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## Building Bridges after a Riot: Talking toward Mutual Understanding following Charlottesville

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*“People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.”*

—Martin Luther King Jr.

### 1 Introduction

On Saturday, August 12, 2017, the centuries-long race struggle in the United States erupted again when a group of right-wing protesters clashed with opponents over the removal of a pro-Confederate statue in Charlottesville, Virginia. The riots not only further divided a community and a nation but also revealed the urgency to address underlying problems in the United States. The divisions in the current American society, where people prefer to live in tribes of like-minded people, have contributed to an atmosphere of polarization, fear, and debate (Pariser 2012;

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Bishop and Cushing 2009; Sunstein 2017). In the absence of meaningful connections across social cleavages, people are often left with bare, one-dimensional stories of those whose values and identities differ from their own (Stains 2016). For a healthy democracy to exist, however, various people must constructively communicate and collaborate in order to achieve common goals. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges that a society has, is to promote better relations across divides.

This chapter explores the role of discourse in bridging divides between individuals and groups with various social identities, values, and perspectives on the topic of race. Research (e.g., Taylor 2014) shows that there is a strong connection between how things are said or written, and how interactions about divisive issues may develop. Furthermore, this can influence how issues escalate and how they promote shared meaning, mutual understanding, and collaboration. This study examines two dialogic interactions on the topic of race in Charlottesville a year after the riots. To explore how people with various backgrounds discursively deal with their differences, this chapter focuses on the ways in which they frame issues (*content level*) and identities (*relational level*). Drawing lessons from the Charlottesville riots, light will be shed on how building bridges through talk (i.e., dialogue) contributes to develop trust, understanding, and relationships between people who are dissimilar and cross social cleavages (bridging social capital) and thereby foster social cohesion and inclusion in a fragmented and polarized society (Doornbosch and van Vuuren 2019b).

To grasp how various participants attempted or avoided bridging in their conversations about race, the following research questions were focal points for the analysis of both dialogues. The first step concerned identifying frames on content (RQ1) and relational level (RQ2). The second step examined how participants dealt with their frame diversity on both levels in terms of (non) bridging (RQ3) (Hassenforder et al. 2016).

- RQ1: Which interactional frames on the issues of race (inequality) are used by participants in the two dialogues in Charlottesville? (*content level*)
- RQ2: Which interactional identity and relationship frames are used when discussing race? (*relational level*)

- RQ3: How do participants discursively deal with their differences on content and relational level in attempting or avoiding bridging? (*[non]bridging*)

The next section provides a theoretical framework of discursive psychology and the use of discourse analysis in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and interactional framing theory for dealing with differences.

## 2 Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Discursive Psychology: Discourse Analysis in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

Discursive psychology explores how psychological matters appear in discourse (Potter 2011). In this specific form of discourse analysis, talk is considered as a form of ‘social action’ rather than an abstract system of description. The study of discourse draws on methods of conversation analysis and is focused on discourse practices in natural (every day or institutional) settings (Potter 2011).

More recently, scholars have illustrated the potential for discursive psychology to contribute to peacebuilding and conflict resolution (Gibson 2018). As a social constructivist approach, discursive psychology emphasizes the importance of studying how people co-construct meaning and share their identities, attitudes, motivations, etc. in their everyday conversations. The *constructive character*, which focuses on how people use language to negotiate meaning on issues and identities, enables the understanding of how various people construct their versions of the world (Potter 2011; Gibson 2018). In addition, discourse is *functional*; people use language to perform actions and achieve certain goals. These goals, however, may vary depending on the context. Therefore, it is critical to understand that discourse is *situated* in a particular context (Gibson 2018). Discursive psychologists emphasize that discourse is *variable* and that speakers often use various (or even contradictory) words, styles, or varieties of language to achieve diverse interactional goals (Goodman 2017).

By studying interactions about conflicts (i.e., what people actually say and do) in real-life situations, discursive psychology offers a unique approach in the field of peace and conflict (Stokoe 2018). Instead of relying on interviews and questionnaires that focus on *people's accounts of their lives*, discursive psychology explores *how life itself is lived* (Gibson 2018). Consequently, it offers valuable insights for participants, mediators, and facilitators to improve their practices, and ultimately, bridge their divides.

This study uses discourse analysis to examine *dialogic intergroup interactions*. Intergroup dialogue can be described as a “face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating, and action” (Zúñiga 2003: 8–9). A goal of intergroup dialogue is to provide opportunities for participants to examine the social norms and ideologies that guide their (unconscious) beliefs (Dessel and Rogge 2008). On a broader scope, dialogue enables people to identify and suspend their judgments and assumptions and helps provide support for collective thought and collaboration (Maiese 2003). By inviting people to share personal stories and to explore the gray areas of their own beliefs, dialogue encourages the bridging of divides (Herzig and Chasin 2006). The dialogues examined in this study are extracted from discussions conducted under the aegis of the *Listen First Project* in Charlottesville. These dialogues provide a safe and structured opportunity for participants with various identities and perspectives to explore their differences and to find common ground.

## 2.2 Interactional Framing Theory for Dealing with Differences

To grasp how people are bridging divides, this study observes specific *framing strategies* used in these dialogues. Framing can be described as “[selecting] some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman 1993: 52). The concept of framing is especially “relevant for researchers studying conflicts, negotiations, and inter-group interactions” (Dewulf et al. 2009: 155). In conflict

situations, the various frames of participants show how they think and feel about an issue, what is important, or how to respond to the problem (Dewulf et al. 2009). Frames enable people to understand their experiences within a wider social context (Goffman 1974) but also guide their actions (Benford and Snow 2000). This chapter takes a *discursive interactional approach to framing*: frames are considered interactional alignments or co-constructions that are negotiated and produced through interactions (Dewulf et al. 2009). This conceptualization of framing aligns with the principles of discursive psychology that focuses on how people co-construct meaning in their everyday conversations and use language to act.

