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Lived Experiences of Liberal and Conservative Educational Leaders Navigating Solutions to Highly Contentious and Polarizing Sociopolitical Education Problems

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**Lived Experiences of Liberal and Conservative Educational Leaders
Navigating Solutions to Highly Contentious
and Polarizing Sociopolitical Education Problems**

**by
Troy Fisher**

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of George Fox University

Faculty Research Committee

Chair: Dr. Gary Sehorn

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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE EDUCATIONAL LEADERS NAVIGATING SOLUTIONS TO HIGHLY CONTENTIOUS AND POLARIZING SOCIOPOLITICAL EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS, a Doctoral research project prepared by TROY FISHER in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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Abstract

The intent of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the lived experiences of two different school leaders that have lived through the same polarizing contentious political experience. One of these leaders self-identified as liberal and the other as conservative. More specifically, the purpose is to identify similarities and differences in the strategies these school leaders utilized as they navigated the political challenges so as to bring partisan, polarized groups together – while still maintaining a quality instructional program for their students. The narratives of these two school leaders were captured through semi-structured in-depth interviews and two political survey tools. Each participant shared their lived experience of the polarizing event: a school district implementing a policy in accordance with a state law that allows transgender students access to their locker rooms of choice. Narratives were crafted and common themes emerged. These narratives were viewed through the lenses of The Moral Foundations Theory, Culture War Theory, Political Ideology, and conflict management. Stakeholder reaction, political polarization, conflict, collusion, mindset, and civility are discussed. Further research is suggested in which the number of participants is expanded so as to further discover like and unlike narratives and to compare different socially polarizing topics. This research suggests it is important for the leader to be prepared not only for how to look at a conflict, but more importantly, for how to look at the people in a conflict.

Acknowledgments

My interest in school leadership and in dealing with polarizing conflict began more than a decade ago as I began to perceive a fundamental change in the way various stakeholders interacted with the school and school leadership.

In order to pursue this interest, I needed to find a university close to me that provided a doctoral program in educational leadership. My entire educational career, both as a student and a professional, had been in the public-school arena. I consider it a blessing to be a part of a Christ-centered university like George Fox. From the very first day of the program, I recognized the difference, as the first words of the first meeting were, “Let’s pray.” The staff and program at George Fox have been an oasis of Christ’s love for me in this process.

My dissertation committee chair, Gary Sehorn, has been a key thought partner as well as an accountability partner for me. His joy and excitement in my project kept me going when I sometimes wanted to stop. My committee member Dane Joseph has been invaluable to me in my journey from practitioner to scholar. His patience in helping me with methodology is greatly appreciated. My final committee member, Jay Mathisen, is an amazing leader. Every time we talked, he would ask me how it was going. When I began to tell him where I was in the dissertation writing process, he would always interrupt me by telling me he knew all that – what he wanted to know was how *I* was. I always leave Jay feeling more joyful than before I saw him. I owe all three of these Christ-centered men more than they will ever know.

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me in so many ways. They modeled, as school leaders, that I could choose how to look at conflict. I honor their commitment to their students and districts in this difficult time.

I want to thank people from the Forest Grove school district who have supported me through this process. David Parker, John O'Neill, Kimberly Sharer, and Cassie Kenney have been there to encourage me along the way, and to help me clarify my thinking. To my staff, some of whom may be very tired of hearing about my topic, I have appreciated your support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Polarization in Education

School board meetings that turn into shouting matches about critical race theory (Hooks, 2021), recalls over the politicization of Black Lives Matter and rainbow flags (BallotPedia, 2021), lawsuits on transgender bathrooms (Castle, 2018), enforcing the COVID-19 mask mandates (Lehigh, 2021), the firing of administrators for refusing to implement board directives due to their beliefs that board direction violates personal values (Sabatier, 2021); one only has to glance at the local or national news to be aware that there are many polarizing issues facing school leaders (SLs) today. There are also many day-to-day issues that don't make the news that SLs nevertheless face every day: dealing with the student and their family who object to the Blue Lives Matter T-shirt, ordering that book for the library that takes a position on transgenderism, adhering to a policy that is antithetical to the SL's personal world view, are a few of the everyday challenges.

The day-to-day experiences of SLs are becoming more contentious. Studies have shown that SLs live in an increasingly divided world (Haynes, 2012). Polarization is a defining feature of politics (and of society) today (McCarty, 2019). McCarty discusses a measure of the "depth" of polarization and has determined that this depth, while it increases and decreases over time, is currently very large and appears to be growing. Further, polarization leads to absolute shift (becoming more polarized as a society), gridlock (holding on to polarized positions), and uncertainty (worry about the future) (McCarty, 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore the lived experiences of SLs who have lived through a polarizing contentious political experience. More precisely, the purpose is to identify strategies these school leaders have utilized to navigate these challenges so

as to bring partisan, polarized groups together, while still maintaining a quality instructional program for their students.

General Statement

The culture war is alive and well in the United States today (Jacoby, 2014; Hunter, 2004). For the purposes of this study, “culture war” is defined as a political struggle caused by conflict between sets of social beliefs and cultural values (Bell, 2020). Many different issues can be categorized as part of the culture war. Positions on LGBTQ (Haynes, 2012), critical race theory, multiculturalism, racism (Valdes et al., 2002), abortion (Nolan, 1996), pornography (Fuller et al., 2020), gun control (Lindaman & Haider-Markel, 2002), and other cultural conflicts based on values, morality, and lifestyle can be described as conflicts in a culture war.

The culture war has led to ideological positions that exhibit increased partisanship and polarization on these and other social issues (Mason, 2012; Lelkes, 2016). Polarization and partisanship have bled into school systems across the nation. School board meetings have become contentious, and school board elections that are supposed to be non-partisan have become political, creating recall petitions for school board members that are based on differing values of the culture war (BallotPedia, 2021). Lawsuits involving social educational issues have been filed by both sides (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021; Freedom for All Americans, 2021). Administrators have been fired or resigned (Fung, 2021), and communities have been divided into different camps leading to protests and anti-protests (Mervosh & Heyward, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Contentious experiences can create conflict. While conflict is not necessarily bad, it can create problems depending on how leadership responds. SLs hold a wide variety of ideological positions and worldviews. These ideological positions may not always match those of the

stakeholders they serve. These differences, during contentious experiences, can cause extremism (Appelbaum, 2008), silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), or preference falsification (Frank, 1996) on the part of either the SL or the stakeholders. Educational institutions serve the public, so it is important to understand the impacts of these differences, in order to ensure that schools are honoring the identity safety of all marginalized groups (Lowe, 2019).

When groups feel marginalized, transgressional behavior may occur—such as retreating into a “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) that stops their voices from being heard, resorting to preference falsification (Kuran, 1997), or dehumanizing those in the out group (Martherus et al., 2019). These transgressional behaviors are often amplified due to fear of possible social sanctions through social media (Bandura, 2001).

Much research has been done on how partisan views conflict and on the consequences of these conflicts. Less has been done on finding ways they can work together and on how to find similarities. I was looking to find how educational leaders from diametrically opposed ideologies either put aside their differences and continue to serve students and families or maintain their differences while still serving them.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current research study was to understand the experiences of SLs that go through a highly contentious sociopolitical educational conflict, in order to find ways to assist them in working together and with stakeholders, despite possible differences in ideological viewpoint. The investigation sought not only to validate school leaders’ experiences through an exploratory case study, but also sought to find positive ways to navigate through highly contentious and polarizing events and to learn, specifically, how a school leader that may not share the same worldview as other stakeholders can face these challenges. This study does not

defend or support the “correctness” of one ideological position or worldview over another. I worked to find ways that opposing positions found common ground, in order to illustrate positive opportunities for discourse or dialogue.

