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## 'But I don't know if I want to talk to you': strategies to foster conversational receptiveness across the United States' political divide

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the conversational receptiveness strategies that are intentionally embedded in the Braver Angels organization's Red/Blue Workshops. These workshops facilitate difficult conversations across the political divide in the United States, especially communication between Republicans and Democrats. Workshop training materials and workshop recordings were analyzed to identify how moderators were trained to encourage conversational receptiveness through structured dialogue. Results identified trained facilitator strategies (greeting behaviors, acknowledging power differences, setting up structures for safety of outgroup conversations, active listening, and showing appreciation for participant input), structured conversational receptiveness practices (limiting assumptions through perspective-taking and locating shared interests), and the strategic sequencing of training activities all contributed to creating dialogic moments. The conversational work done in these workshops around sharing one's own perspective and invoking the perspectives of others, holds potential implications for helping to create communities of dialogue where people can develop conversational receptiveness, both within these workshops and beyond.

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Political polarization has been growing across democracies for some time (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019), with roots in ascriptive and ideological identities such as race, religion, and sociocultural worldviews. The rise in polarizing rhetoric and intolerance can lead to people in divergent groups denying the legitimacy of the other. With an increase of this type of 'affective polarization,' people often become unwilling to look for common ground (Carothers, 2019; Cleven et al., 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019), attributing dehumanizing and malevolent characteristics to the other group (Crawford et al., 2013; Warner & Villamil, 2017; Warner et al., 2020). Such attributions can lead to diminished intergroup contact and a lack of 'conversational receptiveness' (Yeomans et al., 2020), in which people are unwilling to engage in conversations with those who differ from them. This unwillingness can lessen a person's 'conflict resilience' or 'the ability to sit with and be

fully present around those with whom we have fundamentally different views on critical issues' (Bordone, 2018, p. 70).

Determining how people can learn to have 'dialogue,' or conversations over their differences with the goal of bettering understanding of each other, can be immensely helpful in increasing constructive dialogues across political divides. The deliberative inquiry and facilitation literature illuminate how this can take place, through third-party-facilitated structured conversations, with outcomes such as embracing multiple perspectives, making stronger and more positive connections with others, and creating policy for future actions (e.g. Carcasson & Sprain, 2016; Gower et al., 2020; Sprain & Black, 2018). We need to better understand what it is that facilitators actually do in polarized settings, as well as what intentional designs they employ, to provide opportunities for the type of dialogue that can encourage conversational receptiveness, or 'the extent to which parties in disagreement communicate their willingness to engage with each other's views' (Yeomans et al., 2020, p. 132). This study looked at how one non-profit organization and its facilitators build structured communication spaces for such dialogue to occur between individuals across the political divide by the use of intentional facilitator and workshop design strategies.

## Literature review

Within difficult dialogues, research has pointed to the importance of locating the various interests that motivate or underlie someone's position (Brett, 2017) to understand *why* the other side holds the positions they do. One way facilitators do this is by intentionally creating opportunities for participants to engage in perspective-taking and to actively imagine others' experiences, perspectives, and feelings (Muradova, 2021). Perspective-taking not only assists with comprehension, but also with limiting assumptions of the other (Warner et al., 2020), which are often inaccurate and stereotypical. As Wang et al. (2014) found, perspective-taking increases a person's willingness to engage with outgroup members. Moreover, when groups can 'come to recognize their own differences in perception about shared experiences, it may help them better find common ground on the issue they are exploring' (Black & Wiederhold, 2014, p. 303).

Bruneau and Saxe (2012) identified the importance of both ingroups and outgroups sharing their own society's life difficulties with each other ('perspective-giving') and reflecting back what they heard about those difficulties from the other group ('perspective-taking'). However, they noted 'perspective-taking might not be equally beneficial, in both directions across a power divide' (p. 856) and found ingroups benefited more from perspective-taking and outgroups benefited more from perspective-giving in understanding and managing conflict amongst the two groups. When people believe they have unequal power with those they are in communication (or in conflict) with, they are more likely to be distrustful of the other side. Because of this, we need to better understand the intentional work that facilitators do to provide opportunities for both perspective-taking and perspective-giving among ingroups and outgroups, especially when there are clear power differences and inequities between the groups.

When attempting to manage conflict and promote dialogue between divergent groups, as well as increasing conversational receptiveness for the 'other,' it is important for facilitators to keep in mind how participants' group membership(s) may reflect power

asymmetries and impact discursive practices. Before opposing parties can engage in dialogue to contribute to conversational receptiveness, they first must feel safe in the setting in which they are disclosing. Research has pointed to the importance of rapport-building in order to have safe environments, in which respect and empathy amongst opposing parties are present (e.g. Park & Hyun, 2021). Scholars have specifically identified ‘greeting behaviors’ as one way to initiate and build rapport. Greeting others through addressing them by name, looking them in the eye, and/or participating in other customary nonverbal gestures plays a pivotal role in motivating interpersonal dialogue, as it acknowledges another’s presence and creates a space for connection to take place (Mirivel, 2014).

