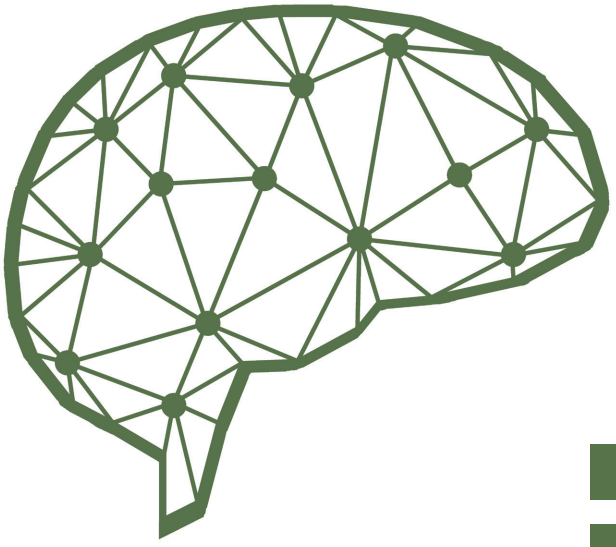
NORMS, NARRATIVES AND NEURONS

THE NEUROSCIENCE AND SOCIAL CONFLICT INITIATIVE

MEETING REPORT



15-16 MARCH 2014

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NORMS, NARRATIVES AND NEURONS

A MEETING AS PART OF THE NEUROSCIENCE AND SOCIAL CONFLICT INITIATIVE

15-16 MARCH 2014

MIT MEDIA LAB, CAMBRIDGE, MA

The Neuroscience and Social Conflict Initiative is a major multi-year effort that seeks to utilize advances in neuroscience to better understand universal human reactions to conflict, cultivate a Neuroscience and Social Conflict field, and disseminate the initiative's insights to key policy and research audiences.

On March 15-16, 2014, Beyond Conflict (formerly the Project on Justice in Times of Transition), in partnership with MIT's SaxeLab for Social Cognitive Neuroscience and MIT's Political Science Department, organized a two-day event entitled ***Norms, Narratives and Neurons*** as part of its ***Neuroscience and Social Conflict Initiative***. **The Neuroscience and Social Conflict Initiative is a major multi-year effort that seeks to utilize advances in neuroscience to better understand universal human reactions to conflict, cultivate a Neuroscience and Social Conflict field, and disseminate the initiative's insights to key policy and research audiences**. The objective is ultimately to transform and improve the way domestic and international conflict is understood and mitigated.

The ***Norms, Narratives and Neurons*** meeting was the *second mapping meeting* designed to survey what is known about core areas of human affect and behavior that are widely assumed to be at play before, during, and after conflict. The first mapping meeting was on ***Dehumanization in Conflict***, and future meetings are planned on topics such as memory and trauma, and sacred values. **The objective of these meetings is to advance the pursuit of a nuanced, systematic, and scientifically cutting-edge understanding of the aspects of the human mind and brain that drive us into and away from conflict and violence**.

It is with these larger objectives in mind that the Neuroscience and Social Conflict Initiative undertook an exploration of recent findings in cognitive neuroscience, the social sciences, and from direct experiences in the field on the ways norms and narratives can motivate behavior change in conflict settings. The key question driving the meeting was: **What can neuroscience tell us about how norms and narratives influence behavior?** And during the course of the meeting the overriding concern of the participants was further refined to the question: **Can neuroscience tell us what norms and narratives are more likely to change behavior and how can it be done?**

INTRODUCTION

Narratives and norms are inherent to the way we perceive, interpret, and act within our social environment. Groups create unconscious borders of acceptable behavior, enforce them through a variety of organic and formal means, and sustain and justify them using collective stories, or narratives. Beyond our own personal preferences, aspirations, or moral sensibilities – these norms and narratives shape our social and personal worlds, and frame what we consider acceptable, and sometimes imaginable, behavior. These are essential tools for the survival of individuals and groups, and they are ever more important in an environment of intractable conflict, pervasive fear, and frequent violence.

In a conflict situation, norms and narratives often serve as crucial adaptations that help groups and individuals cope with threats to their survival. They help us make sense of the traumatic events around us and implicitly guide us towards safety from harm and exclusion. In the process, they also become central pillars of who we are and how we see our surroundings and ourselves.

And yet, precisely because they remain so central to group behavior and identity, these norms and narratives often hamper the efforts of activists, negotiators, diplomats, and practitioners to prevent and resolve conflict and to promote reconciliation. Too often, leaders struggling to reach peace or reconciliation seem to get stonewalled by deeply entrenched narratives of conflict. Too often, practitioners working to prevent violence fail when groups and individuals revert to old norms of violence as dispute resolution. Too often, activists see narratives and norms of sectarianism become more and more entrenched without any recourse to prevent them from leading to violence and division.

What seems to be missing is a better understanding of the effects these norms and narratives have on human behavior before, during, and after conflict; as well as the conditions under which they can be changed,

reframed, or reinforced. Not many researchers have studied norms or narratives in the context of conflict and not many neuroscientists have looked into the neural correlates of norms and narratives. Still, the fields of sociology, psychology, and neuroscience are in a position to offer some important insight into the mechanisms of narratives and social norms.

To facilitate this research, Beyond Conflict hosted this event with the overall goal of understanding how social norms and narratives arise, become effective, and change, both in general and, specifically, in conflict contexts. The hope was to catalyze a cross-disciplinary conversation about the role norms and narratives play in social conflict – How are narratives surrounding conflict formed and distributed? What behavior is considered socially acceptable and even encouraged within a group and towards other groups? How do narratives influence norms and vice versa? How do norms and narratives change and how can they be changed? – a conversation that will lead to cutting-edge interdisciplinary research and eventually, better approaches, tools, and methods for diplomats, leaders, and practitioners.

THE MEETING

Tim Phillips, Co-founder and Chair of Beyond Conflict and meeting moderator, opened the meeting by asking, "What is common in humans that drives them towards conflict? Can neuroscience tell us how to use norms and narratives to change this behavior?" And he spoke to the objective of the meeting and the overall initiative in terms of getting a handle on "the emerging scientific basis for answering 'What drives human behavior?'"

Dr. Emile Bruneau, Research Scientist at the MIT SaxeLab, contextualized the opening discussion with a brief sketch of the conceptual framework of the conference. In the social sciences and cognitive neuroscience, he said, there is a common analogy of how the brain works. **The brain is described as a rider on an elephant**. The rider represents the part of the brain to which one has introspective access, the part with which you can directly communicate. But the analogy emphasizes that a vast majority of the brain – the elephant – is completely opaque to introspection. We do not know what processing is going on there. And this is one of the great realizations of social psychology: that there are a lot of processes going on behind the scenes that are driving human behavior. **And those opaque processes are particularly important because since we are not aware of them, we discount their effect on our behavior**. This is what neuroscience is attempting to measure directly and hopefully that is the contribution it can make; allowing us to know about the processes and functions, not just of the part of the brain to which we have direct introspective access, but of the entire brain.

The brain is described as like a rider on an elephant. The rider represents the part of the brain to which one has introspective access, the part with which you can directly communicate. But the analogy emphasizes that a vast majority of the brain – the elephant – is completely opaque to introspection.