Importance of the Study

Intergroup hostility is produced by the existence of conflicting goals (i.e., competition) and is reduced by the existence of mutually desired superordinate goals only attainable through intergroup cooperation (Jackson, 1993). In a bounded system it is vital to work with groups that have conflicting social goals and explore tools to foster cooperation. This study works to illuminate successes and pitfalls for educational leaders working in polarized situations in order to find ways for them to support their students.

Conceptual Framework

This case study research is primarily narrative in nature. Dormandy (2016) argues that narrative case studies are an important form of philosophical argument and reflect novel facets of reality with which we can then make meaning for ourselves. According to Josselson (2010), “Narrative research avoids a predetermined theory” (p. 872). To that end I identified several frameworks that I used as lenses through which to look at this research. It is common for case study research to develop theories as the research is being conducted; therefore, these guides did not limit the possible frameworks this research project will utilize. Further frameworks may be added and addressed in Chapters 4 and 5.

The moral foundations theory (Haidt, 2013) states that people’s political stance originates from six moral foundations. In this theory, the liberal stance derives primarily from two foundations: care/harm and fairness/cheating, while the conservative stance includes those foundations but also adds loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and

liberty/oppression. This theory is important to this inquiry because the research will attempt to determine the political stance of participants using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (*Questionnaires: Moral Foundations Theory*, 2021), which was developed by Haidt and his colleagues from moral foundations theory, in order to analyze their responses through the lens of ideology.

The culture war theory (Hunter, 1991) frames social conflict in America between conservatives and progressives as common and spanning issues of family, education, law, and politics. Further, it claims that the culture war is expressed in predictable ways in these settings. Although Jacoby (2014, p.767) contends of the culture war that the “empirical results create a picture of extreme heterogeneity that contradicts any notion of widespread agreement on a set of fundamental principles,” it is still important to apply culture war theory to this research. This study will be looking at controversial and polarized social issues and their impact on school leadership. Many of these social issues could be defined as being a part of the culture war. The type of culture war issues in this study are defined by the characteristics of a) a topic common to public school experiences, b) a topic that needs to be addressed by the educational leader, c) a topic that may be reported on, or d) a topic that moves beyond the local school level (for example, advocacy or Facebook groups or litigation) (Hunter, 1991).

The theory that humans have a specific ideological identity is important in this study. Ideology is generally defined as a broad worldview represented by a set of issue positions that can be consistent with each other to varying degrees. It has usually been formed along one continuum—liberal to conservative, left to right, or progovernment to antigovernment— but ideological identity is identifying with the ideology of a particular group (Mason, 2019). In a bounded system, such as a school district, multiple ideological identities may be present. Each

person's ideology impacts the way they see the world, determine right from wrong, respond to conflict, and make decisions (Wayne et al., 2016; Hatemi et al., 2019; Brandt et al., 2019). While this ideology can change over time, once set it is likely to remain constant (Klien, 2020).

Response to conflict has been studied for decades (Meyer, 2004; Snyder et al., 2007; Keye et al., 2013; Gilin-Oore et al., 2015). Conflict is discussed in this research in relation to problem-solving within a polarized environment in a bounded educational system. Several possible responses to highly contentious sociopolitical issues are mentioned here and further described in detail in Chapter 2. The "spiral of silence" is the theory that postulates that holders of minority opinions, when faced with opposition by the majority opinion, will not share their minority opinions with the group for fear of being othered. This creates the idea in the majority opinion that there is no alternate opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This response likely leads to increased partisanship. Preference falsification is the act of misrepresenting one's wants under perceived social pressures. It happens frequently in everyday life, such as when we tell the host of a dinner party that we are enjoying the food when we actually find it bland (Frank, 1996). This response, too, often leads to increases in partisanship. The final response, discussed in this chapter, that likely leads to an increase in partisanship is extremism. Extremism can show itself in protest or outspoken statements of belief (Coleman & Bartoli, 2003; Alizadeh et al., 2014).

A response that may lead away from partisanship is strategic dialogue. Strategic dialogue (Lee, 2018) is a method that contains several basic principles designed to change attitudes, reduce tension, and remove obstacles to the truth: a) preparation for yourself, your audience, and the space; b) dialogue using strategic listening, strategic storytelling, and repeating to break down barriers; and c) next steps such as make an ask, reflect and evaluate, and repeat the process.

The final possible response outlined in this section is compromise. Compromise can be easy if the stakes are low, and the issue is not controversial. For example, if a person is selling a car for \$15,000, and you only want to spend \$11,000, meeting in the middle and compromising at \$13,000 is possible. Both people usually walk away both happy and sad in these types of compromise situations. If, however, the issue is a high-stakes social issue that may be influenced by morality (I am right; you are wrong), or is an issue that causes harm to another, compromise is difficult or impossible. In those cases, people often fall back on another strategy (Lee, 2018). Since most of the issues in this research fall into the category of high-stakes social issues, it is unlikely that compromise will be a strategy that shows up much in this research. Each of these are possible responses to conflict that SLs may exhibit throughout the course of this study.

The way political ideology is formed through moral foundations has an impact on how people experience life events and on the decisions they make. This is particularly true in contentious events. The way these culture war events are responded to is greatly dependent on the political ideologies involved. This narrative case study will be guided through this lens.

Research Question

Both qualitative and quantitative research questions may be included in individual case study or multiple case study research designs. Questions asking to explain, explore, describe, and understand are the focus. Often case study research questions ask how or why. Case study research questions need to address the substance of what the study is about (Hatch, 2002). The research question for this study is: What are the lived experiences of liberal and conservative educational leaders navigating solutions to highly contentious and polarizing sociopolitical education problems?

As this question required data collected from extensive conversations and interviews, a quantitative research design would be limiting. A qualitative multiple case study was used to hear the stories and solutions provided by educational leaders.

Methodological Overview

Pragmatically, I allowed the question to guide the methodology. Understanding the participants' experiences of leading a school system through a polarizing event while looking for solutions required an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon; thus, a case study design is the most appropriate (Yin, 2017). Research questions that are exploratory in nature, that investigate a current phenomenon while seeking to understand lived experiences, lead directly to case study design. Investigated behaviors cannot be controlled or manipulated, so experimentation or quasi-experimentation was an inappropriate design choice (Yin, 2017). Case study is defined as an "in-depth analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2015, p. 38). Creswell states, "'Bounded' means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries" (1998, p. 485). Cases are units that have limits. A single program, organization, classroom, group of people, or even a single person can make up a case. The number must be limited to qualify as a case. A case study reveals factors of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2017). They are generally qualitative because they place importance on the context of social realities.

Qualitative research attempts to "explain complex phenomena through ... descriptions rather than testing hypotheses with numerical values" (Sutter, 2006, p. 41). In qualitative research, narrative descriptions of data are created to paint a picture of a specific phenomenon rather than to generalize findings to other populations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Sutter, 2006).

Bracketing

I am an SL. The fact that I experience polarizing events and witness colleagues doing the same provides advantages and disadvantages throughout the research process. Researchers are divided on the topic of studying something to which they are closely linked in experience. Collins believes that “only someone who has walked in the same cultural shoes can speak for the culture”, while others argue that “[s]ubjectivity can be equated with bad research, and only an outsider who has distance can observe and analyze clearly” (Johnson & Bailey, 2004, p. 133). In one way, I am a part of the culture under study: I am an SL with a similar education and certification as the participants, and some similar experiences. In another way, I am an outsider, coming from a different bounded system with different cultural norms based on experiences that are specific to the different contexts.

