

Realizing the promise of dialogue: Transformative dialogue in divided communities

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Abstract

This article introduces an approach to conflict transformation called transformative dialogue. Building on transformative theory, it differs from other approaches in two important ways. First, it sees the ethical relation to conflict parties as of primary importance, taking priority over any analysis or conceptualization of conflict. Second, transformative dialogue posits a different relationship between conflict analysis and practice. Rather than prioritizing a particular mode of analysis, transformative dialogue starts from the primacy of human agency, prioritizing people's own experience and ways of understanding their conflicts. In this way, transformative dialogue addresses many of the weaknesses in current peacebuilding models.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this article, we review common conflict resolution practices and models for strategic peacebuilding. Research on peacebuilding shows that these efforts are often ineffective or inefficient because interveners do not spend much time in any given country, fail to connect adequately with local populations, and apply generic models to every conflict situation. In addition, we argue that conflict resolution practitioners often adopt a series of assumptions that do not match the complex reality of postconflict settings or people's experience of community conflict. We introduce an approach to community conflict transformation called transformative dialogue, which builds on transformative theory. We argue that **transformative dialogue differs from current approaches in two important ways**. **First, transformative practitioners see their ethical relation to conflict parties as of primary importance, taking priority over any analysis or conceptualization of conflict**, or over any of their own goals, even peace and reconciliation.

Second, transformative dialogue posits a different relationship between conflict analysis and practice. Rather than prioritizing their own preferred mode of analysis, transformative practitioners start from the primacy of human agency, prioritizing people's own experience and way of understanding their conflicts. We argue that what people living in postconflict settings need is support to get clear and make the best possible decisions about their situation, and to change interactions with others from negative and destructive, to positive and constructive. We show that transformative dialogue can address many of the problems of current peacebuilding approaches. We argue that it therefore constitutes a better alternative for practitioners interested in conflict transformation in divided societies.

2 | POSTCONFLICT PEACEBUILDING AND DIALOGUE

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in peacebuilding efforts all over the world in countries that have experienced armed conflict. These efforts include conflict resolution training, dialogue seminars with members of different ethnic groups, mediation, and other projects. The roots of this work go back to the international conflict resolution workshops of the 1960s and 1970s (Kelman & Cohen, 1976). The conflict resolution work done by NGOs usually builds on basic human needs theory (Burton, 1990) or on social psychology approaches (Çuhadar & Dayton, 2011). In the former, participants in workshops are helped to analyze and reframe conflict in terms of interests and needs, rather than incompatible positions. In the latter, negative attitudes, enemy images, and stereotypes are seen as the root of conflict, and changes in attitude are sought through meetings based on the so-called contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Dessel & Rogge, 2008). These efforts are often seen as part of a comprehensive framework referred to as strategic peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997). Dialogue is one component of peacebuilding and has been described as "a way of talking in which people listen to each other carefully enough to be changed by what they hear" (Saunders, 2011, p. 4).

2.1 | What third-party interveners do

Although peacebuilders can be local residents, they are often foreign, third-party interveners with their own goals, assumptions, and expectations that shape what they do on the ground or are local residents trained and directed by these foreigners. Many NGOs certainly aim for local participation in peacebuilding and conflict analysis (see for example ACCORD, 2015), and many scholar-practitioners advocate for it. Fisher (1997, p. 334), that is, defined interactive conflict resolution as comprising activities that "promote collaborative conflict analysis, resolution and problem solving among parties...in a manner which addresses basic human needs and promotes the building of peace, justice and equality." Scholar-practitioners have also distinguished elicitive from prescriptive approaches, in attempts to build on "the cultural resources that exist in the host setting" and thereby achieve both cultural appropriateness and work based on local knowledge (Fisher, 1997, p. 342; see also Lederach, 1995).

Based on our own work in postconflict settings and research conducted in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Kenya, we find that many foreign interveners make a series of assumptions about the contexts they work in which shape what they do (Cleven, 2013; Cleven, 2020).

First, many foreign interveners tend to see identities as fixed and to view conflicts in terms of what Kalyvas (2003, p. 476) named "master cleavages" or what Maoz (2000, p. 143) named

“the ‘one conflict–two groups’ idea.” People’s actions are understood from the starting point of these central identities, and intervention strategies also take this as their starting point.