Comprehending what is being said or done in conversations across divides requires knowing how participants frame issues and their underlying values and beliefs (*content level*) as well as how they frame their identity (*relational level*) (Gee 2015). This study analyzes framing at these two levels.

Examining how people frame topics of concern (issues) in their conversation helps to understand different perspectives on a *content level*. Issues are not objective; they are controversial and evoke discussion about how people define the problem, the causes, and who is responsible. Issues are defined in context and evolve through discourse. This occurs as participants co-construct and redefine their meanings (Dewulf et al. 2009). This study examines the *content level* through the analysis of *frame packages*, consisting of *reasoning devices* (i.e., how participants define the problem, causes, responsibility, possible solutions, and their moral judgments) and *framing devices* (the use of specific language by which frames of participants can be identified, and the ‘cultural master frames’ in which their frames are embedded) (Entman 1993; Van Gorp 2007).

Regarding the *relational level*, this study explores how participants portray themselves and others in the conflict situation. Identity, thus, is seen as constructed and negotiated through interaction. By examining how participants *foreground their own identity* and how they *characterize others and their relationships* (Brummans et al. 2008), it aims to grasp how people deal with their differences on a relational level.

## 3 Data and Method

### 3.1 Data Corpus

Focusing on two specific dialogues following the Charlottesville riots on August 12, 2017, this study aims to better understand how people construct meaning in dialogic interactions about race. The data is selected from a series of dialogues that were held by the *Listen First Project* in Charlottesville in April 2018. Both dialogues are focused on bridging divides, healing, and reconciliation. The participants have various backgrounds and social identities as well as different perspectives on the topic of race (see Table 12.1). The first dialogue<sup>1</sup> involves various community leaders and the second<sup>2</sup> concerns different national leaders. Bearing in mind that the dialogues concern racism and that participants have

**Table 12.1** Overview participants (P) + facilitators (F) dialogues Charlottesville

P = participants (P1, P2, etc.) / D = dialogue (D1 and D2) / F = facilitator (F1 and F2)

(24–27) = the line numbers refer to the transcripts of both dialogues.

D1: *ListenFirst in Charlottesville: Charlottesville working to heal and progress*

- F1: Charlene G. (black female, Manager Charlottesville Office of Human Rights)
- P1: Ryal T. (black male, Local Business Owner)
- P2: Sarah K. (white female, Former President UVA Student Council)
- P3: Tom G. (white male, Rabbi Jewish Congregation)
- P4: Antonio R. (black male, Development Director Charlottesville Salvation Army)

D2: *ListenFirst in Charlottesville: Bridging divides across America*

- F2: Sandy H. (white female, Founding Director National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation)
- P1: David B. (white male, President, Better Angels)
- P2: Joseph P. (black male, Founder, Conservative Color Coalition (CCC))
- P3: Liz J. (white female, Executive Director, Village Square)
- P4: Hawk N. (black male, President, Black Lives Matter (BLM) Greater NY)
- P5: David L. (white male, Founder & President at Undivided Nation)

<sup>1</sup> See YouTube: <https://youtu.be/k3ohYBCZp1k>.

<sup>2</sup> See YouTube: <https://youtu.be/XIVA8TfzccU>.

multiple identities, relevant features (e.g., race, gender, religion, political affiliation) of the facilitators and participants will be indicated in the results section.

## 3.2 Analysis

After transcribing the data, the dialogues were analyzed following the two steps of Goodman (2017) for discourse analysis guided by the research questions.

The first step in the analysis concerned identifying interactional framing on two levels. By carefully reading the transcripts, the first author classified the texts into meaningful units of analysis. Consequently, relevant segments were analyzed in detail and various frames were identified and classified. In the end, these selected segments and their interpretations were discussed with the second author and modified until there was agreement on the selected sequences and their classification.

To identify frames of participants at content and relational levels, this study applied the following strategies:

*Content level.* The frame matrix of Van Gorp (2005) provided a good framework to identify the various frames of participants on issues. Important elements of this matrix include *reasoning devices* that describe how participants *define the problem, the causes, responsibility, and the possible solutions*. In addition, the underlying *values* of participants were defined. Examining *framing devices* (e.g., specific terms, metaphors, and stereotypes) enabled the authors to connect individual frames and values to cultural ‘master’ frames.

*Relational level.* To establish relational framing in both dialogues, sequences with signs of ‘identity work’—in which participants interactively construct meaning of self and others—were selected. The authors applied the following categorization: (a) *positive identity*: foregrounding of oneself or one’s group in a praiseworthy or optimistic way; (b) *negative identity*: foregrounding of oneself or one’s group in a pessimistic or diminishing way; (c) *positive characterization of the relationship*: foregrounding another person or group in a praiseworthy or optimistic

way; and (d) *negative characterization of the relationship*: foregrounding another person or group in a pessimistic or diminishing way (Brummans et al. 2008: 34). To determine various identities of the participants, the following subcategorizations were defined: *personal identity*, *group identity*, and *common identity* (Doornbosch and van Vuuren 2019a).

The second step of analysis examines how participants managed frame diversity on two levels. To establish differences on issues (and the underlying values); the sequences in which participants presented their frames were determined and interpreted in terms of ‘bridging’ or ‘non-bridging’ strategies. For bridging, the codes *frame incorporation* (including elements of the others frame into one’s own frame) and *frame reconnection* (valuing both frames and reconnecting them) were applied. Non-bridging is coded as *frame disconnection* (by disdaining or disregarding the others frame) or *frame polarization* (making framing differences bigger by reaffirming one’s own frame) (Dewulf and Bouwen 2012). In addition to these strategies, two other new strategies were found: *frame adaptation* (non-bridging), and *contradictory framing* (using both bridging and non-bridging strategies). In order to discern how participants managed differences pertaining to identities and relationships, their positive and negative characterizations—of self and others—were determined and analyzed.

