February 11, 2025

Strengthening Democracy through Relational Dialogue

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Roadmap

- Problem Context – Crisis of Political Polarization

- I. The Nature of Political Belief and Cognition

- II. The Ideologue's Perspective - Media, Persuasion, and the Political Landscape

- III. Relational Dialogue: Productive Politics in Action

- Concluding Reflections on the Present Political Moment

Problem Context:
The Crisis of Political Polarization

The Crisis of Political Polarization

Javier Zarracina/Vox

We see mortal enemies, not fellow citizens

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Waning faith in Democracy

▶ Center for Politics (U of Virginia) 2021 poll shows decreased commitment to democracy (surveyed, N = 2,012):

- Trump voters (n = 1,001)
- Biden voters (n = 1,011)

https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/new-initiative-explores-deep-persistent-divides-between-biden-and-trump-voters/

Statement	Percentage who at least somewhat agree/ percentage who agree strongly	
	Biden voters	**Trump voters**
There are many radical, immoral people trying to ruin things; our society ought to stop them	65%/29%	83%/44%
If our society so wants, it is the duty of every true citizen to help eliminate the evil that poisons our country from within	63%/29%	78%/35%
Our country needs a powerful leader in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today	62%/26%	82%/43%
It would be better for America if whoever is President could take needed actions without being constrained by Congress or the courts.		
The situation in America is such that I would favor [Blue/Red] states seceding from the union to form their own separate country		

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I. The Nature of Political Belief and Cognition

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What makes *political* beliefs so special, anyway?

▸ My foray into studying political cognition:

Reasoning Lab

- Information processing:
  - Emphasizes critical thinking and reasoning capabilities.[1]

- *Metacognitive failures* tell the story:
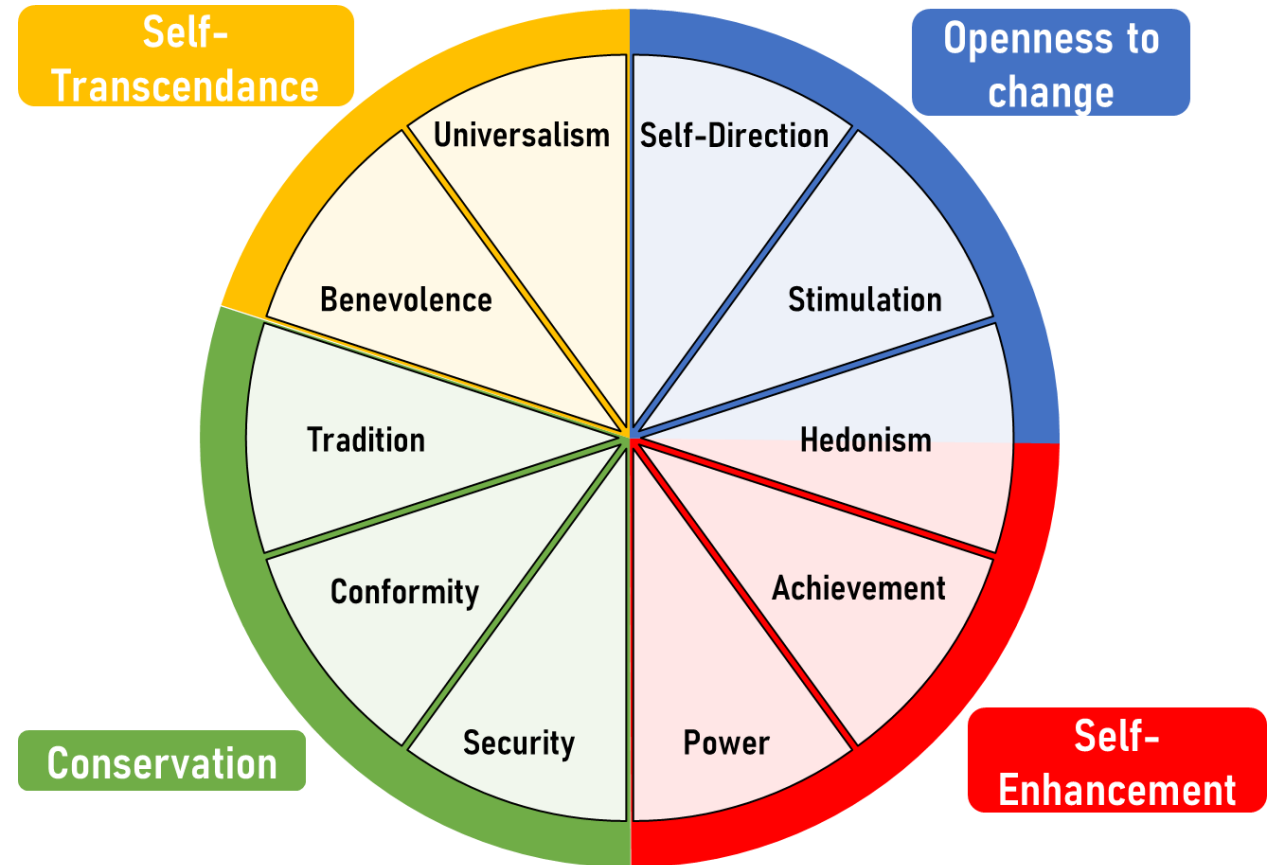 - Unwarranted confidence in beliefs impeding the exploratory mind.[2]

1. Lewandowsky et al., 2012   2. Rollwage et al., 2018

Ideological Narratives Characterized by Value Architecture

▶ Psychological undergirding of Ideological Narratives.[3]


Javier Zarracina/Vox

Self-Transcendance

Openness to change

Universalism

Self-Direction

Stimulation

Benevolence

Hedonism

Tradition

Achievement

Conformity

Security

Power

Conservation

Self-Enhancement

Benjamin Pastorelli

Source :
Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25, 1-65.