NEUROSCIENCE ON NORMS AND NARRATIVES

The first set of presenters, though not all neuroscientists, focused a great deal on what neuroscience is telling us about how norms, in particular, are being found to have a dramatic effect on human behavior. The ability to change norms and shift the narratives in which they are embedded in predictable ways was demonstrated to a surprising degree, as was the extent to which such changes can affect human behavior on individual, small group, and societal levels. Finally, the importance of the messenger who delivers the norm or narrative changing message was addressed, and it was shown that this factor is arguably just as important to shifting norms, narratives, and behavior as is the message being delivered.

Robert Cialdini, Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University, argued that behavior can be effectively changed through influencing psychological tendencies. He focused on the power of norms to influence behavior and, in particular, environmentally related behavior. Very often program developers try to leverage change by using financial or regulatory motivators of that change. But those are costly on the financial side and regulation has a social cost. People don't like being regulated into action and they often resist such efforts. There is another set of motivators of change, he argued, those with a psychological foundation, those that are aligned with fundamental human tendencies. If we can arrange our messaging so that people are likely to behave in ways that are consistent with their fundamental inclinations and move in our direction, little is lost in the bargain.

Normative theory suggests that there are two kinds of norms that influence human behavior. There are **descriptive norms**; norms of what people commonly do, what is normal in the situation. Descriptive norms motivate us to behave in certain ways by subtly informing us of what is likely to be effective and functional in that situation. If a lot of people like us are doing something, then we say, "Oh that's something I can do as well." There is another kind of norm that sociology talks about in terms of shared expectations; it's about approved conduct in the culture. Those are called **injunctive norms**. They enjoin people to behave in a certain way. Whereas descriptive norms inform us into agreement, injunctive norms sanction us into assent in terms of informal sanctions such as approval and disapproval.

The power of descriptive norms, according to Cialdini, is underemployed and under-recognized. It is much more like the elephant than the rider. It is the one that occurs automatically and spontaneously. With very little cognitive effort we can be moved in a particular direction by the simple recognition of what those around us and like us are doing or have been doing. An example of this is a study done in Beijing where restaurant owners could predictably influence the likelihood that customers would choose a specific item on the menu by simply marking those that were most popular as such. "These are our most popular items." The consequence was each one became 20 to 30 percent more popular, without changing anything about the items themselves. No coercion and no investment is required. *It is entirely ethical and entirely honest*, he stressed. This strategy goes unregistered, unrecognized, and generally unemployed.

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many comparable others. That means it will not just be "many others" that will stimulate behavior change, it will be *"similar others"*. It is "many comparable others" who most reduce my uncertainty about what I should do in the same situation. Some evidence of this comes from one of Cialdini's studies with hotels in the Phoenix area. In many hotels now there are cards asking you to reuse your towels and linen. There is usually some sort of endangered woodland creature on them.

Since it is not just what many others do, it is what similar others do, he tried a sign that told people that the majority of guests who have stayed in "this room" (and it had the room number on it) have reused their towels at least once. Under those circumstances hotels got more compliance than ever before. **"It is not about rationality," Cialdini commented. "This is the elephant, not the rider."** It reveals an automatic, non-rational response to the perception of what those around us and like us are doing. It does not require a lot of cognitive capacity. "Birds fly together, cattle herd together; you don't need a lot of cortex for this. It's below that."

Is there any way to tell whether this is generalizable to people's decisions in their everyday behavior? Cialdini did a study trying to get homeowners to reduce their energy usage. What is the best message to send to do this? **"We found that the most effective message was, the majority of your neighbors are reducing their energy usage."** Information and admonitions are not enough to move people to change their behavior. You have to give them a reason to change.

But what do we do when the majority is not acting in a socially desirable way? You can't use the descriptive norm and say, "Look at what all your neighbors are doing." That's when it is necessary to resort to the injunctive norm. **"But we have to make sure we don't make the mistake of lamenting how many individuals are engaged in the bad behavior," he warned. If we talk about how many people are apathetic about voting and lament this, we increase the number of people who don't vote. It *normalizes* the socially undesirable behavior in a primitive way.** The subtext message is: "This is what all your neighbors are doing." It is more primitive and more powerful than rational calculations about being caught. Instead we should use the injunctive norm here. Giving people evidence of what the majority approves and disapproves of can cancel the negative consequences of an undesirable social norm. "Many people are doing this but most of us don't approve of it – that will reverse the negative effect."

Cialdini argued this is where there is an intersection of norms and narratives: **in informing people in a story-based narrative that most people are disapproving of some undesirable action**. This can be very successful, he said, citing the work of **Betsy Levy Paluck**, Professor of Psychology at Princeton University, (and a presenter at the inaugural Neuroscience and Social Conflict Initiative meeting). Paluck has done research in sub-Saharan Africa with radio soap operas in which the players are acting in conciliatory, peaceable ways rather than in violent, aggressive ways in intergroup interactions and also with domestic violence. "This is who we are" is implicitly communicated by the storyline. This strategy significantly reduced hostile attitudes toward different groups and behaviors towards those groups and in terms of domestic violence. "This is how we can link the norms and the narratives to carry that message and win the day," maintained Cialdini. Informing individuals through the use of a story-based narrative can be successful in either motivating or preventing certain behaviors, depending on which norms are invoked. **Dr. Paluck was acting as a practitioner purposefully shifting injunctive norms via the use of narratives. That is the goal.** More often, as we shall see below, practitioners unwittingly use narratives to shift norms. The prospect of bringing this process to the level of purposeful, conscious programming was highly motivating to many of the participants.

Emile Bruneau began by focusing on *changing hearts*, and emphasized the role of empathy in affecting peoples'

Dr. Emile Bruneau,
Research Scientist at the MIT SaxeLab

responses to emotional narratives. People generally think of changing hearts in terms of increasing empathy for the other group, like increasing Americans' empathy for Arabs and vice versa. But Bruneau explained that **increasing empathy when seeking to change emotional responses to narratives is insufficient. He argued that in the context of inter-group conflict, empathy can actually be a motivator of political violence rather than a motivator for reconciliation**. This is because political violence arises when individuals have high levels of empathy for their in-group and little empathy towards out-groups. This presents an interesting paradox. It is borne out by a lot of empirical evidence that shows that **in violent conflicts, may of the people who carry out violent attacks are not sociopaths, but, rather, empaths**: people like the female Palestinian paramedic who carried out the first suicide bombing in the first intifada. If you have a lot of in-group empathy, then you are likely to be motivated to act on behalf of your in-group. And if you have little out-group empathy, then the barrier to harming them is lowered.

Bruneau's research has found that this **difference between high in-group empathy and low out-group empathy, which he calls *parochial empathy* or *parochial identity*, is a "meaningful measure" of likelihood of in-group members being moved to act against out-group members**. And as an example he cited supporting evidence from his work trying to get Americans to take small actions to aid Palestinians or Arabs. He also cited work of **Jeremy Ginges** of the New School for Social Research (also a presenter at the first Neuroscience And Social Conflict Initiative meeting) that has shown that **the gap between in-group and out-group empathy is the best indicator of who is likely to take violent action among Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East**.

Moreover, Bruneau has found in systematic, scientific studies in which participants are arbitrarily assigned to purely artificial groups (e.g., red group versus blue group), the level of parochial empathy is very high. **"We have a primitive tendency to be *groupish*,"** he said. We tell people they are *competing* and then show them a bunch of stories about in-group and out-group members, and they report how good or bad they feel about things that happen to members of their in-group versus out-group members. And indeed this reveals, via self-report, that they feel a lot more badly for members of their in-group when some misfortune is described as happening to them than they do for similarly affected members of the out-group. **But if we start by telling them they are going to be cooperating with the other group and then show them these stories, the difference goes away**. So competition is key, but it doesn't even need to be explicit. We can just give them an impression that the groups are different and we still see this dramatic gap. "Parochial empathy matters."