## 4 Results

To grasp if and how the participants in this case study were able to bridge their differences, the results of the analysis are structured in the following subsections: identifying frames at content level (RQ1), identifying frames at relational level (RQ2), and dealing with frame diversity at content and relational levels (RQ3).

### 4.1 Identifying Frames at Content Level

The individual frames of participants were not invented spontaneously, but echo significant cultural ‘master frames’ within the ongoing American debate on race (see Table 12.2). The issues frames of participants were



Table 12.2 Identifying content frames

| Framing   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Content level                                   | Issues frames<br><i>racism (inequality)</i>        | Description of frame<br>type (including values)   | Exemplary quote  |
| <i>Cluster 1:<br/>Problem<br/>source frames</i> | 1a. Racism as a structural / systemic problem      | Racism is a structural problem, created and sustained by policies and institutions, and embedded in social structures.<br>Values: e.g., inequality, fairness/injustice, (concerning structural inequality), harm/ care, oppression. | <i>"systems of oppression, and the systems of inequality and injustice...in our society."</i>                                      |
|   | 1b. Racism as an individual/ interpersonal problem | Racism are discriminatory attitudes or behaviors of individuals. Focus on 'individual responsibility'.<br>Values: e.g., individualism, meritocracy, fairness/ justice (concerning politics of affirmative action).                  | <i>"it was you who was responsible for making your way."<br/>"You may be failing yourself, and not doing what you need to do."</i> |
|   | 1c. Racism as a cultural problem                   | Denial of racism by relating cause of problems to 'social stratification' and 'culture of the poor' (e.g., inequality, poverty, lower socioeconomic status).<br>Values: meritocracy, individualism, cultural inferiority.           | <i>"poverty does not know race"</i>  |

(continued)

Table 12.2 (continued)

| Framing                       |   |   |  |
|-------------------------------|---|---|--|
| <i>Content level</i>          | <i>Issues frames racism (inequality)</i>                        | Description of frame type (including values)  | Exemplary quote  |
| <i>Cluster 2: Time frames</i> | 2a. Racism as a problem from the past                           | The problems of inequality and injustices of the past (due to racism) are no longer relevant today. | "I'm not so much into the past, I'm into the present, into where we can go tomorrow."  |
|                               | 2b. Racism as a problem of the present                          | Racism is still a problem of today. The current problems can be related to the past.                | "divisions along the lines of race and class in our society"                           |
| <i>Cluster 3: Dual-frames</i> | 3. Using two parallel frames to describe the problem of racism. | Using a combination of two frames at the same time.   | "...my views of inequity...has changed since I started working at the Salvation Army." |

categorized in three clusters: problem source frames (cluster 1), time frames (cluster 2), and dual-frames (cluster 3).

Exploring the framing of issues (*content level*) in both dialogues showed the variability of discourse; not only *between participants using the same frames* (e.g., same frame, but different focus on causes and/or solutions; or same frame, but different underlying values), but also *within individual frames* of participants (strategy of dual framing).

### **Cluster 1 Problem Source Frames**

#### 1a. *Racism as a structural / systemic problem*

The frame of racism as a *structural / systemic problem* emphasizes that racial differentiation has been created and sustained by policies and institutions, and is embedded in social structures (O'Neil 2009). Values that can be associated with this frame are, for example, inequality, fairness/injustice (concerning structural inequality), harm/care, and oppression. In this study, most participants consider inequality/racism as a structural problem.

When Charlene (Facilitator, black female, Manager Human Rights, D1) introduced the topic of racism as a structural problem of the current society, this view was confirmed by Sarah (white female, UVA) and Tom (white male, Rabbi) who talked about the: *"divisions along the lines of race and class in our society"* (94), and *"living in a structure that has been given to us and that's almost invisible"* (95–96).

However, when participants define the problem, they often refer to various causes. Sarah warned of the risks of the paradigm of a *post-racial* society (59): *"That paradigm traps us...from looking at the systems of oppression, and the systems of inequality and injustice that perpetuate in our communities, in our society."* (55–57). Tom (Rabbi) addresses a different cause, namely, *silencing racial history*: *"I think that we need to, to be honest about that history"* (97). David L. (white male, Undivided Nation, D2) underlined the structural and individual problems of racism and addresses the *ignorance present when reviewing the racial history*: *"I mean, we have no idea in America how little we know about these issues. I had no clue, I mean I'll tell you how ignorant I am. I'm like 'Hey, the Emancipation Proclamation happened; the Civil War happened; Voting Rights Act; Civil Rights Act. Congratulations: We did it.' And as I've gone out there, racism—both institutional and individual—is alive and well in this country...Slavery has just taken on different names through the years"* (125–131). Hawk (black male, BLM, D2) also addressed the *silencing of racial history* as one of the causes. He used a *victim approach*, integrated elevated diction ('suffering') and portrayed black Americans as victims of the systems of oppression (and white supremacy): *"I think it comes from acknowledging the suffering, right? The Holocaust always remember; Pearl Harbor, 9/11 always remember; Slavery, Get over it. You've come so far."* (140–141). The underlining values of both frames are, for example, inequality, fairness/injustice, harm/care, and oppression.

Joseph (black male, CCC, D2) also acknowledged the structural frame of racism but adopted a different perspective. He explained that the root of the problem is not slavery, but *'apathy' of the (white) Americans*: *"America's original sin is apathy, right...And we haven't confronted that apathy as a nation, right? We haven't invested in the emotional actual energy required to start dealing with the vestiges of our previously racially driven existence, right?"* (197–201). In contrast to the other participants, his view is based on different values, namely, *'individual responsibility.'* Later in the conversation, he explained that—despite the structural problem—black Americans have to do a better job explaining their position to white Americans.