Along with rapport-building, facilitators also need to provide opportunities for all participants to share their perspectives in a way they can be heard by others, as ‘simply choosing to engage with opposing views may not lead to greater understanding or cooperation if the language of that engagement is unreceptive’ (Yeomans et al., 2020, pp. 141–142). Heath and Borda (2021) re-imagined civility to include the fostering of ‘discursive openings,’ in which there is an intentional effort to create ‘communicative structures and conditions that work to keep the conversation open’ (p. 12), demonstrating the importance of establishing ground rules and nurturing an environment needed to disrupt ‘distorted power arrangements’ (p. 12) and allow a variety of perspectives to be heard. It may initially take trained facilitators to create a process where all sides, including marginalized voices, feel heard (Chung-Mei Lensen et al., 2012; Herzig & Chasin, 2006; Morrell, 2018) and where there are opportunities for ‘dialogic moments,’ which ‘involve deep listening, perspective-taking, respect, and a sense of genuineness or honesty’ (Sprain & Black, 2018, p. 341). Yeomans et al. (2020) identified specific linguistic markers that accompany conversational receptiveness in such environments, including behaviors such as using positive emotional words, ‘I’ statements, and hedges when making claims. Such behaviors can help divergent sides identify and connect to the beliefs and goals of the other.

Importantly, previous researchers have studied singular cases to determine how best to manage intractable intergroup conflict. Dorjee and Ting-Toomey (2020) conducted an analysis of a controversial Indian-based case and recommended multiple strategies for managing polarized intergroup conflict. The authors suggested mediators cultivate a climate where participants can discuss their identity and morals, and engage in mindful listening and imaginative reframing. Moreover, Muradova (2021) studied the Irish Citizens’ Assembly and found that using both fact-based rational argumentation and storytelling can increase the likelihood of perspective-taking happening among participants.

When deep polarization occurs in a society, researchers need to understand how facilitators intentionally design environments that create safe spaces for multiple voices to be heard and encourage the types of dialogic moments that can lead to increased conversational receptiveness. This allows facilitators to become designers of ‘spaces where different perspectives can be shared and talked about in ways that enable mutual learning, enhance our capacity for jointly managing important challenges, and transcend individual interests’ (Barge & Andreas, 2013, p. 630). Much like the singular case studies referenced above, the present study investigates one such space within a non-profit organization called Braver Angels. Through analyzing a Braver Angels’ workshop, our study extends Yeomans et al.’s (2020) work to explore how conversational receptiveness

can be enhanced through the intentional design of structured dialogue between polarized sides.

## Case context

Braver Angels is a U.S.-based non-profit founded in 2016, with the goal of helping individuals and communities bridge the political divide through better communication. Braver Angels' original work was done in what has now become known as the 'Red/Blue Workshop,' in which equal numbers of people from the Republican and Democratic political parties in the U.S. come together in a day-long workshop to talk about their beliefs, perceptions, and stereotypes, using structured dialogue processes. Over time, the leaders of Braver Angels created other workshops and structured debates around controversial issues (Gino et al., 2020). For this study, however, we chose to focus on the Red/Blue Workshop, since, of all the workshops, it appears to allow the most direct engagement between 'Reds' and 'Blues'. The Red/Blue Workshop has the goal of not changing participants' views on issues, but rather to 'change their minds about each other' (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 3).

Baron et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study of Red/Blue Workshops held on four college campuses, with a total of 59 participants. They found that the workshops reduced partisan polarization, generated empathy for the other side, and helped to identify ideological common ground between participants. In another study of Red-Blue Workshops, Jacobs et al. (2019) noted three quantitative themes related to improving levels of affective polarization from 531 participants. These themes revealed that over 70% of the participants indicated they had (a) improved their mutual understanding and comfort with the other side, (b) discovered areas of commonality they did not realize they had, and (c) increased their 'capacity for constructive conversation with the other side' (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 8).

Red/Blue Workshop attendees believe their participation increases their conversational receptiveness, but no existing research examines what is intentionally done within/during the workshops to encourage such results. To understand how the Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshops achieve such outcomes, our research sought to answer the following research questions.

1. How do discussion moderators facilitate conversational receptiveness in Braver Angels' Red/Blue Workshops?
2. How does the design of the structured discussions in Braver Angels' Red/Blue Workshops facilitate conversational receptiveness?

## Methods

To answer our research questions, we used a case study methodology to investigate the Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshop. We looked for practices within this workshop, with a goal of 'creating rich detailed descriptions of an existing communication practice' (Barge & Andreas, 2013, p. 618), to evaluate how communication is encouraged and managed within this setting.