3. Schwartz, 1992

Neural Signature of Ideological Narratives

▸ Brain regions processing narratives instantiating core values:[4]

- Across cultures, similar brain regions activated (Medial PFC and Anterior Cingulate Cortex) when values invoked.

- Identifying a universal neural signature for protecting values when challenged.

4. Kaplan, 2017
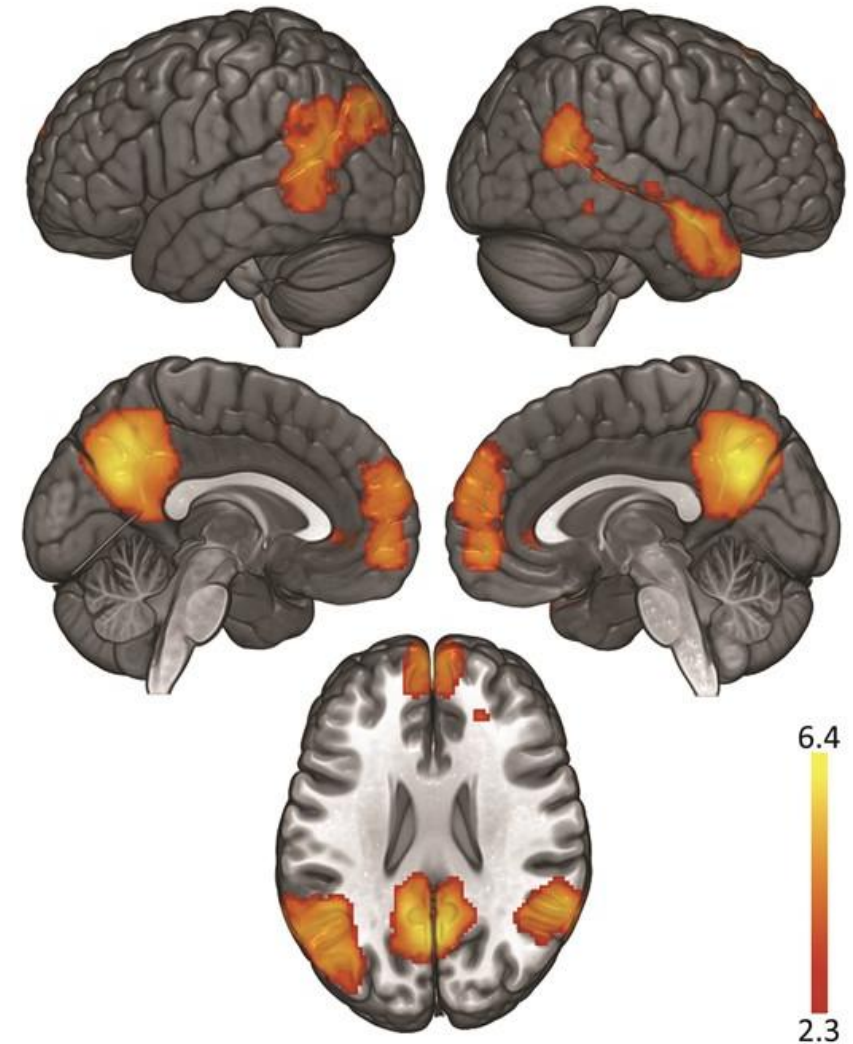
Why we defend our Ideological Narratives

▶ We mobilize our reasoning in defense of "Ersatz Religions": [5]

- Offers a grand life *purpose* and *identity*
- Confers *meaning* behind personal actions
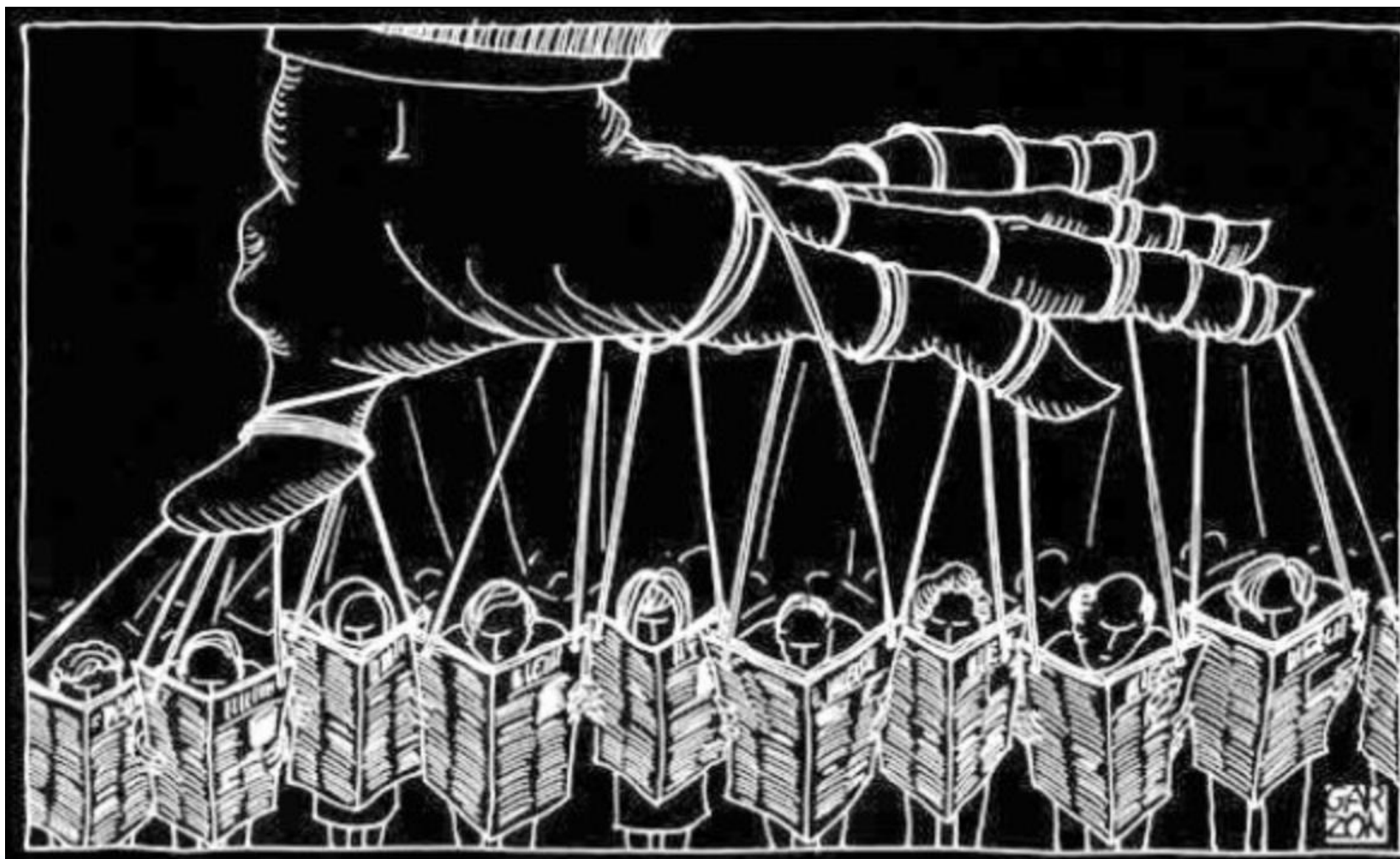- Immersion into like-minded *community*