Second, foreign interveners often assume that conflict and violence are the result of stereotypes, enemy images, and hatred, or at least that a central challenge to peacebuilding is the presence of negative attitudes about outgroup members. While there is no doubt that negative attitudes exist in postconflict settings, careful research has shown that these are as much a product of violence, as the cause of violence, and that barriers to peace are just as much rooted in politics and self-interest as in the presence of these attitudes (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). Thus, work that focuses on changing attitudes, even when successful, does not necessarily prevent violence (Maoz, 2004).

A third commonly held assumption is that everyone wants peace and that the main barrier to peace is the lack of creative win-win solutions. This assumption may have its origins in the fact that interveners often understand conflict as a problem to be solved or as rooted in incompatible goals (Bartos & Wehr, 2002). According to this understanding, moving parties to their underlying interests and needs can open up the possibility of mutually acceptable solutions. If parties are not reaching win-win outcomes, the thinking goes, it must be because they do not see them.

These assumptions lead interveners to make particular choices about the peacebuilding processes they design, whether they are working prescriptively or elicitively. For example, many peacebuilding and dialogue projects focus on bringing equal numbers of people from different ethnic groups together to learn conflict resolution skills and to engage with one another in dialogue and/or conflict analysis exercises. Often young people are recruited for such activities because they are more open to new thinking and less entrenched in their views of others. Participants who are difficult or radical, or who could be potential spoilers to the process, are excluded (Fast, Neufeldt, & Schirch, 2002). People recruited to such efforts are not always socially connected to one another, and the strategies developed are often apolitical, focused on civil society initiatives. Often pressure from funders for “results” supports choices like these.

2.2 | What the research says

Research on international conflict resolution and peacekeeping interventions has demonstrated a number of factors that make interventions ineffective or inefficient. One is that foreign interveners often pay little attention to local realities. To be successful, peacekeeping missions need to be learning organizations that are connected to local populations and build on local knowledge of the situation (Holohan, 2005; Howard, 2007). Autesserre (2014) noted that it is also a matter of whose peace is to be realized, as well as whose knowledge matters and how to define success. She shows how the narratives interveners hold lead them to devalue local knowledge and to believe that locals lack capacity to deal with their own situation. She goes so far as to describe a “struggle for power among foreign interveners and their local counterparts” (Autesserre, 2014, p. 24). Outsiders often rely on simplified understandings of the conflict contexts they are working in, which are often a result of the prevailing models of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Focusing on particular forms of conflict analysis inevitably has a controlling effect on the types of knowledge being shared and produced: it limits the agency of those directly involved. Labels used to describe and understand conflict, such as victim and perpetrator, seize definitional power, and have profound consequences. Writing about the assignment of labels like “victim” and “perpetrator” in the aftermath of the civil war in Sierra Leone, Chris

Coulter (2009, p. 153) argued that using these labels explains “neither the experiences of my informants nor those of their communities.” Such labels can also determine who is included and excluded, whether from initial negotiations or decisions about aid allocation (Berry, 2017).

The assumptions and practices of foreign interveners ignore several realities of postconflict settings. First, their theories of change are fundamentally apolitical, failing to take power and political structure into account (though see e.g., Laue & Cormick, 1978). The reason peace is difficult to achieve is not because people or leaders living in postconflict communities lack creative solutions to conflict, nor is it because they cannot overcome ethnic divisions. It is not, for example, difficult to brainstorm a number of different win-win solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The difficulty with making peace between Israelis and Palestinians lies instead with the difficulty in finding solutions that are *politically acceptable* to those that hold power on both sides.

Second, foreign interveners often ignore what motivates people living in the complex reality of conflict. Not everyone is waiting for an opportunity to contribute to peace, especially those people who hold power, or are connected to the powerful, and benefit from the status quo. During a dialogue training in Kenya, many participants, representing a number of Kenyan NGOs, told us that people's involvement in the projects of nongovernmental organizations is often a result of a need for income. NGOs can provide employment, a fact that for many local residents may trump the stated goals of the projects they engage in.

Third, understanding identity in postconflict settings is more complex than “the ‘one conflict-two groups’ idea” (Maoz, 2000, p. 143) or assigning labels like “victim” or “perpetrator.” As noted by Fearon and Laitin (2000, p. 849), members of any two ethnic groups A and B “need not think of themselves as A’s and B’s at all.” People do not have interests independent of social context; rather interests are a product of identities (Wendt, 1992). As people interact, their understanding of identity can change, as can people’s needs and wants. Mediation and dialogue processes can change preferences and interests as they change how people relate to each other. Maoz (2000, p. 145) describes how a “dispute over agendas was accompanied by the emergence of new groups, subgroups, and coalitions that further splintered the originally defined configuration of two conflict groups (Jewish and Palestinian) and one (mixed) third-party group.”

