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Don't say 'privilege': can the left find better words for talking with people on the right?

Sadiya Ansari

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When Karin Tamerius first started arguing with her elderly uncle about rightwing memes he was posting on Facebook, she surprised herself. She found herself launching personal attacks, making him feel he was objectively “bad” for holding certain beliefs - behaviors she knew through her work as a therapist were unfair at worst, and didn’t work at best. But she couldn’t stop herself. She felt she had a moral imperative to act, a compulsion to make the case for her side.

In the lead-up to the 2016 election, Tamerius saw her uncle drifting into more extreme rightwing rhetoric thanks to his exposure to Fox, Breitbart and social media. They fought so much that eventually they stopped speaking.

Then Trump won the election, and Tamerius began to question her approach to politics and her persuasion strategies.

She started reaching out to her uncle and his friends to understand him - and half the country - better. Scouring through his Facebook posts, she found willing participants in conversations about gun policy and abortion and realized they had more in common than she imagined. She also realized how words had become a barrier between them.

Using the term “gun control” could set people off, but making a small change - using the term “gun safety” instead - opened up the conversation.

“The most important thing I learned was how much of the division between us is an illusion, that it has far more to do with speaking a different language and communicating poorly than then it does with an actual difference of opinion,” says Tamerius.

Of course, there are - and should be - instances of irreconcilable differences. People shouldn't have to debate their right to exist in the world as themselves; or whether they should be treated with respect and dignity. Racism is not a debate, for example, nor is being a trans person. Being open-minded isn't the same as letting people with archaic ideas bulldoze a conversation.

But Tamerius realized certain words she commonly leaned on - like “privilege”, or “triggering” - were creating a wall between her and those who weren't as steeped in the discourse that came naturally to her.

She started a Facebook group called Smart Politics to strategize how to have healthy political conversations with other left-leaning Americans. And that's when the penny dropped: “We don't just have trouble talking with people on the other end of the political spectrum,” she said. “We have trouble talking with people on the left.”

Victims and villains

While progressives desire ambitious, structural change, it's surprising how often arguments descend over minutiae: the internet abounds with articles lambasting people for using the wrong terms, like **“POC” instead of “bipoc”**, or **not recognizing one's privilege** before speaking up. Other times, people simply call something “problematic” rather than defining the actual criticism.

While the right can cry wolf about “cancel culture” - many have landed lucrative book deals and TV slots after they complained about it - there is a valid reason to be wary of putting people off with words. If the left wants to ensure broad inclusion in political movements, it needs to talk to a broad range of people.

The left increasingly finds itself dividing rather than building allies - the massive rift in the Democratic party between traditional liberals and the new left being a prime example.

A 2017 [Pew Research Center study](#) tracking political typology in the US notes that while the gulf between values held by Democrats and Republicans is the widest in two decades, the fissures *within* both parties are also increasingly visible.

The report outlines four distinct groups within the Democratic party: two are more affluent and mostly white, while two are less affluent, “majority-minority” groups. The former group are more likely to feel like working hard can get you ahead, while part of the latter group are more critical of the economic system and lack of government benefits.

Concurrently, the influence of traditional Democratic constituents such as trade unions has waned, and blue collar workers typically aligned with the left were [more likely to vote](#) for Trump in the last election - especially those [who are white](#). And yet, a persuasive left should be able to build unity with these groups, and to talk to the concerns of people who would benefit from their suggested reforms, such as higher minimum wages and universal healthcare coverage.

Research on overcoming polarization might hold lessons for the left on how to have more meaningful conversations within its ranks.

“ While distrust is a dominant emotion among the right, anger incites the left

One of the problems at the root of conversational blocks is social media - and how we talk to one another when using it. Megan Boler, a University of Toronto professor who studies online polarization, likens social media to melodrama, inflamed by loaded words to create a cast of victims and villains. And, she adds, this tendency to simplify reality is spilling offline.