…constructs that defy measurement.

ERIC VOEGELIN

The New Science
of Politics

AN INTRODUCTION

5. Voegelin, 1952
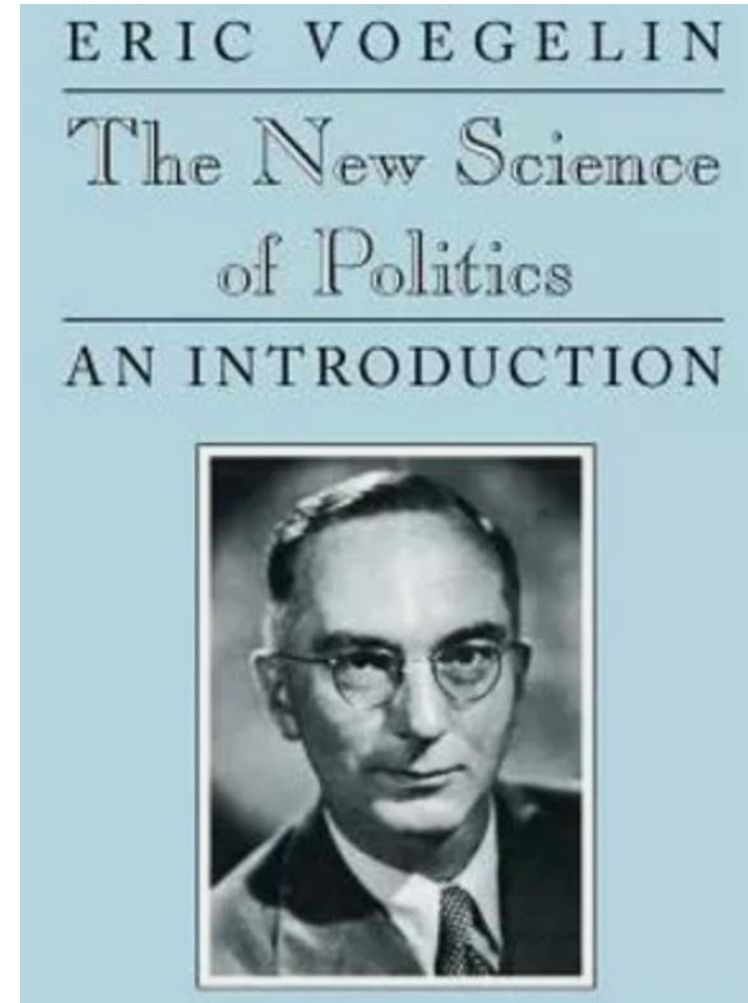
II. The Ideologue's Perspective: Media, Persuasion and the Political Landscape

