that asking specifically students with minority identities to speak on their experience for their white classmates is not reflective of a supportive learning environment (Love, 2013; Rudick & Golsan, 2018). Instead, as outlined by Noddings (2018), the teacher should model openness in sharing their experiences and helping students to listen and critically examine their own experiences in relation either privately or with their peers – what Barbara Love (2013) calls developing a "liberatory consciousness." Ethics of care can serve an especially important role for instructors to give themselves and their students grace to make mistakes and learn from them. With the focus on community in the "relational web of care", no individual is blamed, only called into reflection with the group as a whole to learn about the power and oppression that impact our identities and relationships (Sykes & Gochago, 2018).

Eventually, the hope is that students will see the space as open for them to share their perspectives and be open to having conversations that may change their perspectives.

Additionally, according to Allan G. Johnson (2013), “... change isn’t simply a matter of changing people. The solution also has to include entire systems [that]... shape how people feel, think, and behave as individuals, how they see themselves and one another” (p 613). Johnson (2013) went on to say those in positions of power, like teachers, should begin by withdrawing support from these systems in little ways and “interrupt the flow of business as usual” (p. 615). In cases of teaching in higher education classrooms, this may look something like reimagining the course syllabus and resisting the elements of the standardization by the institution that privilege power dynamics or justice approaches to education. *The Social Justice Syllabus Design Tool* by Sherria D. Taylor and colleagues (2019) offers suggestions such as language changes that enact care for student success and incorporating discussions of social justice and care across disciplines.

hooks (2014) asked teachers to consider that, “we were all going to break through collective academic denial and acknowledge that the education most of us had received and were giving was not and is never politically neutral” (p. 30). This, once again, addresses and brings us back to our justice versus Ethics of Care approach where we can recognize that the objectivity privileged by the justice approach is a myth and we can utilize Ethics of Care to interrogate our perspectives in relation to each other to encourage more empathetic individuals in ourselves, in our students, and in their communities.

These pedagogical suggestions verify the need for cross-group communication about divisive issues on college campuses as an approach to narrowing polarization and facilitating perspective-taking and open-mindedness. Engaging political attitudes and polarization among

students on a college campus, may provide insights into how Ethics of Care approaches may shape affective polarization and/in intergroup interactions around politically divisive topics. In an attempt to tackle the issue of polarization between the two main political parties in the United States from a communication-focused perspective, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Ethics of Care principles and practices appear in and impact conversations on politically-charged topics among college students?

RQ2: How does participating in a dialogue on politically-charged topics impact affective polarization among college students identifying with each of the two major U.S. parties?

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODS

The study utilized primarily qualitative methodology, which was appropriate considering the subjective nature of political interactions and experiences in the United States (DeCoster & Lichtenstein, 2007). Instead of theorizing about political identities generally, the goal of this research was to observe how different participants respond to cross-party interactions in real time, as well as how they theorize and have experienced polarization. Additionally, researcher context was important to consider, recognizing that both the researcher's personal political leanings and the campus context in which the study occurred were a part of the analyzed interactions. By using a qualitative approach, I, as the researcher, was able to consider my own experiences as data and draw conclusions based on a more comprehensive picture of participants' beliefs, behaviors, and experiences than quantitative identifiers and assumptions of a person might (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Young & Babchuk, 2019).

The research was guided by Grounded Theory, as its inductive nature honors all participants' individual experiences, as well as collaborative and iterative sense-making, instead of only taking note of what falls in line with a rigid set of guidelines from a pre-chosen theory. Grounded Theory was created by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 and is based in sociology (Gill, 2020). This background confirms its usefulness in organizing observations of a live focus group interaction in which the researcher hopes to understand what people think and why they think it. It has been found to be helpful in previous identity work by Gill (2020) that seeks to name and explore individual realities rather than try to establish an overall truth. In this research, Grounded Theory allowed me to understand how participants perceived their place in the world and among the U.S. socio-political culture. Further, this methodology was suitable to

explore emergent meanings of polarization, as well as related intergroup communication practices and their connections to Ethics of Care and participants' social identities related to party affiliation. Approaching the observed interactions as a type of theorizing was essential to answering the question of affective polarization. The literature informing the study and research questions provided some sensitizing concepts for the grounded theory analysis (Bowen, 2006). Sensitizing concepts allow the researcher a place to start when interpreting information from qualitative data. While the researcher starts with guiding theoretical concepts, the process remains inductive because the researcher does not limit their analysis to the theoretical concepts, but allows other discoveries to form around them. The researcher remains sensitive to the presence of the concepts and connects authentic findings from the data to their previous knowledge of theory (Bowen, 2006).

As such, existing literature and the SIT, IGC, and Ethics of Care frameworks guided me in framing the composition and design of the focus groups. For example, I sought to create intergroup communication opportunities and considered how party-related social identity distinctions may show up in those. Further, as a sensitizing concept (Bowen 2006), the Ethics of Care framework attuned me to interactional aspects without confining me to particular themes.

The grounded theory approach used for this research is constructivist and critical, with the understanding that turning to sensitizing concepts based in literature enriches the research process and makes it more inclusive (Charmaz, 2006; Hadley, 2017; Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006; Zaidi, 2022). The constructivist view specifically affirms that participants are making social realities during the research process itself, they are not simply reflecting and/or theorizing inner thoughts (Charmaz, 2006). Sensitizing concepts help orient the researcher to this world-making that occurs during research interactions, such as the focus groups in this study.

The constructivist approach recognizes the multitude of realities that exist due to the range of individual and intersectional experiences that people have. In qualitative research, and arguably all methodologies, it is important to recognize the construction of varied individual and collective realities to better understand and interpret the participants' responses, attitudes, and their potential impacts.

A critical orientation adds attention to the circulation of power in communicative actions to the constructivist paradigm outlined above. A critical approach is appropriate here because topics of social justice are deeply intertwined with politics in the United States and beyond and situating both the researcher and participant experiences within systems of power and oppression provides deeper insight into how experiences vary for different socially constructed identity groups. This approach meant that my sensitizing concepts included a lens for western social norms that participants used to express their perspective on the polarization within their cross-party interactions and relationships. By understanding how participants view themselves in the polarization landscape, broader issues of power and privilege can be simultaneously examined along with their experience within them. The insight gained from these individual perspectives and awareness of systems of privilege can then contribute to a learning process for both the researcher and the participants in co-constructing understanding across a range of previous experiences and assumptions about different others (Charmaz, 2020).

### **Data Collection**

To understand conceptualizations and manifestations of polarization and to observe how Ethics of Care in political interactions might affect party member polarization, this study involved University of Maine students recruited from political student organizations such as College Republicans and College Democrats, as well as Political Science and Women, Gender

and Sexuality Studies, Communication, Business, and Engineering majors. After receiving IRB approval, recruitment emails were sent to the aforementioned organizations and departments as well as flyers posted in buildings around campus. The project consisted of a series of political dialogues/focus groups, accompanied by pre- and post-conversation surveys. The pre-surveys informed the formation of the focus groups, so that dialogues included students with differing party affiliations. Participants were emailed the link to the post-focus group survey immediately after the conclusion of the focus group and received a \$15 Amazon gift card upon completion of the survey.

The pre- and post-focus group surveys (Appendix A & B) measured affective polarization and perceived closeness to members of both the Democratic and Republican parties. To do this, survey questions were modeled after Wojcieszak and Warner's (2020) measures for affective polarization including a scale of perceived closeness as represented by overlapping circles and a 1-100 feeling thermometer. Both surveys included open-ended responses for further expansion on political alignment and reflections on the focus group experience.

The focus groups were observed, recorded, and transcribed using the videotelephony and online chat service, Zoom. The focus groups were constructed by the researcher once enough responses were submitted with the intention of having a group of 4-6 participants with as close to equal representation of each party in each group as possible. The focus groups began with a reminder of the consent materials and prompted participants to rename themselves with a desired pseudonym in Zoom (the transcripts reflected these pseudonyms). After that, we viewed a 5-minute video showing a group of Black Lives Matter (BLM) supporters attending a Trump rally. The video showed scenes from an outdoor rally in support of presidential candidate at the time, Donald Trump. At this rally there were hundreds of Trump supporters listening to a few

speakers on a stage. A group of about ten Black Lives Matter protesters joined the crowd of the rally dressed in clothes with BLM logos, colors and flags, and stood with their fists in the air. The speakers on stage invited the BLM supporters to address the crowd. While the BLM representative spoke, the crowd cheered as he amplified messages of freedom and being a patriot and christian with a responsibility to not be complacent with “bad politicians.” The audience responded negatively and jeered when he spoke about police violence against People of Color. The final portion of the video includes clips of the BLM protesters and the Trump supporters mingling and taking pictures together while a voice over of the BLM representative speaks about the success of the interactions at the rally and his hope that connection will continue to grow between the groups. Participants were asked to use this video as a starting point for sharing their experiences with people from their opposing viewpoint.

The focus group then proceeded with the facilitator asking IRB-approved questions (Appendix D) about participants’ views on the video and the politically-divisive topic of BLM in the United States. Facilitation questions (Appendix D) were informed by Ethics of Care principles and the work of Warner and colleagues (2020) about the power of narrative to reshape perceptions of the out-group. The discussion was mostly left open and also included political beliefs on other topics if the conversation led participants there.

### **Data Analysis**

Focus group transcripts were first coded, line-by-line. Emerging codes were grouped into themes, and then - into categories. I started this project with a sensitizing definition of Ethics of Care: interactions that represent a commitment of parties in an interaction to enhance respect and space for the opposite party, as well as for the self, through seeking understanding by asking questions, listening and sharing personal stories, among others. Following grounded theory



analysis, a sensitizing concept is one that simply orients the researcher to the data (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz & Smith, 2003) instead of providing codes and categories. With this in mind, my analysis was attuned to moments where care for the other and care for the self seemed simultaneously present. I coded both the content (what was said), as well as the dialogic process (how things were done/said) during the focus group.

Some patterns in the transcripts that stood out to me included in what contexts participants used “I” or “we.” This was significant to my observation because it allowed me to understand when participants felt isolated while expressing their opinion. I also looked for moments when participants willingly revealed their political party preference to see if participants wished to appear as part of their party or wished to separate themselves during the interaction. Throughout my facilitation experience I recognized that all of the focus groups spent some time, without a specific prompt, talking about the way they felt the media contributed to polarization of the parties.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the primary researcher, I identify as a young, college-educated, white cis-woman with liberal political ideology. I identify strongly as a Democrat as do my closest friends. I was raised in a white, two-parent, Catholic family with more conservative values, with whom on occasion I have struggled to find understanding on topics of social justice. While I had started to form my liberal opinions a few years before, the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the preceding campaign invigorated my passion for social justice and concern for the rights of historically marginalized groups such as BIPOC, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, and women, among others. While I have personal experience as a member of only one of these communities, I strive to become a better ally and activist through seeking out

perspectives from these different communities and through working to change mundane and formal interactional dynamics, so that marginalized voices and communities' self-determination can be amplified and honored.