### 1b. *Racism as an individual / interpersonal problem*

In the debate on racism, American media primarily uses the *individual (interpersonal) frame* that considers racism as discriminatory attitudes or individual behaviors (O’Neil 2009). Underlying values that can be connected to this frame are, for example, meritocracy, individual responsibility, fairness/justice (concerning politics of affirmative action). Contrary to the dominant use of this frame in American media, only two participants apply the individual frame.

When Ryal (black male, Local Business Owner, D1) described the problem of racism, he indicated: “You know, and when I speak of or even think about racial discrimination, you know, I know it exists. But I’m not sure if it’s all racially motivated. I think that it may be character discrimination. I think that a lot of times people may use race as a crutch, you know, and say because they may feel that some, some misfortunes may have happened in their life and they may not have the right job, they may not live in the right home, or they may not be around the right people. And all of that contributes to what you think life should be like, and what you may perceive life to be. But you have to be real with yourself and look in the mirror. And some of the things that you may be looking at may not even be racially motivated.” (31–39). Despite the fact that Ryal acknowledged that racism exists, he is critical and argues that it might be more an individual problem. His view is based on the values of individual responsibility and meritocracy.

Antonio (black male, Salvation Army, D1)—who also used an individual frame—explained that he was raised with the values of the American dream that promote hard work along with ‘individual responsibility.’ “It was you who was responsible for making your way” (109), and you have to take “ownership in your own success,” (112) meaning “if you had to work harder, then you worked harder (if you had to work) ...longer...you worked longer.” Besides his view of racism as an individual problem, he also adopted the frame of racism as a cultural problem. In the dialogue, he presented this dual-frame.

### 1c. *Racism as a cultural problem*

This frame denies the problem of racism by relating the causes (e.g., inequality, poverty, lower socioeconomic status) to ‘social stratification’ and the ‘culture of the poor.’ In this frame, black individuals (and other poor people) are blamed for their problems. This can be viewed as a result

of existing as an ‘inferior culture’ (e.g., dysfunctional family structures, lack of hard work). Underlying values of this frame are, for example, meritocracy, individualism, and cultural inferiority (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Fraser and Kick 2000).

Antonio (black male, Salvation Army, D1), was the only participant who adopted this frame saying: “poverty does not know race” (117).

### *Cluster 2 Time Frames*

The recent incidents in Charlottesville renewed the discussion about the place of race in American society. Some people argue that racism is a *problem of the past* and that inequality and injustices of the past are no longer relevant today, while others argue that race is a *problem of the present* and is still deeply rooted in American society (Fraser and Kick 2000).

#### *2a. Racism as a problem of the present*

The frame of racism as a *problem of the present* emphasizes that racism, inequality, and injustices of the past continue to be part of American society (Fraser and Kick 2000). Important values of this frame are, for example, inequality, fairness/justice, and harm/care.

Both Sarah (white female, Village Square, D1) and Tom (white male, Rabbi, D1) adopted this frame of racism. Whereas Sarah emphasized the importance of addressing the racial inequality in the current systems and warned of the idea of a post-racial society, Tom related the racial problems of today to the silencing of racial history. Hawk (black male, BLM, D2) also acknowledged the current problems, but related the causes to the denial of the history of slavery.

#### *2b. Racism as a problem of the past*

In this frame, racism is considered a *problem of the past* and people argue that inequality and injustices of the past are no longer relevant today. As a result of America having had its first Black President, they

now consider the country as a “post-racial society.” Another concept that can be related to this frame is ‘colorblindness’; the idea that nowadays skin color is insignificant and that race no longer matters. Others, for example, Bonilla-Silva (2018) call this “color blind racism.” An important underlying value of this frame is the ‘individual responsibility’ of people.

This frame of racism can be illustrated by Ryal (black male, Local Business Owner, D1), who argued: *“I’m not so much into the past, I’m into the present, into where we can go tomorrow”* (43–44). He expressed (American) values like ‘individual responsibility’ and ‘meritocracy’: *“It may be you. It may be you, looking at yourself feeling guilty, because you haven’t accomplished the things that you have, or you want to accomplish, so, therefore, you’re pointing the finger at everyone else, because of your failures and you cannot look at society as failing you. You may be failing yourself, and not doing what you need to do.”* (39–43).

Despite his contradictory viewpoint of racism as a structural problem, Joseph (black male, CCC, D2) underlined the value of the individual responsibility of black Americans to express their position to white people, and has a focus on the future. When he discussed the ‘apathy’ of Americans to act on the problem of racism, he emphasized the responsibility of Black Americans to explain their position: *“And I think that to me, people of color have done a poor job of trying to delineate that message or get it into the drinking water in a way that, I think, more people would be willing to accept, right? And is that our responsibility. Is that fair? No. But again, we talked about it before. To me, it’s what’s required if our goal, if our objective is to get people different from us to understand in the same way they need us to understand.”* (229–233).

Finally, Antonio (Salvation Army, D1)—who adopted a dual-frame—also used the frame of racism as a problem of the past and focused on ‘individual responsibility.’

A significant finding here is that all three participants who adopted the frame of racism as a problem of the past (two of them also emphasized ‘individual responsibility’), are all black American males. This contrasts the predominant findings (Pew Research Center, Race in America 2019) that black Americans are more likely than white Americans to see racism (e.g., racial discrimination, less access to good paying jobs and good schools) as a structural problem.

Finally, participants who consider racism as a structural problem generally also view racism as a problem of the present. Participants with an individual frame of racism are more likely to see racism as a problem of

the past. They deny the impact of the racial past and/or the structural inequality in today's society. In discussing the problem of racism, the former focus on the impact of the past on the present, while the latter are more oriented toward the present/future.