Bruneau asked, "Can narratives alter parochial empathy?" If you portray the other side, will it actually decrease the parochialism we feel? **He found that if individuals are introduced to out-group narratives that are focused on the out-group's mental state, parochial empathy tends to be reduced**. In contrast, if individuals are introduced to narratives that endow the out-group with physical characteristics but do not endow the out-group with mental characteristics – do not focus on the other's thoughts – parochial identity is not only *not reduced*, it may even be increased.

"Sometimes one needs to take an oblique approach to conflict resolution" he commented. "Yes, we often want to get opponents to do 'perspective taking,' to take the perspective of the other, hoping they will find that the other is not so other, not so different as they thought. But this can also produce a *paradoxical effect*, because you can think of the other's negative thoughts about you, which hardens your barrier to the other." **Sometimes it is better *just to give the impression* that the other is not so different**.

Bruneau then shifted to address "how we take this to the scanner" to overcome the shortcomings of self-report by describing his work on neuroimaging through fMRI scans that seek to examine how different parts of the brain respond

to ideological narratives. His research had people lie in a scanner and read different stories that would evoke emotional responses and ones that would not. This enabled him to see with neuroimaging that in-group empathy-evoking narratives are associated with different parts of the brain than out-group empathy-evoking narratives.

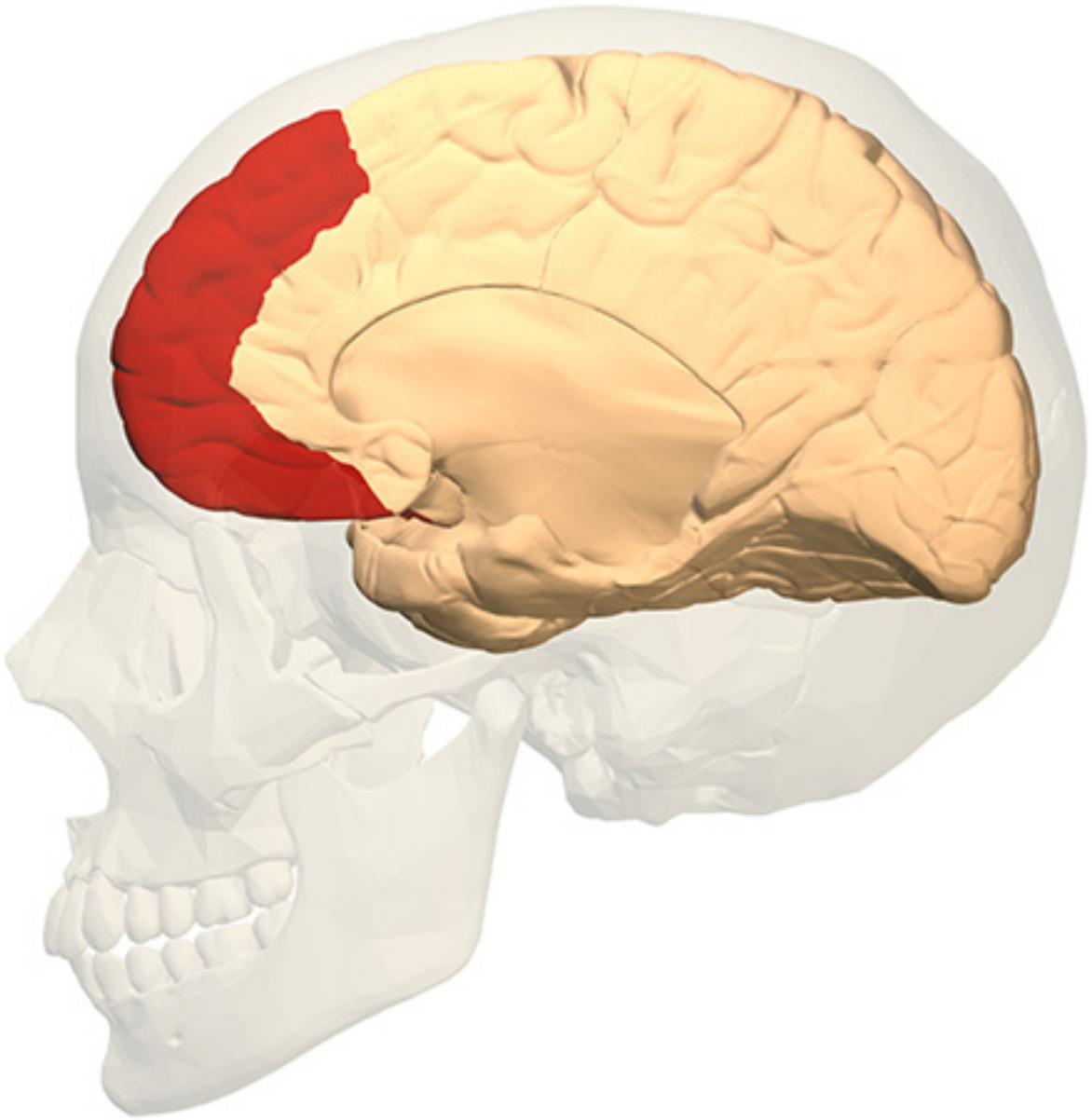
Finally Bruneau discussed his studies putting Arabs and Israeli's into the scanner and exposing them to pro- and anti-Arab and pro- and anti-Israeli narratives. These ideological narratives were found to affect the precuneus region of the brain which is activated by social cognition, thinking about other people's thoughts, and also by self-referential information, "how does this affect me?" and it revealed that Israelis' brains responded to pro-Arab narratives similarly to the way they responded to irrational narratives, whereas Arabs responded that way to the pro-Israeli narratives. Bruneau has found preliminary evidence that these results can be reproduced using members of Republican and Democratic parties.

Bruneau concluded by asserting that researchers can intervene in how the brain responds to in-group and out-group narratives by understanding which parts of the brain are involved in processing different narratives, and future research has the potential to foster open-mindedness by **shifting the processing of narratives from regions of the brain that focus on social cognition to regions of the brain that process logical information**. Such research could have significant implications for understanding and intervening in conflicts

Dr. Emily Falk, Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, presented work that Bruneau had previously said was rare in neuroscience at present insofar as it shows how neuroscience can *already* move from the theoretical to the practical realm and be used to influence behavior right now. Falk started with the provocative idea that "neural findings can tie all this (i.e., what has been discussed so far) together." **Being in a group, she said, is good for our health. Not being in a group is a threat. Our brain responds to this. Social rewards change how our brains respond**. The emotional system in the brain primes us to action based on reward and threat mechanisms. The same underlying brain mechanisms are tying together diverse phenomena. "Opinions of others affect us," she said, "why and how?" This is the challenge of understanding through neuroscience how to predict behavior, both on an individual level and on a larger social scale. **"Knowing what's going on in people's brains when they are in different situations and being exposed to different messages *can* help us do this."** Falk's research further looks at how norms, values, and behaviors spread from person to person, what makes one individual more successful than another in communicating a behavior changing norm to members of their wider social environment, how broader level, social structures interact with what is going on in our brain, and what this can that tell us about what is happening on larger social scales.