The right and left are motivated by different aspirations. Researching polarization in the lead-up to the 2020 election, Boler found that while the right is driven by nostalgia - wanting to go back to a “simpler time” - the left is motivated by change, to ensure rights for all, whether that’s healthcare or fair wages. Researchers have found the [right](#)

has a heavier hand in online polarization, but if those on the left want to mobilize against this highly organized rightwing media ecosystem, they will need to find a way to unite.

Boler found that while distrust is a dominant emotion among the right, anger incites the left online. For those on the left, pithy statements on social media amplify this anger, and not always in useful ways. Discussion of complex issues like structural racism are reduced to retorts like “check your privilege.”

When words like “privilege” first migrated from academic to mainstream discourse, it was an opportunity to have conversations about things like how your immigration status influences your **earning potential**, or **how race affects educational opportunities**. But academics unpack words over decades of research and hundreds of pages in books - 280 characters doesn't exactly provide space for nuance.

Closing ranks

Peggy McIntosh, senior research scientist at the Wellesley Centers for Women, helped popularize the term “privilege”, describing it as “a combination of unearned advantage and unearned disadvantage in life” in a 2014 [New Yorker interview](#). Race is one variable, but so is your body type, education level, your place of birth - and “it changes minute by minute, depending on where we are, who we're seeing, or what we're required to do,” McIntosh added.

The concept requires deep reflection, to see how the systems around us are influencing us, how that shapes what we have access to and what we don't.

“Check your privilege,” by contrast, can shut down conversation by saying that having unearned advantages means you're not *allowed* to have an opinion, rather than examining what others have to deal with in life to form a more informed opinion.

Strict language policing has cropped up in part because the left has felt under attack for years, says Peter T Coleman, a Columbia professor who studies intractable conflict.

“ When groups are under duress and threat, they tend to close ranks and have very clear norms

Coleman found [research](#) from Michele Gelfand offered a compelling explanation for the increasing hostility within the left. Gelfand's insight, as Coleman explains it, is that “when groups are under duress and threat, they tend to close ranks and have very clear norms. Violators of those norms are really shunned and shamed.”

Coleman points out that even though Democrats won the 2020 election, the left and its values are still under fire: Fox News [attracts the most](#)

viewers, abortion rights are being obliterated, and voter suppression tactics are being made law. This context creates a “tight culture” within the left that demands people in the group “fall in line.” While this behavior is motivated by the need to mobilize against an outside threat, ironically, it can result in arrested development.

The other issue suffocating meaningful conversation is the adversarial nature of debate embedded in American culture. “Debate is a game to win,” says Coleman, who published [The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization](#) earlier this year. “I’m listening to find flaws in your argument that I can weaponize against you to show you that I’m right.” That’s the opposite of dialogue, which, when facilitated properly, is a process of discovery and learning.

Dialogue is what Coleman and his colleagues try to cultivate at the [Difficult Conversations Lab](#) at Columbia University. The lab facilitates conversations between people on opposing sides of divisive issues, like abortion and gun control, and studies the results. Researchers track participants’ emotions - asking them to listen to audio of the discussion, to follow what their emotions were like throughout the conversation.

Coleman is a fan of “**complicating the narrative**”. Instead of pitting someone who is anti-abortion against someone who is pro-choice, the lab would frame abortion as a “highly complicated, nuanced, personal set of decisions” that has medical, religious, health and gender equity implications. The pair is then asked to create a statement they can agree on from their conversation.

Participants report a variety of emotions - they can move from negative emotions towards their partner to thinking *huh, that’s a good point they made*. And while participants still advocate for their position, in conversations that lead to a shared understanding, people tend to ask more questions, such as, “Can you explain that?” or “Tell me more about what you mean.”

He also found that those who have a high degree of complexity in their own lives - for instance, who have friends across religious and political stripes - are able to have richer conversations.