Banks defines an “indigenous-insider” as a researcher who shares many of the same experiences of the population in study and an “indigenous-outsider” as one who is external to the population (quoted in Johnson & Bailey, 2004, p. 130). As an indigenous-insider to the population, I share many of the same characteristics and experiences of the participants. The participants share my socioeconomic status and professional role, have similar educational backgrounds, and share several similar experiences. My role as an SL provides me with an insider look at the multifaceted role of an SL. My position as a veteran SL will assist me in collecting data and establishing relationships with participants. Participants may be freer to communicate and reveal feelings due to shared common experiences with me. There are also ways I am an “indigenous-outsider” during the research process. I work in a different school district than the participants—one with a different number of students and schools, and one whose community values are different. Further, the SLs in the participants’ district have different

common experiences than me. Since values and common experience are keys in developing culture, my own and the participants' culture and norms will vary. It is important for me to be cognizant of the "implied communication differences that might exist between the researcher and the researched" (Johnson & Bailey, 2004, p. 126). These differences may hinder connections between the participants and myself and impact participants' responses.

In this study, I am thus both insider and outsider, being part of the broader population of SLs while not necessarily sharing all the same experiences with the research population. I intentionally selected a population that shares many of the same experiences as the participants to assist me in understanding and interpreting their social context (Johnson & Bailey, 2004). I will create the distance between the participants and myself, of a different bounded system, in order to distinguish between my experiences and theirs as an attempt to decrease bias.

Overview of Study

To answer the research question, I conducted a multiple case study of two SLs who come from the same public school-bounded system and who have experienced a polarizing sociopolitical event. I used purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009; Noy, 2008). During the 2021–22 school year, I collected data from participants. I relied primarily on interview data and combined it with the Moral Foundations Questionnaire and the Political Typology Quiz. I utilized the constant comparative data analysis technique: coding, memoing, and analyzing data as it was collected to guide any future data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Final data analysis was both an in-case and cross-case synthesis, allowing findings on both individual and shared experiences between SLs.

Definition of Terms

Affective polarization: polarization that is not only based on political issues but rather on feelings about people themselves. Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those from the other party. Previously polarization was seen in issue-based terms. Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party's members are hypocritical, selfish, and close-minded. (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Conservative/conservatism: in American history these terms have meant many different things, including a defender of the status quo and those who, when change becomes necessary, prefer that it comes slowly and in moderation (Allitt, 2009; Safire, 1993).

Culture war: a cultural conflict between social groups and the struggle for dominance of their values, beliefs, and practices. This term commonly refers to topics on which there is general societal disagreement and polarization in societal values or a political struggle caused by conflict between sets of social beliefs and cultural values (Hunter, 1991; Jacoby, 2014).

Dehumanization: considering others less than human, allowing people to justify harsh and inhumane treatment during extreme intergroup conflict (Bandura, 1999).

Echo chamber: limiting the exposure to diverse perspectives and favoring the formation of groups of like-minded individuals framing and reinforcing a shared narrative. Often used in describing social media (Lee, 2018).

Extremism: the quality or state of being extreme or the advocacy of extreme measures or views. Political agendas perceived as extremist often include those from the far-left politics or far-right politics as well as radicalism, reactionism, fundamentalism, and fanaticism (Berger, 2018).

Ideological identity: Ideology is a broad worldview represented by a set of issue positions that can be consistent with each other to varying degrees. It has generally been along one

continuum—liberal to conservative, left to right, or progovernment to antigovernment.

Ideological identity is identifying with the ideology of a particular group (Mason, 2018b).

LGBTQ: an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning. These terms are used to describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Liberal/liberalism refers to a considerable number of ideas, and no one person has the authority to judge what is a truly liberal position and what is not. Currently, it is thought of as one who believes in more government action to meet individual needs (Rawls, 1993; Safire, 1993).

Out-partisans: person outside of a particular partisan group issue (Amira et al., 2021).

Partisanship: an attitude, a predisposition, or an abiding identification; a behavioral commitment to a party or idea (Converse & Pierce, 1985).

Pluralism: Pluralism is more of an ideal than a reality, and has a plethora of ambiguous definitions; it is a term used to describe conditions in which different racial, ethnic, or social groups are combined into political or governmental units. Pluralism is characterized by social cleavage and cultural diversity. It allows minorities to express their own cultures without experiencing prejudice (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). Witt (2021, p. 329), writes that, "In a pluralistic society, a subordinate group does not have to forsake its lifestyle and traditions."

Political polarization: the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed and the process by which this opposition increases over time. Polarization is associated with the process of politicization (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008).

Preference falsification: the act of misrepresenting one's wants under perceived social pressures. It happens frequently in everyday life, such as when we tell the host of a dinner party that we are enjoying the food when we actually find it bland (Frank, 1996).

School Leader (SL): a leader in any location of the educational system including both the building level and district level.

Spiral of silence: theory that postulates that holders of minority opinions, when faced with opposition by the majority opinion, will not share their minority opinions with the group for fear of being othered. This creates the idea in the majority opinion that there is no alternate opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Strategic dialogue: a particular way to communicate with people you disagree with. Designed to change attitudes, reduce tension, and remove obstacles to the truth (Lee, 2018).

Worldview: a collection of attitudes, values, stories, and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action. Worldview is expressed in ethics, religion, philosophy, scientific beliefs, and so on (Sire, 2004). A worldview is how a culture works out in individual practice.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

An assumption made in this study is that most school leaders have experienced contentious experiences and conflict. Another assumption is that all participants answered questions honestly and completely during interviews.

A delimitation of this study is that all participants are current or past school leaders from one educational system. The participants may not fully represent the norm for all levels of leadership. A larger and more diverse set of participants may provide more insight into possible strategies to deal with contentious experiences. Further, the data collected in this study was limited to a small sample size and was collected from one particular conflict in one particular region of the country. Perceptions and responses may vary from a different social issue or region of the country. Findings may not be generalizable across regions and issues.

Having worked in education for 28 years, the last 17 as a school leader, I likely have some unconscious and conscious biases from my workplace experiences and my social value paradigm. Much of the literature review in Chapter 2 was developed prior to the research and is therefore incomplete (Urquhart, 2012) and may contain bias. Once the coding process had begun and theory began to emerge, I performed further literature review to investigate the resulting theory. It is important not to let the literature review bias the study analysis by force-fitting the data into an existing theory.

Summary

John Wooden said that “A strong leader accepts the blame and gives the credit. A weak leader accepts the credit and gives the blame” (Feyoh, 2020, Develop Good Habits Section). This study sought to explore the lived experiences of SLs as they navigated through a polarizing issue and specifically responded to these challenges in a way that supported students. It utilized a multi-case method through qualitative interviews to investigate participants’ responses to hopefully allow for positive conflict management as polarizing situations arise. Chapter 2 of this study is a comprehensive review of the literature on polarization and its impacts and offers several possible solutions to these impacts. In Chapter 2, along with a review of prior research, I evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of relevant studies and identified gaps in the literature that this study sought to fill. Chapter 3 is an account of the research methodology, including a rationale for the selection of qualitative multiple case study design and specific details of how the study will be conducted. Research results are presented in Chapter 4 in the form of individual descriptions of each case. A cross-case synthesis, followed by an interpretation of the findings and, analysis of common themes is in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The goal of this literature review is to highlight considerations needed to answer the research question. There is significant research on political polarization in society and its impact on how humans interact with each other (McCarty et al., 2006; Dimant, 2021; Boxell et al., 2017). Less research has been done on how to respond to the negative impacts of this polarization (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). This current study looks to dive deeply into one population's response to this polarization and its impacts. This chapter is structured in several parts: partisanship and polarization in a pluralistic society, foundations of ideology, conservative and liberal mindsets, impacts of partisanship ideology, cultural conflict and its consequences in public schools, and finally conflict response.