First, she talked about neural processes that are involved in receptivity to influence and discussed what determines whether influence takes hold, what determines behavior change. She focused on the brain's **medial prefrontal cortex, which, she asserted, has consistently been found in a significant number of neuroscientific studies to be robustly activated by self-related processing and in people's assessment of values to themselves**. Falk found that differences in responsiveness in this part of the brain seem to be indexing a certain kind of self related processing, an implicit value-to-the-self processing. When we look at neural activity in this part of the brain, in response to messages that are designed to change behavior, messages that in her studies were designed to get people to quit smoking, we find that the **responsiveness of this brain region to media predicts people's willingness to change their behavior and *their subsequent ability to do so***.

In addition, preliminary evidence suggested that neural responses as observed in relatively small groups, such as 30 people, parallel what occurs on a larger social scale and can



Cross-section of brain with pre-frontal cortex highlighted in red.
(Source: Database Center for Life Science)

Dr. Emily Falk,
Assistant Professor of Communication,
The University of Pennsylvania

therefore accurately forecast which messaging campaigns will elicit widespread change. They serve as kind of **neural focus groups**. Moreover, measurement of such activity was a much better predictor of the likelihood of behavior change than self-reports. The least liked campaign according to self-report was found through neuroimaging to produce the most activity in the medial prefrontal cortex. And in her studies on anti-smoking campaigns in which she looked at calls to quit-smoking hotlines before and after the airing of different campaign messages, **Falk found preliminary evidence that what was happening in the neural responses was more closely paralleling what was happening on the larger social scale than any other available data**.

Falk then developed a study in which she had more control over the messaging, which concerned an anti-smoking campaign conducted by email. She used 20 different threatening anti-smoking messages and 20 relatively neutral messages that were each sent to a different group of 800,000 recipients. She also collected fMRI data concerning increased neural activity in the medial prefrontal cortex from a group of 50 smokers exposed to these messages. What she found was that there was a positive correlation between increased neural activity in the medial prefrontal cortex of the small group and help-seeking activity of the large scale, email receiving groups that got anti-smoking ads that were personally relevant and contained a threatening health risk message. This positive relationship was not present in the neutral control ads used in the study, suggesting that the medial prefrontal cortex was indexing the ability of risk messages to elicit a certain kind of productive and self-related processing as well as behavior change.

"Is it possible to push around this neural activity?" Falk asked. "Can we increase medial prefrontal activity in response to threatening information, and does that in turn predict behavior change?" To answer these questions, Falk conducted a study focused on changing the physical behavior of sedentary adults. She leveraged ***affirmation theory*, which posits that people are motivated to maintain a positive view of themselves and that any kind of threats to self-worth, such as self-relevant and threatening health messages, will be met with resistance**. It is completely logical. People are defensive against self-relevant messages that say "what you are doing is bad for you and you are going to die." They have strong motivation to argue against them. So Falk examined whether affirmation priming could increase activity in the brain's valuation system of such individuals and thereby influence the likelihood of getting them to change behavior. Falk discovered through questionnaires which values (unrelated to health) individuals ranked higher than others. Invoking these before presenting individuals with health related messages, she found preliminary evidence that reflecting on personally salient values made them more receptive to self-relevant threatening messages. This indicated that **an increase in medial prefrontal cortex activity could make people more open to specifically tailored messaging and thereby predict behavior change, on both small and large social scales**. So the answer to her question about the possibility of *pushing around* brain activity in order to change behavior was yes: **"Affirmation-of-values priming makes people more receptive to a behavior change message and more likely to change their behavior."** She tested this in the lab with brain scans of sedentary adults and found that the effects of values affirmation is reflected in increased brain activity which predicts increased physical activity over the course of the following month. The wider implications of this are that we can produce more medial prefrontal cortex activity, and this predicts receptivity to behavior-change messaging *and* consequent behavior change itself. In Falk's words, "Neuroscience can really give us some suggestions about places we might want to 'poke' in an effort to move behaviors down the road."

We also know that interpersonal influence matters. So Falk next turned her attention to the factors that make information and value sharing among individuals in networks effective in spreading messages and influencing behavior. **She**

explained that it is not enough to understand what motivates individual behavior change, but it is also necessary to understand *what makes an individual effective in changing the hearts, minds, and behaviors of others*. So what makes people want to exchange ideas, what makes them want to pass on information to others? And what makes some people more successful than others in passing on information? How do we get people onboard with spreading those norms further? And finally, how does this relate to broader social environments? The new media environment gives us an incredible capacity to quantify social networks that we never had before.

She described studies that involved not only the self-related processing areas of the brain but also the "perspective taking" or "mentalizing" parts of the brain – the temporo-parietal junction and dorsal medial prefrontal cortex. They showed that self-related processing activity was related to the intention to spread messaging and share information, just as it was an indicator of receptivity to messaging and behavior change. But what is associated with being effective in sharing information? Through her study Falk found that the ability to get people onboard with your preferred ideas – to recreate your valued ideas in the minds of others – is "a different ball of wax." It was found in her studies to involve heightened activity in the temporo-parietal junction and dorsal medial prefrontal cortex – the "perspective taking" or "mentalizing" parts of the brain. **That means successful message transmitting individuals are thinking about such things as how to frame the message so that it appeals to others' minds.** Falk went on to hypothesize that the tendency to recruit the perspective taking brain system "almost certainly" varies as a function of social context. And in her studies, **Falk has found that individuals who have more diverse social networks, more opportunities to communicate with differing others, are more effective in propagating information, and this coincides with their exhibiting more mentalizing-system activity**. She went on to study whether more contact produces this increased activity or whether those who have more activity in these brain regions to begin with are drawn to develop larger and more diverse social networks, and found preliminary data that the former is indeed the case. The more opportunities individuals have to communicate with diverse others, the greater the activity in their mentalizing-systems. **The broader implication to which Falk drew attention was that *mentalizing activity seems to change as a function of where individuals are situated in their social groups and is deeply rooted in considerations of relative status***.

Her lab has started to ask whether they can push around social cognition, i.e., push around mentalizing network activity, using language. Falk presented preliminary evidence demonstrating that when ideas are described with more social language, researchers can increase neural activity in the temporo-parietal junction and thereby influence behavior change, which in this context meant that individuals who had the most activity when viewing the messages used more social language when propagating the ideas to others when they were outside of the scanner. This allows us to tie together the different pieces of the behavior change puzzle on these different levels. We can look at brain activity in these different regions to understand what is going on mechanistically and which messages and individuals are going to be the most successful in propagating behavior change, and on the large scale level we can look at language data from new social media, and when we try to figure out the process, moving from individual behavior change to large-scale social behavior change, we can triangulate between them both. We can collect the same kinds of data in both situations and with computer science we can automate the analysis of these kinds of raw data.

Taken together, Falk suggested, these results give some examples of ways that integrating the expertise present at this meeting, from neuroscience all the way up through population sciences, can help us understand questions that we all care about deeply: How do we change individual behaviors? How do

we change norms? How do we change large-scale outcomes that make people healthier, happier, and less prone to engage in aggressive, violent behavior? How do those things spread through social networks?