### ***Cluster 3 Dual Issues Frames***

These frames from Cluster 1 and 2 oftentimes appear together, as participants use dual-frames to present their views.

### 3. *Dual-frames*

#### **Racism as an Individual and Cultural Problem**

Antonio (black male, Salvation Army, D1) used a dual-frame by arguing that he formerly viewed inequality/racism as an "individual responsibility" (see insert section 1b). More recently, however, he adopted the frame of social 'stratification', indicating "...my views of inequity...has changed since I started working at the Salvation Army" (105–106) and that he has now realized that "poverty does not know race" (117). Furthermore, he explained that "the folks who we (Salvation Army) serve come from all, all different kinds of backgrounds" (119) and what their clients "probably have in common for the most part is... that they're poor" (120–121). In both frames, he focused on the present and was oriented making changes for the future. This dual-frame illustrates how frames of participants may change over time and are based on different values and identities.

In conclusion, the framing of issues is a complex problem that requires deep analysis on many intricate levels. To understand the views of participants on the issue of race, and to find common ground in underlying values, it is essential that their (individual) frames are considered in the broader context of cultural master frames.

## **4.2 Identifying Frames at Relational Level**

Besides issues frames, participants discursively construct themselves and their relationships with others who are different, through positive and negative *identity* and *characterization frames* (see Table 12.3). Considering people often have multiple identities, the following subcategories were defined: *personal*, *group*, and *common* identities.

**Table 12.3** Identifying Relational frames

| Framing                              |   |  |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <i>Relational level</i>              | <i>Identity and relationship frames</i> | Description of frame type  | Exemplary quote   |
| 1. <i>Identities—self</i>            | 1a. Positive identity                   | Foregrounding of oneself or one's group in a praiseworthy or optimistic way. | <i>"I'm going to volunteer my services at the high school... letting them know that there are opportunities out there."</i>       |
|                                      | 1b. Negative identity                   | Foregrounding of oneself or one's group in a pessimistic or diminishing way. | <i>"I'm liberal politically, And I think I have come to know that I am deaf to some of what conservatives want to say to me."</i> |
| 2. <i>Characterization of others</i> | 2a. Positive characterization of others | Foregrounding of another person or group in a praiseworthy or optimistic way | <i>"I'm so proud, I impressed you. You're such a hero in this field."</i>   |
|                                      | 2b. Negative characterization others    | Foregrounding of another person or group in a pessimistic or diminishing way | <i>"Your son won't have to worry about being killed by the police."</i>   |

#### 4.2.1 Identity and Characterization Frames

##### 1a. *Positive identity frames*

Positive identity frames can be described as foregrounding oneself or one's group in a praiseworthy, constructive, or optimistic way. In both dialogues, participants referred to themselves, their group, or their common identity predominantly in a positive way.



Ryal (black male, Local Business Owner, D1) who strongly believes in the American dream and values (e.g., individual responsibility, meritocracy) portrayed himself as an optimist who wants to make a positive change. He is focused on the present and future: *"we must be real with ourselves and understand exactly what we can do to improve the city..."* (27–28) (positive identity, subcategory: personal). Ryal (D1): *"I'm going to volunteer my services at the high school... letting them know that there are opportunities out there."* Another participant, Hawk (D2), foregrounded his common identity (American / Christian) in a positive way: *"I think common ground is big... We agree that we love Christ. A large number of us loved Christ and the Bible."* (161–163).

### 1b. *Negative identity frames*

Negative identity frames refer to foregrounding of oneself or one's group in a negative, pessimistic, or diminishing way. In both dialogues, participants sparsely used negative identity frames.

Sarah (D1) demonstrated a critical attitude towards her personal identity. She explained her prejudices and her difficulties in talking to conservatives due to conflicting moral values: *"I'm liberal politically, And I think I have come to know that I am deaf to some of what conservatives want to say to me."* David L. (D2) also placed himself under a negative light by acknowledging his own ignorance and admitting how little he had known about the current problems of racism in modern society (see insert section 1a). However, despite these rather critical attitudes of participants toward their personal identities, they later point to their journey of personal growth, which enabled them to better bridge divides.

Additionally, in various cases, participants provide a negative portrayal of their common (group) identity (e.g., as Americans). For example, Liz (Village Square, D2) argued: *"I believe that we've forgotten all about the idea that having intensely diverse opinions is a strength and a value in American democracy. Not a weakness. And, and I feel like almost sort of, as a whole society we've just forgotten that that exists. We feel like those other people just need to be gone. And then we'll be fine. And, and that is incredibly destructive to me, and I feel like it's not going to end well."* (70–74). Here, she not only criticized her group identity (of Americans), but also addressed her personal identity by expressing her concerns and feelings. Sarah (D1) showed a critical attitude toward white Americans and urged them to take responsibility and seek action to end racism and to bridge divides: *"And so, I think, getting out on the realm of a theoretical. The realm of guilt, especially for white individuals. And moving into the space of responsibility. Showing up in community. Forming relationships. Being active."* (276–278).

### 2a. *Positive characterization frames*

Positive characterization frames refer to the foregrounding of another person or group in a praiseworthy, constructive, or optimistic manner. In both dialogues, participants use various positive characterization frames. Most notably, these frames are utilized to characterize other participants as valuable and to connect with them in a constructive way.

Sarah (D1) mentioned: *"Antonio, I relate to what you're saying a lot"* (214), and Tom (D1) states: *"I'll build on what you just said..."* (296). In the less structured format of dialogue 2, where participants responded more directly to others' opposing frames at content level, they seemed to put forth increased efforts in bridging divides at a relational level. In addition, the facilitators of both dialogues (especially F2), contributed to a positive atmosphere by praising participants and by valuing their contributions: *"Everybody is incredibly credentialed on this stage"* (29); *"It's awesome. Thank you, David."*; (94); *"Joe, I'm curious..."* (183).