Dehumanization: The Ideologue perceives the adversary as narrative pawns

The Ideologue's Gambit: Balkanization

▸ Symbolic boundary setting and ideological purity testing[6]
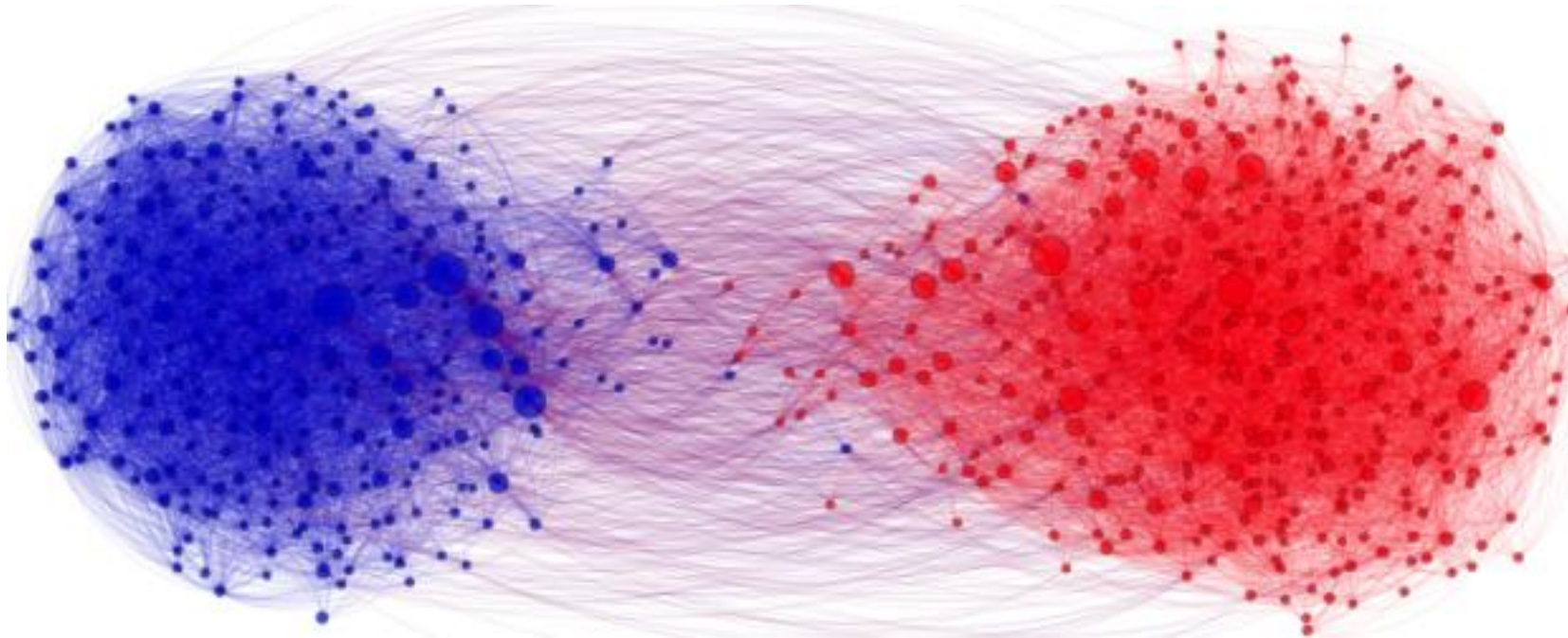
- Ingroup and outgroup signals

Image: Visualizing Polarization in Political Blogs · AllThingsGraphed.com

6. Tajfel & Turner, 1986

Cognitive Warfare and The Politics of Fear

- Conquest of perceptions and judgments, seeking converts within population.[7]

7. Baughman, 2023

However, only a Pyrrhic Victory is on offer…

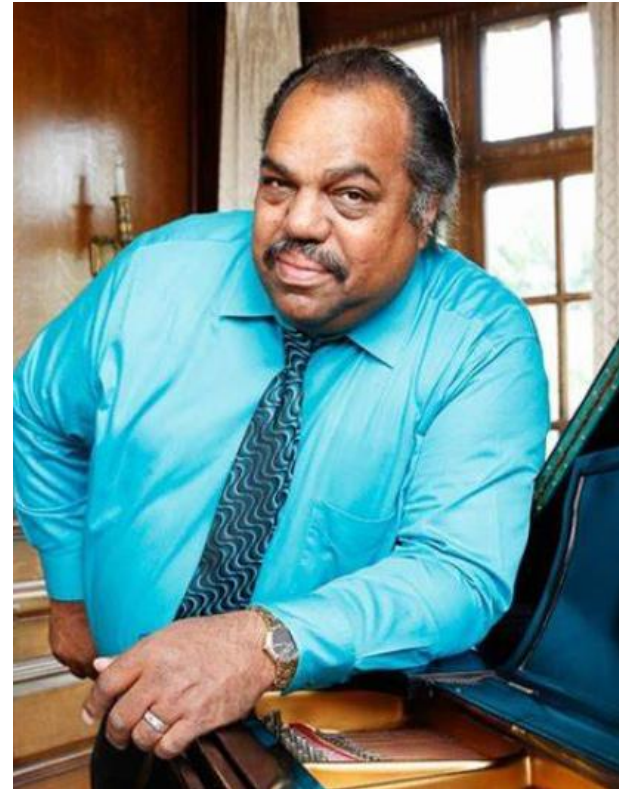- Ideological Narratives recursively strengthen isolation and resentment.[8,9]

8. Simi & Futrell, 2021   9. Horgan & Braddock, 2018

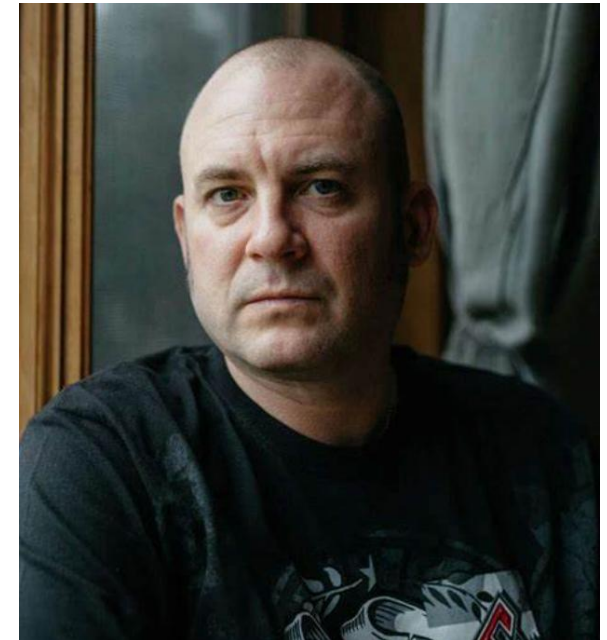# III. Relational Dialogue: Productive Politics In Action