This research took place at the University of Maine (UMaine), which is a white-serving land-grant institution with about ten-thousand students. While I had heard the term “primarily white institutions” in the final years of my undergraduate studies, I did not hear or really critically explore “White Serving Institutions” until I began the graduate program. Using the term White Serving Institutions in place of Predominantly White Institutions draws attention to the privilege that exists for white students in academic spaces that does not exist for students of different racial and ethnic identities (Mohajeri & Nishi, 2022). Through my undergraduate career in the Communication and Journalism Department, I took several classes that had units on racial disparities. I also took an entire course devoted to narratively understanding the experience of immigrants in our surrounding communities. Through social interactions with students from other majors, I had realized that outside of Communication classrooms, discussions of race and the ongoing inequities that persist in our institutions are not visited as often or in the same critical ways – such as discussing the “intersectionality” framework, paying special attention to the diversity of field contributors in the syllabi, and pointing out instances of naturalized white privilege in students' experiences. Additionally, many white students in my interactions at the university have expressed their resignation to issues of race. One of the most difficult practices that I am trying to incorporate into my own life is talking about race in all settings whether I am teaching a course, a student in a course, socializing with friends, socializing with strangers, in a professional environment, etc. I still find myself feeling anxious about these topics, one recent one being working with a team of my superiors on creating a social media post to celebrate

Black History Month at my job on campus. It became especially clear to me through my facilitation of the focus groups that white students do not feel that discussions of race are salient to them which goes to show the failure of the University of Maine in that department. While these research questions do not specifically address race as a political issue, I feel it is important to recognize and expand on the interplay of race in these interactions.

My liberal ideology that I bring to the context of the University of Maine, as the research site, may have shaped how I analyzed focus group interactions and survey responses. However, using grounded theory to identify themes as they were emerging in the conversation was a helpful approach to open up and challenge liberal and conservative alignments alike. Additionally, having this research located at a white-serving institution has affected the perspectives I was able to get from a voluntary group of participants. Having politically-charged interactions is a different experience for those of dominant groups than it is for those who are part of historically marginalized communities. Those with minority identities can often find themselves defending their humanity when it comes to political dialogue across parties (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). It is important to recognize that for this reason, many valuable perspectives may have been missed due to the voluntary nature of the project, the campus on which it occurred, and the divisive nature of politics in recent years.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Overview of Results

After four focus groups, the project concluded with fifteen participants who completed all three steps (pre-focus group survey, focus group meeting approx. 1 hour, and post-focus group survey) with an additional twenty-four students either partially or completely filling out the pre-focus group survey. All participants identified their race as caucasian and two of the fifteen who fully participated specified additional identifiers: one LatinX/Hispanic, and one Ashkenazi. Of the fifteen full participants, thirteen were between the ages of 18-24, one participant was between the ages of 25-34, and one between the ages 35-44. All participants had not yet completed a college degree. The breakdown of political identification for those who participated in the focus groups was 40% Republican, 40% Democrat, 13.33% Independent leaning Democrat, and 6.67% Independent leaning Republican.

The pre-focus group survey showed that participants were fairly neutral towards members of either the Democratic or Republican party as indicated by their responses on the feelings thermometer where the mean response was 52.97 (SD = 25.56) towards Democrats and 53.94 (SD = 26.39) towards Republicans (a value of 50 is the midpoint of the thermometer and indicates a truly neutral feeling towards the group, neither negative or positive affect is present). The closeness measure revealed a similar conclusion where the mean response showed participants felt moderately close to supporters of the democratic party (Appendix A – see question 7, fourth photo from the left),  $M = 4.00$ ;  $SD = 1.41$ , and a bit less close to supporters of the Republican party,  $M = 3.77$ ;  $SD = 2.03$ . From these responses, it seems that those who volunteered for the study already viewed themselves as neutral, non-polarized partisans. The way

recruitment for the study was framed asked for participants interested in helping combat political polarization (Appendix C). Thus, it is possible that those who volunteered for the study were not looking to debate and already thought of themselves as even-headed and committed to easing polarization between the parties. This may have had an effect on the environment created by the participants in the focus groups, which was a space where stated opinions were rarely challenged and discussion topics relied mostly on experiences with polarization itself and less on partisan issues.

In the focus groups, participants shared their thoughts on a variety of topics such as climate change, BLM, COVID-19 mask mandates, among others. Participants rarely challenged each other's opinions and spoke mostly in turns in response to the prompting questions (Appendix D), directing their answers to the facilitator instead of engaging with one another. All focus group participants expressed a desire for less polarized interactions across party lines and suggested a few ways this might be achieved such as responding without trying to persuade the other, finding common ground on a subject outside of politics, and consuming a wide variety of information sources outside of news media.

In the post-focus group surveys (Appendix B), the feelings thermometer responses reflected a slight increase in warmth towards both parties, but still remained mostly neutral with a mean of 55.08 towards Democrats ( $SD = 22.15$ ) and 54.58 towards Republicans ( $SD = 20.55$ ). The closeness measures also increased slightly with the mean being 4.22 towards supporters of the Democratic party ( $SD = 1.42$ ), and a mean of 3.83 towards members of the Republican party ( $SD = 1.86$ ). Because of the small number of participants who completed the whole study ( $N = 15$ ) and the only slight increases in both the feelings thermometer and the closeness measures, no

pre- and post-tests of statistical difference were performed. Instead the analysis focused on the qualitative focus group data.

Findings based on the grounded theory analysis suggest that with regards to the first research question, participants had a desire to practice Ethics of Care and named intergroup communication strategies that would help achieve that, such as practicing listening to the other, finding connection on other topics, and imagining the other's perspective. Such suggestions notwithstanding, participants were either unwilling or did not know how to engage in an intergroup (polarizing) discussion during the 1-hour focus group session, as described above. However, in response to the second research question, even just connecting with those from the opposing party about this shared goal for future political interactions seemed to slightly increase feelings of warmth and closeness to their opposing party as a whole. I cannot suggest a decrease in polarization since participants did not report starting out very polarized in the first place. However, it is notable that participants did surface an operational definition of affective polarization and provided their own analysis of social factors that may be contributing to it, most specifically, biased media and argumentative culture. Future research should adjust recruitment techniques to get a wider range of participants to engage in cross-party dialogues, and consider specifically the degree of polarization present.

### **Ethics of Care during Polarizing Conversations**

Several themes emerged from the grounded theory analysis of focus group data that help illuminate college students' views on and practices of political interactions that model Ethics of Care. Perhaps the main and most consistently present theme was that of **metacommunication** where participants explicitly discussed what communicative practices make a difference when engaging with others on potentially divisive or sensitive topics. Metacommunication (or

metadiscourse) is defined as a type of talking or signaling that is about communication, its purposes, practices, and problematics (Craig, 2005). An example of a metacommunicative statement is “Communication is the cure.” Importantly, metacommunication enacts taken-for-granted cultural norms and beliefs of and about interactions and message exchanges (Craig, 2005).

Participants modeled this practice in the focus groups when they were reflecting on what they picture and experience as polarizing interactions and what strategies might be effective in such situations, as in the excerpt below.

*Nb: ... it's not like you can just say treat them better it's, how do you get people to treat other people better and with respect and, like their other and like they're on the same level, and I don't have an answer for that besides continuing to have – I don't want to say rallies, but protests and making noise and the minority does need to be loud, in this case, they need to make their voices heard.*

This theme makes apparent the value that participants attribute to communication as a connection-building essential to creating understanding of differences in politically divisive interactions. Additionally, the focus on communication as a solution establishes the value of communication-centered research on political polarization. The subthemes within the metacommunication umbrella included cultural norms and critical hope.

Table 2. Metacommunication. Subthemes relating to metacommunication found in analysis of focus group transcripts.

Theme: Metacommunication		
Subtheme	Description	Quote Examples
Cultural norms (tolerance of difference and avoidance of	Participant states a response to or effect of polarization that connects to common	"And I think that that that's that's something that I find really personal and important is the fact that don't judge a book by its cover because I think that everyone deserves a

Table 2 Continued.

<p>engagement)</p>	<p>Western cultural practices of social rules of interaction and disagreements.</p>	<p>chance at the very least to show their own opinions and be themselves, be who they are instead of just people jumping to conclusions, just assuming."</p> <p>Nb: ... maybe it's better if we don't start off talking about politics, maybe like you go and get a cup of coffee first or something like that or talk about something stupid, like the weather, just to like feel each other out because if you just dive right into it it's such a hot charged topic that just shouldn't be done out of the blue... like I think you need a little bit more basis with the other person first, you need to know where they're coming from a little bit otherwise you're just dealing with their opinions which you may or may not agree with.</p> <p>Blue: yeah [don't] talk about politics on the first date.</p>
<p>Critical Hope</p>	<p>Participant expresses a sense of hope or optimism for reducing polarization.</p>	<p>K: But I feel like watching it, it did sort of remind me of, like, the power of communication and just like being able to talk to someone and share your message in a way that may or may not be understood, is, in some cases, like, enough to to understand each other.</p> <p>Maverick: ... this is the first time I've had a political discussion with anyone that has identified as a Democrat in the last four years, so this has been really great and it makes me feel like I could have discussions more often, with people</p> <p>Azul: You know, polarization often, two things: one, depends on the individual and two, doesn't -- it can be remedied simply by opening that conversation.</p>



## Cultural Norms

The cultural norms metacommunication subtheme included comments that reiterated specific models about what behavior is appropriate and effective in interactions, what counts as credible and relevant sources of information, and what the outcomes of a political discussion should be. One of these cultural norms was **tolerance for differing political views and stances**, as exemplified in Blue's words below.

*Blue: And I think that that that's that's something that I find really personal and important is the fact that don't judge a book by its cover because I think that everyone deserves a chance at the very least to show their own opinions and be themselves, be who they are instead of just people jumping to conclusions, just assuming.*

Here, this participant directly states that interactions free from judgment are preferable and provide an opportunity to get to know someone. This remains in line with IGC and SIT because participants feel by separating their emotionally attached identity to their polarized position on politics from an interaction, they could pursue a relationship on a different basis – perhaps a different community they both identify with such as what Warner and colleagues (2020) found to be successful in their narrative writing study (Bond et al., 2018; Gallois & Giles, 2018; Gower et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2020).

Reflecting the self-defense reaction to conflict, identified in SIT research (Hogg, 2016), later in this interaction, another participant in this focus group expressed frustration with those who seek to change others' political stances.