In the following *Question and Answer* session, in response to DARPA program manager **William Casebeer's** question about the efficacy of fictional narratives in stimulating mentalizing activity in the brain, Falk affirmed that engaging with fictional narratives that simulate the mental states of others produces more perspective taking activity in the temporo-parietal junction and dorsal medial prefrontal cortex and therefore represents another mode of enhancing our ability to predictably influence others. **Casebeer noted that research has found that regions of the brain associated with sacred values have also been found to be associated with the "theory of mind" or mentalizing areas, and this indicates another axis on which the relationship between norms, narratives, and brain activity should be researched**.

and lie if it will get them to do it? Cialini's response was that **if the message is not scrupulously honest information that allows the recipient to make up his or her mind fairly on his or her own, the message will eventually be seen as propaganda and the messenger will not only lose his credibility and capacity to change behavior, but there will be a backlash against him and his message, and people will move farther in the undesired direction**. In other words, while a dishonest message and/or messenger may gain ground for a while, ultimately he will lose more than he gained. This was echoed by William Casebeer who said that this is why we can "speak truth to unjust power" and produce significant behavior change with our narratives, even of they are fictional, provided they are accurate to people's lived emotional experience.

The broader implication to which Falk drew attention was that mentalizing activity seems to change as a function of where individuals are situated in their social groups and is deeply rooted in considerations of relative status.

Carlos Saladrigas, Chairman of the Cuba Study Group, who spoke later in the conference reacted to this presentation with the comment that neuroscience seems to be getting to the point where all it needs is the resources to design messaging that makes people do what we want them to do, and this makes him uneasy. Other participants had similar reactions, but Robert Cialdini put some of this uneasiness to rest in response to a question from **Dr. Donna Hicks** of Harvard's Weatherhead Center. She asked why in his presentation he stressed that the behavior changing information he gave individuals in his studies was scrupulously honest. Why, she asked, if we know how to get people to do the right thing, don't we just go ahead

Dr. Kathryn Sikkink,
John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University

PRACTITIONERS AND SOCIAL SCIENTISTS ON NORMS AND NARRATIVES

The remaining presentations focused on what social science has learned over nearly a century of study of how norms and narratives affect human behavior and how they can be purposefully shifted, and on the experience of practitioners from the field who have extensive personal experience with norms and narratives as both obstacles and catalysts to peace and progress. Much of what was discussed earlier resonated though these presentations and provided a greater sense of unity to these disparate perspectives than might have been anticipated, helping point the way to a meaningful overarching vision that emerged from the meeting which will be addressed in the conclusion below.

John Packer, Director of the Human Rights and Education Center at the University of Ottawa, and Member of the UN's Mediation Unit, spoke on the need to balance human rights norms with political realities, with which he is richly experienced though his work helping governments and the UN lead complex negotiation processes. He began his remarks by asking a simple question, *how do we live together with relative peace and prosperity*? **Packer argued that people are unable to successfully answer this question because they lie to themselves about their level of rationality. Rather, people are fundamentally emotive and tend to rationalize their decisions ex post facto**.

Packer also argued that there is a problem with the typology of descriptive versus injunctive norms. The more important issue is the gap between the descriptive aspect of a norm and the conduct that follows. This raises expectations surrounding performance, compliance, and conformation, rather than just the descriptive content of a norm. Moreover, Packer emphasized the fact that the elements of performance, compliance, and conformation are culturally and socially distinct due to the differing levels of importance that various societies attach to norms.

Packer also described seven important distinctions of norms that are linked to the issue of human rights. The first is the source of a norm, whether cultural social, legal, religious, or other. The second distinction is the applicability of norms, because not all norms are universally applicable. The third distinction is the substantive content of norms. Fourth is the normative consequences and functions of norms. Fifth is the hierarchy of norms. Packer explained that the significance placed on one norm versus another is important because this affects individuals' choices. The sixth distinction discussed was legitimacy, which relates to the sources and consequences of norms and their resulting authority. The seventh and final distinction was the correlation of norms and values.

Packer's conclusion claimed that norms can help prevent violence if they are understood in a nuanced way. He argued that it is necessary to move from an abstract understanding of norms to an understanding based on lived experiences in order to comprehend how, when, and where norms work best.

Dr. Kathryn Sikkink, Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, discussed what she called a life cycle of norms. There are two extremes regarding the stages of a norm's development. The first is when a norm is emerging and those deeply committed to the norm are willing to act against the consensus of society in order to promote that norm. The second extreme is when a norm reaches a tipping point, or a cascade. In describing the stage of a norm cascade, Sikkink invoked Cialdini's remarks on norms as motivators. She explained that at the cascade stage, people who follow the norm do so not because they are necessarily committed to the norm, but because they are conforming to a widely socially accepted behavior.

Dr. Alin Coman, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University, turned the discussion more in the direction of narratives and addressed how collective memories are formed among individuals and groups to create shared representations of the past. His

remarks drew on some of his work, which seeks to examine the mechanisms that transform memories from "divergent" to "convergent". Divergent memories are ones in which, when an instance is recalled, participants in the discussion differ as to its importance and details. Convergent memories are ones which, when recalled, are recalled similarly by participants in the discussion. He found that the shift from divergence to convergence has to do with the interaction of individual cognition and social dynamics. Memory convergence can be demonstrated by individual cognition in a social space where individuals can interact with and influence one another.

Coman explained several cognitive mechanisms that are critically important in the formation of collective memory. ***Retrieval induced forgetting* refers to the process in which retrieving a memory from the past comes at a cost, because information related to the retrieved memory becomes inhibited and less likely to be remembered**.

When individuals remember information through social interactions, such as conversations, *social-retrieval induced forgetting* occurs. Information that is retrieved in conversations between individuals becomes more active in subsequent memory, and information that is associated with the retrieved memory becomes less active through a mental process of "inhibition". Concurrent memory occurs in a situation where the listener in a conversation concurrently retrieves memories along with the speaker. Individuals' memories tend to become synchronized through conversations, thus the relationship between speaker and listener is critical regarding the formation of shared representations of the past. Finally, in-group identity can impact motivated retrieval, whereby individuals are motivated to retrieve certain information that is reinforced by memories of other in-group members and to inhibit memories that are inhibited by in-group members.

This is of crucial importance because we have a limit on what we can accurately remember, and what events we remember and how they are remembered are generally not within our conscious control. Coman is pointing to a mechanism whereby conversations with others about past events is key both to what and how we remember and what memories we "inhibit" and are unconsciously reticent to recall. This turns out to have a startlingly important dimension of social determination. Moreover, while in everyday life this occurs spontaneously, it has great potential for purposeful use by those seeking to increase a sense of community and shared narrative among a group with common experiences, as well as for calculative abuse by conflict entrepreneurs.

Coman concluded his remarks by offering several implications of this research. He explained that while collective memories are not yet fully understood, real world examples, such as politicians' use of narratives and memories of past events, suggest that collective memories can be activated and deactivated. It is also possible that collective memories could be used to prevent or alleviate conflict by engineering collective memories for positive purposes.

It is also possible that collective memories could be used to prevent or alleviate conflict by engineering collective memories for positive purposes.

Dr. Kelly Greenhill, Associate Professor of Political Science at Tufts University, discussed the role of narratives in international relations (IR). Greenhill began her remarks by observing that a cohesive literature on narratives in IR is still lacking. However, she argued that divergent strands of research on narratives in IR can be viewed as a collective

body if narratives are understood as ***collective stories that frame individuals' understanding of events in the world around them and as sense-making devices or blueprints for action***.

Greenhill began by highlighting several points of agreement among IR scholars regarding narratives in international politics. First, most IR scholars agree that narratives are used as political tools to shape future political action. Second, narratives can serve as identity claims. Third, the content of political norms is not fixed; rather, narratives in IR are dynamic and malleable, based on states' interactions with their polities and other states. Still, narratives are also constrained and bounded by prevailing norms, ideas, and domestic and international understandings and expectations. Additionally, competing narratives can exist because domestic and international audiences have different interpretations of and reactions to events.