Search Strategy

The search strategy for this study started with establishing a literature review concept map. This map helped guide search keywords, which included but were not limited to the following: educational leadership, political ideology, conflict in schools, conservative and liberal mindset, partisanship, culture war in education, and political polarization. Searches were conducted using EBSCOHOST and SAGE databases. Google Scholar was also used to search for information. Included in this research are books, peer review journal articles, survey statistics, theses, and dissertations, as well as newspaper, website, and magazine articles. Over 200 sources, dating from the 1780s to the present, are referenced with relevant material. While some older sources were included to allow an understanding of the longevity and history of the topic, most of the sources cited are from the last ten years.

Partisanship and Polarization in a Pluralistic Society

Pluralism has a plethora of definitions, and is more of an ideal than a reality. It is primarily characterized by cultural diversity (Witt, 2021). A society can be considered pluralistic when it has several competing value systems existing within it (Kazemzadeh, 2020). Pluralism refers to a condition within a society, system of government, or organization where different groups keep their identities while existing with other groups or a more dominant group (“Examples of Pluralism,” 2019). Pluralistic societies foster the equal participation of all citizens in the political, economic, and sociocultural life of the nation—enabling individuals as well as groups to express their cultural, linguistic, and religious identities within a framework of shared citizenship, while at the same time competing for decision-making power (Lott & Bennett, 2020; Chandhoke, 2012; “Pluralistic Society: Definition & Examples,” 2017). Since the United States is a pluralistic society, controversial topics are commonplace here.

Multiple types of pluralism exist in a society. Harvard lists three main types: cultural, political, and philosophical (Scholars at Harvard, 2015). As this research contains discussions of morality it is important to indicate a fourth type of pluralism - moral pluralism (McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin, 2022). Moral pluralists consider moral issues to be extremely complicated. Therefore, no one philosophical approach will always provide all the answers. Due to this, moral pluralists are often open-minded when faced with competing viewpoints. Often, they look at issues from several different moral perspectives before making a decision or taking action.

When political pluralism is balanced, all people should be able to contribute equally to the public discourse (Inazu, 2018). Recently, there has been an ever-increasing gap in ideological identity between individuals and groups (Castle & Stepp, 2021). This gap in ideology and belief

systems helps create polarization, which limits the ability to have discourse, and to find common ground. The bigger this gap becomes, the more these ideological positions become entrenched. Further, these positions may even be based on different foundations of morality (Haidt, 2013).

Research suggests that the more polarized a pluralistic society becomes, the less empathy and tolerance for the opposite ideological position there is (Keller & Inazu, 2020; Inazu, 2018). Affective polarization (Mason, 2012; Mason, 2018a; Martherus et al., 2019) is the idea that polarization is not just about the issues but that it impacts our feelings toward one another as individuals. This polarization often leads to dehumanizing the holders of the opposite position (Martherus et al., 2019). Partisan polarization has been in existence since the beginning of the United States (Nivola, 2010). As far back as the late 1700s, the founders called for a need to “cure” or “break” the partisan havoc. Members of Congress spat on or caned one another and were reported to have called members of the opposite party stupid, suspicious, and licentious or dangerous radicals.

Partisanship and Polarization

Partisanship can be considered the new tribalism. It not only means that one side is right but also that the other side is wrong (Goldberg, 2020). While some see polarization as a defining feature in society today (McCarty, 2019), others find it to be much less polarized than it has been portrayed (Fiorina, 2017). In their study on partisanship, Castle & Stepp (2021) found that while approximately 50% hold the centrist views that Fiorina asserts, a large minority hold polarized views especially on social/cultural issues. Respondents claim that out-party members, ones that subscribe to a different ideology, are less evolved than those in their own group (Martherus et al., 2019). This dehumanization can lead individuals and groups to seek out aggressive rather than diplomatic solutions to conflict (Leidner et al., 2013).

History of Ideological Conflict

Throughout the history of the United States, there has been a long history of ideological conflict and polarization. This polarization has ebbed and flowed through the years. The founders experienced partisanship that may even surpass the current trends. In 1792, James Madison called opponents in the opposite party “Stupid, suspicious, and licentious” (Nivola, 2010). In *Federalist No. 10* (1787, p. 1), Madison recognizes factions as exhibiting a “Zeal for different opinions based on religion or government.” Madison’s *Federalist No. 10* This paper is a call for a cease to partisan “havoc.” After he was inaugurated in 1801, Thomas Jefferson, who was often called a dangerous radical by his opponents (Nivola, 2010), on becoming president quickly removed all of his predecessors’ legally appointed judges from office. The nullification processes that were enacted by both Jefferson and Madison led to separatist movements in the 1830s.

Partisanship around states’ rights and voting laws was a contributing factor in Lincoln’s election and the start of the Civil War in 1861 (Inbody, 2016). By the end of the Reconstruction period in 1877, all the southern states were controlled by one party (History.com Editors, 2019). Partisan politics so marred the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876 that he was called “His Fraudulency” by his opponents.

In some political arenas, the 1920s through the 1980s saw a decreased level of partisanship in part due to the common enemies of the Depression, two worldwide conflicts, and the Cold War (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Situated partisanship still existed in Jim Crow laws during the New Deal and Fair Deal from 1933 to 1957, continuing to divide North and South (Katznelson & Mulroy, 2012).

As the Cold War ended, partisanship began to regrow. In addition to the loss of common enemies, Congressional members of the two political parties began to spend less time interacting with each other outside of the congressional chamber. One possible reason for this is the election of Newt Gingrich to speaker of the house in 1994. Prior to 1994, most elected officials from both parties moved themselves and their families to Washington, DC. This allowed opportunities for positive interactions. Beginning in 1994, all political business began to be conducted in only three days a week, and members were encouraged to not move families to the capital (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Lukianoff and Haidt contend that this action contributed to the acceleration of partisanship due to the decrease in opportunities for social interaction.

More recent data from *Congressional Quarterly*, which tracks how consistently members of Congress vote along party lines, calling it “party unity” or partisanship, shows an increase in partisanship in the voting records of Congress. In 1956, 70% voted along party lines regardless of issue; by 2009, 85–91% did (*CQ Almanac Online Edition*, 2021).

While Fiorina (2017) contends that American partisanship and polarization are not much more intense than in the days of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, there are many studies that suggest otherwise. McCarthy (2019) claims that polarization is a defining feature of politics (and society) today. It is widely accepted that there is polarization among the political elites and activists as well as in Congress (Mann & Ornstone, 2016; Poole & Rosenthal, 2000; Schaffner, 2011; Theirialt, 2008; Layman et al., 2006, 2010). There is evidence that this polarization is putting the public into more divided ideological camps as well (Fiorina et al., 2010; Fiorina, 2017). This polarization is not just based on political and social issues; rather, individuals are also experiencing affective polarization, which means they have polarized negative feelings toward one another as people (Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2012, 2018a).