*Blue: I will respect you for your opinions as long as you respect me for mine and we can agree to disagree and we can move on with our lives because either way you're a good person, I'm a good person that's all there is to it we're human.*

Nb: *Right, and unless you're trying to make a change or something, like, please don't shove it in my face.*

In this interaction, it seems that both participants (each of whom disclosed as identifying with an opposing party on their pre-focus group surveys) agreed about the cultural expectation that part of caring for another person in a political interaction means allowing them to have and construct their own opinions about a situation or topic. Prior literature on Ethics of Care has identified care for the other through listening and being open to understanding their perspective, as well as care for the self through sharing personal stories with others as integral characteristics of interactions (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2018; Warner et al., 2020). The congruence among participants here suggests that a dimension of care is also that of self-determination.

However, from a SIT perspective, one should consider also that this can easily be lost in the identity formation process that leads people to become entrenched in their group identities and result in a closing off from other perspectives (Hogg, 2016; Miller & Conover, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). What may address this issue would be an environment where people with diverse views have an extended time to hold meetings (such as a higher education course) where they can get to know each other and create relationships so that group membership may still be present but not the focus of interactions on both political and non-political topics (Foster & Janco, 2020; Gower & Giles, 2019; Noddings, 2018).

While there might be a place for self-determination in an Ethics of Care approach to political polarization, focus group data suggested also that there is a cultural norm of **maintaining distance and/or avoiding engagement with difference**. Some participants went so far as to say that certain interactions should avoid discussing these differences in opinion

altogether, at least until some other connection has been established first or interlocutors have had a chance to learn more about one another. In their reaction to the BLM video shown as a conversation stimulus during the focus group, participants stated the following:

*Nb: I mean seeing people get along like that kind of for a second like put their differences aside, it was refreshing I think.*

And...

*Nb: ... maybe it's better if we don't start off talking about politics, maybe like you go and get a cup of coffee first or something like that or talk about something stupid, like the weather, just to like feel each other out because if you just dive right into it it's such a hot charged topic that just shouldn't be done out of the blue... like I think you need a little bit more basis with the other person first, you need to know where they're coming from a little bit otherwise you're just dealing with their opinions which you may or may not agree with.*

*Blue: yeah [don't] talk about politics on the first date.*

*[both chuckle]*

It is clear by the chuckle at the end that these participants share a metacommunicative view that there are socially in/appropriate times for political discussions, which should not be present in every interaction they have. In the first example of this preference, the participant expressed that interactions that lack political tension are “refreshing” or more desirable over those addressing political differences head on. Though this might appear to be positive, it also

signals that differences are better “put aside.” This speaks to an assumption of care that is rooted in white norms of avoiding conflict to protect the relationship (Gutierrez-Perez & Ramirez, 2019; Rudick & Golsan, 2018). This white norm of avoidance is reflective of the power that white people have in interactions that keep their privilege unchallenged (Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). By identifying specific situations where difference is inappropriate, white people can remain comfortable in their assumptions that grant them social power over others. This white dominated version of civility is not conducive to a feminist Ethics of Care approach. Instead the type of civility that should be pursued is one where differences can be discussed and examined, enriching perspectives. This is not to say that these participants are aware of their role in these norms of whiteness, but shows how ingrained these practices are and how they play a part in social interactions of difference to this day. However, as Ethics of Care orientation would suggest, conflict resolution through mutual understanding can strengthen relationships (Gilligan, 1993; Makau & Marty, 2013; Noddings, 2018; Reed, 2018).

**The Golden Rule** was also alluded to as a cultural norm that should guide communication in political discussions.

*Blue: Everyone just should understand the fact that if you are not being nice to other people, they don't necessarily need to be the nicest to you either.*

Here, the participant expresses that interactions are reciprocal and may reflect this whether they are positive or negative. This cultural norm would fall in line with the reciprocal nature of the Ethics of Care model (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2018). However the framing of this comment prioritizes the negative which may relate back to SITs defensive identity (Hogg, 2016). While Ethics of Care does include this self-care element, the self-care should be guided by an open perspective of others and when a negative interaction happens, the

carer may seek to ask questions about the other's reaction instead of falling back on reciprocating a negative response (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Makau & Marty, 2013).

An Ethics of Care supported practice was mentioned in more than one focus group who expressed valuing the communicative **humanization** of those with opposing views in an interaction which reflects this repeated desire for recognition of a person beyond their political identity. Ethics of Care supports this practice as long as the relationship built with it can also engage differences instead of continuing avoidance (Bond et al., 2018; Gower et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2020).

*K: I think it's really important to understand like your, I don't want to say opponent but like the other person as a just that, just as a person, because I feel like there's a lot of just othering happening everywhere, all the time, but everybody has the same like capabilities, you know you have the same potential like that could be you on the other side, like in another universe, you know. So I just, you know, be open to communication, actively listen, you know be rational, explain your side or your point in a way that isn't, I don't know, sort of demonizing to the other person I suppose.*

This expression of care reveals participants' desire to create connection in interactions and feel seen by their counterparts. If people can do this successfully in interactions, participants feel that interactions may become more common and more effective at reducing polarization.

Many focus groups also made the distinction between **opinions and facts** and assigned one more value over the other in the context of political debates.

*Jess: I like the suggestion of using facts because I think that using facts it's very hard to, like, argue against because it's like no, these are the statistics of what is going on and most people will be like 'oh yeah, that's what's going on,' then, of course, we should help*

*you know, but if you just start with, 'we need to defund the police, we need to do this, we need to do this' without any of the actual history or context behind it, it just makes you seem like a crazy person.*

This participant clearly prioritizes generalizable and documented facts and sources over other types such as personal anecdotes. This is reflective of western cultural norms, where a “rational world” paradigm takes precedence over narrative perspectives (Fisher, 1989; Warner, 2019).

This particular focus group was also hesitant to practice sharing any personal anecdotes or other identifying information during the meeting but one other participant did express an appreciation for anecdotes in political interactions when more pointedly prompted by the facilitator. This avoidance was a clear indicator of hesitancy to apply Ethics of Care in this interaction.

Participants in an Ethics of Care based interaction would be ready and willing to share personal experiences as a way to find connection with the other participants (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Noddings, 2018). This speaks to the importance of implementing this practice into educational settings since it is possible that the participants in this focus group may have wanted to share something more personal, but did not know how to or did not feel confident in doing so.

Some of the expressed goals and expectations of interactions also revealed cultural norms that guided the participants' conceptualization of what successful care looks like, not just how to enact it. Participants theorized “getting along” as an important cultural concept, related to polarization, with some suggesting the purpose of political interactions should be to make progress toward such an ideal.

It was clear that for some participants **getting along** was aspirational. They saw it as an unexpected novelty in political interactions among those with differing views.

*Jay: I thought it was, it was really interesting like something that hadn't really, that I haven't really seen before, I hadn't really. Seeing something like people at a Trump rally and Black Lives Matter supporters talking and getting along like that was definitely something I haven't seen before.*

However, others thought maybe getting along is not necessary for an Ethics of Care based interaction.

*nb: yeah that's tough, that's almost like an existential question like, how do you get everyone to get along with everyone because well yeah.*

*Blue: I don't know if any – everybody doesn't have to get along with everybody that's something that I've grown to understand more than more than a lot of people is that I don't agree with some of my best friends, I don't even close to agree with some of the things that they say, and sometimes, you know, a lot and I have entire, you know, groups of people that I find fun to be with, I think they're great people but I don't necessarily get along with certain people.*

These assumptions that getting along with everyone is both simultaneously rare and unnecessary reflect SIT in the way that participants see group membership as overriding connection across parties. This is consistent with previous research (Miller & Conover, 2015) and suggests that separation of groups is an accepted cultural norm that is perceived as reducing conflict but in the context of polarization and care, may actually contribute to a widening gap connection and understanding (Makau & Marty, 2013; Warner, 2020). These cultural norms pervade and mislead participants as they seek to negotiate the path to a less polarized social environment.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed on the goal of **progressing towards a less polarized social environment**, which in a way suggests communication as the cure (Craig, 2005) and ignores that tensions and disagreements might also be generative. Disagreements from an SIT perspective are scary to people because it forces their group identity to become unstable as they debate with another group or ideology (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). If they lose the debate, they must reconcile their group identity in some other way since the emotional attachment remains strong (Hogg, 2016; Huddy & Bankert, 2018). So, in that case, disagreements are better avoided. From an Ethics of Care perspective, disagreements are an opportunity for people to better understand different others (Makau & Marty, 2013; Noddings, 2018). Participants often referenced how the aforementioned practices of cultural norms in political interactions may lead to a desired result of discussions of differences without negative effects to the relationship between the people in the interaction.

*Azul: The Mother of All Rallies speaker was very much in a position of power there, it would have been very normal in that situation to, I think, just leave the protesters off to the side and continue on with the rally so in breaking the the tradition, the norms, there was a huge advancement at that rally that was that powerful, I think, for all of us to see and proof that, you know, polarization often, two things: one, depends on the individual and two, doesn't -- it can be remedied simply by opening that conversation.*

Others often referenced this goal as “moving forward” and always mentioned it in tandem and/or as a direct result of communicating about political issues instead of ignoring, avoiding, or refusing to engage openly in them. In some ways, this contradicts the finding summarized earlier that participants advocated for avoiding engaging political differences. There is a dialectical tension there - one between maintaining distance and seeking closeness (Hogg,



2016). The presence of this tension in the focus group data emphasizes how people involved in the research were actively trying to make sense of ways to minimize polarization, rather than feeling like they had a ready-made solution. Such dialectical tensions point to openings for shaping shared meaning-making and for learning generative communication practices. Actions toward this have been implemented into educational curricula with success and positive student reflections on their experience (Foster & Janco, 2020; Noddings, 2018). Existing scholarship, along with these data, align to suggest that addressing differences in an educational setting will have lasting effects on the students who will model it for others in their lives outside of the classroom (Noddings, 2018).

While the above mentioned cultural norms (tolerance, not forcing opinions, avoiding differences in discussion, the golden rule, humanizing, opinions vs facts, getting along, and progress) may have been referenced in an attempt by the participants to demonstrate knowledge of care, the actual conversational interactions did not seem to enact an Ethics of Care. In other words, there was a disconnect between stated principles and their implementation. For example, the participants did little work in engaging with each other and instead simply used the focus group as a time and space for the opinions of those present to be said aloud. It was rare that a participant would ask another a question about their beliefs or make connections to a community that they are a part of other than their political affiliation. Additionally, the stimulus video that the participants were asked to speak about focused on issues of race and it seemed the students had trouble addressing the political aspects of race relations in relation to their own whiteness. At our white-serving institution, it is not often that students are asked to engage in discussions of race and so learned behaviors of whiteness still cloud our students' definition of care and pervades every other aspect of their lives and relationships as well.