Cultivate curiosity, and really listen

Tamerius learned that curiosity was the key to repairing her relationship with her uncle. She learned more about his views by approaching conversations as she would as a therapist: guided by questions while being supportive. Within a month, she saw a difference. She offered to look into memes when he wasn’t sure of the source, for instance, and he would delete ones associated with white nationalists.

Soon, he started to post doubts about Trump - like wishing Trump would tweet less. "He didn't feel like he had to always defend his initial position," Tamerius says.

“ I want people to feel like it's okay to advocate for what you believe in - it turns out the way to do that is to listen

Her uncle died soon after Trump was inaugurated, but those conversations led her to build Smart Politics into an organization that holds workshops and is her full-time job.

While other organizations working at depolarization are explicitly nonpartisan, like [Braver Angels](#), Tamerius is transparent about her partisan agenda: she wants liberals to be more effective in persuading people. "I want people to feel like it's OK to advocate for what you believe in," she says. "But it turns out the way to do that is actually to listen to what they have to say and connect with them around it."

John Regalado grew up in a household that listened to Rush Limbaugh in a suburb outside Denver, but working as a video journalist for a left-leaning series at Univision, he knew there were large parts of the country his work wouldn't speak to. So he started working on a web series called [Middle Ground](#), which brings together six people on opposing sides of issues like gentrification and immigration.

Regalado's first assignment was in Jerusalem, bringing together Palestinians and Israelis to discuss the conflict. Prompts guide the conversations - each participant stands when hearing the prompt, and if they identify with it, they take a seat to discuss it, and eventually the others also join in.

The first prompt was: "Someone I know has died because of this conflict." Five out of six participants took a seat, and shared who they had lost. Even though it quickly became clear even within this small group that the Palestinian side suffered at a different scale, the conversation allowed participants to connect around the impact of their losses.

The prompts are designed to be simple jumping off points for discussion, not clearcut political statements where it's obvious who will agree or disagree. While there are heated moments in that first episode Regalado directed, at the end of it the participants all chose to hang out and share a meal together.

It's clear when watching the show that when participants try to convince or lecture others, walls come up. And [research shows](#) that most people aren't looking to be persuaded. Tamerius likens the mind to a fortress, trying to protect its existing way of

understanding the world. But there are still ways to effectively talk about subjects with those seemingly on the “other side”.

Tamerius has co-written two bots for the New York Times that model conversations on polarizing subjects. Her most recent, on [how to speak with people who don't want a vaccine](#), opens with a friend texting that getting a Covid vaccination seems like a “bad idea”.

The bot then prompts you to choose a response: one is an answer you know is wrong (“Are you an anti-vaxxer?”), the second is a more subtle form of persuasion (“Covid is scarier”), and the third is a question (“You’ve heard some things that make you worried and unsure?”). When you click on your favored response, you’re told why it’s a good or less effective choice. The third one is the best choice because people want to feel heard - so instead of spamming someone with links to convince them that vaccinations are necessary, first hear where their fear comes from.

Tamerius often gets comments from people who say they know what the right answer is, but just can’t stop themselves and choose another. “That is exactly what [it’s] like when you’re in a conversation,” she said. “The responses that are counterproductive or emotionally gratifying are kind of like the junk food of political discourse.”

When you don’t have a bot to help you along in those moments, Tamerius suggests two things. First, change the way you think about the other person. “Stop thinking about the other person as ‘them’, and immediately start thinking in terms of ‘us’,” she advises. And second, listen. But, like, *actually*.

“That doesn’t mean listen to respond; or listen to rebut; or listen to reply - or God forbid, listen just to take turns talking,” she says. “It means listening to understand - until the other person feels heard, not until you feel like you’ve heard them.”

Intellectually, it makes perfect sense. But practically, how do you avoid reaching for the gratifying junk food when you’ve been fed a steady diet of it for a decade?

“You’ve got to set the intention and work at it,” says Tamerius. “Over time, it builds into habit.”

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