A positive agreement among IR scholars is that narratives can serve to build and enhance in-group cohesion and foster community, both domestically and internationally. More negatively, there is an agreement among IR scholars that narratives can cause misperceptions, increase threat perceptions, and possibly create hostilities. Narratives can also create tensions and prejudices that contribute to future conflicts.

Greenhill ended her presentation by discussing several policy implications of her research. She argued that states ignore narratives that they find implausible or absurd at their peril. She also identified several key features of narratives that are likely to make them more "sticky": that is, they should be simple, unexpected, credible, concrete, and emotive. Additionally, factors such as repetitive dissemination of information from elites influence individuals' acceptance of narratives. Greenhill remarked in conclusion that narratives of fear, when they tap into peoples' concerns about threats and existential crises, can upend everything scholars know about how actors respond to uncertainty. Therefore, the implications that narratives of fear can have are significant.

Dr. Roger Petersen, Professor of Political Science at MIT, discussed the issues that arise when individuals confront memories of war, killing, and violence, and how such memories can engender narratives that are used as strategic tools during times of conflict. In particular, Dr. Petersen identified three main ways in which narratives are strategically used in conflict:

- To punish an opponent
- To motivate group members
- To change the nature of the strategic choices of an in-group or out-group

Petersen then asked the question, *what accounts for the variation in responses to a narrative?* In order to answer this question, he argued that one has to understand the roles played by guilt and shame in both private discourse and public debate.

- **Guilt** involves the cognition that one has committed a bad action, and the action tendency that accompanies this cognition is to atone for the bad action.
- **Shame** involves the cognition that one's own character is bad, and the action tendency that accompanies this cognition is to isolate oneself.

Petersen argued that narratives surrounding the memory of war or conflict are most damaging when the accused perpetrator sees the victim as seeking to shame, rather than impose guilt on, the perpetrator for past actions. The distinction between guilt and shame is crucial, because a global norm exists against shaming an entire people or group. Collective shaming is viewed as stereotyping, prejudiced, and inappropriate according to western standards. Moreover, because shaming strategies seek to lower the worth of the perpetrator in the eyes of a third actor, the perpetrator has incentive to respond negatively to shaming. Thus, if the victim

seeks to outwardly shame the perpetrator, backlash will occur and dialogue will break down.

Petersen concluded by commenting that there are two types of narratives that arise after war: victimhood and pride. He said that the biggest problems arise when both the victim and the perpetrator have narratives that directly attack the pride of the other side, because this leads to backlash. Petersen ended with the question, how can you have a narrative of victimhood that doesn't attack the pride of another group? This very thought provoking question provided a good segue to the presentations that followed.

Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Clark University, discussed the psychology of collective victimhood and began her remarks by explaining that narratives of victimhood are not necessarily personal experiences of victimization. Rather, they are **narratives that have been transmitted over generations, and often involve indirect experiences of collective victimhood**.

Vollhardt then posed an important question related to victimhood: *What makes this narrative of collective victimhood so attractive?* She answered that several positive societal functions can arise out of victim narratives. **Firstly, narratives of victimhood can provide a sense of meaning by explaining a group's current situation as well as what happened in the past**. These narratives can create solidarity and social cohesion, as well as communicate a sense of moral superiority on the part of the in-group. Narratives of victimhood can also lead to international sympathy or support for an in-group's cause.

Vollhardt also underlined several consequences of victim narratives that can lead to conflict. She explained that in-group solidarity may lead to violence against other groups when collective victimhood is used to justify violence and reduce guilt for such actions. These consequences relate to what Vollhardt described as *collective victimhood*: a group's motivation to claim that their group has suffered more compared to other groups involved in a conflict. Collective victimhood prevents reconciliation and demonstrates how historical victimization can serve as a lens through which present day events are interpreted and viewed as a continuation of past conflict and suffering.

Vollhardt distinguished between two types of victimhood narratives:

1. **Exclusive victim consciousness** focuses on the distinctiveness of victim suffering and the perceived unique experience of the in-group.

2. **Inclusive victim consciousness** emphasizes the idea that people can be aware of their in-group's similarities with other victim groups.

Vollhardt discussed the role that ***conflict specific*** inclusive victim consciousness can play in peace and reconciliation, through which adversaries in a conflict recognize similarities with one another. She explained that survey research in East Africa has found that beliefs in similarities between group suffering predicted support for inclusive leaders and a willingness to speak out on behalf of ethnic out-groups when they are being treated unfairly. Vollhardt then moved to discussing ***general*** inclusive victim consciousness, which involves recognition of similarities with victim groups in other parts of the world that are unrelated to the in-group's specific conflict. Her research showed that perceptions of shared victimization across different contexts could be observed among many groups. However, Vollhardt also underlined the fact that inclusive victim consciousness is not always positive. For instance, inclusive victim consciousness can be very selective, such as when comparisons with other victim groups are based on strategic calculations rather then empathic motivations. Therefore, it is important to determine ways in which exclusive victim narratives can be shifted to become inclusive in ways that promote reconciliation rather than just strategic interests.

Veton Surroi,
Chairman of the Board of the Kosovo Foreign Policy Club

Vollhardt concluded her remarks by offering several ideas for how this shift from exclusive to inclusive victim narratives could occur. First, inter-group contact could decrease competitive victimhood and lead to a less exclusive construal of in-group victimization. Secondly, fictional narratives of suffering are less threatening than adversarial confrontation and can therefore be effective in changing perceptions of victimization. Additionally, pluralistic narratives within in-groups can help shape victimization narratives. Finally, acknowledgment can play a crucial role in shifting these narratives because it helps to avoid competitive victimhood. Acknowledgment from other victim groups – even from other contexts – in addition to acknowledgment from the perpetrator, can be instrumental in establishing a cycle of virtuous recognition and validation.

Veton Surroi, Chairman of the Board of the Kosovo Foreign Policy Club, was the first of four speakers to talk about concrete examples from their own experience concerning the ways in which norms can be changed and new narratives can develop. Surroi's case concerned his experience in Kosovo. Surroi described several widespread and competing narratives from the early 1990s that ranged from peoples' narratives of fear and repression to Milosevic's narrative of widespread pro-Serbian sentiment.

Surroi explained the necessity he felt to establish a new nonviolent and collective narrative, and he described several initiatives he led between December 1989 and February 1990 to do so. He urged people to engage in an individual walk of silence, whereby they would stop at the same time and light a candle. Surroi explained that this nonviolent protest accomplished two things. First, it demonstrated widespread solidarity for the dead, because the narrative of widespread deaths had previously been suppressed. Secondly, this action contributed to eliminating fear, because it demonstrated to people that they could make a statement without engaging in violence.

When Milosevic responded to this nonviolent protest by instituting a state of emergency and a curfew, Surroi explained that he continued to develop a new nonviolent narrative by urging people to light candles on their windowsills and balconies and to go outside and ring their keys. This sent a symbolic message that they still held light in the darkness ordained by Milosevic, as well as the keys to the conflict's solution. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of signatures on a petition for democracy and nonviolence demonstrated, contrary to Milosevic's narrative, the existence of a majority that was unafraid and willing to engage in a democratic transition.