Values like tolerance and ignoring difference, while seemingly morally good, echo discourses of color-blindness and absolve white people from addressing the oppressive systems that they benefit from and participate in, focusing instead on individual actions (Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017). A more specific example of what this looks like is when white people call out others for being racist and separate themselves as not racist because they call out other individuals, not because they actively resist the structures that support them at the expense of others (Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2017). The way that this practice showed up in these focus groups was actually a group assumption where participants positioned themselves as part of a majority or spoke something that resembled a larger truth using **universalizing** language, such as “we” and “we all”, in an attempt to relieve the pressure and avoid being challenged when making a political statement, or potentially, suggests that these participants are enacting SIT and attempting to create a group that they can all identify with so that in-group out-group divisions fall away in this instance (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

*C: yeah, I feel like it was a reminder to me too that um we only got two teams to choose from in this country and that doesn't leave us with very good options at some points in time I think it's safe to say that probably both 2020 nominees were not popular, yeah, I think it's safe to say that popular support, if there was like a jungle primary system, we wouldn't have had either of them.*

Another participant said,

*F: I mean, Trump, I mean we all know, Trump's a, lot of us probably know Trump's not the greatest person in the world like personally like no one thinks he's a great person...*

The use of the third person plural pronoun “we” may be, on its face, suggestive of a community, but it also is vague, undefined, and unaccountable for possible differences or

learning about them. This assumption of commonalities or ignorance of difference shows how these participants sought to avoid opening their statement to criticism, the same way they may feel when confronted about their role in privileged systems, become frustrated with those who confront them, and feel defensive about their privileged position which may feel as though they are not cared for from their perspective. Here, we can reference back to the Ethics of Care use of maturity and justice (Noddings 2018; Reed, 2018). A person who practices a mature Ethics of Care would be willing to state their views and welcome criticism of their views as a way of furthering their learning and breaking down of their privilege in service to the oppressed group. Additionally, the justice approach would be applied in such a way that problematic views are called into the conversation and discussed not as a detriment to the person who stated them, but as a way to foster connection across difference and collaborate in visualizing and breaking down oppressive power structures.

What a Feminist Ethics of Care seeks to highlight is not that care feels good all the time, but that the process of care is simultaneously painful and rewarding (Cawston & Archer, 2018). An Ethics of Care can not be completely accomplished while power structures and systems that privilege certain people at the expense of others still exist (Anderson & Accomando, 2020; Foster & Janco, 2020). Within issues of race power relations, it is easy for those of us who experience white privilege to separate ourselves as ‘one of the good ones’ (Gutierrez-Perez & Ramierez, 2019; Kaufmann, 2010; Mohajeri & Nishi, 2022; Rudick & Golsan, 2018). This habit has transferred into other areas of our lives where it seems individuality is for the best in light of our image as a caring person. However, if we ignore our ties to the collective oppression of other identities, we fail to utilize the essential aspect of community in an Ethics of Care approach.

White people view care as privilege, while in reality, care in this framework will more likely be uncomfortable as privilege systems are subverted through care for the oppressed.

### **Critical hope**

While such problematic unexamined white/west-centric discourses animated all focus groups conversations, a counterpoint of **critical hope** was also articulated. Participants recognized the need for a larger cultural shift and the potential role they can play in it. They showed this through analysis of situations (both real and imagined) that reflect care discourses and practices.

*K: But I feel like watching it, it did sort of remind me of, like, the power of communication and just like being able to talk to someone and share your message in a way that may or may not be understood, is, in some cases, like, enough to to understand each other.*

And

*Maverick: ... this is the first time I've had a political discussion with anyone that has identified as a Democrat in the last four years, so this has been really great and it makes me feel like I could have discussions more often, with people.*

And

*Azul: You know, polarization often, two things: one, depends on the individual and two, doesn't -- it can be remedied simply by opening that conversation.*

So, while Ethics of Care practices may not have been deeply engaged in the focus groups, it is encouraging that the participants expressed an interest in pursuing a future where these practices would be more present and normalized, and that they recognized the experience in the focus group as a pedagogical model for such interactions. Additionally, it is important to note that the

way they expressed this vision for the future was action-oriented in relation to their role in the polarization landscape. Participants aspired to seek conversations with the political other. This reflects the previously scholarly defined definition of critical hope,

Zembylas (2014) argues for ‘critical hope’ rather than ‘naïve hope’, which he likens to ‘optimism or a blind faith that things will get better’ (p. 13). Critical hope requires a ‘critical analysis of power relations and how they constitute one’s emotional ways of being in the world’ and an attempt “‘to construct, imaginatively and materially, a different worldview’ (Zembylas, 2014, p. 13)” (Frizelle, 2020, p.13).

The hints of critical hope present in the focus group data suggest that teaching an Ethics of Care approach to difference could be a step toward improving the political landscape and pursuing social justice with a more responsive public (Frizelle, 2020; Grain & Lund, 2016; Wenham & Lee, 2022).

Even though the interactions themselves did not necessarily put Ethics of Care in action, since differences were not truly engaged with and mostly went without response from others, the participants showed a reflexive desire to engage with them in the future. From the themes drawn from this analysis, the lack of Ethics of Care praxis may be related to students’ perceptions that care means an avoidance of conflict and a focus on the existence of differences of opinion without judgment. What would change in an interaction modeling Ethics of Care would be one where the students engage with each other’s differences of opinion and challenge each other to view issues from a different perspective than their own. From the previous scholarly conceptualization and application of Ethics of Care (Foster & Janco, 2020; Goerisch, 2019; Noddings, 2018), it is unrealistic to expect a group of strangers to achieve this type of connection within an hour of meeting each other. These types of interactions need time to develop

relationships, trust, and understanding between people especially when these interactions are not how people are used to communicating about politics (Gallois & Giles, 2018; Gower et al., 2019). This is why the literature on the implementation of these techniques in a classroom curriculum is valuable and should continue to be explored in tandem with these data on affective attitudes and perceptions of care and expanded upon with instructor trainings (Taylor et. al, 2018). With this in mind, it seems from this sample that Ethics of Care would positively impact these students' perceptions of members of the opposing party and improve discourse of differences by finding connection instead of creating division

In terms of actually interacting with one another with an Ethics of Care frame, these focus groups lacked the actual practice. While constraints (such as modality via Zoom) were present, it was clear after all the focus groups had been completed that Ethics of Care requires longer-term relationship building than what was possible in the time span of an hour-long randomly assigned virtual meeting. Many times after the facilitator would ask a question, participants would take turns responding from their point of view to the question and focus less on what each other and more on how they personally wanted to answer the initial question. Practices that would reflect a better model of Ethics of Care would include participants asking each other questions about themselves or their views, sharing personal experiences without being specifically prompted, and leading the discussion together instead of relying on the prompting questions which would exemplify deep listening amongst the participants.

### **Affective Polarization in/and Political Intergroup Communication**

While focus group data suggest that some movement toward Ethics of Care was present in the cross-party interactions - either as aspirational descriptions or, more rarely, as modeled practices - a question remains whether such intergroup communication experiences impact

affective polarization among members of opposing parties? Affective polarization is a distinct dislike and distrust from members of an in-group towards members of an out-group (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020) – in this case between members of the Republican and Democratic parties. The descriptive statistics in the surveys suggest a slight decrease of polarization/increase in closeness and warmth but, on average, participants maintained a mostly neutral response in both pre- and post-focus group surveys. However, it is also important to note how people spoke about polarization, their experiences with it, and their perceptions of what contributes to it. In thinking about SIT and its notion that group animosity or affective polarization is due to a strong sense of group membership (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we recognize that communicating one’s identity was central for participants throughout the focus groups, suggestive of identity attachments.

Table 3. Experiencing Affective Polarization. Subthemes relating to participants’ experiences of affective polarization found in analysis of focus group transcripts.

Theme: Experiencing Affective Polarization		
Subtheme	Description	Quote Example
Communication of Identity	Participant specifies themselves as separate from others either by exposing their political party identification or by claiming a statement as their own without assuming the statement is agreed upon by all.	F: So I'm also going to say like I'm a Republican, and I mean this is where we kind of disagree on a lot of things, like, I tend to be, like, I totally believe in climate change but I don't believe it's really as quite as big a deal as other people make it so.
		Batman: I mean, I personally feel like you know what's the point in trying to educate someone when they don't want to be educated.
Social Factors (media role, argumentative culture)	Participant names a specific entity or practice that they believe contributes to the affective polarization they have experienced.	F: I feel like the media really divides us, and part of it is their profit mission, which is that they're trying to make money and they discovered that a story that's feel good and like uniting us just doesn't make money, but what does make money is

Table 3 Continued.

		<p>something that angers people and divides us, and so that's all the media has really become and the media has been the biggest divider not politicians not, you know, not whatever like companies or you know people, not poverty not inequality, but the media, because the media creates problems that didn't even exist before.</p>
		<p>K: I have a lot of political debates with my mom all the time and it's really frustrating to me when I'm saying something, and she like immediately grasps to, like, go against something like she just sort of flings her point out at my point when like maybe I'm not done or she's not trying to understand where I'm coming from because she just wants to immediately rebut what I'm saying, and I think that that's kind of what we saw happen.</p>
<p>Responding to polarization (fear/avoidance)</p>	<p>Participant reveals a reaction they have either seen or practiced when anticipating or experiencing a polarized interaction.</p>	<p>Azul: I think even this conversation, despite being anonymous is slightly defensive any anytime that politics is is the main focus of the discussion I think it's the habit, especially nowadays, if not historically as well, for people to protect their viewpoint and keep their values to themselves, for fear of being judged or bullied for those views.</p>

### Communication of Identity

Focus group participants declared their identities in different ways throughout these interactions. Some revealed their **political party affiliation** and voting history, as in the quote below.

*F: So I'm also going to say like I'm a Republican, and I mean this is where we kind of disagree on a lot of things, like, I tend to be, like, I totally believe in climate change but I don't believe it's really as quite as big a deal as other people make it so.*



Others did not disclose party preferences and shared only other elements of their identity and the communities they are a part of.

*Grey: But it's very difficult, for example, like I'm an EES major so a lot of environmental science someone can tell me I don't think we should do this to address climate change, but if you tell me, there is no climate change it's hard because that's there's certain things that are opinions and certain things that are not...*

Considering previously summarized focus group findings that focus group discourses amplified a cultural norm of avoiding political disclosures, particularly with strangers, it is important to note such differences in how participants communicated their identity. Equally important it is to note where the similarities are. Minimizing affective polarization is about reducing the distance between seemingly opposing positions (Serrano-Contreras et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2020). In the above examples, we can see two distinct movements toward that, and what they do share is a focus on an issue (climate change) and fundamental values and beliefs. This implies, then, a relational communication and definition of (political) identity (i.e., in relation to issues), rather than a categorical one (i.e., necessarily through party affiliation).