People in places with ethnic conflict are not, in fact, simply following elites to produce ethnic violence because of ethnic hatred, but are supporting the interests of ethnic leaders while actually following their own, local, or personal agendas (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). Actions and identities must be understood as the product of “an interaction between various central and local actors with distinct identities, motivations, and interests” (Kalyvas, 2003, p. 476).

After violent conflict, people are focused on their own local and personal agendas. Though most interveners seek peace and reconciliation, people in divided societies are often not focused on opportunities to build peace. In fact, they are often busy trying to survive and look after their interests in what are extremely difficult situations. Pickering (2007) describes the complex reality that people in post-conflict situations face. She writes:

...ordinary people influence the implementation of peacebuilding programs through their everyday reactions to these projects. The case of postwar reconstruction in Bosnia shows that the everyday reactions of common people to a central goal of reconstruction – reintegration into more or less diverse communities – are not simply determined by elites, institutions, interests, or resources from on high – quite the contrary. Instead, even the most cursory focus on everyday life reveals an obvious component often absent in the literature – that the responses of ordinary

people are guided by their own particularistic understandings of self and of their social situation... Armed with these notions, people cope with one statebuilding project after another, all of which fail to gain their confidence and instead make them feel like lab rats in scientific experiments. The experience of reconstruction in Bosnia shows that internationally designed institutions often do not help popular efforts to reintegrate and rebuild normal lives. (Pickering, 2007, pp. 3–4).

The reality of postconflict societies and divided communities is that the situations people find themselves in are complex. They include local and national factors and a range of challenges that are economic, political, social, and personal.

In sum, while third-party interveners tend to understand conflict in terms of the “master cleavage” (Kalyvas, 2003), people themselves may be more concerned with local issues that become obscured when interveners engage them in analysis of macrolevel issues. There can be both intragroup and intergroup conflicts, and some conflicts have nothing to do with the “major” conflict that interveners are focused on. People are often engaged in struggles outsiders cannot understand. Decisions that interveners may see as bad ones may make perfect sense to those making them. Sen (1999) argued that the main goal of development should be freedom. He wrote, “[i]f a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty...then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen” (Sen, 1999, p. 31). The same could be said about the choices, risks, and sacrifices involved in conflict resolution, dialogue, and peacebuilding.

In the following sections, we present a different way of engaging with people in divided communities that addresses the points mentioned earlier and has at its core a respect for party agency and choice. Because this approach builds on transformative theory, we call it transformative dialogue. We believe it constitutes a better alternative for conflict transformation than current peacebuilding models.

3 | THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE

Transformative theory builds on the pioneering work of Bush and Folger (1994 and 2005). The transformative approach to community conflict and dialogue has two starting points. First, it starts from an intervener's ethical relation to parties in conflict. Transformative interveners work from the principle that people's own understanding of conflict trumps that of the third party. Based on a deep respect, transformative facilitators support people as they consider the decisions they face, but never supplant their agency (Bush & Miller, 2019).

Second, transformative dialogue starts from people's experience of conflict. Whether involved in individual or community conflict, it is people's experience of conflict, and the decisions they ultimately want to make, not the interveners' analyses of conflict, or third party or donor goals, that determine how third parties can best support people in difficult situations.

When presenting these two starting points to the transformative approach we often hear things like “that's what I do” or “yes, it is important to use an elicitive approach.” What we describe in this section, however, differs from elicitive and interactive, collaborative approaches in that we do not primarily seek to build on local resources per se, but rather to hand decision-making power regarding goals, participation, and process—and even whether there should be a process—to the potential parties. We do not in any way question the good intentions of scholars

and scholar-practitioners engaged in peacebuilding. But in reading current work in the field one finds again and again that goals are to “discuss sources of the conflict” (Fisher, 2016, p. 107) or to reach “mutual understanding, recognition, and respect between the parties, coupled with jointly acceptable and sustainable solutions to the conflict in the context of changed relationships” (Fisher, 2016, p. 109). This often happens, as noted earlier, in the context of elicitive approaches that seek to build on local knowledge and resources. But as d’Estree and Parsons (2018, p. 355) point out, “all participants do not share the view that local knowledge is what is most desirable.” Research has also shown how “agendas promoting tolerance, togetherness, or coexistence...as well as those striving to create more positive attitudes toward the other, may be perceived by the participants—the targets of the contact intervention—as serving the ideological interests of a specific group in the conflict” (Maoz, 2000, p. 146).