To gain access to materials, one of the authors signed up to be trained as a workshop moderator. She has since become a trainer and moderator for the organization. As part of her training, she watched three hours of training videos, including examples of training sessions. These videos were guided by a 44-page moderator training manual.

Initially, we did a deep dive into the detailed workshop training manual, to explore what types of communication practices were present in the workshop. Data analysis of the manual was accomplished across five steps. First, we read through the training manual holistically to gain familiarity with the data. Second, we created an initial codebook of themes or codes pertaining to dialogic strategies used based on our holistic reading of data. The third step of analysis involved both coders using the initial codebook to code the same 40% of the data to validate initial codes. We then compared our codes to determine if our initial codes needed amending. We used the constant-comparison method (Glaser, 1965) to compare emerging codes to those in the initial codebook and noted theoretical saturation had been achieved when no new codes emerged. Convergence was sought on our amended codes at this meeting, and we developed a final codebook and decided that units should only be assigned one code each, unless the same bullet point included two explicit instructions – one for the participant and one for the moderator. At that point, we chose to code those bullet points with more than one code. Fourth, we each coded the remaining 60% of the data individually by splitting the rest of the moderator guide in half and using the finalized codebook to assign each bullet point a code. Fifth, we held a data conference (Braithwaite et al., 2017), in which we discussed findings, identified the most frequently identified strategies, selected exemplars of the themes, and explored potential theoretical and practical implications.

After coding the training manual, we then conducted observation of two Red/Blue Workshops and compared our codes to practices utilized in the actual workshops (9.5 h total of observation). Observations were conducted online via video recordings. One workshop was held via Zoom in 2020 and recorded by one of the present study's authors who served as the Zoom events manager for the workshop. The second workshop was held face-to-face in 2017 and video recorded by the organization. We were able to attain and analyze the workshop videos from the national organization, with their permission.

Although the Braver Angels organization did not collect demographics such as race/ethnicity and age at the time of the workshop, the face-to-face 2017 workshop included seven female participants (46%) and eight male participants (54%), including two male moderators. The 2020 workshop held via Zoom with 18 participants did not allow for the collection of demographic information as Breakout Rooms and the choice for hiding videos obscured accurate demographic information. Although recruitment for participants for Braver Angels-sponsored workshops has never been based on demographics such as race/ethnicity or age but only on an even distribution of Reds and Blues, it is important to note that the majority of the organization's members and those who participated in organization-sponsored activities during the time of data collection were White, well-educated, older people. This is important to note as suggested practices in the results section may speak more to the homogenous and traditionally privileged group that made up our present data set. The Braver Angels organization continues to strive for more diverse representation across their members and workshop participants.



During observation, we checked for the existence of each of our codes in the workshops themselves and for new codes that might emerge. We found the recorded workshops followed the training manual almost exactly; all codes found in the training manual were present across both the Zoom and face-to-face workshops; and no new codes emerged. During observations, we also noted the order and duration of each activity in the workshops to explore the temporality of the strategies used, in addition to using these recordings as a validity-checking procedure.

## Findings

In analyzing both the training materials and the videos of two of the Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshops, we were able to answer our research questions. We discuss our findings for each research question below.

### *Research question 1: moderator strategies*

The first research question focused on moderator strategies employed in workshops to help facilitate participants' conversational receptiveness. Five moderator strategies were used for this purpose: (a) greeting behaviors, (b) acknowledging power differences, (c) setting up structures to ensure the safety of the group, (d) active listening, and (e) showing appreciation for participants' contributions. We describe each in turn.

The Braver Angels training asked moderators to greet each participant as they arrived and welcome them. These behaviors were demonstrated in the moderator training videos and evidenced in the actual workshops by the moderators who greeted each individual participant as they arrived in person or by Zoom. This process was used to provide participants with an opportunity to explain their individual reasons for attending the workshop. In the online workshop, participants were encouraged to come into the Zoom meeting a little early to introduce themselves, and each was greeted as they entered. In some cases, it was clear that the participants and moderators already knew each other, with statements like, 'it's been a long time – good to see you,' used.

A second strategy facilitators used in the workshops was to acknowledge power differences that could negatively impact group communication, including their own perceived power as a moderator. Training materials repeatedly instructed moderators to remain neutral in order to build rapport with all participants, no matter their background or political affiliation. Moderators were instructed to 'not express approval or agreement with what anyone says, lest you start shaping what people offer' (Braver Angels, 2019, p. 7). It was also not clear what the political stance of the moderators was in any of the workshops observed, although there is an underlying assumption that one is Red and one is Blue, based on guidelines provided by Braver Angels for the workshop. Moderators maintained this neutrality through discursive practices such as using 'we' when referring to their breakout room participants, regardless of which political group they represented. However, they cautioned against assuming that all of the participants in the group were similar, with one moderator stating, 'I would like to say that when we say "we all," we need to remember that we are a diverse group.'