Another way of expressing identity was **isolating oneself** through language as a way to allow themselves to take up a limited amount of space while also leaving room for others to establish their own space or identity that may differ. Ethics of Care can work with this behavior as it asks participants to remain open to hearing and learning from other perspectives (Cawston & Archer, 2018). However, the space must be accompanied by an active listening with intent to understand instead of simply passively allowing space without the second step of taking in the other's perspective.

Batman: *I mean, I personally feel like you know what's the point in trying to educate someone when they don't want to be educated.*

And

Yellow: *... in my opinion, at this point in the pandemic I don't see the use of masks to be necessary at all, particularly in communities similar to [school name]...*

By specifying “personally” or “in my opinion,” participants are owning their words as a way to make sense of themselves in relation to the focus group interaction, in relation to the others in the focus group, as well as in the more general socio-political environment of their surroundings. In addition to claiming their views before stating them, they are also inviting the other participants to either join their claim or create their own that may or may not oppose them. By the repetitiveness of this code throughout the transcripts, it is apparent that these participants felt it was important to claim and offer space for a multiplicity of views and opinions. This act may be simultaneously against and in-line with SIT. On one hand, this space participants created for differing views and opinions reduced the competitive aspect of their group identity. SIT instead suggests that perhaps taking over the space with one ideology would take power away from the competing group (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), but this was not present here. From a different perspective, by creating space for their own political view to remain unchallenged by others, this may suggest an emotional attachment between the opinion and the participants’ identities which would align with the earlier discussion of animosity between groups being a result of self-defense (Hogg, 2016).

While this process of trying to allow space for others may, on the surface, present as an act of care and acceptance of others, it actually resulted in the participants engaging in a communication behavior called “hedging.” In seeking to make this space, they felt the need to

minimize the space they took up with their initial sharing by using language such as “that’s just my opinion” or “feel free to disagree.” It is through this space and flexibility of language that participants expressed their desire for a conflict-free interaction (Vlasyan, 2019) and everyone followed suit, consistent with an earlier finding affirming the value of avoiding polarizing conversations. By leaving opinion statements open, there was no space for pushback, which potentially even discouraged response to the opinion since participants did not feel like they needed to explain their point of view.

Participants did not seem to attempt to persuade anyone else in the focus group and instead stated their separate opinions with the hedging language as a cultural/linguistic signal of politeness and avoidance of conflict (Vlasyan, 2019). If participants had attempted to persuade while remaining inline with Ethics of Care techniques, it may have been possible to see Horizontal Propaganda (Ellul, 1964) at work in such a way that students created enough understanding and trust between them that they may have found agreement on an issue based on shared perspective. But, instead of enacting care, hedging worked as a technique of control, under the guise of self-determination, precluding open discussions and attempts to understand the differences present in the interaction. Additionally, we could also trace this isolation of the self through hedging back to norms of whiteness and civility which allow white people to keep themselves clean of racism or other forms of oppressive behavior by adhering to practices that masquerade as care for others instead of addressing their role in the power structures that uphold such behaviors (Rudick & Golsan, 2018).

Continuing to provide an unexpected insight into the second research question, it is worth noting again that none of the focus groups interactions exemplified any outright animosity between members of the group. As discussed previously, this may be a reflection of assumptions

about what care looks like to the participants and perpetuating cultural norms related to western whiteness such as conflict-free interactions and adjusting language to avoid individual blame of problematic opinions (Gutierrez-Perez & Ramirez, 2019; Kaufmann, 2010; Rudick & Golsan, 2018). In their autoethnography, Gutierrez-Perez and Ramirez (2019) critique how the pretense of dialogue in the classroom prevented their authentic presence as LatinX learners and deepened a sense of non-belonging. Similarly, in her qualitative study Kaufmann (2010) observed that white students often dominated group settings when asked to present on experiences of scholars of color and students who identified with these experiences did not get a chance to share. These findings provide concrete, recorded examples of when dialogue can subvert Ethics of Care in groups of mixed-races, cultural norms, and understandings leading to an enactment of racial power structures that determine whose voice matters. Importantly, this research is situated in the college classroom, emphasizing the presence of whiteness-centering conflict-avoidance in education. The participants in the current research, who all identified as white, affirmed the value of such norm and implied it as "neutral," contributing to a whiteness-serving discourse (Brooks-Immel & Murray, 2018; Gutierrez-Perez & Ramirez, 2019; Kaufmann 2010).

As a counterpoint, Gutierrez-Perez and Ramirez (2019) amplified the value of engaging difference in the classroom and offered: "An alliance is created through struggle during heated discussions that are not based on mutual agreement with my instructor or my peers or my family" (p. 331). Notably, even Makau and Marty's (2013) advocacy of dialogue emphasized the value of disagreement as an opening point to begin to meaningfully understand each other's differences. Taken together, this research and the current study's findings of white participants' conflict-avoidance around political topics speak to the importance of actually practicing polarizing dialogues in the classroom, not only as an exercise but also to reshape cultural norms.

As an example of how specifically classroom discussions can be facilitated, building on student-led analysis, we can look to the focus groups and how the participants lead unprompted discussions about political media as something they believe contributes to affective polarization among Democrats and Republicans in the U.S.

### **Social Factors Shaping Affective Polarization**

Participants framed much of their discussion around what they believe causes and invigorates political polarization among the public. These discussions centered on the two cultural forces - **the media** and an unhealthy norm of **argumentativeness** (Makau & Marty, 2013). It is worth noting that in identifying these factors, participants offered their own unprompted critical analysis of their social worlds.

First, participants were highly critical of news and/or social media and the way political leaders act on or are represented through these platforms.

*F: I feel like the media really divides us, and part of it is their profit mission, which is that they're trying to make money and they discovered that a story that's feel good and like uniting us just doesn't make money, but what does make money is something that angers people and divides us, and so that's all the media has really become and the media has been the biggest divider not politicians not, you know, not whatever like companies or you know people, not poverty not inequality, but the media, because the media creates problems that didn't even exist before.*

And

*Spider-Man: I like I was saying earlier it's the polarization is you only hear the people who are screaming because those are the people that get the most coverage and like*

*that's I think that's why politics in this country is gone so far skewed from what it used to be.*

In these examples, the participants are placing blame on the media as an intangible source. Such external attributions could be a mechanism for participants to absolve themselves from responsibility and from the pressure to have the hard discussions with people they have differences with. This could even be traced to cultural norms of whiteness in which white people try to enact power by making their roles in an issue invisible (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Instead, an Ethics of Care approach would reflect participants who focused on what they could do to contribute to the reparation of the issue which would be reducing affective polarization in this case. Another assumption this topic could point to is the negative associations participants have with political media or propaganda. This may be another example of the frustration the participants feel when they feel others are trying to persuade them into thinking one way or another instead of allowing different views to exist together. If participants were to be made aware of this negative association, it's possible they may instead learn to see media and propaganda as a useful tool for connection between the polarized parties. Participants may even work together to create a media plan to reach across partisan platforms in the interest of suggesting a media platform that appeals to both conservative and liberal aesthetics (Young, 2019) to better consolidate the messages that go out about policies to partisans. Such a project would be well-suited for a classroom approach and would empower students to think of themselves as a form of media for their peers to encourage dialogue and connection about political topics and concerns instead of further distance and dislike as the participants feel is the case with popular political media at this time.

In addition to media's negative impacts, participants emphasized the harmful influence of **argumentativeness** in their interpersonal communication. As they discussed their experiences in polarized interactions, participants spoke about the behaviors that others use that enhance their negative affect towards the opposing party.

*K: I have a lot of political debates with my mom all the time and it's really frustrating to me when I'm saying something, and she like immediately grasps to, like, go against something like she just sort of flings her point out at my point when like maybe I'm not done or she's not trying to understand where I'm coming from because she just wants to immediately rebut what I'm saying, and I think that that's kind of what we saw happen.*

And

*Spider-Man: A rally isn't a place to talk about this kind of thing because it's just going to lead to chaos and arguing and bad messaging because making a well reasoned argument doesn't play well at a rally necessarily.*

*Batman: And, to that, like, how many times have you seen on social media or maybe in person, where someone tries to argue against you know someone saying blm or the blm movement and as soon as they start saying something that goes against it, they're automatically called a racist and, you know, white privilege and right off the bat, you know, you just shove someone's opinion right aside, because it doesn't go with your opinion and with the guy in the video talking about it, you know, that's not really freedom, you know, when when one side decides what the messaging is you can't really have discourse.*

Participants described these instances where they did not feel that polarized cross-party interactions allowed for any space or expectation of understanding, only persuasion. Participants in these examples expressed a desire to feel like their perspective was heard and considered by their opponent instead of being met with a purely argumentative intention. Participants were implicitly critiquing what Makau and Marty (2013) called “competitive debate” an act which only seeks to win against the other and resists care and connection. Argumentativeness and disagreement are not synonyms -- argumentativeness (or competitive debate) shuts down the other perspective, but disagreement brings them to light for further discussion (Makau & Marty, 2013). Participants recognized argumentativeness as a damaging practice to their relationships and instead desired “dialogue” (Makau & Marty, 2013) because the conflict may then feel effective in some way, even if it does not necessarily end in total agreement.

These examples also reveal that arguments often try to get the other person to feel guilty about their opinion. Batman’s comment on this is also connected to the concept of white fragility (Rudick & Golsan, 2018) in which he suggests that supporters of BLM are contributing to polarization when they call out attitudes rooted in racism. In thinking about this issue, it is interesting to consider what polarization means to different people and how the reduction of it would look differently from different perspectives. This participant seems to see a reduction of polarization as others seeing their way instead of themselves shifting their own position to a new perspective. However, polarizing discussions about racial injustice will have to alienate the color-blind perspective that endangers the lives of BIPOC in order to achieve equity (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).



## Responding to Polarization

In their unprompted analysis of polarization in the U.S., participants identified not only contributing factors, but also responses. They described what they feel is a common reaction to polarization manifesting as a complete **fear/avoidance** of political topics with others altogether. They describe this as a result of their fear of being judged or attacked for their views or jeopardizing their relationships which suggests they value relationships, which is consistent with an Ethics of Care approach (Cawston & Archer, 2018; Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2018).