What is important here is not whether conflict work builds on local or outside resources, or whether the process is more or less structured, but who makes the decisions about process, structure, participation, and the extent to which local resources are the foundation. This is similar to d’Estrée’s (2006) p. 104 work on “voice” but goes beyond “the ability to contribute information” or to be heard by others. Although we welcome what d’Estree and Parsons (2018, p. 380) describe as a “fourth wave of conflict resolution capacity bulding” that “focuses on making global trends locally relevant, partnering in learning as well as doing, empowering individuals and communities with the agency to resolve conflicts,” we think of agency as prior to this. Respect for people’s agency is connected to the ethical relation between interveners and local communities and involves decisions about whether to attempt to resolve the conflict or engage with the other, and if so, how to do it.

3.1 | The Transformative Practitioner’s Ethical Relationship to Parties

Several scholars have identified a need for clear ethical guidelines for conflict resolution interveners (Fast et al., 2002; Laue & Cormick, 1978; Nan, 2010). Ethics is often understood as a set of guidelines for action (Fast et al., 2002) or “a set of principles defining the rightness or wrongness of acts” (Laue & Cormick, 1978, p. 220). We argue that the transformative practitioner’s ethical relation to parties in conflict is different than that of other practitioners. Based on the descriptions of conflict mentioned earlier, we could argue that understanding any person’s situation is so complex that it is not ethical to presume that we can know how best to analyze or solve people’s conflicts. Although this is true, transformative theory takes a different starting point. Even if a third-party intervener could know everything about a conflict and could say what is “best” for people, a transformative practitioner would still not supplant the freedom and agency of any individual by imposing their own categories of conflict analysis or their own goals on the parties. It is not just that this is unethical *relative to a given analysis of conflict*, but that the ethical relation to another person *precedes* any analysis or conceptualization of conflict an intervener might develop. This means that the ethical relationship between an intervener and community members in areas of conflict goes deeper than guidelines and principles for action.

The work of the philosopher Levinas (1991) helps us understand this critical point. Normally we think of our ethical responsibility in terms of the type of relation a person has to us or the role they play relative to us. We have particular responsibilities to our children, our employees, or our neighbors that are determined by those roles. In this view, we first determine

who or what other people are to us and from that derive our responsibilities to them. Thus, in technical terms, we could say that ontology, the study of what is real and what things are, precedes ethics. Levinas reverses this. When we meet another person we can certainly start to think of them as belonging to particular categories. For example, we may see them as male or female, old or young, and so on. But Levinas argues that there is a way that another person appears to us prior to any categorization, conceptualization, or thematization and that this happens through the face of the other. The face of another person appears to us and not only exceeds any ideas we might form of them, but also calls us to responsibility for them. Our responsibility to another person precedes any determination of their relation to us or their role in society.

Levinas (1991) uses very specific words to describe this. Rather than using terms like I and you, Levinas refers to the Same and the Other. One of the things that characterizes the relation between the Same and the Other is the radical difference between them. If we try to fit another person into an idea we have of them, or their similarities to ourselves or others, Levinas says that we are denying the otherness of the Other and trying to make them into the Same. We are bringing them into what he calls a totality. Note that this is the root of the word totalitarian.

But for Levinas it is critical that the Same and the Other stand in relation to one another without being part of a totality. And, he argues, this happens through language. Through language one can be in relation to others without making them the same as oneself or subjecting them to one's own categories and conceptualizations. And for Levinas, this is the ethical way to be in relation to another person. This does not deny that there are forms of language, such as rhetoric, that seek to persuade or exercise power over others, but it posits that language can be the basis for a relation that does not deny the fundamental difference between self and Other. By approaching the Other in a particular kind of conversation or speech, we receive what the Other expresses in a way that exceeds any idea we can have of them or framework that our thinking would place them in. Ontology, the understanding of being or what is real through categories and the relationships between them, is for Levinas a philosophy of power because it seeks, in his language, to reduce the Other to the Same, rather than represent a relation to the Other.