Relational Dialogue and its philosophical foundations

▸ Relational Dialogue, a pragmatic approach to political conflict:

• Founded by Daryl Davis, who emphasizes:

  – Mutual Respect
  – Exploratory Posture of the Mind
  – Reciprocal Vulnerability
  – Metacognitive Sensitivity

Jeff Schoep
Founder of Beyond Barriers, former Neo-Nazi leader deradicalized through Relational Dialogue

Daryl Davis
Political Activist, Relational Dialogue subject matter expert

The key tenets:

What is Relational Dialogue

Engagement

Perspective Mindset

Storying

Re-Humanization
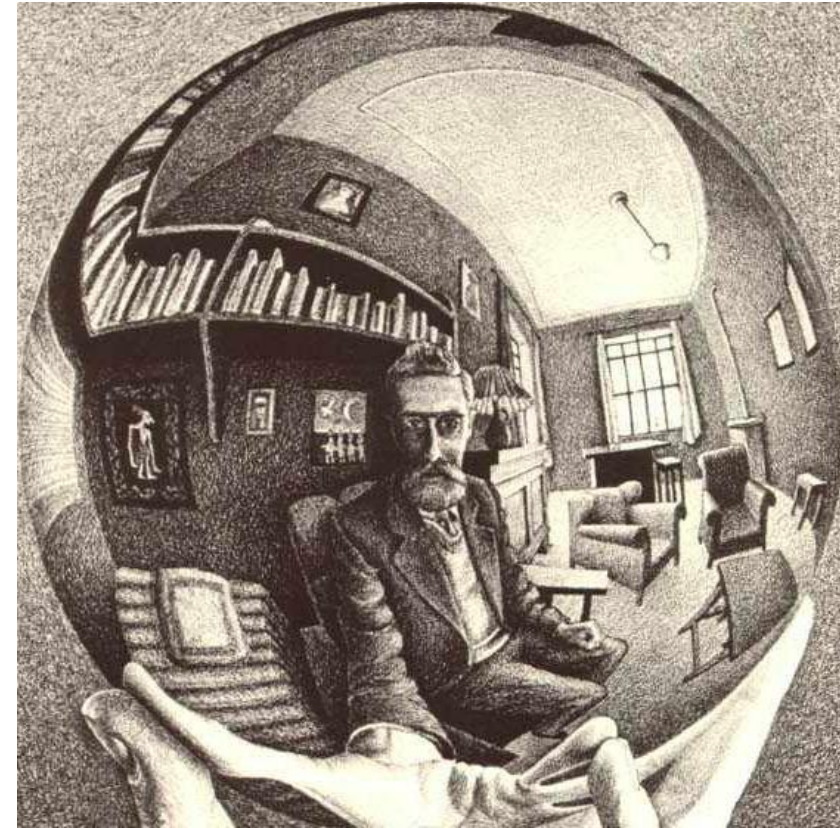
Mitigate Polarization through Relational Dialogue

▶ "Re-Humanize" through curiosity and connection:

- Provoke <u>cognitive dissonance</u> by humanizing the interlocutor and forging genuine social bonds and connections

- Cognitive dissonance initiates fluid and explorative reasoning[10]

Curiosity-oriented dialogue to reduce threat response at core of polarization

10. Sripada, 2018

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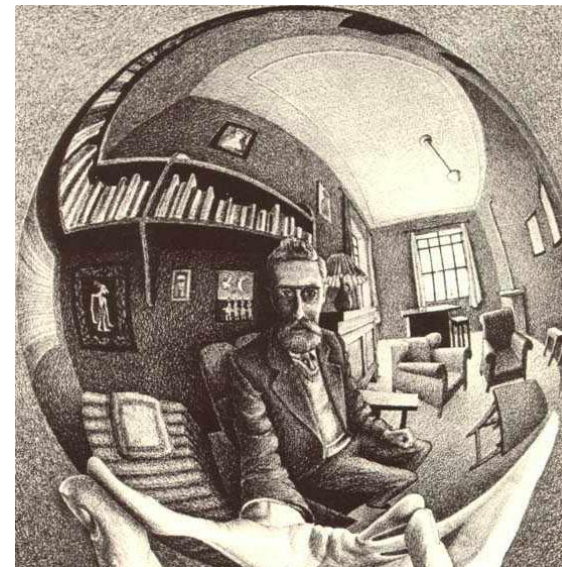# Embracing Alternative Narrative Schemas

Self-Growth Narrative (individual vs Self)

▶ …and reframing the conversation dynamic

Ideological Narrative (individual vs individual)

Supplanted by

Relational Narrative (individuals vs Nature)

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Concluding Reflections on the Present Political Moment

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What we are up against…

The Social Dilemma, theatrical poster. (Image: Netflix)

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Reliance on Social Media for Engagement

% of U.S. adults who get news **often** from ...