*Blue: I don't particularly know what's going on in the news at the moment, I'll be hon- I kind of, I've kind of taken a step back just because, especially in this last two years, and everything it's been, it's just been a whirlwind and I, I am very happy not knowing, although I know that I probably should be informed but.*

*Nb: Yeah.*

*Blue: I'm just taking, I've taken a break, yeah, at the moment.*

And

*Azul: I think even this conversation, despite being anonymous is slightly defensive any anytime that politics is is the main focus of the discussion I think it's the habit, especially nowadays, if not historically as well, for people to protect their viewpoint and keep their values to themselves, for fear of being judged or bullied for those views.*

These assessments of the participants bring back the importance of finding a solution to polarization. If people stop talking about politics and stop sharing their opinion, democracy has failed (Tronto, 2013). Additionally, it brings back the importance of taking a communication-based approach that helps people to interact effectively. Ethics of Care, in this case, would support interactions that center difficult issues of social justice such as abortion,

immigration, police reform, incarceration, LGBTQ+ rights, among others, that are tied so closely to people's identities and make for emotional reactions to opposing views and perspectives and preserve and strengthen the relationships that engage in this way. Echoing Makau and Marty (2013) once again, these interactions would require people who would be open to listening to all viewpoints but also work together towards a goal of understanding and connection instead of a debate of right and wrong. Because of this form of dialogue reflecting care, I believe people would be less fearful and avoidant of political topics and find ways to address politics in a way that would reflect connection and care.

Comments about the media's role in polarization, argumentative interactions, and fear/avoidance of political topics as a result of polarization all provide insight into how these participants perceive and experience the affectively-polarized environment for partisans in the U.S. These focus groups did not have any particularly affectively polarizing interactions and the participants' survey responses did not reflect a polarized sample. Nevertheless, the focus groups seemed to be construed by the participants as spaces to resist polarizing practices by naming them and sharing them with others who, presumably, were also concerned about the effect of polarization among the parties.

Through themes of communicating identity, naming social factors that contribute to affective polarization, and responses to polarization, participants expressed that they feel polarization is very much present and negatively impacts their lives. They negotiated their group membership through language that either separated them as an individual or placed them as part of a group they could speak for matching with the tension between desires for both inclusion and distinctiveness as described within SIT and IGC. They made connections to Ethics of Care by providing examples that did not model care such as partisan media and argumentative interaction

and they expressed a fear and avoidance response to such interactions that antagonize polarizing opinions. These responses compel polarization research to help remedy the deteriorating relationship between political differences in the United States and teach partisans how to engage with their differences and enact care for each other through interactions and policy decisions.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Through the grounded theory analysis of conversations among college students affiliated with opposing political parties in the U.S., the present study supports existing scholarship that suggests political polarization is very much about identity (Bond et al., 2018; Gallois & Giles, 2018; Gill, 2020; Green, 2004; Hogg 2016; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Linnell, 2011; Warner et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020), giving perhaps a different twist to the phrase “identity politics.” Not only were participants establishing their identities as part of their political party, but they were also expressing culturally-dominant whiteness through communicative behaviors, such as isolating themselves and their statements and upholding norms such as tolerance and individualism of beliefs. Such acts allowed college students to maintain a status of good (white) people, while at the same time, continue to fear and avoid interactions that question this status (Gutierrez-Perez & Ramierez, 2019; Kaufmann, 2010; Mohajeri & Nishi, 2022; Rudick & Golsan, 2018). This goal is likely not conscious for most of the students, but it remains as a behavior that has been coded as a way to respect and care for others as a way for white power structures to remain invisible and unquestioned (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Participants didn’t seek to engage with differences, but instead minimized or ignored them in the name of comfort. This neutrality that feels comfortable for the white participants affects the way they think about care and what reducing affective polarization may look like. These definitions and goals may be expressed differently in groups of BIPOC students, and it is important to note that at a white serving institution, discussions pretending to uphold neutrality may serve as violent places for BIPOC individuals among a group of mostly white students (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

It is important to also be reminded of how the Feminist Ethics of Care framework differs and resists these assumed practices, especially since power and oppression that can be mistaken for care. We may return to the aspect of self-care to explain what happened in these focus groups. Participants saw these interactions as a space to express their views without being judged or challenged. However, these acts of whiteness as defense cannot coexist with practices of care (Foster & Janco, 2020). Practices that uphold white privilege will always result in the oppression of another (Foster & Janco, 2020). Therefore, care for the self must be separate from the status that we hold in our society dominated by whiteness. It is here that transformative pedagogy can make a difference. Instead of engaging in practices that keep their privilege invisible, transformative pedagogy challenges students and teachers to bring tenets of their identity into discussion with each other and examine their similarities and differences in the creation of meaningful relationships. The future that the participants in the focus groups longed for through their expression of critical hope, would be reflected in a community where transformative pedagogy became the norm as learners (both teachers and students) would take these practices outside of academia. As people become more accustomed to questioning power structures, even and especially those that benefit them, differences will become - instead of a site for division - a place for relationship building and deeper understanding of individuals and the groups they identify with.

In returning to the research questions, this study found that Ethics of Care mainly appeared in these cross-party interactions in the form of metacommunication where participants stated aspirational strategies such as forming non-political connections with others and active listening as ways to better understand their differences. The student participants expressed a

desire both in their survey responses as well as in their responses during the focus groups for a decrease in polarization between Republicans and Democrats.

In measuring affective polarization, this sample of participants did not come to the interactions as particularly polarized in the first place. Still, their survey responses, while remaining mostly neutral, showed a slight increase in positive affect towards their opposing party after the cross-party focus group interaction. The conclusion this research draws is that in an interaction where participants find community around a desire to reduce political polarization, attitudes towards their opposing party will be positively impacted.

An additional finding that this research highlights is that cross-party interactions with mostly white identifying students at a white serving institution are characterized by a white and western norm of fear and avoidance of conflict. Participants both tried to present this avoidance as desirable but also critiqued it, meaning there is a tension there, suggesting that future communication work needs to focus on reshaping this norm of avoidance and how we relate to it. As next steps are taken to help reduce polarization through interaction across differences, racial power structures and assumptions must be examined and engaged with white students so they may understand how to resist them. Students who understand their own biases in the context of different others around them will better be able to learn and model Ethics of Care and create meaningful relationships with different others (Noddings, 2018).

### **Implications**

While psychological theories like SIT have provided valuable information on how political attitudes and identities are formed, more communication-based approaches such as IGC are needed to continue to explore how differences in attitudes can be bridged, rather than avoiding interactions altogether. Communication approaches provide action-oriented suggestions

that are essential when answering questions that have an impact on people's everyday lives. Our democracy relies on not only the participation of the public, but also on the implication that decisions can be made in the interest of everyone (Tronto, 2013). If the public cannot debate among themselves about solutions, our democracy has failed and the power stays in the hands of the elite. It is important to contribute plans of action to combat the direction of political in-group and out-group attitudes to establish a democratic public who pursue social justice because they understand, desire, and perform care (Tronto, 2013).

Higher education has the potential to become a space where future leaders and generations can develop this understanding of care and respect for differences through experiences and classrooms that support Ethics of Care frameworks for communication. Providing students with the tools of Ethics of care through modeling and allowing them the freedom and opportunity to practice them through dialogue in the classroom as well as encouraging them through confirmation of their skills may have lasting impacts on our structural institutions and personal relationships. It is important to recognize the domino effect that Ethics of Care can have in the development of a more empathetic society with more efficient and effective problem solving and conflict resolution as those who practice Ethics of Care in their relationships will teach others to reflect these practices in order to maintain their relationship. Ethics of Care will not only remain present in students' academic lives, but will be sustained throughout their lives and across areas such as family, career, social, and personal interactions.

To achieve these learning spaces, teachers will need additional training to understand how to teach and model care in their classrooms. Strategies can be developed by groups of researchers and instructors using previously published literature (Foster & Janco, 2020; Noddings, 2018; Reed, 2018; Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Sykes & Gochago, 2018; Taylor et al.,

2019). These trainings should also include media literacy for both instructors and curriculum for students in the classroom to help alleviate the effect of inaccurate and antagonistic sources that subvert care and reject openness and understanding of differing views (Au et al., 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019).

We know these implications are important considerations in educational settings especially because of the timing in students identity development. It is much easier for people to incorporate assumptions during development and discovery of perspectives than it is after identity elements have already been established emotionally-attached to a person's self-image and value (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In the college environment especially, students are being exposed to difference for the first time for most of them and if they can see how their behavior affects their peers and relationships, they are likely to take those lessons with them and impart on their relationships beyond college as well (Noddings, 2018). The college population may be the most practical place to start implementing these curriculum since higher education levels are more likely to lead to trusted opinion leaders among communities (Chomsky, 1989; Stanley, 2015).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Though this study provided valuable insight into how students at the University of Maine perceive political polarization in the U.S., there were some limitations that may have affected the research. The first limitation being the recruitment process. Participants for the survey and focus groups were recruited through email and by flyers hung around campus. The recruitment script framed political polarization as an issue that needs to be addressed and therefore likely only attracted students who agreed with this presumption. Some students may not feel that political polarization is negative or even exists at all. Those who volunteered to participate in this study



all identified as non-polarized partisans, so the sample did not reflect a truly polarized interaction. Future research may benefit from framing the study as more of a debate to attract more polarized participants and later ask participants to attempt an interaction that reflects Ethics of Care practices, then see how their attitudes shift after a cross-party interaction.

The next limitation was time. As mentioned in the literature review, Ethics of Care techniques rely on the building of relationships. A singular 1-hour long interaction has little potential for strangers to build relationships that can withstand such emotional topics that deal with ties to people's identities. I would suggest creating a research plan that includes multiple meetings between the same groups of participants to allow relationships to form and help participants become more comfortable pursuing vulnerable avenues such as sharing personal stories, asking each other questions, and being open to shifting their perspective.

Finally, while there is strong support for studying a college student population in regards to political identity, research that expands its population across a larger spectrum of education levels may find differing results in regards to perspectives on political polarization and willingness to attempt Ethics of Care practices in an interaction. It is important to recognize that active partisans in the U.S. come from many different educational, socio-economic, and social backgrounds and all play a part in the political environment through media consumption, social media, and peer interactions (Bond et al., 2018; Frizelle, 2021; Green, 2004; Hogg, 2016; Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Iyengar et al, 2019; Johnson et al., 2017; Lelkes, 2016; Linvill, 2011; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Partisan populations outside of the college scene are also worthy of participating in such research.

Building off of these college student interactions and survey responses, the next steps should attempt to simultaneously explore solutions to political polarization in social spheres as

well as the potential of higher education classrooms in the guidance towards more empathetic future leaders, and seek to answer the following: What are the potentials and limitations of using Ethics of Care in facilitating classroom conversations in a politically polarized climate? Are the impacts of this pedagogy different among students and instructors with minoritized identities and those with dominant ones? This research could create a focus group and teaching observation plan to measure the impacts of this research on Higher Education students' social and academic experiences.