Polarization Equals the Culture War?

In their 2020 study, Castle and Stepp find there is an increasing depth of this polarization. This study shows that several social issues have majority polarizing positions. While approximately 50% of the population does hold some centrist views, a little more than 50% are polarized on multiple social issues. Some have suggested that the culture war may have come to an end (Hartman, 2019), while new battles over social issues like religious liberty and transgender rights (Castle, 2018) suggest the battle front has just moved.

Intensely religious and nonreligious groups have deepening affective polarization and thus have become negative reference groups for one another (Castle et al., 2018; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Religion's influence on cultural issues is much higher than on noncultural ones. In one example of this, according to the Pew Research Center, anti-transgender bathroom bills show a partisan difference of 1.79 on a 6-point scale and are called statistically significant. Wormald (2015) contends that in seven of ten social categories, 33% of the population sit on a polar side of the issue. While most Americans hold moderate political views, a substantial portion express polarized views on cultural/social issues. Castle and Stepp (2020) contend that individuals and group social identities seem to fuel this polarization.

The Foundation of Political Ideology

One theory that attempts to explain this polarization in political ideology is Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2013). Moral Foundations Theory is the idea that the political ideologies of liberals and conservatives are formed in different ways. Moral foundation theorist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues propose that political ideology is formed from six moral foundations: a) care, b) fairness, c) liberty, d) loyalty, e) sanctity, and f) authority (Haidt, 2013). Haidt contends that liberal ideology primarily ascribes to the first two of the six moral

foundations: a) care or the prevention of harm, and b) fairness. These internal foundations focus on showing caring and fairness to each individual or group. The first two foundations allow for flexibility as the morality of a culture changes. These two moral foundations are closely related to decision making based primarily on reasoning and logic, an approach which has its foundations in Plato. Plato described reason and logic as being the natural monarch who should rule over other parts such as spiritedness and passions (A. & Irwin, 2019). One challenge arising from such individualistic foundations comes when, by caring about or preventing harm to one group, you may create harm for another.

According to Haidt (2013), conservative ideology is formed from all six foundations. The latter four foundations (liberty, loyalty, sanctity, and authority) are rooted much more in traditional values and a desire for consistency and minimal change. In fact, anxiety can be relieved by conservatives' holding on to moral foundations (Bose, 2019). A challenge to these four foundations is that they are less flexible to change and may limit the level, or perceived level, of care and fairness that is shown by conservatives to individuals. Haidt and his colleagues have developed a tool to help identify ideology in participants called the Moral Foundations Quiz (Atari et al., 2017).

These moral foundations, along with environment and experience, solidify individuals' political ideology at an early age (Klein & Stern, 2009). This is a particularly important consideration as ideology is unlikely to change once it is set, and there is little evidence of the efficacy of efforts to change. The division between these ideologies continues to widen, which in turn increases the self-righteousness of each position (Chambers et al., 2013). This is also referred to as the prejudice gap, which is the belief that members of the opposite ideology are more prejudiced than the members of one's own. Both ideologies prejudge the other as being

wrong, leading to an unwillingness to even listen to the other's point of view (Brandt et al., 2019).

Differences in Ideology

Each ideological group shares beliefs that are very different from those of the other group (Pew Research Center, 2015). Chambers, Schlenker, and Collision (2013) and Apple (2006) state that those that hold the conservative ideology, particularly Christians, don't use reason or scholarship. Apple even states the need for a push in K–12 education farther to the left. Other researchers state the need to expand this leftward push to those in homeschool situations, seeking verification that homeschooled students are becoming citizens in a liberal democracy and that parents don't have the ultimate right to guide a child's education (Kunzman, 2006; Courtland et al., 2018). Concurrently, many within the conservative ideology believe that the liberal ideology alienates others with a moral compass that seems superior to liberals, but appears thin and intolerant to conservatives (Parry, 2012). Both liberals and conservatives hold beliefs about key political issues—in some cases they don't even have the same understanding of the relevant vocabulary as do their opponents (Ditto et al., 2018).

Liberals and Conservatives

The words “liberal” and “conservative” conjure up many different reactions in individuals. While there is a considerable number of definitions, there is no universal understanding of the terms. The terms “liberal” and “liberalism” refer to a variety of ideas, and no one person has the authority to judge what is a truly liberal position and what is not. Currently, the term is often used to describe a person who believes in more government action to meet individual needs (Rawls, 1993; Safire, 1993). The terms “conservative” and “conservatism” in American history have meant many different things, including a defender of the status quo and

those who, when change becomes necessary, prefer it to come slowly and in moderation (Allitt, 2009; Safire, 1993).

The terms “conservative” and “liberal” can be used in multiple contexts including but not limited to political, social, and religious. Separating and categorizing these contexts is challenging as all three contexts are intertwined (Castle & Stepp, 2021). In the United States, the groups identified as more socially liberal have the general characteristics and viewpoints of secularism, gender equality, internationalism, pro-choice, gun control, universal health care, and removal of all references to God in schools in accordance with the ideal of the separation of church and state (Wolin, 2004; Donahue, 2004). By contrast, the group identified as socially conservative has the general characteristics and viewpoints of opposition to abortion, advocacy against drug abuse, opposition to pornography, opposition to same-sex marriage, support for school prayer, promotion of abstinence only sex education, Christian traditions, and support of LGBTQ rights but opposition to their “normalization” (Danver, 2013).

Pew Research Center

The Pew Research Center, in its online survey given over multiple years to more than 5,000 individuals regarding political typology, divides political ideology into eight groups and a ninth group of people who are less politically engaged. While Iyengar and Vavreck (2012) argue that sampling bias is a concern in online polling research, the Pew Research Center (PRC) uses a randomly selected, probability-based sample of U.S. adults 18 and older to attempt to decrease this limitation (*U.S. Survey Methodology*, 2021).

Four of these groups are classified as liberal and represent 55% of the respondents, in order from more to less liberal: Progressive Left (PL), which are 6% of the general public and 12% of Democrats; Establishment Liberals (EL), which are 13% of the public and 23% of

Democrats; Democratic Mainstays (DM), which are 16% of the public and 28% of Democrats; and Outsider Left (OL), which are 10% of the public and 16% of Democrats. Four of the groups are classified by the PRC as conservative, which represent 40% of the respondents; In order from more to less conservative, these groups are the following: Faith and Flag Conservatives (FF), which are 10% of the general public and 23% of Republicans; Committed Conservatives (CC), which are 7% of the public and 15% of Republicans; Populist Right (PR), which are 11% of the public and 23% of Republicans; and Ambivalent Right (AR), which are 12% of the public and 18% of Republicans. The final group is Stressed Sideliners (SS), which are 15% of the public, with 13% leaning Democratic and 15% leaning Republican, and which share ideology with both parties (“Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” 2021). The survey’s findings show how each group in the sample feels about five social issues: abortion, religion and government, transgender people and society, history of racism in America, and the Black Lives Matter movement (“How the Political Typology Groups Compare,” 2021).