Facilitators' neutral stance contributed to a climate of trust that could positively impact conversational receptiveness. As past research has concluded, trained facilitators

are important in creating an environment where participants on opposing sides all feel heard (Chung-Mei Lensen et al., 2012; Herzig & Chasin, 2006). As such, their neutrality and not overtly identifying with or supporting either side helped cultivate such an environment, which likely included individuals who may have come to the workshops already distrustful of a particular political affiliation (Warner et al., 2020).

Third, moderators communicated and enforced rules and guidelines for workshop activities that ensured safety for participants to communicate openly and honestly. Moderators were instructed to not only state the workshop ground rules but to ask participants to ‘buy-in’ to these rules. In addition, moderators operationalized these ground rules throughout the workshop. They informed participants early in the workshop of a ground rule about the moderators’ role: ‘[State] that you will likely steer people back from time to time during the meeting; be clear but light-hearted about this role you’ll have to play’ (Braver Angels, 2019, p. 8). As early as introductions, moderators were told to establish ‘the group’s operating norms right from the outset, signaling that you are going to be a fair but in-charge facilitator’ (p. 6). These norms were portrayed as ‘guard rails’ to create ‘a sense of safety for the group’ (p. 6).

The use of these strategies was observed in workshops when moderators corrected participants for making assumptions about other people in their group. For example, during an activity known as the ‘Stereotype Exercise’ in a face-to-face workshop, a participant said, ‘we can find common ground because we seem more moderate,’ and the moderator interrupted by saying, ‘be careful of that term and not to assume we are all moderates.’ Moreover, during another activity known as the ‘Fishbowl Activity,’ someone went off on a tangent about their stance, and the moderator interrupted and said, ‘The point you are articulating on, it is clear you have strong views on this. But I want to make sure we focus on concerns.’ Trust built through clearly stated and enforced rules helped create a safe community of dialogue within Red/Blue Workshops.

A fourth common facilitator strategy taught to Red/Blue Workshop moderators is active listening behaviors. Moderators were taught to model paraphrasing as a conversational receptiveness skill. For example, during the Stereotype activity, training materials advised moderators to ‘write down the stereotype in the speaker’s words as they are called out ... [then] try to summarize it in a word or phrase and ask if you got it right’ (Braver Angels, 2019, p. 10). General advice for moderators across all activities included, ‘If someone is so vague and rambling that you don’t think listeners are tracking, try to paraphrase’ (p. 17). These types of moderator behaviors were consistently observed in the workshops. For example, in the online workshop, when one participant took a long time to make her point, the moderator stated, ‘I’m hearing that communication is really important,’ when she finished, to which the participant agreed. Another time, during the Stereotypes Exercise, the moderator asked, ‘Is that what you’re saying?’ after writing down what they thought the person said on the note-taking pad.

Finally, moderators were given specific guidelines for how to encourage participant disclosure and show appreciation for participant contributions. During or after each activity, moderators were instructed to use phrases such as ‘I appreciate everyone sharing in this circle’ or ‘if someone expresses strong emotion or tells an impassioned personal story, acknowledge what you just heard, such as “So this is very close to your heart. Thanks for sharing it”’ (Braver Angels, 2019, p. 18). Other times, moderators were asked to simply ‘appreciate the work of the first reporter, and invite applause’



(p. 12). Examples used in the workshops observed, included, ‘Thanks [name],’ ‘That is indeed one of the reasons we are now called Braver Angels,’ and ‘We think these conversations are incredibly important.’

All of these strategies – greetings, acknowledging power differences, enforcing ground rules, listening actively, and providing appreciation for sharing – served as discursive strategies that helped create dialogic moments for the participants, consistent with conversational receptiveness.

### ***Research question 2: structured discussion design***

The second research question focused on structured discussion design choices which help to facilitate conversational receptiveness. Three themes identified in the workshops were specifically related to such practices: (a) Limiting assumptions through perspective-taking, (b) locating shared interests and commonalities, and (c) intentionally structuring the order of the workshop activities.

#### ***Limiting assumptions through perspective-taking***

Many activities utilized in Red/Blue Workshops, such as the Stereotypes, Fish Bowl, and Question Exercise activities, were strategically included to elicit assumptive beliefs and dispel inaccurate attributions about Democrats and Republicans, in order to better engage in perspective-taking of the other. Instructions for moderators included making statements to participants such as, ‘The real work in this exercise is done by the observing group whose task is to listen and learn something about the other side’ (Braver Angels, 2019, p. 16). The phrase ‘listen and learn,’ as opposed to ‘declare and debate,’ was repeated frequently across the stereotypes and fishbowl activities in the workshops.