■ News websites or apps   ■ Search   ■ Social media   □ Podcasts

18-29: 28% (News websites or apps), 28% (Search), 42% (Social media), 12% (Podcasts)
30-49: 38, 28, 25, 8
50-64: 33, 22, 15, 4
65+: 32, 15, 10, 3
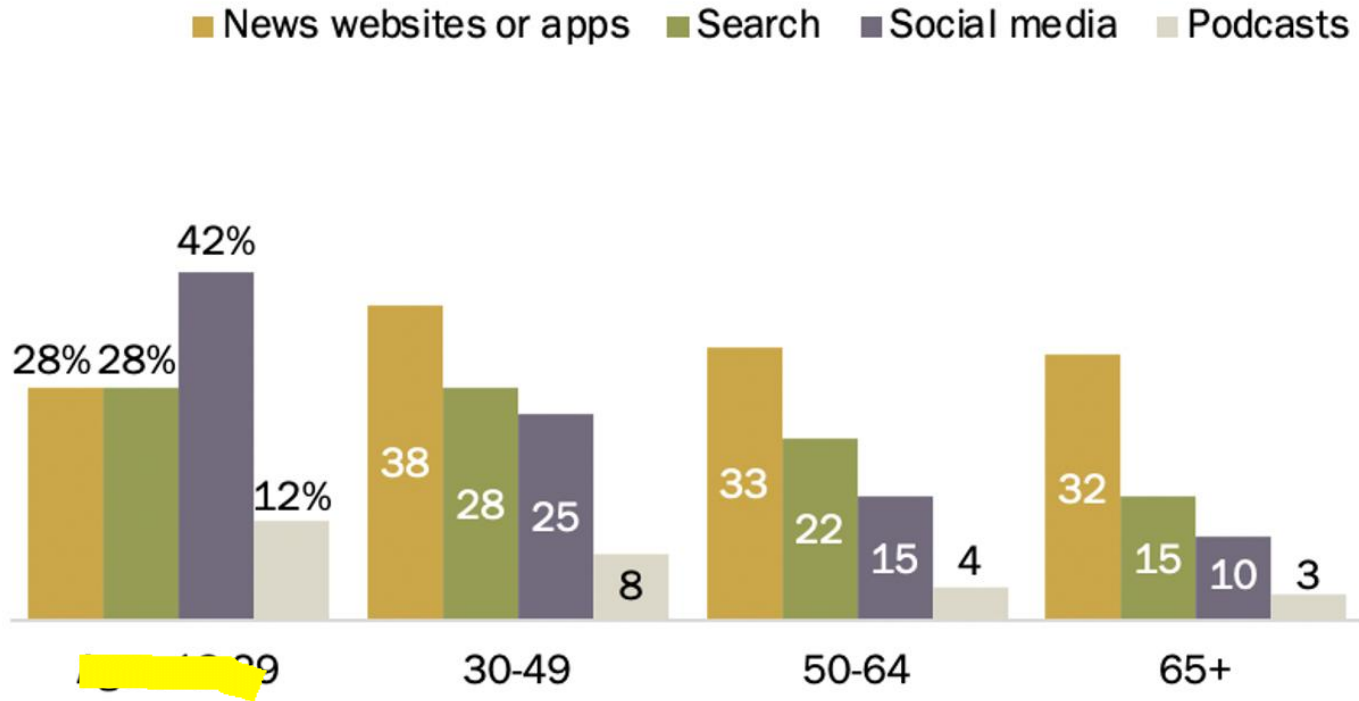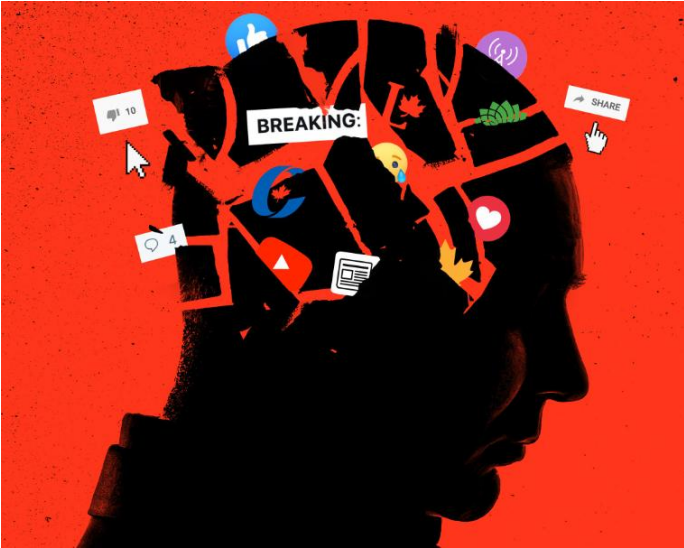
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

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Let us not outsource our engagement to social media