Most approaches to conflict aim to bridge differences, seek common ground, and resolve conflict; to use Levinas' language, to turn that which is Other into the Same. Approaches that build on basic human needs theory, whether problem-solving mediation models (Moore, 1996) or Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 1999), narrative approaches (Cobb, 2013; Winslade & Monk, 2000), identity-based approaches (Rothman, 1997), cultural approaches (Väyrynen, 2001), interactive conflict resolution approaches (Fisher, 1997), and peacebuilding models (Lederach, 1997) all start with the practitioner's or scholar's analysis and conceptualization of conflict—hence the names of the different approaches. These analyses determine third-party goals and thus practices. By prioritizing conflict analysis from a particular perspective, these approaches all prioritize ontology. They place people in a totality and make it very difficult to stand in a genuine relation to them, prior to the concepts and understandings one might have of them. This stands in sharp contrast to transformative practitioners, who aim to meet people in conflict openly, face to face and to respond in conversation, prior to conceptualization and categorization. Transformative practitioners listen to people's understandings and experiences in order to be with them and support them as they decide what they need, and what they intend to do next (Bush & Folger, 2005).

Some scholars focusing on the ethics of intervention rightly argue for the importance of interveners building relationships with members of local communities. Fast, Neufeldt and Schirch (2002, p. 201) write that "Ideally, interveners seek to create authentic relationships not

just between antagonistic groups in conflict situations, but also between themselves and groups in the receiving communities." But with regard to the ethical guidelines, the focus is still on intervener decisions, and "empowering people to build peace" is still defined as an "ethical end" (Fast et al., 2002, p. 186). Laue and Cormick (1978, p. 217) write, "The ethics of intervention in community disputes focuses on the nature and quality of decisions made by the intervenor." From this, they define a "single ethical question" that must be asked of every intervener, "Does the intervention contribute to the ability of relatively powerless individuals and groups in the situation to determine their own destinies to the greatest extent consistent with the common good?" (Laue & Cormick, 1978, p. 217). **We argue that the ethical relationship to parties or community members requires interveners to ask a different question. Does the intervention allow people themselves to determine whether or not to participate in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, or dialogue processes, who to engage with, and what the process should look like?**

The transformative approach leaves people with the agency to define and express their own identities and understanding of conflict. This requires a deep commitment to respect and support of the Other, letting their agency take priority over the categories and theories of the intervener. Obviously, transformative practitioners cannot avoid making judgements about others. Everyone is subject to implicit bias and we all make assumptions about others based on hasty impressions, socialization, or our particular worldview. But it is possible to develop an awareness of these tendencies, and to acknowledge them, without letting them determine our actions. To meet and engage with people in this way requires attention, listening, presence, and a lot of respect and humility (Bush & Pope, 2002).

3.2 | How people and communities experience conflict

The **second starting point for transformative practitioners is people's experience of conflict.** Bush and Folger (2005, pp. 45–53) have described the individual's experience of conflict from a transformative perspective as a crisis in human interaction. The human experience of conflict is the experience of an interaction that throws people out of balance into a state where it is hard to think clearly, speak articulately, and listen well. Transformative theory describes the negative communication that results as a state of relative weakness and self-absorption. As conflict escalates, interaction degenerates. If nothing changes this downward spiral in communication, it leads to a sense of alienation from one's own best self and from others involved, and a sense of disempowerment. At its worst, conflict can lead to demonizing of others, opening up the possibility of treating them in violent or dehumanizing ways. The theory also posits that when individuals are off balance because of disagreement or conflict, they need to reestablish their own equilibrium before they can effectively interact with others. Regaining balance or equilibrium opens the possibility for shifts toward strength and responsiveness. Transformative theory is premised on the belief that people have the capacity to make these shifts.

Communities also experience conflict, and we have described the reality of many post-conflict societies earlier. Conflict divides communities. Some societies are divided as a result of violence and civil war. Other communities have not suffered political violence, but nonetheless experience serious divisions along lines of politics, class, ethnicity, or race. In the former Yugoslavia, some communities are so divided that members of different ethnic groups do not travel to certain parts of town. Individuals from different ethnic groups use different cafes, health providers, and shops (Cleven, 2020). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, public education is ethnically segregated as a result of the war (Hromadzic, 2015).