For the Stereotypes Activity, participants were put into separate Red and Blue groups and asked to come up with common stereotypes that they think others have of their group. They were then asked to identify what was wrong with those stereotypes as well as the ‘kernels of truth’ they contained. These were then further discussed across both groups, with the moderator asking everyone to reflection on what they learned ‘about how the other side sees themselves beyond stereotypes.’ This perspective-taking activity purposely interrogated the assumptions that each group believes the other holds to test their accuracy (if any). It gave both groups insight into the processes and effects of these stereotypes. For example, one participant stated:

I had no idea that you guys felt like you were on the offensive always, that you’re always trying to have to defend yourself against the, like, “we don’t necessarily believe in Trump” ... It’s easiest to just assume you all voted for Trump, you all believed everything he said ... but we’ve lost the fact that you’re all individuals and you have your own beliefs and you’re multi-dimensional, and you’re not just a belief in one thing.

Another activity, the Fishbowl Activity, aimed to help participants ‘learn something about how the other side sees themselves’ (Braver Angels, 2019, p. 19). This activity was structured around two questions that attempted to draw out assumptions participants had about their own side and the beliefs of the other side: (1) ‘why do you think your side’s values and policies are good for the country’ and (2) ‘what are your

reservations or concerns about your own side?’ One group asked the questions of one another while the other group observed. Again the activity concluded with a larger discussion and learning opportunity where moderators asked participants to talk about what they learned:

I realized, “oh my gosh, I totally disagree with what they just said, but ... I was listening, and I wasn’t getting defensive.” And I was curious about why, you know, they felt different than I did, and it was really powerful because it reminded me that you can have differences, like real differences, and you can state those differences, but still be in that listening mental mode.

We continued to see this activity increase the conversational receptiveness in participants.

A final activity, the Questions Exercise activity, invited participants to ask questions to explore their own assumptions about the other side. Moderators first put Reds and Blues in separate groups to formulate questions for each side, then mixed the groups to answer the questions. Moderators carefully vetted the questions to make sure they were not ‘gotcha’ or unanswerable questions, to increase the likelihood of hearing multiple perspectives. After reflecting on these discussions as a large group, participants seemed more willing to work across the divide, as seen in this participant’s comment during the share-out:

I was impressed with what I thought was the sincerity of the questions asked. I thought the questions were excellent and very sincere in wanting to understand our answers and they were very thoughtful in their responses. And that just gives me so very much hope.

Not only were these three activities intended to identify and dispel inaccurate assumptions, but they showed the importance of attempting to understand the other side by engaging in perspective-taking, even when you disagree. The effect of these strategies in the workshops we observed supports the argument that perspective-taking is essential in order to change behavior towards another person or group for whom an individual holds stereotypical or negative attributions (Muradova, 2021; Warner et al., 2020). It was clear in our research that perspective-taking was a powerful conversational receptiveness practice that can be used to identify and dispel inaccurate attributions of the other side and contribute to dialogic moments and depolarizing dialogue.

### *Locating shared interests/commonalities*

Another conversational receptiveness practice used in Red/Blue Workshops was locating shared interests or commonalities across political differences. This practice was encouraged by moderators in two ways: (1) through noting the common goals all workshop participants shared and (2) through directions given during workshop activities.

Moderators challenged participants to ‘see if there is any common ground’ in the initial part of the Stereotypes Activity and, later, to reflect with the larger group on ‘whether you saw something in common.’ The Fishbowl and Questions Activities included similar instructions. Explicitly looking for common ground seemed effective for increasing conversational receptiveness, as seen in one participant’s comment:

Let’s be honest, we all have those judgements and biases coming into it and thinking ‘they think this way.’ One of the real surprising things when we asked the question of ‘quality of

opportunity versus quality of outcome' was that we were more unanimous and that surprised me.

Another stated, 'I think what we both saw was that our values were not that far apart in what we believe. What we are far apart in is how we both see getting to solving that.'

The last Red/Blue Workshop activity, the 'How We Can Contribute Exercise,' asked paired participants to discuss 'what can each of us do individually, and what can we do together to promote better understanding of our differences and search for common ground' (Braver Angels, 2019, p. 24). This explicit focus on seeking common ground together was strategically placed at the end of the workshop, building on earlier perspective-taking activities and aspiring to create a continued community of dialogue (Cohen, 2018) moving forward, as participants worked to increase their own conversational receptiveness towards people with different political affiliations. Participant comments highlighted the gains they had made in understanding the power of respectful listening:

I found out that if you actually shut up and listen to the other side, you might find out they actually have the same position as you on something, and they are able to articulate it better than you could ... and so you know just from that dialogue, I am now better able to represent what I believe because it just so happens I have that place of commonality with people who I'm supposed to disagree with on everything.