### 2b. *Negative characterization frames*

Negative characterization frames foreground another person or group in a negative, pessimistic, or diminishing way. In both dialogues, negative characterization frames mostly concerned third parties (e.g., specific groups in the American society).

Tom (Rabbi, D1) and Sarah (UVA, D1) expressed their views on the alt-right protestors in Charlottesville in a pessimistic way. Tom, hereby, took the perspective from the Jewish community: *"Not just the signs and the symbols but to actually come face-to-face with the kind of hate, that we had actually seen on the websites."* (196–197). Sarah characterized the alt-right group when offering her advice for how UVA students should address the protestors: *"Don't give these, these crazies a platform to espouse their ideologies, stay far away...It must be one's own moral decision as to whether or not they came downtown and, and looked evil in the eye"* (216–219).

In both dialogues, however, participants showed a very constructive attitude and hardly used negative frames to characterize other

participants. In the few instances where a critical attitude was assumed, it was often done more implicitly and/or referred to the group identity of other participants.

Hawk (black male, BLM, D2) criticized the group identity of conservative participants: “*what really amazes me about that is that the Republicans have championed [in] this moral sense and Christianity, right? But their practices and their policies don’t show that*” (347–349).

#### 4.2.2 Complexity of Identities

While these constructions can be identified separately, oftentimes the participants combine multiple identities and various opposing values in the interaction in different ways, for example:

- *Multiple identities.* The multiple identities of participants impacted the conversation in various ways. For instance, Sarah (D1) adopted a critical attitude toward others from her professional identity, but showed a very constructive and bridging attitude (e.g., using many positive characterizations) from her personal identity. Antonio (D1) also balanced between various identities when characterizing people who are poor and in need. From his personal identity as an American citizen, he embraced the American values (e.g., meritocracy, individual responsibility) and asked himself: “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” (126–127). However, from his Christian identity (e.g., love for neighbors) and his professional identity (working for the Salvation Army), he stated “*I’m your brother’s keeper*” (135).
- *Dominant identities and values.* Sharing one identity or frame does not mean that participants share other identities or frames as well. Understanding that people may have dominant identities or values in specific situations, helps to avoid common ‘identity traps.’ For example, Joseph (D2) and Hawk (D2) shared a common identity (race/gender: being black males), but had opposing frames of the issue of racism. While Hawk posed a ‘victim frame,’ Joseph underlined the opposing frame of ‘individual responsibility.’ Recognizing the various

identities of participants showed that Joseph is a conservative, and Hawk resides closer to the liberal end of the political spectrum. Identifying their political (dominant) identity explained their different framing of issues and relationships.

- Where a similar identity (e.g., race, ethnicity) may lead to different frames, common values can bridge different identities. Hawk (D2) and David L. (D2) have opposite backgrounds and identities. When they spoke of what motivated themselves to work on bridging divides, Hawk (black male, BLM, liberal, D2) explained: “...*my devotion in my service to God...to move from a place of love and to pursue justice.* (77–78). David L. (white male, Undivided Nation, former Republican staffer, D2) argues: ‘*Similar to what (Hawk) said, really what drives me is love. I mean it, it’s love for this country; it’s love for the people of this country; and it’s hope that the best days of our country are ahead*’ (88–89). On surface level, both participants had seemingly little in common. However, they found common ground in the value of ‘love,’ despite this value’s derivation from an opposite identity: Hawk from his Christian values (love for neighbors) and David L. from his Republican values (patriotism).

### 4.3 Dealing with Frame Diversity: Bridging and Non-bridging

Given the frame positions summarized in 4.1 and 4.2, the interactions can take turns into opposite directions: participants may attempt to overcome the gap between their positions or widen it and/or avoid bridging (see Table 12.4).

#### 4.3.1 Strategies for Dealing with Frame Diversity

The strategies used for dealing with frame diversity on *content level* were categorized in terms of *frame incorporation* and *frame reconnection* (bridging strategies); and *frame disconnection* and *frame polarization* (non-bridging strategies) (Dewulf and Bouwen 2012). In addition, two (new)

**Table 12.4** Dealing with frame diversity

| Frame type   | Description of strategy   |
|--|---|
| <i>1. Non-bridging strategies</i>  |   |
| 1a. Frame disconnection (content)  | Not connecting by disdaining or disregarding the other participants frame(s).   |
| 1b. Frame polarization (content)   | Making framing differences bigger by posing an opposing frame or reaffirming one's own frame.                             |
| 1c. Frame adaptation (content)   | Adapting (a more general) issues frame to one's own specific context.   |
| 1d. Use of negative characterizations of other participants (relational) | Foregrounding the personal identity of other participants or their group in a pessimistic or diminishing way.             |
| <i>2. Bridging strategies</i>  |   |
| 2a. Frame incorporation (content)  | Valuing the other participants frame by including elements of the others frame into one's own frame.                      |
| 2b. Frame reconnection (content)   | Valuing others and own frame by (re) connecting them.   |
| 2c. Use of positive characterizations of other participants (relational) | Foregrounding the personal identity of other participants or their group in a positive, constructive or praiseworthy way. |
| <i>3. Dual strategies</i>  |   |
| 3a. Contradictory framing (content)                                      | Using both bridging and non-bridging strategies, to connect with others and to distinguish oneself.                       |

complex categories were found in the data: *frame adaptation* (non-bridging strategy) and *contradictory framing* (dual strategy of bridging and non-bridging). To grasp how participants managed differences at a *relational level*, the way in which participants portrayed each other was examined more closely; *positive characterizations* were considered bridging; and *negative characterizations* non-bridging' strategies.