Surroi also discussed the difficulty of establishing new norms and narratives among individuals. He explained that both the human mind and behavior lack borders in terms of a capacity for destruction and a capacity to absorb injustice done to others. Therefore, while many like to think that the "responsibility to protect" is a norm, the human mind often rationalizes pain and injustice.

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Finally, by drawing on his own experiences, Surroi explained how narratives and people's views can change, and how new narratives can emerge that replace old narratives of conflict and violence through bottom-up efforts and perseverance.

Carlos Saladrigas discussed the efforts to change narratives of victimhood in the Cuban-American community. Saladrigas

opened his remarks by highlighting the deep legacy in Cuba of using violence to solve political problems and the impact this legacy has had on political culture.

The challenge now, he asserted, is to continue to change and transform the narrative on both sides, because hardliner approaches lead to mistrust and hinder the development of opportunities to engage in sincere, meaningful, and open dialogue.

Echoing one of Chialdini's chief points, Saladrigas emphasized that once individuals began to speak out against the hardliner approach, others immediately began to follow. Additionally, more freedom and fewer restrictions regarding travel, economic activity, and use of the Internet helped to weaken the narrative that presented the Cuban people and the Cuban government as a monolithic entity.

Saladrigas then moved to explaining the pervasive narrative in the United States regarding Cuba. He explained that after the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban-American community became a proxy for the U.S. in the fight against Cuba. Additionally, a culture of isolation developed, through which significant hostilities emerged between Cuban-Americans and the Cuban government. The conflict was presented as something to be won rather than something that could be changed through negotiation.

Saladrigas described his own personal transformation away from the hardliner narrative towards Cuba towards a more open perspective. Saladrigas began his transformation in 1998 when Pope John Paul II visited Cuba. While Saladrigas had originally opposed the visit, as well as the visit of the Archdiocese of Miami to Cuba, his viewpoint began to change after he saw the impact that the Pope's visit to Cuba had on the Cuban people.

This experience caused him to question the prevailing narrative surrounding the Cuban government and the Cuban people as a single entity. While the Cuban government had propagated this narrative as part of its fundamental strategy, Saladrigas began to understand the negative repercussions of a narrative that confused Cuban identity with the Cuban government.

Allison Harper, former president of the Board of ACLU-Maryland, discussed the role of narratives in changing public opinion in the context of the movement for marriage equality. Harper began by discussing the significance of the November 2012 elections for the movement for marriage equality, in which the movement reached majority support at the ballot box for the first time. She explained that the opposition had created a narrative based on an absence of legislative victories that argued that the majority of Americans weren't supportive of marriage equality. However, the 2012 elections and their aftermath, in which 17 states legalized same sex marriage, demonstrated that public support for marriage equality was not an aberration.

Harper discussed the importance of broadening the coalition in support of marriage equality, which contributed to demonstrating the movement's diversity. This element had an important role in shifting the narrative, because as the movement's coalition grew larger, individuals were increasingly influenced by loved-ones and trusted leaders in their own communities.

As Harper explained, they struggled for decades to find the right message. They began with an economic argument that emphasized tax benefits. That got no traction. Then they shifted to a civil/human rights argument, which also failed to pull in the general population. It was only when they centered their narrative on "conservative" values of marriage, family, and commitment that they reached a historic breakthrough.

Harper described three crucial narratives adopted by national organizations seeking to spread support for marriage equality. The first narrative centered on emphasizing the values of marriage, such as love, commitment, and responsibility, *rather than rights and benefits*. A second approach focused on the hurtfulness of denying the happiness of marriage

to same sex couples, while the third approach focused on reminding individuals of shared beliefs like freedom. Harper also spoke about the significance of individuals' personal journeys in influencing narratives and shaping public opinion. She explained that these narratives emerged from a desire for authenticity as the movement sought to speak directly from the heart and tap into shared values among all individuals.

Dr. Jim Walsh, a Research Associate at the MIT Security Studies Program, discussed the prevailing American narrative on Iran and ways in which that narrative can be changed. Walsh began by discussing the widely shared American narrative surrounding Iran, which is dominated by the belief that Iran both has a nuclear weapons program and is determined to acquire a nuclear weapon. The narrative asserts that the U.S. has to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, because Iran could build a nuclear weapon in a matter of months and would be willing to use it both politically and militarily. This would have major consequences globally, such as prompting a proliferation cascade.

Walsh asserted that this narrative of Iran does not reflect factual reality. He then moved to discussing the emotional element of the narrative surrounding Iran. He explained that many Americans frame the issue as one of good versus evil. This emotional stance is reinforced by visual images and rhetoric of Iranian leaders in the media, as well as strong self-reinforcing networks such as intense public issue groups. In addition, **the emotional narrative is embedded in a political context, whereby political actors use political and emotional narratives about Iran in a struggle for power**.

In discussing how to change the public's views on Iran, Walsh highlighted the fact that individuals have contradictory feelings towards Iran that surface episodically. He explained that the way in which individuals think about Iran depends on the frame in which the issue is raised. **The goal, therefore, should be to find a frame that makes negotiations a more palatable alternative to war, rather than convincing individuals that Iran is good rather than evil**. Framing a diplomatic agreement with Iran as choosing peace as opposed to war is a message that resonates with the American people, especially in the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The goal, therefore, should be to find a frame that makes negotiations a more palatable alternative to war.

CONCLUSION: THE BIG PICTURE

This report began by noting that the key focus of the meeting evolved over the course of the meeting to be: **Can neuroscience tell us what norms and narratives are more likely to change behavior and how can it be done?** And it appears that the tentative answer that came out of the meeting was yes. Dr. Cialdini's presentation provided very persuasive evidence from social science that much can be known about what norms and narratives are more likely to change behavior *without* the use of neuroscience. Dr. Bruneau's presentation illustrated the significance of perceptions of social context, specifically of attachment to an in-group/out-group orientation, in determining an individual's receptivity to change-driving norms and narratives that enjoin one to act more humanely to "the other." Dr. Falk gave examples in her presentation of ways that neuroscience can already provide actionable information about how to change individual behaviors, how to change norms, and how to make large-scale interventions designed to move people away from violent behavior more likely to succeed. Moreover, the social science researchers and field practitioners who addressed the role of narratives in shaping behavior emphasized that careful manipulation of collective stories about the past already can be used to predictably shift norms that govern current and future actions.

What do these presentations, taken together, tell us about what it means to be human and to be living with conflict or its destructive legacies?

First and foremost they tell us that the emotions that drive us into and away from conflict are not just psychological, they are biological. Put another way, psychology and biology are inseparably intertwined, and the biological dimensions of this relationship are only now beginning to be understood scientifically. We can manipulate brain mechanisms and make people more or less "open-minded" or "groupish", as Dr. Bruneau's work is showing. Or we can do this to make people more or less receptive to harmony promoting messaging, more or less likely to want to spread this messaging, more or less likely to succeed in doing so, as Dr. Falk's research shows.

But are we simply malleable material that can be shaped in any way program designers' desire? This was the frightening implication of the discussion to which Carlos Saladrigas called attention in the Q and A session. And it was implicit in Donna Hicks' question to Dr. Cialdini. If we can make people behave in ways that are nearly universally condoned across the globe by manipulating their material beings, then what is stopping us? What is unethical about that? Self-evidently, the concern that arises in this context is about the fact that norms and narratives in conflict contexts are not obviously universal. Even *fairness*, which was cited by several participants as one of the normative values that Jon Haidt has persuasively described as one of five seemingly universal "moral instincts," is construed differently by Israelis and Palestinians, Russians and Ukrainians, Americans and Iranians.