Another said:

Both sides of us are constantly talking about the individual and both sides of us are also talking about the needs of the community, and I'm seeing that there's so much opportunity for balance where both sides meet each other, because you know one side does something better or one side does something else better, and seeing that here, it's like, 'Wait a minute! These guys aren't, you know, opponents! They are potential partners!'

These comments illustrate how Red/Blue Workshop participants began adopting practices that increased their conversational receptiveness, by challenging their previously held assumptions, perspective-taking and finding shared commonalities.

### *Temporality*

A third conversational receptiveness practice was built into the structure of the workshop exercises. Both the face-to-face and online workshops followed a similarly ordered pattern: (a) moderator guidance and set-up of workshop and activities, (b) whole-group introductions, (c) talking with ingroup, (d) talking with outgroup, (e) individual self-reflection and sharing, and (f) whole-group debriefing.

Moderator guidance was provided through the overall workshop set-up (goals, agenda, and ground rules), as well as for each of the exercises and sharing opportunities. In the face-to-face workshop, this took approximately 29 min of the 4.5-hour one-day workshop. In the online workshop, it took 34 min of the 5-hour, two-day workshop. Whole-group introductions were encouraged for workshop participants, with each person asked to introduce themselves and why they came to the workshop. This took 12 min in the face-to-face workshop, which had 13 participants (six Red, seven Blue), and took 16 min in the online workshop, which had 18 participants (nine Red, nine Blue).

Much of the workshop was spent talking in ingroup conversations with participants who considered themselves to be the same political ‘color.’ These sessions provided a safe space to share alternate thoughts without concerns about being judged. This was where the reason-giving exchanges marked by disagreement (Sprain & Black, 2018) primarily occurred in the workshop, with cross-talk allowed between participants. These ingroup sessions were always done before there was any content-related interaction with a person/s from the other side. Both the face-to-face and online workshops had approximately one hour devoted to these conversations (70 min for the face-to-face workshop and 63 min for the online workshop), with time spent brainstorming and agreeing upon what to share from the Stereotypes and Questions Exercises with the other side. These sessions enabled participants to ‘[use] discourse to understand other perspectives on an issue instead of policing people for violating civility norms’ (Sprain & Black, 2018, p. 11), thus incorporating inclusion as a conversational practice.

After participants had congressed with individuals from their own group, they were given the opportunity to meet in smaller groups and/or pairs with those across the political divide. This occupied the bulk of each workshop, with 107 min spent on this in the face-to-face workshop and 113 min in the online workshop, divided between the Fishbowl (large group), Questions (small group), and How We Can Contribute (pairs) Exercises across the workshop. The large and small group interactions were moderated by the workshop facilitators, while the pair interactions done near the end of the workshop were not, which scaffolded participants’ adherence to the ground rules of listening and respect (Sprain & Black, 2018), before allowing them to have unmoderated pair discussions.

The workshop moderators also gave time during the workshop for individual reflections (14 min in the face-to-face workshop and 24 min in the online workshop), as well as for whole-group sharing of learnings and reflections. The whole-group sharing time ranged from 38 min in the face-to-face workshop to 50 min in the online workshop. In these whole-group sharing sessions, we noticed there were more commonalities shared among participants than differences, with appreciation expressed about both sides being open and honest about their perspectives.

In short, it was clear that the Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshop had been purposefully designed to provide a safe space for conversations with one’s ingroup as well as outgroup. The sequencing of activities facilitated structured communication spaces for such dialogue, with conversational receptiveness practices used to create dialogic moments that were interactionally accomplished across the workshop.

## Discussion

The findings of this Braver Angels’ Red/Blue Workshops study corroborate previous research on the role facilitators play in creating communities of dialogue to bring divergent groups together (Barge & Andreas, 2013; Cleven et al., 2018; Cohen, 2018). Our findings detail how the work of facilitators and the workshop design helped Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshop participants experience dialogic moments with those whom they previously assumed to have little in common with, as well as within their own group. Regardless of whether the workshops were online or face-to-face, the workshop structure was important for helping participants to understand their perspectives and begin to appreciate others’ differing political perspectives.

Our research adds to the existing literature on how a facilitator's use of communication strategies can increase opportunities for conversational receptiveness. Moderators' work on greeting behaviors, inclusivity, setting up safety structures, active listening, and appreciation for participants' contributions all promoted participants' engagement in perspective-taking and finding commonalities, key to increasing conversational receptiveness. These practices likely contributed to Jacobs et al. (2019) finding that participants reported greater willingness and ability to communicate across the political divide after participating in these workshops. The strategies we observed are those previously associated with collaborative outcomes and communicating through difficult conversations (Black & Wiederhold, 2014; Gower et al., 2020; Muradova, 2021). Importantly, our findings take the literature further on possible practices that can be used by facilitators to create 'discursive openings' (Heath & Borda, 2021), especially when voices have been muted within the political atmosphere in which a person finds themselves.