Returning to our roots – built for dialogue and connection

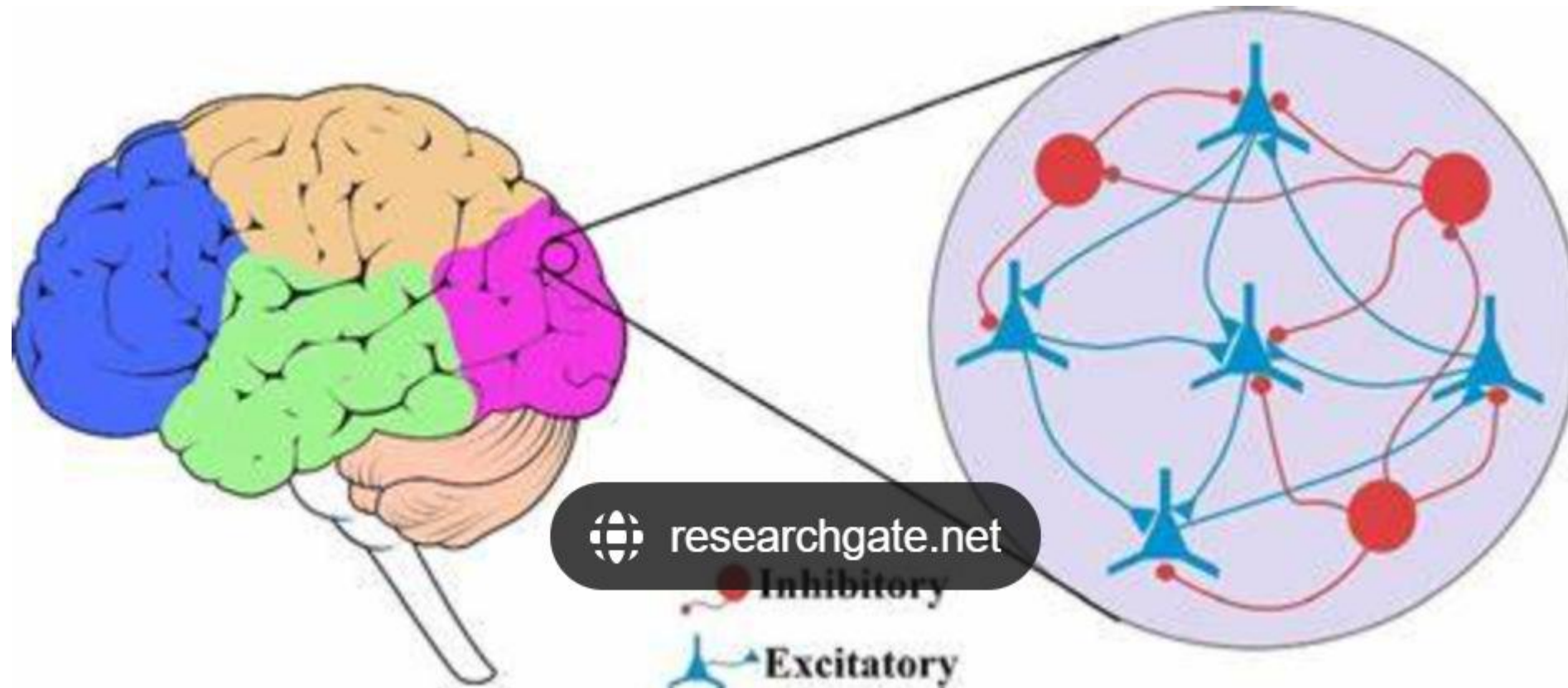▶ Take heed of the remarkable impacts of curiosity and vulnerability

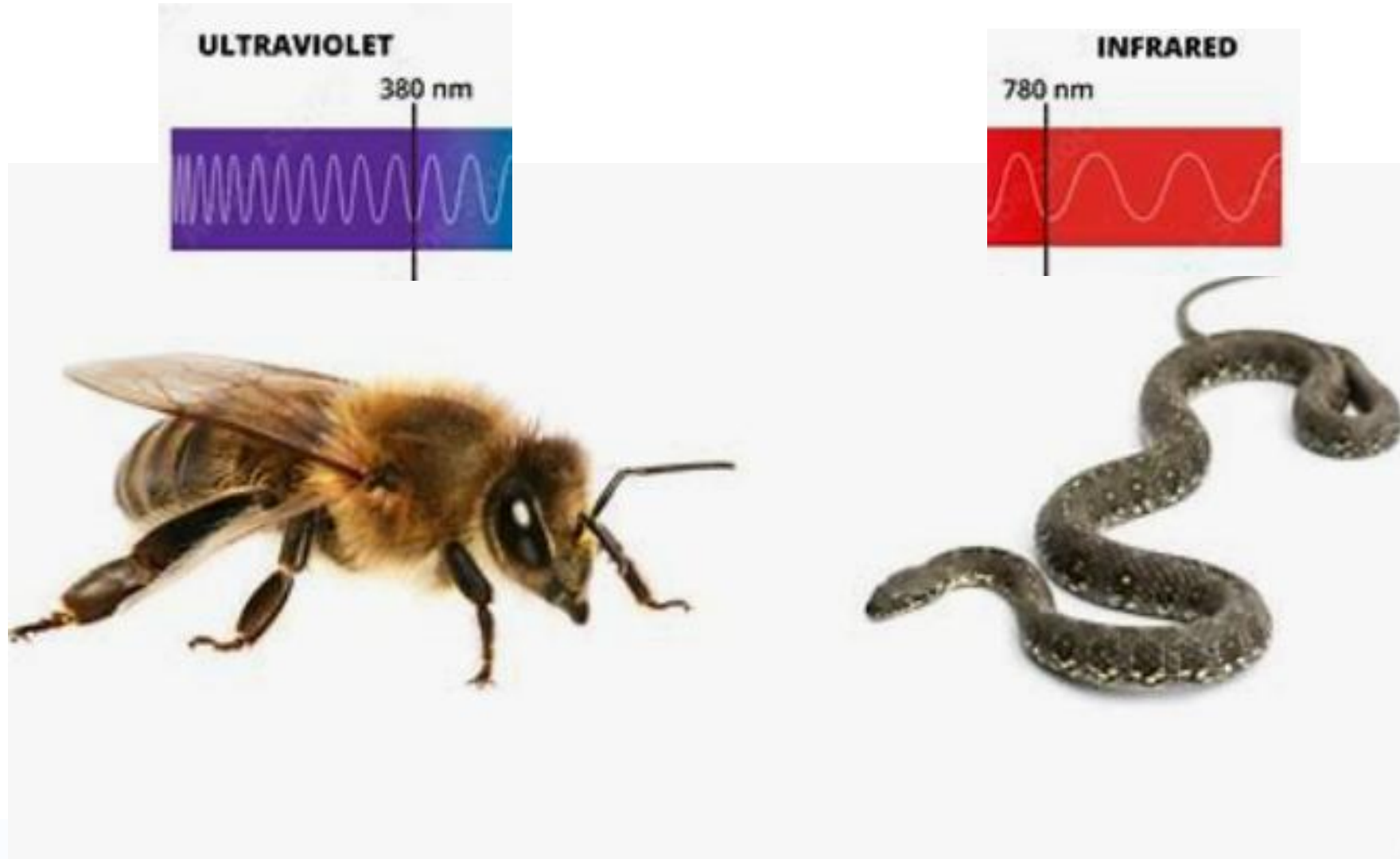Daryl Davis, left, and Jeff Schoep. *Courtesy Of Daryl Davis*