This is where points made by Cialdini and Casebeer, among others, are particularly salient. **They asserted that not only must messaging be scrupulously honest to be effective in the long-term alteration of behavior, it must also resonate with lived experience.** Even if neuroscience can hoodwink combatants into behaving in accordance with the seemingly universal moral instinct or norm of fairness, unless that notion of fairness is also embedded in their own social and cultural context and resonates with their lived experience, it will not move them for long. And as Cialdini and Bruneau point out, the backlash may well produce a worse situation for those combatants than existed before neuroscience intervened.

What lesson is to be drawn from this? **Dr. Rose McDermott**, Professor of Political Science, Brown University, mentioned it in passing in her brief but dense Respondent comments: "We can learn to separate from our suffering, our emotions, and our thoughts, which are often wrong. **Biological anthropology teaches that, like the apes, we evolved to cooperate with the in-group first and out of that**

developed group competition with the out-group. But evolutionary psychology teaches that the in-group/out-group orientation becomes blurred as we evolve." Such evolution need not be taken to refer only to entire species or to processes that take place over millennia. Rather, it is possible to think of the evolution each individual goes through during the course of his or her lifetime, from child to adult, but also from simplistic, black/white, us/them thinking to more complex thinking and receptivity to recognition of the shades of gray that characterize all truly lived experience and all notions of self and other. Each individual is somewhere along this developmental spectrum, and conflict is arguably a regressive influence on such development, driving individuals into tribal thinking and parochial identities. So if messaging is to be effective, and we are to take into account what has been discussed above, it must meet each individual at the stage where he or she is.

And this is precisely where discussion of what makes someone an effective messenger becomes relevant. As Cialdini emphasized, the messenger who is most effective in communicating a behavior-change message is a member of one's in-group or a "convert", that is someone who can say, "I used to believe like you, but now I believe something else." And as Dr. Falk's research showed, the individuals who were most effective in both spreading behavior-change information and at getting it to "stick" were the individuals with the most opportunities for social contact and the most diverse social networks; the individuals who had the greatest activity in their mentalizing networks where they think about what others are thinking about. It seems likely that such individuals – practiced in viewing the world from the most numerous and most varied perspectives – would be likely to have developed the most complex and nuanced views of reality themselves, and would be the most likely to have moved beyond parochial identities to an identity that incorporates and respects the many varied views of others in their social network. In other words, it seems likely that they would be individuals that are closer to "converts" from the more parochial views of their in-group to the more "open-minded" viewpoint from which "the other is not so other" and the orientations of black/white and us/them become blurred. In fact, this is a point referenced not just by Rose McDermott but also by Dr. Falk in the Q and A session.

Dr. Alin Coman and **John Packer** both emphasized that persuasive messaging about norms and values has to resonate with individuals' lived experience and lived through memories. And that fact plays a role here too insofar as converts such as those we are imagining would be speaking to their more groupish peers from their own lived experience of perspective taking with the largest number of others in the most diverse social networks. In fact, they would be the ones in the best position to communicate more progressive ideas, norms, and narratives with more parochial members of their in-group and move behavior precisely because they would be the ones with whom such ideas *would* resonate with their lived experience. They would be honestly presenting ideas that were persuasive to them. And as **Allison Harper** emphasized, **"authenticity really matters."** However, one can expect the dissenters' argument against all this to be: isn't this just a backhanded way of bringing back in the ideas, norms, and narratives of Western liberalism and calling them universal? Not, we could respond, if these ideas, norms, and narratives are communicated to in-group members by other in-group members who have expansive, biologically based capacities for perspective taking with non in-group members. Or if, as emphasized by **Dr. Johanna Ray Vollhardt**, individuals in comparable positions from other conflicts around the world communicate them.

The foregoing may be taken as a mere thought experiment, but this construction of the ideal messenger for communicating conflict-averse ideas and producing conflict-reducing behavior change is derived from a combination of the insights of neuroscience, social science, and practice presented at the Norms, Narratives and Neurons meeting. Moreover, not only was it implicit in a number of the presentations and discussions, it was explicitly (albeit fleetingly) referenced by

Philip Rubin
White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, Head of President Obama's BRAIN initiative

several presenters as well. Where do we take this idea from here? **Emile Bruneau** stated that the role of scientists in this discussion is to apply science to the intuitions that emerge. And **Dr. Jim Walsh**, noted, neuroscience makes discoveries by "systematically manipulating variables and seeing what people do." The challenging idea raised here about the nature of the most effective conflict-ameliorating messages and messengers certainly deserves this kind of treatment, and it is certain to be the focus of more explicit and sustained examination in future Neuroscience and Social Conflict Initiative meetings.

This report was written by **David Taffel**, member of the Neuroscience and Social Conflict working group.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Lee-Or Ankori Karlinsky
Beyond Conflict

Ben Armstrong
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Christina Asquith
Beyond Conflict

Eileen Babbitt
Fletcher School for Diplomacy, Tufts University

Susan Becker

Chris Bedford
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University

Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch
Belfer Center, Harvard University

Adam Berinsky
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Ina Breuer
Beyond Conflict

Kim Brizzolara
Creative Visions Foundation

Emile Bruneau
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Melinda Burrell
Democracy and Peacebuilding Consultant

Turhan Canli
Stony Brook University

William Casebeer
Defense Advanced Research Project Agency

Fotini Christia
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Robert Cialdini
Arizona State University

Alin Coman
Princeton University

Justin de Benedictis-Kessner
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Jennifer Dixon
Villanova University

Georgeta Dragiou
MDC Strategies

Abigail Dusseldorp
Beyond Conflict

Nir Eisikovits
Suffolk University

Salma El Beblawi
Soliya

Emily Falk
The University of Pennsylvania

Kelly Greenhill
Tufts University

Justine Hardy
Mental Trauma Specialist and founder of Healing Kashmir

Allison Harper
Former President ACLU-Maryland

Charles 'Chip' Hauss
Alliance for Peacebuilding

Amy Hein
Defense Advanced Research Project Agency

Takao Hensch
Conte Center, Harvard University

Donna Hicks
Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University

Becky Hitchner

Bruce Hitchner
Tufts University

Caroline Jones
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Alexander Kell
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Marika Landau-Wells
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Laura Ligouri
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Adele Lute
Defense Advanced Research Project Agency

Margareta "Magda" Matache
FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University

Rose McDermott
Brown University

Melissa Nobles
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Hugh O'Doherty
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

John Packer
Human Rights and Education Center, University of Ottawa

Colonel David Pendall
U.S. Army Intelligence Liaison to MIT Lincoln Laboratory

Roger Petersen
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Tim Phillips
Beyond Conflict

Ted Piccone
Brookings Institution

Amanda Rothschild
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Philip Rubin
White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, Head of President Obama's BRAIN initiative

Carlos Saladrigas
Cuba Study Group

Kathyrn Sikkink
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Adam Strom
Facing History Facing Ourselves

Veton Surroi
The Kosovo Foreign Policy Club

Dave Taffel
Philosopher and Writer

Cody Valdes
Institute for Global Leadership, Tufts University

Stephen van Evera
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Johanna Ray Vollhardt
Clark University

Jim Walsh
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Dean Williams
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Stephen Wittles
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Jonathan Wolff
Tufts University

Ketian Zhang
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

1100 MASSACHUSETTS AVE, SUITE 300
CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138
WWW.BEYONDCONFLICTINT.ORG

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