### **Conflict implications**

To provide an environment conducive for enabling conversational receptiveness, certain elements need to be present, including a neutral moderator, clear ground rules for discussions, and multiple activities that demonstrate how to engage in difficult conversations. However, even with these elements present, comprehension of the other's views, constructive conflict management, and collaboration may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve when individuals refuse to engage in perspective-taking and use inaccurate assumptions to drive their own behavior towards, or in response to, those for whom they have negative attributions (Dorjee & Ting-Toomey, 2020; Muradova, 2021). In an attempt to build conversational receptiveness, multiple Braver Angels' Red/Blue Workshop activities asked participants to consider their own perspectives before thinking about their assumptions about the other and engaging in dialogue to alter or reframe those assumptions.

Workshop participants were not contemplating for the purposes of reaching a decision, as might be found in some deliberative discourse contexts; rather, the workshops engaged them in 'multiperspectival inquiry,' which Sprain and Black (2018) claim helps 'build understanding about self, other, and issue' (p. 351). The same-group interactions that preceded the cross-group and pair interactions, and the subsequent whole-group sharing, all contributed to understanding each other, paving the way for further dialogue across differences. Identifying this temporality finding takes the current research on deliberation further and in part answers Sprain and Black's (2018) call for identifying 'when deliberative moments occur and how other factors complicate the situated accomplishment of deliberation' (p. 349), as well as Wolfe's (2018) call for designing processes to support 'dialogic and deliberative moments across perceptions of difference' (p. 8). Deliberation is difficult without first understanding one's own side and personal experience with bias.

Based on our findings, we recommend facilitators working with polarized groups first consider allowing discussions in homogeneous groups to create safe spaces for exploring initial positions and interests, as well as biases experienced by and held towards the other side. Considering one's own perspectives and attributions in detail first allows participants to prepare for riskier conversations that can happen across divergent groups.

This conclusion echoes Karpowitz et al.'s (2009) finding that deliberative equality can best be achieved when groups, particularly disempowered groups, deliberate within their own interest groups or parties before they deliberate across more diverse or heterogeneous groups. Referred to as 'enclave deliberation,' disempowered groups can consider 'diversity of viewpoints rather than falling into groupthink and polarization, and can persuade external stakeholders of the legitimacy of the group's deliberations' when doing so prior to engaging in a more public civic forum (p. 576). Moreover, using this type of training strategy can also give voice to those who may feel shut down because they are part of the outgroup, which is an important consideration for facilitators attempting to build more inclusive environments for deliberation.

Outside of workshops such as the one discussed in this research, individuals can engage in similar thought processes when reflecting on their values and beliefs during politically driven conversations (Stains, 2012). Engaging in perspective-taking to locate assumptions and then participating in discussions about possible inaccuracies, can help build conversational receptiveness and ultimately conflict resilience (Bordone, 2018; Yeomans et al., 2020).

### ***Braver Angels implications***

As this study illustrates, we believe that the Braver Angels organization is building conversational receptiveness as a means to achieve the 'coexistence of difference and respect' (Wolfe, 2018, p. 9). The process of learning to sit with another who holds different political views, and to understand them, takes time, structure, and trust, but it holds much potential. Although agreement between sides towards solutions on specific policy issues was not the goal of this workshop, the type of dialogic moments encouraged in these workshops can eventually contribute to 'perspective-shifting,' in which disclosures can 'disrupt the rigidity of in-group/out-group boundaries, softening the membrane between conceptions of Self and Other so that different relational connections can be entertained' (Wolfe, 2018, p. 11). Future research should explore how experiencing these types of dialogic moments can impact willingness to work towards consensus within polarized environments in other work Braver Angels does as an organization.

One critique we have of the Braver Angels workshop formula is the lack of opportunity for facilitators to go 'off script,' and shift responsibility to participants to negotiate meaning together outside of the structure provided. For example, facilitators are discouraged from adjusting the agenda or structure, even if doing so would be productive in allowing conversations to invite 'civil disagreement into the conversation, not as a problem, but as a necessary check on inequity' (Heath & Borda, 2021, p. 16). In some ways, the structures they use, which are intended to create safe spaces for dialogue, may actually be shutting down dialogue, especially in groups that are already muted. For example, if a 'kernel of truth' or another activity report out misrepresents a marginalized group or makes a biased interpretation of the opinions of a participant whose background is different from others in their political affiliation group, the agenda does not always afford the facilitator the time or flexibility to intervene, further discuss or debrief such instances.