To start, the research should focus on the teacher or instructor's perspective. Researchers could recruit faculty through emails and posters across all disciplines on campus to participate in their own dialogue and syllabus workshop. In this way, instructors could begin coalition-building (Anderson & Accomando, 2020) through discussions of their personal identities and social location, how that impacts their classrooms among each other, and have a system of support before they disrupt the institutional status quo of course curriculum and transform their courses. At this workshop, instructors would use the SJSD tool and Ethics of Care principles to rework the look, feel, and utility of their course syllabi and brainstorm how their curriculum will address their own social locations as well as their students. They would have a chance throughout the workshop to work with instructors in similar departments and fields as well as across disciplines to co-create syllabi that foster care in the classroom as well as support each other's feelings and concerns about facilitating this type of classroom and resistance to the institution. After this workshop, the faculty would have the opportunity to submit reflections to the researchers. Additionally, class observations would happen at least twice a semester to see how students and faculty have progressed with Ethics of Care principles in the classroom and if both the instructor

and students notice a difference either emotionally or academically from other courses they take or have taken.

While much of the research discussed above has given specific guidelines for instructors on transforming their classroom and self using an Ethics of Care approach (Bozalek et al., 2010; Noddings, 2018; Reed, 2018; Rudick & Golsan, 2018; Sykes & Gochago, 2018) and even tested them out in a few settings (Foster & Janco, 2020; Taylor et al., 2019), measurable effects have largely been left out. By gaining data through surveys and reflections from both students and teachers with unique and intersecting identities and social locations who will enact these practices, the research may reveal positive impacts that Ethics of Care, transformative pedagogy, and Liberatory Consciousness have on students' and instructors' interactions across differences in Higher Education.

An obstacle that may present itself would be reaching departments outside of Liberal Arts that tend to discount emotion in their fields of study as irrelevant such as STEM fields. Extra work would need to be done to entice these instructors to attend the coalition workshops and adjust their courses to fit Ethics of Care and emotion where it is mostly ignored not only in higher education but in the work environments that follow (Daren, 2018).

By starting with the language in their syllabi, teachers have the opportunity to open up a space in their classroom where relationship building and understanding are the main learning objectives. Breaking down teacher/student power structures in classroom activities and discussion can play an important role in helping students realize the power they have over their learning and interactions through simple communication such as story sharing and also in resisting oppressive structures. Patricia Hill Collins (2013) reminds us that, "while we each may be committed to an inclusive, transformed curriculum, the task of building one is necessarily a

collective effort” (p. 609) and working with instructors in higher education provides the community of support needed to disrupt “business as usual” (Johnson, 2013, p. 613) in higher education institutions.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, M. (2020). *Do Americans want to be united?* Medium.  
<https://myraadams1.medium.com/do-americans-want-to-be-united-8749e8195d98>
- Anderson, K. J., & Accomando, C. H. (2020). The pitfalls of ally performance: Why coalition work is more effective than ally theater. In *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study* (11th ed., pp. 713-717). Worth Publishers.
- Au, C. H., Ho, K. K. W., & Chiu, D. K. W. (2021). The role of online misinformation and fake news in ideological polarization: Barriers, catalysts, and implications. *Information Systems Frontiers*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-021-10133-9>
- Bernays, E. (1928). *Propaganda*. Horace Liveright.
- Black Lives Matter Protestors Invited Onto Stage at Pro-Trump Rally*. (2017). [Video]. NowThis News.  
<https://nowthisnews.com/videos/politics/black-lives-matter-activist-speaks-at-pro-trump-rally>
- Bond, R. M., Shulman, H. C., & Gilbert, M. (2018). Does having a political discussion help or hurt intergroup perceptions? drawing guidance from social identity theory and the contact hypothesis. *International Journal of Communication (Online)*, 4332-4352.
- Bowen, G. A. (2006). Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 5(3), 12-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500304>
- Bozalek, V., Carolissen, R., Leibowitz, B., Nicholls, L., Rohleder, P., & Swartz, L. (2010). Engaging with difference in higher education through collaborative inter-institutional pedagogical practices. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 24(6), 1023-1037.
- Brooks-Immel, D. R., & Murray, S. B. (2017). Color-blind contradictions and Black/White binaries: White academics upholding whiteness. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 39, 315-333.
- Cawston, A., & Archer, A. (2018). Rehabilitating self-sacrifice: Care ethics and the politics of resistance. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies: IJPS*, 26(3), 456-477.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2018.1489648>
- Charmaz, K., & Smith, J. (2003). Grounded theory. *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, 2, 81-110.

- Chomsky, N. (1989). *Necessary illusions: Thought control in democratic societies*. House of Anansi.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative sociology*, 13(1), 3-21
- Craig, R. T. (2005). How we talk about how we talk: Communication theory in the public interest. *Journal of communication*, 55(4), 659-667. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/55.4.659>
- Daren, S. (2018). *Why does a STEM curriculum need empathy?* The TeacherCast Educational Network. <https://www.teachercast.net/why-does-a-stem-curriculum-need-empathy/>
- DeCoster, J., & Lichtenstein, B. (2007). Integrating quantitative and qualitative methods in communication research. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 1(4), 227-242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312450701636599>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2017). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Ellul, J. (1964). *Propaganda: The formation of men's attitudes*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fassett, D. L., & Warren, J. T. (2007;2006;). *Critical communication pedagogy* (1st ed.). SAGE Publ. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452225883>
- Fisher, W. R. (1989). Clarifying the narrative paradigm. *Communication Monographs*, 56, 55-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758909390249>
- Foster, J. A., & Janco, A. (2020). Challenging a 'Warist' society with digital peace pedagogy. *Radical Teacher*, 117. <https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2020.798>
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (2nd ed.). Penguin Group.
- Frizelle, K. (2021). Using personal history to (re) envision a praxis of critical hope in the face of neoliberal fatalism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 34(5), 395-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2020.1761478>
- Gallois, C., Watson, B. M., & Giles, H. (2018). Intergroup communication: Identities and effective interactions. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 309-317. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx016>

- Gill, M. J. (2020). How can I study who you are? Comparing grounded theory and phenomenology as methodological approaches to identity work research. *The Oxford Handbook of Identities in Organisations*, 295-310.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.
- Goerisch, D., Basiliere, J., Rosener, A., McKee, K., Hunt, J., & Parker, T. M. (2019). Mentoring with: reimagining mentoring across the university. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(12), 1740-1758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1668752>
- Goldberg, J. (2018, July 6). Nationalism & patriotism: Partisanship and toxic politics get worse with conflation of the two. *National Review*. <https://www.nationalreview.com/g-file/patriotism-has-lost-its-universality-american-politics/>
- Gower, K., Cornelius, L., Rawls, R., & Walker, B. B. (2020). Reflective structured dialogue: A qualitative thematic analysis. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 37(3), 207-221. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21271>
- Grain, K. M., & Lund, D. E. (2016). The social justice turn: Cultivating "critical hope" in an age of despair. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 23(1), 45.
- Greene, S. (2004). Social Identity Theory and party identification. *Social Science Quarterly (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 85(1), 136–153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0038-4941.2004.08501010.x>
- Gutierrez-Perez, R., & Ramirez, B. (2019). A crack to speak out from: Performing coalitional politics through dialogue, listening, and reflexivity. (2019). In L. H. Hernandez & R. Gutierrez-Perez (Eds.), *This Bridge We Call Communication: Anzaldúan Approaches to Theory, Method, and Praxis* (pp. 323-334). Lexington Books.
- Herakova, L. L., & Congdon Jr., M. (2018). Let your self in: Mentoring from/on the margins of academia in the millennial context. In A. Atay & M. Ashlock (Eds.), *Millennial Culture and Communication Pedagogies* (pp. 21-42). Lexington Books.
- Hill Collins, P. (2013). Toward a new vision: Race, class, and gender. In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (3rd ed., pp. 606-611). Routledge.
- Hogg M.A. (2016). Social Identity Theory. In: S. McKeown, R. Haji, & N. Ferguson (Eds.). *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory* (pp. 3-18).

*Peace Psychology Book Series*. Springer, Cham.

[https://doi-org.wv-o-ursus-proxy02.ursus.maine.edu/10.1007/978-3-319-29869-6\\_1](https://doi-org.wv-o-ursus-proxy02.ursus.maine.edu/10.1007/978-3-319-29869-6_1)

hooks, b. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.

Huddy, L., & Bankert, A. (2017). Political partisanship as a social identity. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*.

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129-146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>

Johnson, A. G. (2013). What can we do? In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (3rd ed., pp. 612-618). Routledge.

Johnson, M. R., Dugan, J. P., & Soria, K. M. (2017). “Try to see it my way”: What influences social perspective taking among college students? *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(7), 1035-1054. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0082>

Kaufmann, J. J., & Merriam, S. B. (2010). The practice of dialogue in critical pedagogy. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(5), 456-476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713610363021>

Lakoff, G. (2014). *The all new don't think of an elephant!: Know your values and frame the debate*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Lelkes, Y. (2016). Mass polarization: Manifestations and measurements. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 392–410. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw005>

Leonardo, Z., & Porter, R. K. (2010). Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of ‘safety’ in race dialogue. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(2), 139-157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2010.482898>

Linville, D. L. (2011). The relationship between student identity development and the perception of political bias in the college classroom. *College Teaching*, 59(2), 49-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2010.511312>

Love, B. J. (2013) Developing a liberatory consciousness. In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (3rd ed., pp. 601-605). Routledge.

Makau, J. M., & Marty, D. L. (2013). *Dialogue & deliberation*. Waveland Press.



- Miller, P. R., & Conover, P. J. (2015). Red and blue states of mind: Partisan hostility and voting in the United States. *Political Research Quarterly*, 68(2), 225–239.  
<https://doi-org.wv-o-ursus-proxy02.ursus.maine.edu/10.1177/1065912915577208>
- Mohajeri, O., & Nishi, N. (2022). Whiteness-at-work in white serving institutions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 35(4), 337-340.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2042614>
- Murthy, V. H. (2020). *Together: The healing power of human connection in a sometimes lonely world*. Harper Wave.
- Nakayama, T. K., & Krizek, R. L. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81, 291-309.
- Noddings, N. (2018). *Philosophy of education*. Routledge.
- Ralph, D. (2020). *Abortion and Ireland: How the 8th was overthrown*. Springer Nature.
- Reed, C. D. (2018). Critical pedagogy and the Ethics of Care: How values affect the classroom dynamic. *MSU Graduate Theses*. 3325. <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/3325>
- Rudick, C. K., & Golsan, K. B. (2018). Civility and white institutional presence: An exploration of white students' understanding of race-talk at a traditionally white institution. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 29(4), 335-352.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2017.1392910>
- Serrano-Contreras, I. J., García-Marín, J., & Luengo, Ó. G. (2020). Measuring online political dialogue: does polarization trigger more deliberation?. *Media and Communication*, 8(4), 63-72. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i4.3149>
- Stanley, J. (2015). *How propaganda works*. Princeton University Press.
- Sykes, P., & Gachago, D. (2018). Creating “safe-ish” learning spaces: Attempts to practice an ethics of care. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(6), 83–98.  
<https://doi.org/10.20853/32-6-2654>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & L. W. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

- Taylor, S. D., Veri, M. J., Eliason, M., Hermoso, J. C. R., Bolter, N. D., & Van Olphen, J. E. (2019). The social justice syllabus design tool: A first step in doing social justice Pedagogy. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2642-2387.2019.5.2.132-166>
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. NYU Press.
- Vlasyan, G. R. (2019). Linguistic hedging in interpersonal communication. In *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences EPSBS* (pp. 617-623).
- Voters' feelings about the election and possible outcomes*. (2020, October 11). Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/10/09/voters-feelings-about-the-election-and-possible-outcomes/>
- Warner, B. P. (2019). Explaining political polarization in environmental governance using narrative analysis. *Ecology and Society*, 24(3), 4. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10999-240304>
- Warner, B. R., Horstman, H. K., & Kearney, C. C. (2020). Reducing political polarization through narrative writing. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 48(4), 459–477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2020.1789195>
- Wenham, L., & Lee, C. (2022). ‘Left adrift and wondering what the future holds’: The need for agency and critical hope. *Critical Education*, 13(1).
- Williamson, P. Take the time and effort to correct misinformation. *Nature* 540, 171 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1038/540171a>
- Wojcieszak, M., & Warner, B. R. (2020). Can interparty contact reduce affective polarization? A systematic test of different forms of intergroup contact. *Political Communication*, 37(6), 789-811. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1760406>
- Yamauchi, L. A., Taira, K., & Trevorrow, T. (2016). Effective instruction for engaging culturally diverse students in higher education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 28(3), 460-470.