### 1. *Non-bridging Strategies*

#### 1a. *Frame disconnection (content level)*

In the dialogue, the strategy of *disconnection*—which refers to disdaining or disregarding the other's frame—occurred occasionally. In D1, where participants responded to questions of the facilitator in structured

go-rounds, they often expressed their own frames without connecting them to the frames of other participants. For example, Sarah (white female, UVA), Tom (white male, Rabbi) and Antonio (black male, Salvation Army) presented their views on inequities in Charlottesville from their professional perspective disregarding—or as will be demonstrated at 1b, even opposing—the frames of other participants. However, due to the structured format of this dialogue, they often did not have to deal with their frame differences in the ongoing conversation.

1b. *Frame polarization (content level)*

In both dialogues, participants used the strategy of *polarization*; making their framing differences larger by reaffirming their own frame, or by presenting an opposing frame. For example, directly after Charlene (F1) introduced the issue of inequality/racism as a structural problem of the present in dialogue one, Ryal posed his complete opposite frame of racism (as an individual problem of the past).

1c. *Frame Adaptation (content level)*

In addition to the four strategies of the framework that was applied, participants also used another (new) strategy that was labeled *frame adaptation*; adapting the (more general) frame of an issue to their own specific context. In the first dialogue, Sarah (UVA) and Tom (Rabbi) both presented their view on issues predominantly from the perspective and context of their professional identity. When Charlene (F1) asked how they responded to the Charlottesville incidents, Tom had an almost exclusive focus on the impact of the incidents on the Jewish community: “*I need to bring forward in the sense, you know, what it was like for our community—and I am speaking out about the Jewish community in particular*” (194–195). Thereby, Tom seemed to personalize and adapt the more general question of Charlene. Another case of frame adaptation can be seen when Antonio (Salvation Army, D1) used ‘frame enlargement’ to address a particular issue at a broader scope and context. Instead of focusing on the given context of the issue (the problems in Charlottesville), he presented his hopes and dreams for the future.

1d. *Negative characterizations of other participants (relational level)*

In contrast to the level of content, participants seemed to avoid non-bridging strategies at a relational level. Participants sparsely used negative characterizations for other participants. In the case that a participant (Hawk, D2) addressed other 'white' participants in a critical way, he tried to explain the 'harshest realities' for black people in American society. By focusing on the issue (content level) instead of characterizing individual relationships in a negative way, he maintained positive relations with other participants.

2. *Bridging Strategies*

2a. *Frame incorporation (content level)*

Participants in both dialogues used the strategy of *frame incorporation* by valuing the others frame and incorporating elements into their own frame. For example, when Sarah (UVA, D1) expressed her view on the issues in Charlottesville she started with: '*Antonio, I relate to what you are saying a lot...*' (214). While incorporating elements of the frame of Antonio (Salvation Army)—who expressed his mixed emotions during the riots and shared his dilemmas whether to act—she also presented her own frame focused on the perspective of the UVA. The strategy of frame incorporation enabled participants to value others' frames, while at the same time expressing their own views.

2b. *Frame reconnection (content level)*

*Frame reconnection* enabled participants to acknowledge the frames of others and their own frame by (re)connecting them. When Charlene (F1) invited Tom to present his view on racism/inequities in Charlottesville and the broader society, he connected to the frames of Charlene and Sarah, who described racism as a structural problem of the present. At the same time, he presented his own frame and stressed the importance of discussing the underlying causes ('silencing of the racial history') of the problem. By reconnecting his frame to other participants' frames, Tom valued both perspectives.

### 2c. *Positive characterizations of other participants (relational level)*

Generally, participants showed a very positive and constructive attitude toward other participants. They used various positive characterization frames to praise other participants or to acknowledge their expertise and contributions. The positive characterization of participants provoked a good atmosphere; participants even seemed to copy others' constructive behavior. When David L. (D2) used the following analogy to explain his view on the division in the American society: "*America has an autoimmune disease, or we're so focused on destroying each other that we can't actually destroy and overcome the problem that we're facing*" (106–107), Liz thereafter responded with: "*That's a great analogy. I love that. I'm totally going to steal it.*" (109). Subsequently, David L. stated: "*I'm so proud, I impressed you. You're such a hero in this field*". Participants also connected to others by valuing their frames and perspectives. For instance, Tom (D1) expressed: "*I'll build on what you just said...*" (296). In the less structured format of dialogue 2, participants seemed to make considerable efforts to connect at a relational level. This enabled them to overcome their differences at content level. Another noticeable finding concerned the role of the facilitator in both dialogues. Both facilitators created positive atmosphere praising participants for their expertise and contributions. For example, Sandy (F2) stated: "*I'm honored to moderate this incredible panel of five people that I admire so much, and I'm getting to know better and better as we are here for the weekend*" (16–17).

## 3. *Dual Strategies*

### 3a. *Contradictory framing*

Besides the strategy of *dual framing*—presenting two different frames of an issue—participants employed a similar strategy to deal with differences on issues with other participants. The strategy of simultaneously using bridging and non-bridging strategies to deal with frame differences was labeled *contradictory framing*. For example, after Hawk (D2) described 'selfishness' as the root of the problem of racism, Joseph presented an opposing frame, arguing that 'apathy' is the real cause of the problem (*frame polarization*). However, at the same time, he valued the frame of



Hawk saying: “*Look, the problem with all this is, right, that all of that is true. And yet, all of it is not that simple, right? I take a slightly more nuanced view of things right that.*” (184–185) (*frame incorporation*). This strategy of contradictory framing permitted participants to express themselves (by presenting their own opposing frame), but also to value and connect to others’ frames (by incorporating elements of others frames or connecting both frames).