This survey provides a multitude of data on social issues. FF and PL groups show the most polarization towards each other of any groups. FFs are 10% of the public and represent 23% of those who are Republican or Republican-leaning. Among FFs, 84% believe that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, while 95% of PLs believe it should be legal. This compares to a belief of 59% legal and 41% illegal in the general population. Among FFs, 75% believe that government policies should support religious values and beliefs. This is an outlier statistic as the highest percentage in any other “conservative” typology is 29%. Among PLs, 95% believe religion and government should be kept separate, compared to 27% of the general population. FFs feel that transgenderism is not good for society at the rate of 73%, while PLs feel it is good for society at the rate of 88%. This compares to 38% of the general population feeling it is good,

32% feeling it is bad, and 29% feeling neither good nor bad. Among FFs, 63% feel that public attention to the history of racism is bad, while 95% of PLs feel it is good; this compares to the 35% of the general population that states it is bad, while 53% feel it is good, and 21% feeling neither good nor bad. Finally, when asked if they were in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, 93% of FFs said no, and 97% of PL said yes. This compares to a general public that responded 45% no and 55% yes (“How the Political Typology Groups Compare,” 2021).

Castle and Stepp’s research (2021) utilized the 2017 Pew Research Center’s data to attempt to determine level of polarization on five social-cultural issues (abortion, same-sex marriage, intelligent design, the ten commandments, and anti-trans bathroom bills) and five non-social-cultural ones (welfare, environment, immigration, healthcare, and military size). Both groups have a “large majority” of respondents polarized on the social cultural issues but are much closer regarding non cultural topics. The results of the 2021 Political Typology Group survey show percentages that indicate continued large polarization on social topics.

Impacts of Partisanship Ideology

Partisanship ideology has societal impact. Partisanship is often part of an individual’s social identity, which then shapes their behavior. There is a willingness to dehumanize people not in your ideological group and to discriminate against them even in apolitical contexts (Cassese, 2019). Kelman (1973) reports dehumanization from 1932 when Roosevelt’s supporters called Herbert Hoover and his supporters a “fat time capon,” “treasonous rats,” “cowardly sacks of garbage,” “Frankenstein’s monster,” and “Not even people” (p. 520). When identified as no longer human, Kelman found, principles of morality don’t apply. Dehumanization is applied to many groups and contexts including members of the LGBTQ community (Fasoli et al., 2015). Dehumanization justifies harsh and inhumane treatment during extreme intergroup conflict

(Bandura, 1999). It also makes people easier to stereotype and assign nefarious motivations to. In Kelman's study (1973, p. 523), 77% of respondents said out-party members were less evolved, 65% by a ten-point difference on a 1–100 scale. Both political parties dehumanize at similar rates, which matches Chambers, Schlenker, and Collison's (2013) study on the prejudice gap. In contemporary politics there is a willingness on the part of both partisan groups to explicitly characterize the opposite party as being like animals and as less evolved. When groups are dehumanized, aggressive rather than diplomatic solutions to conflict are more likely. People prefer aggressive rather than diplomatic solutions to conflict when interacting with groups they have dehumanized (Leidner et al., 2013).

Implicit negative attitudes towards outgroups lead to spontaneous unsavory behavior (Fiske, 1998). Victims are more likely to seek retributive rather than restorative justice. Decisions on which type of justice to seek are based in part on the belief that restorative justice will not work. According to Fiske, the lower the belief in the humanity of one's opponents, the less likely a desire for restorative justice. Belief in the sentience of others supports diplomatic rather than aggressive conflict resolution.

Conflict

Social conflict and conflict resolution have long been topics of extensive study (Coser, 1967; Jackson, 1993; Schlee, 2004; Borgatta & Montgomery, 2000). Borgatta and Montgomery contend that conflicts are based on power, dividing order-givers, who have an interest in maintaining the status quo, from order-takers, who have interest in changing it. Conflict motivates groups to seek allies and therefore tends to polarize a society into different factions. Conflicts continue to escalate as each side retaliates against offenses (real or perceived) from the other. De-escalation only occurs when one side is completely out of resources, or when both

sides realize that resources are so diminished that the likelihood of winning is dim. Jackson (1993) contends that conflict is produced by groups' having different goals, adding that conflict resolution is only obtainable through intergroup cooperation.

While conflict and conflict resolution are often focused on what people are fighting about, Schlee (2004) considers another question: "who is fighting and why?" (p. 135). Schlee contends there are three possible reasons individuals take a side in conflict: social structures or identities such as religion, region, or language; inclusion or exclusion categories within the social structure such as conservative Christians within the group of Christianity; and economies of group size as the ability to team up with others to win the conflict.

There are five typical approaches to conflict resolution: avoidance, acceptance, gradual social reform, nonviolent confrontation, or violent confrontation (Schellenberg, 1996). It has been argued that the nature of conflict and the approaches to conflict resolution are too distinct, and the gap between them too wide and widening.

Conflict in School Systems

Public school systems, being an integral part of the sociocultural identity of the United States, are not immune to the increasing gap in ideological positions. Educational institutions serve the public, so it is important to understand the impact these conflicts have, in order to ensure that schools are honoring the identity safety of all marginalized groups (Lowe, 2019).

In the field of higher education, as many as 81% of professors self-identify as liberal (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006; "Chart: Democratic vs. Republican Occupations," 2016). Empirically, the majority of students in teacher prep programs also identify as liberal (Journell, 2017). All candidates recommended by the National Education Association for senatorial seats in 2020 were Democratic candidates (U.S. Senate, 2020), and over 75% of teachers and academic

administrators giving campaign contributions gave them to Democratic candidates (“Chart: Democratic vs. Republican Occupations,” 2016). Since the dominant viewpoint in education appears to be a liberal one, and since often the minority viewpoints fall into a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1994), teachers/leaders and families that have minority viewpoints may not have the voice needed to be supported in their ideological stance.

One reason these issues are so impactful to education is that the difference in ideology between the staff in schools and the families they serve can be very large. Studies indicate that most staff in education have a liberal mindset. The families that public education serves nationwide are statistically closer to 50-50 ideologically (“Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” 2021). This difference of ideologies has created cultural conflict and has conservative families and staff disagreeing with policies and practices or even leaving the public schools (Douglas, 2014), which increases the ideological gap in public schools even further.

An example of cultural conflict in schools is in how SLs interpret, implement, and follow policy and law around LGBTQ rights, such as the use of bathrooms and locker rooms of transgender students. A memo from the Portland Oregon Public Schools to building administrators affirms the need to provide the use of a bathroom and locker room of the gender that a student identifies with (Patterson, 2014). In the state of Oregon, there are Oregon Revised Statutes that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation (“Prohibition of Discrimination,” 2019). This is defined as “an individual’s actual or perceived heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality or gender identity, regardless of whether the individual’s gender identity, appearance, expression, or behavior differs from that traditionally associated with the individual’s sex at birth” (“Construction of Statutes: Definitions,” 2019, p. 1). The Oregon School Board Association, an organization that recommends policy to Oregon school districts,

does not recommend a specific policy for transgender student bathrooms; it does, however, give guidance to schools to allow students to use the bathroom and locker room of the gender the student identifies with (Oregon School Board Association, 2015). A dear colleague letter released by the United States Department of Education on May 13, 2016 helped to set expectations for school districts to follow. This letter, which has since been rescinded due to legal conflicts, confirms that local districts must allow transgender students access to facilities consistent with their gender identities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Implementation of these policies conflict with many conservatives' worldview (Lewis, 2019).

LGBTQ rights are seen from a very different perspective based on ideology and worldview. What the socially liberal worldview may see as rights issues, the socially conservative, sometimes Christian, worldview may see as moral ones (*How Religion and LGBTQ Rights Intersect in Media Coverage*, 2020; The Hasting's Center, 2014). There is strong agreement among conservatives that transgender rights and religious liberty are part of the new culture war, and a substantial minority, nearly 40% of Americans, hold polarized attitudes on LGBTQ issues such as bathroom use (Castle, 2018, p. 670). Laymen and Green (2006) contend that cultural issues are at the heart of any potential polarization.