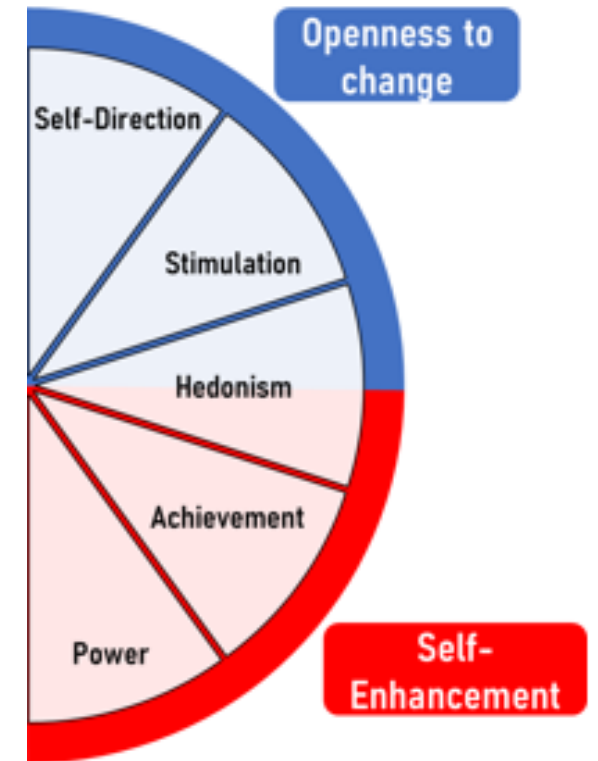# Modeling political culture on the brain's exquisite wiring
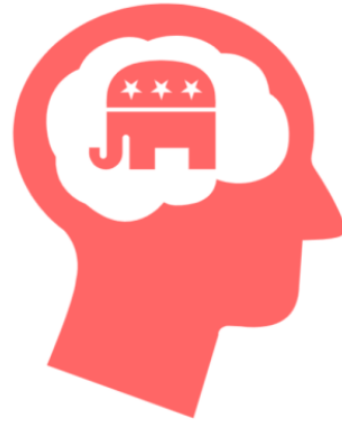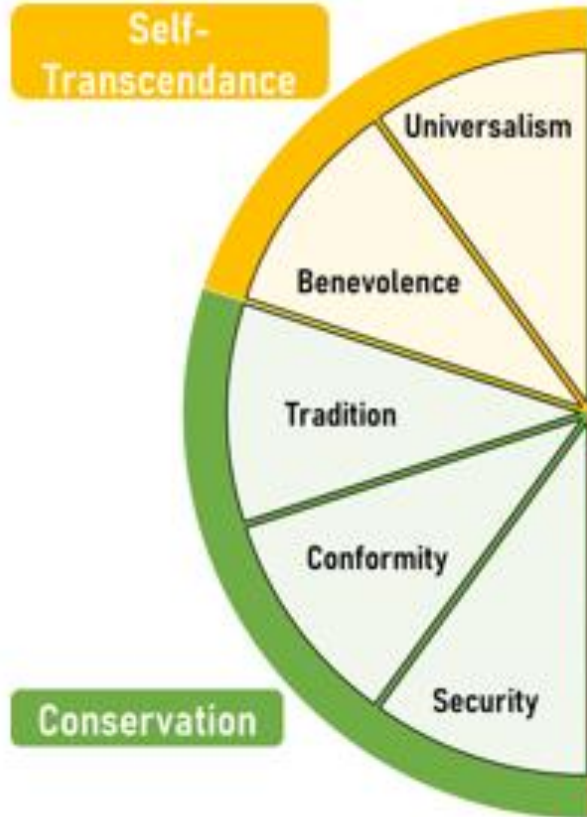

11. Figure: Foroutannia et al., 2020

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Incongruities in perspective are what dialogue is all about

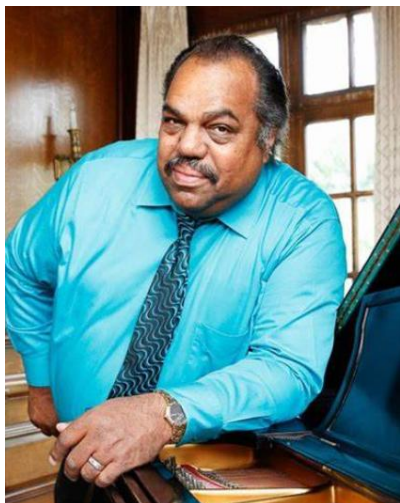# A better understanding by talking to (instead of at) one another

Acknowledgements

Daryl Davis
Relational Dialogue Subject
Matter Expert

Jeff Schoep
Founder of Beyond
Barriers,

Daniel Krawczyk, Professor of
Cognitive Neuroscience, University
of Texas at Dallas

Greg Rule
Principal Engineer
Special Projects

Leanne Young
VP, Cognitive Neuroscience
Subject Matter Expert

Beyond Barriers
Freedom from the barriers of the mind.
beyondbarriersusa.org

Reasoning Lab

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS

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Questions and Observations?

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Supplemental Slides