### 4.3.2 The Role of the Facilitator

Other than the strategies for dealing with frame diversity on content and relational level, the distinct format of both dialogues influenced the interactional strategies and dynamics. D1 was a more structured conversation with three central questions and answers in go-rounds. In this dialogue, participants were invited to present their own views on topics (often) without responding to others’ frames. Whenever participants used non-bridging strategies on content level, they often did not have to deal with these differences in the ongoing conversation. D2 was a more open conversation. After an initial question and one go-round, participants were encouraged to pose questions and responded directly to others’ frames.

Considering the impact of the format, the role of the facilitator serves as an additional frame management strategy. The facilitator of a dialogue can create a safe space and positive environment for participants to explore their differences and to find common ground (Escobar 2011). In the structured format of D1, participants were encouraged to identify and suspend their ‘automatic responses’ and ‘judgments and assumptions’ (Maiese 2003). In this way, Charlene (F1) created a safe environment to explore their different frames on issues. At a relational level, she employed the strategy of positive reinforcement (e.g. “Yes,” “Thank you,” “Right”) and encouraged participants to balance advocacy and inquiry, and to listen to others (Escobar 2011). Charlene (F1) also played an important role in managing frame diversity. For instance, in her concluding remarks she summarized the core of the various frames (even using a ‘shared language’) and, thereby, contributed to bridging divides. In the less structured format,

Sandy (F2) used numerous ‘positive characterization’ frames, for example, introducing participants in a very positive way, or by praising their contributions. In this way, she enabled participants to explore their differences on content level and to find common ground. With a strong coordination of turn-taking (e.g., asking questions, inviting participants to share their stories, addressing various identities of participants, and inviting participants with a common identity to react on specific issues) she took an active role in managing frame diversity.

Therefore, exploring the role of facilitators in dialogues can be a potential strategy to promote connections across divides.

## 5 Discussion

Focusing on how to build bridges through talk, this study aimed to gain insight into how bridging social capital can be promoted, as it fosters social cohesion and inclusion in a fragmented and polarized society. It explored how people with various backgrounds, values, and identities, discursively dealt with their differences on content and relational levels in two dialogues about the divisive topic of race/racism. Examining interactional framing strategies on two levels helped to unpack the complexity of dealing with differences in dialogic interactions on divisive issues and showed how to promote bridging across divides.

This final section concludes with providing practical implications and suggestions for future research.

*Valuing the bigger frame.* This study showed how individual frames of participants are embedded in cultural ‘master frames’ and values. The terms people use should be traced back to their origin, to reveal their underlying logic. Awareness of these dominant frames and values contributes to a better understanding of how people negotiate meaning about competing frames and ideologies in interactions on divisive topics.

To gain a fuller understanding of the various views on a divisive topic such as race in the current context of extreme political polarization in America, it is important to consider the different political perspectives and values of participants. Research shows that liberals and conservatives have different moral values (Haidt 2012). Identifying the political

perspectives and values of participants provides insight in how they frame issues and relationships. By tracing the utterances from the different positions to their cores, it becomes clear how people position themselves and others. Clarity about these bigger frames facilitates the search for common ground.

One of the goals of dialogue is to promote mutual understanding and collaboration across divides. When discussing possible solutions to the problem of racism, it is critical to realize that people with competing frames often propose different solutions. When racial disparities are linked to individual prejudices, potential solutions often are aimed at reducing individual biases. When racism is considered a structural problem, people often will be more focused on systemic solutions that address racial inequalities in policies and institutions (O'Neil 2009). Gaining insight in how people define the problem, causes, and solutions facilitates a shared understanding and finding common ground.

*Identifying identities.* While frames can be rather abstract, they can be personalized through interactions. Therefore, it is crucial to see how the multiple identities of the participants in the dialogue are entangled. There is something at stake for them as well: their identities. Facilitating dialogues about divisive topics should provide a way to help one identify oneself beyond the divisions. As shown in this analysis, identifying multiple and dominant identities in interactions between various people contributes to develop shared values by addressing a common 'superordinate identity' (Hewstone et al. 2002). Such superordinate identities provide the basis to discover common ground and explore differences on controversial issues more openly than when focusing on conflicting views.

*Bridging talk.* Discourse analysts see discourse as a form of 'social action'. To achieve various interactional goals, speakers often use different or contradictory repertoires (Goodman 2017). This study revealed that depending on the specific context at hand and goals in sight, participants used various—even contradictory—language and strategies to express themselves and/or to deal with their differences. Gaining insight which strategies promote bridging on content and relational levels is key to foster connections across divides.

Dealing with the knotty nature of such dialogues, where frames and master frames, identities and sub-identities, talk and action coalesce is

hard enough in itself. Still, in order to make a real impact on society, the bar needs to be raised even higher. This study demonstrated how facilitating dialogues and inviting people who are different to share their personal stories is a promising start to create bridging social capital in a fragmented and divided society. Before dialogue can help to overcome barriers between various individuals and groups, people need to be able and willing to participate in those meaningful conversations. This raises the question how to reach those who do not know or interact with others who are different or are not willing to engage in dialogues. While acknowledging the complexity and difficulty of this challenge, the findings of this study may offer some guidelines.

More research about the context and awareness of the bigger frame of conversations across divides can particularly help facilitators to gain insight in how people think and act: What motivates them? What are their fears of others whom they don't know? What are their goals and values, and what are their (common) identities? A better understanding of oneself and others will contribute to better relations and finding common ground.

In a fragmented society where people often live in bubbles with like-minded others, it is important to proactively create safe spaces and invite people to collaborate and communicate with those who have different backgrounds and identities. Future studies should explore what is needed for people to feel safe enough for such vulnerable encounters. Here, not only experienced facilitators but also teaching and training dialogic skills at schools and at work may enable people to talk constructively about their differences. This is the first step toward reconciliation. In the current atmosphere of polarization and debate, talking toward mutual understanding entails difficulties and challenges but also provides new perspectives and hope for thriving and cohesive communities.

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