Conflict Response

Contentious experiences can create conflict. While conflict is not necessarily bad, it can create problems depending on how leadership responds. There is a large variety of ideological positions and worldviews that educational leaders hold. These differences during contentious experiences can cause SLs and/or stakeholders to engage in the spiral of silence, extremism/dehumanization, preference falsification, or compromise. When groups feel marginalized, transgressional behavior may occur, such as retreating into a "spiral of silence"

(Noelle-Neumann, 1993) that stops their voices from being heard, resorting to preference falsification (Kuran, 1997) or dehumanizing others in the out group (Martherus et al., 2019). This transgressional behavior can increase with altered perceptions of fear of social sanctions brought on by media portrayals (Bandura, 2001).

Spiral of Silence

This theoretical model of opinion formation was developed in the early 1970s by Noelle-Newman (1974) and was founded on a study of the effects of public opinion and ostracism of philosophers such as Locke or Montaigne, and on ideas about conformity to majority pressure expounded on by Asch (Scheufele, 2008). The perception of opinion of others rather than the real opinion climate of others impacts people's willingness to express their opinions in public (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). This theory postulates that groups that see themselves as minority or as losing public ground on an issue will be less vocal and willing to share their opinions in public, consequently making the minority opinion seem weaker and the majority stronger (Noelle-Newman, 1974; Scheufele, 2008).

The spiral of silence is more prevalent in issues with a moral component or in issues that are value-laden (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Studies have investigated the spiral of silence in morally controversial topics such as affirmative action (Hayes, 2007; Moy et al., 2001), abortion (McDevitt et al., 2003; Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990), capital punishment (Hayes, 2007), LGBTQ issues (Gearhart & Zhang, 2013), and environmental activism (Hayes, 2007). Media and social media portrayal of social issues impact individuals' perceptions of the opinion climates surrounding them and therefore contribute to the spiral of silence (Scheufele, 2008; Scheufele, Shannahan & Lee, 2001). Eventually, the echo chambers (Lee, 2018) created by social media can even have an impact on social norms (Scheufele, 2008; Gearhart & Zhang, 2013). Several factors

impact the level of the spiral of silence. First, at the micro or individual level, predispositions to fear of isolation, ambiguous issues, and demographic variables have been shown to have an impact (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). The macro or group level is impacted by perception of public opinion; as it shifts, individuals are less likely to influence personal opinions.

Preference Falsification

Preference falsification, a theory developed in the early 1990s by Tim Kuran, states that individuals say they believe one thing but state they want or believe something else in response to perceived social pressures (Frank, 1996). In Kuran's work on preference falsification, he describes a self-interest calculation used to determine speaking out against the majority opinion. According to Frank, it combines the reward for speaking out, the impact on one's reputation, and the self-respect/peace of mind maintained in not speaking out (p. 116). The more people favor one position, the higher the reputational cost of sharing the opposite. Choices to speak the minority opinion are not exclusively pragmatic and rational, but also based on the respect and affection of one's peers. There are accounts of "heroic behavior" (p. 117) in speaking out at great cost to one's position and reputation. This often happens to maintain a sense of self. (Frank, 1996; Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, 2009). Kuran's work is based partly on Solomon Asch's 1956 study on social pressure. This study concluded that when faced with peer pressure to answer a problem incorrectly, participants did so at a much higher rate than when answering the same questions alone. Often the expression of public opinion is in binary or either-or form; agree, disagree; yes, no; like, dislike, etc. (Leon-Medina et al., 2019). Most social controversy is nuanced, but essentially framed around this binary form.

Factors that impact level of preference falsification are similar to those that impact the spiral of silence. Predispositions to fear of isolation, ambiguous issues, and demographic

variables have been shown to have an impact (Leon-Medina et al., 2019). Most often, preference falsification is expressed in public but not private opinion (Argyle, 1957; Asch, 1956; Mouton et al., 1956). In these cases, “preference falsification implies compliance, but not necessarily conversion” (Leon-Medina, p. 395). There is evidence that, under certain circumstances, falsifying preference publicly can lead to genuine conversion (Kuran, 1997; Moscovici, 1980). Leon-Medina postulates that because “preference falsification is a source of cognitive dissonance” (p. 395), if it is done systematically, it can lead to changing one’s private opinion.

Kuran (1997) considers preference falsification socially inefficient because it leads to the decrease of public discourse, which over time leads to knowledge falsification. This is the intentional or unintentional concealment of knowledge for future generations. In addition, self-censorship such as preference falsification, as a form of self-protection, is on the rise. Ekins (2020) found that 77% of Republicans, 64% of moderates, and 52% of Democrats now feel they need to self-censor.

Compromise

Compromise, by definition, is neither side getting everything it wants. Further, the ability to compromise contains an understanding of both current and future cooperation (Dixit et al., 2000). As discussed earlier in this chapter, the current polarization of society (“How the Political Typology Groups Compare,” 2021) increases dehumanization (Martherus et al., 2019), which discourages cooperation and therefore compromise. One strategy often used in compromise is staying silent. Staying silent on social issues may no longer be a credible option for any respectable person with a public footprint (Kuran, 1997). Former President Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Compromise is like the middle of the road; it is always safer to walk on than the edges.” In the current polarized environment, the statement of the former leader of the labour

party in Great Britain, Aneurin Bevan, seems more applicable: “We know what happens to people in the middle of the road; they get run over” (*Aneurin Bevan Quotes*, 1945).

Conflict Management

Another approach for responding to social conflict created by political ideology differences is a search for understanding of the opposite ideological position through discourse (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Although agreement on issues may be problematic, this approach attempts to separate the person from the idea. Mieretzky (2013) calls for committed impartiality, while recognizing that neutrality is impossible on many issues, looking for common ground through listening. Both liberals and conservatives need to be able to cogently articulate their beliefs and listen to each other. (Schulz, 2020)

Strategic Dialogue

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “We are going to have to face the fact that either we are going to live together or die together, and if we live together, we have to talk” (Lee, 2018, p. 75). A quick summary of strategic dialogue is important here because it as a whole, or any steps within it, may be a part of answering the research question. Strategic dialogue is a particular way to have discourse and communicate with people you disagree with (Lee, 2018). Not all dialogue is created equal: talking about what is for dinner and discussing whether to allow transgender bathrooms in school have different stakes. Strategic dialogue is typically used for the latter. There are four assumptions prior to enacting the strategic dialogue strategy: everyone thinks they are right (Pamerleau, 2013), people recognize we want to change each other’s minds (López-Pérez, 2017), dialogue is more able to change people’s mind than debate/argument because there is less negative effect on the other persons (Hyde & Bineham, 2000), and dialogue isn’t a replacement for action (Fergus, 2020; Lee, 2018). To succeed with strategic dialogue three steps

are needed. Preparation is step one. This includes preparing yourself, your audience, and the space (Lee, 2018). The second step Lee presents, is having the dialogue itself. This includes using strategic listening (Tate & Dunklee, 2005), storytelling (Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2003), and repeating to break down barriers such as ego protection (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009), team loyalty (Haugen, 2021), comfort (Castagno, 2008), and misinformation (Freeze et al., 2020). Step three is to make an ask, reflect and evaluate, and repeat the process. Barriers to the success of step three are the individual's or group's worldview protection and ensuring that there is a key strategic outcome (Lee, 2018). There are some barriers to strategic dialogue. According to Lee, it takes a long time to master and works more effectively in one-on-one conversations.