Young, T. T., & Babchuk, W. A. (2019). Contemporary approaches to qualitative research: Andragogical strategies for teaching and learning. Adult Education Research Conference. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2019/papers/3>

Young, D. G. (2019). *Irony and outrage: The polarized landscape of rage, fear, and laughter in the United States*. Oxford University Press, USA.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: PRE-FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

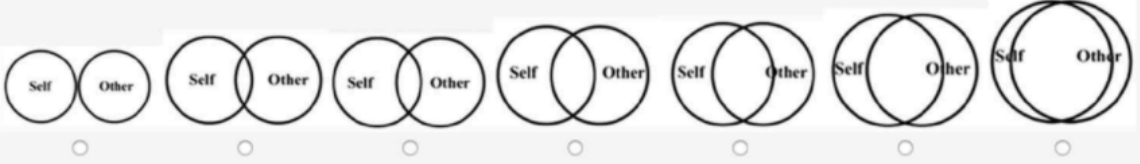
#### Searching for a Solution to Political Polarization in the United States through Ethics of Care

1. What gender do you identify as?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Non-binary
  - d. Genderfluid
  - e. Other
2. What is your age
  - a. 18-24
  - b. 25-34
  - c. 35-44
  - d. 45 or older
3. Please specify your ethnicity. Select all that apply.
  - a. Caucasian
  - b. African American
  - c. LatinX or Hispanic
  - d. East Asian
  - e. South Asian
  - f. Native American
  - g. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - h. Other (please specify)
4. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
  - a. Some college
  - b. Associates Degree
  - c. Bachelor's Degree
  - d. Master's Degree
  - e. Ph.D. or higher
  - f. Trade school
5. Which political party do you most identify with?
  - a. Democrat
  - b. Independent
  - c. Republican
6. Say you had to vote for a generic candidate from one of the two main political parties in the US (Democratic or Republican). In this case, who would you be more likely to vote for?
  - a. A Democrat

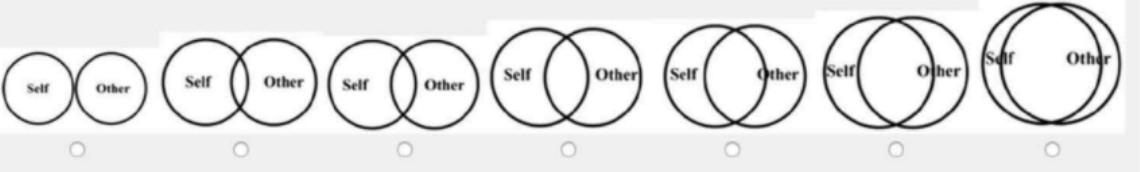
b. A Republican

Figure A1. Feelings of closeness to other measure.

Now please think about supporters of the Democratic party.  
Mark the following image that best describes the way you (Self) identify with the Other (Democrats).



Now please think about supporters of the Republican party.  
Mark the image that best describes the way you (Self) identify with the Other (Republicans).



The figure shows two rows of seven Venn diagrams each. Each diagram consists of two overlapping circles labeled 'Self' and 'Other'. The amount of overlap increases from left to right, representing increasing identification with the 'Other' group. Below each diagram is a small circle for marking a response.

- 7.
8. We'd like you to rate different groups of people using something called a "feeling thermometer". The higher the number (above 50), the warmer or more favorable you feel toward the group; the lower the number (lower than 50), the colder or less favorable; 50 is completely neutral. To start, how do you feel about the following groups?
  - a. (1) Democrats, or supporters of the Democratic Party,
  - b. (2) Republicans, or supporters of the Republican Party.

Figure A2. Feelings Thermometer measure.



9. In your opinion, what are some of the most politically divisive issues in the U.S. currently? Please list no more than 3.
10. How would you describe your position on the above issues?
11. What has shaped your stance on these issues? Please specify any concrete experiences, education, etc. you may have had.

12. How would you describe the typical conversations Republicans and Democrats in the United States have regarding these issues?
13. Please list your preferred name and email address. (Ex. Mari Smith, marissa.ann.smith@maine.edu)

## APPENDIX B: POST-FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

### Searching for a Solution to Political Polarization in the United States through Ethics of Care

1. Please describe briefly the conversation in your focus group. How would you characterize your experience in it (e.g., did you feel heard)?
2. What, if anything, are you better able to understand or appreciate about your own viewpoint?
3. What, if anything, are you better able to understand or appreciate about the opposing viewpoint?

Figure B1. Feelings of closeness measure.

Now please think about supporters of the Democratic party.  
Mark the following image that best describes the way you (Self) identify with the Other (Democrats).

Now please think about supporters of the Republican party.  
Mark the image that best describes the way you (Self) identify with the Other (Republicans).

- 4.
5. We'd like you to rate different groups of people using something called a "feeling thermometer". The higher the number, the warmer or more favorable you feel toward the group; the lower the number, the colder or less favorable. To start, how do you feel about the following groups?
  - a. (1) Democrats, or supporters of the Democratic Party,
  - b. (2) Republicans, or supporters of the Republican Party.

Figure B2. Feelings Thermometer measure.

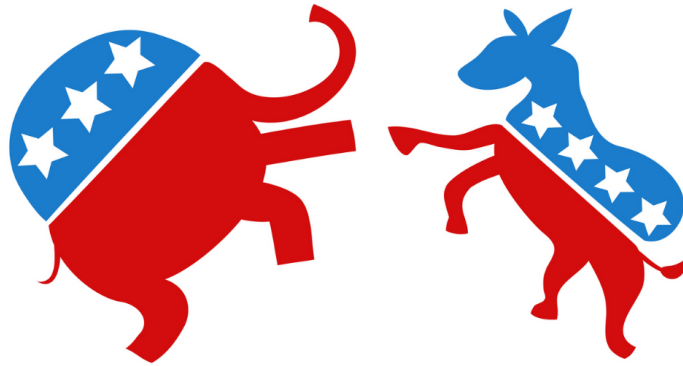


6. Please list your preferred name and email address. (Ex. Mari Smith, [marissa.ann.smith@maine.edu](mailto:marissa.ann.smith@maine.edu))
7. Please list your mailing address to receive your \$15 Amazon Gift Card (# St./Rd./Ln./Ave. City, State Zipcode)



APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLIER

# How do we combat political polarization?



Contact [marissa.ann.smith@maine.edu](mailto:marissa.ann.smith@maine.edu) and complete the following:

1. Fill out 2 surveys &
2. Participate in a 1-hour focus group about a political topic with other students on campus

Total time commitment: 1.5 - 2 hours

**Receive a \$15 Amazon Gift Card  
for your participation!**

This study has a cap of 20 students. Participants will be chosen based on 1st survey responses.

## APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP FACILITATION GUIDE

### Searching for a Solution to Political Polarization in the United States through Ethics of Care

Thank you for participating in this research project. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the polarization of beliefs between Democratic and Republican identifying people and the impact their political beliefs and attitudes have on interactions based on a topic of political nature. The conversation will take about 1 hour of your time. You will discuss with each other a specific politically-charged issue and address questions such as, “Where do you stand on this issue?” and “How does this issue affect you personally?”

Aside from your time and inconvenience, the primary risk to you in participating in this study is potential adverse emotional effects to the discussed questions. Please remember that participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to engage with. **Your participation indicates your consent.**

This focus group will be voice recorded, but your identity will be protected by keeping recordings confidential between focus group members and the researchers. Following the focus group meeting, the recording will be transcribed and deleted. You will be mailed a \$15 Amazon gift card for participation in this study once you provide your mailing address on the post- focus group survey. Please do not share any personal stories or personal information you learn here outside of this group.

The intention of this focus group interaction is to attempt to approach a politically divisive topic in way that encourages connection instead of furthering polarization. During this interaction, please attempt to practice willingness to tell and listen to personal stories, avoiding generalizations, and seeking understanding rather than persuasion.

#### Focus group script

##### Part 1: Stimulus

The participants will be given 5-10 minutes to engage with and reflect on a single real-life artifact that addresses a politically-divisive issue (e.g., news article or clip, social media post). The specific issue will be decided later, but examples include: celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day, mandatory vaccinations, etc. The following instructions will be provided to participants:

*Please review the attached material and jot down your reactions and/or questions. After everyone has had a chance to reflect individually, we will discuss our reactions and opinions as a group.*

##### Part 2: Focus group conversation

1. (Possible) Initial reactions? Where do you stand on this issue?
2. What is an aspect of this story that stood out to you/surprised you? Why?
3. What is an aspect of your own reaction to the story that surprised you? Why?

4. How did reading this story change your position towards the viewpoint opposite of your own? Explain. (Follow up, if needed: for example, did it make you more sympathetic or understanding of the opposing viewpoint?)
5. How does this issue affect you personally? (Follow up: Could you share a personal story that's relevant?)
6. What would you like to share with someone whose stance on this issue is different from yours?
7. In the future, how would you approach talking about politically divisive topics with people with opposing viewpoints and/or party affiliation? (Follow up: What specific strategies would you use?)
8. Final question: where do you stand on this issue now compared to your stance at the beginning of the focus group?

## **BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Marissa “Mari” Smith grew up in Maine and received her Bachelor of Arts in Communication from the University of Maine in May 2020. She is a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in Communication from the University of Maine in August 2022.