Whatever the source of the division, whether violence, war, racism, or political ideology, the experience of division is similar. People usually experience a lack of agreement on basic principles and values. They frequently experience stress and trauma as well as fear and distrust of others. This in turn makes people feel powerless and contributes to cynicism. A feeling of complacency or even hopelessness can develop as people feel that they cannot change their situation. Community participation decreases due to a sense of hopelessness and a concern that members of one's own group will retaliate for connections made to those outside the group. In societies that are divided, people's self-understanding narrows and one identity often becomes more important than the others (Maalouf, 2000).

As we described earlier, people in these situations are trying to cope and survive in a complex setting. They face a constant set of decisions that need to be made about how to live, how to interact with others, what to accept and what to challenge, and how to engage with their communities. Bush and Folger (2005, p. 53) ask "What kind of help do people want from a mediator?" and their response is that "[t]hey are looking for a way to change and transform their destructive conflict interaction into a more positive one, to the greatest degree possible, so they can move on with their lives constructively, whether together or apart." We also might ask what kind of help people in divided societies want from third-party interveners engaged in conflict transformation? We argue that intergroup dialogue can be useful to people living in divided communities, and we have seen many people benefit from such interactions. But first and foremost, people need the opportunity to consider their situation and their relationships to others so that they can gain the clarity and strength to make decisions that are right for them. This may involve interaction with co-ethnics or ethnic others, or it may involve choosing less interaction, but as with individual conflict, people seek to change the quality of their interactional dynamic to one that is more positive and constructive.

Transformative dialogue is a different way of engaging with people in divided communities. Because it starts with the intervener giving priority to the ethical relation to the other, and with people's own experience of conflict, it maintains respect for party agency and choice and aims to support people as they figure out what they need and how they want to interact with others and engage in their communities. It does this while allowing each individual to express who they are and how they see their situation.

4 | TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE

We define transformative dialogue as a process in which a facilitator works with people in communities to support them in gaining clarity and making decisions as they co-create a process that supports changes in the quality of people's interactions, increasing the amount of pro-social interaction. This is done in a way that supports but never supplants people's ability to make decisions about their own situation. By pro-social interaction we mean that regardless of how often or seldom they interact, people interact from a position of clarity and strength, and are open to and able to acknowledge others as human whether they agree with them or have deep disagreements. This does not necessarily mean agreement, reconciliation, or friendship, though all of these are possible. In Levinas' language, it means accepting the radical difference between self and Other.

This definition has several key elements. First, transformative dialogue is party driven, not defined, and designed by the facilitator (Bush, 2008). A transformative facilitator works with people in communities and supports them in determining who should talk to whom, what they are going to talk about, and how they are going to have the conversations. The third party does

not set any goals, even peace, or aim to find common ground, resolution, agreement, or reconciliation. The facilitator does, however, focus on improving the quality of interaction between the parties involved. This does not mean that common ground or agreement is avoided, or undesired, simply that it is not the goal of the facilitator. The facilitator turns responsibility for both content and process over to the parties, understanding that they are the only ones able to determine what content needs to be discussed and what process is most likely to be useful. Fast, Neufeldt and Schirch (2002, pp. 200–201) described a peacebuilding workshop in the South Pacific where outside interveners let go of their preconceived ideas of balance, neutrality, and impartiality to allow local organizers to invite unequal numbers of ethnic group representatives in an effort to “democratize decision-making”—to the benefit of the process. Understanding that individual clarity precedes improved interaction, a transformative facilitator offers the parties the opportunity to figure out what they need for themselves and then how they can best relate to others. One research project in Kenya showed that a program was successful because of the way outside interveners were “engaging with participants to find out what would be helpful for their communities” (d’Estree & Parsons, 2018, p. 355). This is an example of supporting people in co-creating a process that is useful to the local community.

Similarly, because transformative facilitators do not give primacy to one particular type of conflict analysis (e.g., basic human needs theory), conflict understandings are determined and explored by the participants in terms that are useful and important to them. This allows micro- or macro-level conflicts to be discussed and allows for conflict to be understood in its political, cultural, or social context. As mentioned earlier, the point here is not that transformative dialogue is structured or unstructured, or builds on local knowledge or generic models, but rather who makes the decisions about these questions. It also means the facilitator does not assume one conflict and two parties, and that dialogue may be intragroup or intergroup, depending on what people in the community think is needed or useful at that time (Cleven, 2011).