The controlled structure of the Braver Angels workshops allows the organization to scale up the number of workshops they offer with facilitators who are not trained in



advanced deliberation techniques. However, as Baron et al. (2021) note, when perspective-taking, empathy, and common ground are prioritized, important elements such as fact-checking information shared and addressing issues surrounding deep inequalities can easily be deprioritized. Moving forward, we suggest that workshop structures should include opportunities for flexibility and debrief, particularly in instances where facilitators need to intervene in ad hoc topics that are focused on diversity. Stringent structures should not further silence marginalized groups for the sake of keeping the timing and structure of activities; instead facilitators should be trained to address such topics in a way that promotes speaking opportunities for marginalized groups to shed light from their own perspective.

The tradeoffs between structure and flexibility need to be addressed by those in Braver Angels, and in other organizations who aim to depolarize groups. There are times when differences need to be acknowledged to facilitate change, especially when there are human rights issues that need to be addressed. However, we also need to provide spaces where difficult and respectful conversations can take place, in order to build trust and understanding between those who hold different perspectives, which is what Braver Angels is trying to do. Without hearing each other, we have no chance of coming up with co-created just solutions that can help bridge the various divides.

As the Braver Angels organization moves forward in their efforts, we recommend that they also consider the order in which their various workshops should be taken, to explore configurations that work better for building conflict resilience in their participants. They could provide a guide for current and future participants to help in this regard, as well as follow-up reflection homework for workshop participants. In addition, we wonder if allowing more practice time to have dialogue with the other side, rather than just trying to understand the other, would be helpful in workshops such as the Red/Blue Workshop. The organization says they encourage continued conversations between participants outside of their workshops, but the outcomes of such conversations are unknown. They could benefit from bringing in other organizations' strategies on how to have such conversations (e.g. Living Room Conversations). We recommend that they look into some of the work done on training of facilitators for more intensive interactions over time in the intergroup dialogue and public conversations literature (e.g. Chung-Mei Lensen et al., 2012; Heath & Borda, 2021; Herzig & Chasin, 2006; Wolfe, 2018). This could support the design of additional intentional processes to address structural inequalities and power differences between muted and in-power groups, in order to achieve 'mutuality in interaction' (Wolfe, 2018, p. 8).

We also wonder what effect this type of experience has on people's longer-term assumptions or attributions of those on the 'other' side of the political divide, and if they take what they have learned in these workshops into real-life communication with others. More research needs to be done on the short-term and long-term effects of such workshops on people's conversational receptiveness and conflict resilience. While Braver Angels workshops use feedback forms at the end of each workshop, they might benefit from also having a pre-workshop form, to see how perceptions of the 'other side' change as a result of the workshop. We also suggest three-month and six-month follow-ups with participants to measure the effects of the strategies.

## Limitations

Although our findings point to the structured dialogue elements that are encouraged and enforced by the Braver Angels Organization to help Americans communicate across political differences, limitations remain. The Braver Angels organization has acknowledged its need to reach out to more diverse populations, since most of its workshop participants are white, well-educated older people. This was true in the workshops we observed, which is a limitation of our study and of Braver Angels' work in general. Furthermore, practices discussed in our results section may be more applicable to white audiences. This limitation should be considered when applying such practices to more diverse groups. More research needs to be done to investigate the usefulness of these strategies for more diverse settings. To increase conversational receptiveness when there are power differentials present among participants, it may take more nuanced facilitator strategies than are used in Braver Angels Red-Blue Workshops.

Second, it is important to note that the literature this research draws upon on perspective-taking, conversational receptiveness, and structured dialogue is primarily derived from research collected and published in the United States. As such, our literature review may not reflect conclusions within internationally polarized settings, and our findings may be more suited for U.S. political discussions/dialogue than cross-cultural or international discussions.

## Conclusion

In sum, we found that the intentional dialogic moments incorporated into the Braver Angels Red/Blue Workshops provided political opposites the opportunity to understand their own biases, comprehend the other side's viewpoint, dispel inaccurate assumptions, and ultimately move towards conversational receptiveness. Based on these findings, we agree with Sprain and Black's (2018) conclusion that 'disagreement, respect, and inclusion may be achieved through different discourse practices in different social scenes in different speech communities' (p. 14). Braver Angels is one such community.

Overall, the conversational work done in these workshops around sharing one's own perspective and invoking the perspectives of others, within one's ingroup and outgroup, holds potential for helping to create communities of dialogue in which people can develop conversational receptiveness for difficult dialogues. This type of work potentially allows people to both 'reckon with our history and our present' and 'move forward into a better, braver future' (Heath, 2021, para. 28), as they focus on building ideological bridges that embrace 'the free and open exchange of ideas and the beauty of storytelling' (Heath, 2021, para. 26). This study shows one way this can be done.

## Disclosure statement

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