To accomplish this, transformative interveners need to be present in the community they are going to work in. They need to engage with different people to inform them about the possibility of dialogue and what dialogue might do for them. If people decide that dialogue would be useful for them, they must work with people to co-create the dialogue process. This means that one-on-one conversations play a critical role in the transformative dialogue process.

5 | TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATIONS

Many descriptions of dialogue and mediation focus primarily on what happens “in the room,” that is, how to mediate or facilitate conversations once people have agreed to meet. This is of course important, but equally important is the way an intervener engages with people in the community in the process leading up to and in between dialogue meetings.

A key part of transformative dialogue is one-on-one conversations with members of the community where dialogue may take place. This is because transformative facilitators have three main tasks. First, to inform people about the possibility of dialogue and what dialogue might accomplish for them. Second, to help individuals and groups determine whether they want dialogue, and if so, who needs to talk to whom, about what, and how (Cleven, 2011). Finally, to help groups of people interact in constructive ways. One-on-one conversations are a key part of this and are not prior to or less important than large dialogue meetings. When one-on-one conversations are conducted according to the principles outlined earlier, they can be transformative for people whether or not larger dialogue meetings take place (Miller, 2010).

Transformative facilitators need to inform and educate community members about what they are offering. Most people will not know what dialogue is, or they will have a particular, limited idea of what it is. Usually people's perceptions about dialogue are informed by the work that other NGOs have been doing. One of the authors took part in a conversation in a town in Bosnia to introduce the possibility of community dialogue where one of the Croat members of the community said "I suppose you want us to be friends with the Bosniaks." This was a reasonable assumption based on the prior massive peacebuilding efforts that had been made in Bosnia, nearly all of which were aimed at interethnic reconciliation.

A transformative facilitator will emphasize what dialogue can accomplish for people but will never pressure people to take part. Instead, a transformative facilitator will use one-on-one conversations to help individuals gain clarity about whether dialogue is the right thing for them and, if they decide it is, who they think they need to talk with. An initial "no" from one or more people is always respected, but this no may change when they begin to understand that this may be a different kind of dialogue and that they, rather than the facilitator, will be the decision makers. Or they may decide that what they need to do is talk with members on their own "side" before or instead of engaging in intergroup dialogue. In other cases, people may continue to decline an invitation to participate in dialogue. In that case their "no" is respected. Transformative facilitators understand that the goal is not necessarily to hold dialogue meetings, but to help people get clarity about what dialogue can or cannot do for them, and about their situation and the relations they have, or would like to have, with others. If facilitators maintain this appropriate intention and act as true listeners and supporters, then one-on-one conversations can be as transformative as a larger intergroup meeting and benefit the people they talk with. A "no" to dialogue should not be viewed as a failure (Miller, 2010).

6 | WHAT TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE CAN DO FOR PEOPLE IN COMMUNITIES

Transformative dialogue does not necessarily aim to solve conflict or bring about reconciliation between people. It can certainly achieve that. Sometimes, however, it does not, and when that happens the dialogue is not necessarily unsuccessful (see e.g., Maoz, 2004). The goal of a transformative dialogue process is after all to improve the quality of interaction between parties. This can happen whether or not conflicts are "solved" or people decide to be friends. The test is really whether people have been able to make decisions for themselves from a position of strength and clarity, rather than weakness and self-absorption (Bush & Miller, 2019). In a community setting, transformative dialogue can do several things for participants.

First, transformative conversations with facilitators allow people to be themselves and to explore their situation, to gain clarity about it, and to decide whether they want to do anything about it or not, and if so, what. It also allows people to meet in small or large groups to talk about the things that are most concerning to them, or to say no to such offers.

Second, it allows people to make decisions individually or as members of groups. This can be about whether or not to participate in dialogue with others, or about whether or how to relate to members of their own group or other groups. It might also be about how they want to understand their identity or which aspects of their identity they want to bring to the interaction with others. Transformative dialogue allows people to assess the risks involved with actions that might challenge the status quo and whether they want to take on those risks. Because people themselves are making decisions about who needs to talk to whom, about what, and how,

people who take part in these dialogues are socially connected, and this allows people to deliberate about their situation in ways that does not deny the political or social dimension of conflict.

Third, transformative dialogue can allow people to choose identities and interactions that division, conflict, or violence has closed for them. If a conflict or division means that people primarily see themselves in terms of one dimension of their identity, dialogue can open up new possibilities for people to share their full selves.

Fourth, through transformative dialogue, people can establish positive and constructive interactions. This could be with people from their “own side” or with people from the “other side.” In the course of face-to-face encounters with others, people can also determine how to interact with those people in the future.

Finally, transformative dialogue can give people the freedom to recognize the humanity of others, as individuals and as members of groups. In a face-to-face dialogue, it is harder to see others simply as a “representative” of a particular identity. As people meet in person they see that members of identity groups are also individuals (Çuhadar & Dayton, 2011).

7 | CONCLUSIONS

Since the end of the Cold War, the international community has spent billions of dollars on postconflict peacebuilding in order to bridge ethnic divisions and build peaceful, democratic societies in countries that have suffered civil war and political violence. Research on peacebuilding and peacekeeping shows that interventions are ineffective when interveners lack connections to people in local communities and fail to build on local resources. In addition, we argue that conflict resolution and peacebuilding practitioners work from a series of assumptions that fail to recognize the complex reality of conflict and postconflict situations. Transformative dialogue provides an alternative that addresses many of the weaknesses of other standard approaches.

Transformative dialogue starts from an intervener's ethical relation to the other that is given priority over particular conflict theories or conceptualizations of identities and interests. Transformative practitioners therefore do not seize definitional power over people's conflicts, or impose categories or modes of conflict analysis on them, but let people choose how they want to understand themselves and their situation. They do, however, take responsibility for supporting and being with people in conflict as they try to gain clarity about what to do and figure out how to understand their situation and their relations to others. Note that the point here is not that basic human needs theory, or any other conflict theory, is wrong. Instead, the point is that even though one can understand conflict in terms of unmet basic human needs, or narrative structure, it does not follow that moving people from positions and interests to needs, or deconstructing and restorying conflict narratives, is the right thing for third-party interveners to do.

Because transformative dialogue starts from an ethical relation and people's own experience of conflict, it connects interveners to people in local communities in a different way and recognizes that people are grappling with difficult situations that include economic depression and unemployment, ethnic tensions which may include violence, and the interests of multiple parties, including NGOs and international agencies trying to “help.” Party choice about whether to participate in dialogue or not, and about who needs to talk to whom, about what, and how, therefore trumps the choices, goals, and preferences of third-party interveners.

Dialogue work done this way builds on appropriate resources because local community members are making decisions about whether and how to engage.

Transformative facilitators do not take identity groups as given and do not make assumptions about which people need to be talking to one another. Members of the main groups that are in contention may or may not be ready to interact across that identity boundary. For example, in Kosovo after the 1999 war, our experience was that Serbs desperately needed dialogue within their own community so that they could talk about how they should relate to the newly empowered Albanian majority. Such so-called single-identity work is almost never done, though work in Northern Ireland is an exception to this (Fitzduff, 2005/2006), in part because of the assumptions of conflict practitioners, and in part because donor agencies only fund interethnic, not intraethnic, dialogue.

Transformative dialogue facilitators value one-on-one conversations and recognize that such conversations, when done according to the principles outlined earlier, can be transformative for people. It also means that if dialogue occurs, it will include people who are socially connected because people will choose those who matter to them and their situation. Dialogue therefore develops in the context of networks, neighborhoods, or institutions where people's lives are being lived. This also means that dialogue takes place in a social and political context and recognizes the full complexity of conflict situations, unlike the apolitical conflict resolution initiatives often organized by peacebuilding NGOs.

Finally, transformative dialogue builds capacity. Because it involves participants in decision-making at every step of the process, it supports people's agency. By supporting people in acting from a place of personal agency and a place that acknowledges some level of relationship with others, transformative dialogue leaves people with the ability to continue to interact differently. This in turn moves members of a community to a place of greater engagement and connection (Bush & Miller, 2019; Clevén, Bush, & Saul, 2018).

The work of many scholar-practitioners points in the direction of honoring the ethical relation between intervener and community members including Neufeldt's (2016) nurturing of ethical thinking, d'Estrée's (2006) work on the importance of voice, and Nan's (2010) focus on intervener integrity through transparency and meeting party needs. But ethical and effective engagement with divided communities requires interveners to give primacy to personal agency and to communities determining goals, processes, and categories of analysis. Though we articulate the need to let go of externally defined goals, even "good" goals like peace and reconciliation, we believe that this approach holds the most promise for laying the groundwork for genuine, lasting peace.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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