Summary

Dealing with contentious issues is something that SLs face on an ever-increasing basis. With the increase in polarization, these conflicts seem to be happening more often and with more intensity. The impacts these conflicts have, and the solutions that have been tried in the field, warrant more research. Much has been done in the area of conflict response. In the charged times in which we live, investigating strategies that are used and the resulting impacts will hopefully help SLs to support their students in the future. This study provided other insights as guidance to SLs who work with stakeholders who hold political ideologies different from their own.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this study, I utilized a qualitative multiple case study research design. A case study investigates a specific issue or phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2017). It is important to understand qualitative research to have a complete understanding of case study design. There is a constructionist orientation of learning and knowledge in qualitative research (Crotty, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2017). Constructionism suggests that truth is relative, constantly changing, and contains unknowable biases that can't be totally eliminated from research (Crotty, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative studies generally have hypotheses and constructs that are loosely defined. Due to the individualized and subjective nature of social realities, data from interactions between people and contexts is essential, and inferences are necessary, when conducting qualitative research.

Qualitative research is an attempt to understand a phenomenon rather than an attempt to change it. Even though researchers recognize that they will have an impact on the environment they study, safeguards need to be put in place to minimize the manipulation of that environment. Both qualitative and quantitative research questions may be included in individual case study or multiple case study research designs. Questions asking to explain, explore, describe, and understand are typically the focus of qualitative case studies. Often case study research questions ask how or why, rather than research questions that aim to generalize effects to multiple populations (Crotty, 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Suter, 2021). Case study research questions need to address the substance of what the study is about (Hatch, 2002).

Due to the nature of the research, qualitative researchers often spend a considerable amount of time in the researched environment and with the participants they are investigating (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2017). This allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the

participants and context than they would through quantitative research. The depth and descriptive nature of qualitative research often produce findings that help to better understand social and educational contexts.

Case Study Design

Case studies can be defined as in-depth analyses of a bounded system or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Stake, 2000). A bounded system is limited by time, space, or activity. Examples of cases could be studies of a single person or group of people, school, program, or event. To qualify as a case, the number of people or events must be limited. A case study's purpose is to uncover and understand the characteristics of the phenomenon under study.

Yin (2017) asserts that case studies are used for three main purposes: description, exploration, or explanation of a phenomenon. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection may be used in case studies. Qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observations are the most commonly used (Merriam, 2009). A case study seeks understanding and meaning in social phenomena. Primarily, according to Merriam, the final product of case studies is descriptive in nature (p. 39).

Merriam (2009) argues there are three main attributes in a case study. The first is that they are particularistic, in that a case study focuses on a specific person, event, phenomenon, etc. The purpose of a case study is most often not to generalize but rather to increase understanding. The second attribute is that case studies are heuristic, bringing new knowledge or confirmation of previous understanding. Merriam states that case studies "illuminate the readers' understanding of the phenomenon under study" (p. 44). Finally, case studies are descriptive of both the context and participants.

Single case studies explore an individual case without comparison to other cases. They are commonly used with an extreme or unique case, a longitudinal study, a biographical case, or as a basis for future case studies. One limitation of single case studies is that they most often lack generalizability. A multiple case study collects and analyzes data from several cases or various aspects of one original case. Cases in a multiple case study share some common characteristics or are in some way bounded together. Multiple case studies can be more generalizable, but that is not a primary goal of the study; the goal is, rather, to understand a specific phenomenon.

Case Study Rationale

Of research, Yin states, “The question can provide an important clue regarding the appropriate research method to be used” (2017, pp. 10-11). I defined the purpose of this study as an exploration of the solutions educational leaders have derived from the lived experiences of going through a highly contentious sociopolitical educational conflict. To answer the research questions in an in-depth analysis of a distinct phenomenon (Yin, 2017), a sociopolitical conflict in educational leadership is needed for analysis. Yin says that “A ‘how’ or ‘why’ question asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (p. 13) is ideal for a case study. A case study is the best research design choice for this study as the researcher will investigate a contemporary phenomenon. In addition, the initial research questions explore the educational leaders’ experiences and look to answer a “how” question.

Multiple Case Studies

Multiple case study design is an analysis of more than one case. There is the possibility of replication in multiple case study design, which can lead to powerful conclusions (Yin, 2017). The researcher repeats the same research process for each individual case. The experiences of

each school leader are unique and individual. They do, however, all share the experience of leading an educational system during the same controversial sociopolitical event. Despite their differences in leadership roles, experience in educational leadership, and personal political positions, participants are expected to share some experiences due to all being in the same bounded educational system. Using multiple cases of educational leaders increases both reliability and validity by providing a variety of experiences from which to draw conclusions (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2017).

The Researcher

I have worked in education for 28 years. The first 12 years were as an elementary school teacher and the last 16 as an elementary school principal. I hold a Bachelor of Science degree in elementary education and a Master of Arts in educational leadership. I have no direct relationship that represents a conflict of interest nor have met any participant prior to the beginning of this research.

I have been trained in the skills necessary to carry out the designed study. I have interviewed multiple people in the course of my career. While this research was my first full qualitative study, my skills include training in listening skills as a part of school systems training and a qualitative research course at George Fox University.

Participant Selection

Nonprobability sampling, a process of selecting participants that is not random, was used for this study. Sampling in this way is the most common sampling method in qualitative research in which statistical generalization is not the goal (Merriam, 2009). Since the goal of the research is to understand the experiences of participants in a specific bounded system, nonprobability sampling was logical and necessary. Purposive sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling. In

purposive sampling, a researcher uses his or her subjective judgment to select participants that fit the study based on a specific set of criteria (Merriam, 2009) rather than on random selection.

Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants fitting specific criteria.

Criteria

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of people in a specific set of cases who shared a specific common experience. The criteria used to select participants was that they must be individuals who were educational leaders in the bounded system at the time of the experience. All participants, therefore, had the same shared experience of leading an American public school system, at the building or district level, through a contentious sociopolitical educational conflict. To maintain distance, I chose a district in which I have never been employed or had my own children attend.

Case Selection

Upon gaining Institutional Review Board approval for the study, I contacted a key gatekeeper/informant. Gatekeepers are individuals used by researchers to gain access and to advocate for participation on behalf of the researcher (Clark, 2010; Campbell et al., 2006). In order to be effective, gatekeepers need to have enough relational or positional power to allow access to the relevant participants or organizations (Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). In order for the gatekeeper to be useful, it is very important to ensure that they do not feel they or their school are threatened by the research (Wanat, 2008).

If needed, the gatekeeper will take on the role of key informant (KI). The key informant technique has been used in social research for decades (Tremblay, 1957). Marshall (1996) identified five characteristics of a KI: KIs need to have a role in the community being researched, knowledge of the information being researched, willingness to communicate that

knowledge to the researcher, the ability to communicate that knowledge intelligibly, and the ability to maintain impartiality by suspending their bias as much as possible. While an advantage to utilizing a KI is the speed with which data can be collected, KIs may only provide information they consider “politically acceptable” (p. 93).

The gatekeeper provided me access and an introductory email to two participants. One participant the gatekeeper believed to be socially conservative and one he believed to be socially liberal. I reached out to both participants and they both agreed to participate in this study. As a sole researcher, I limited the study to a manageable number of participants to enable a deep analysis.

Data Collection

In a case study the researcher should collect data from multiple and varied sources in order to cover a broad range of behavioral issues. Triangulating with multiple data sets increases the validity of conclusions (Yin, 2017). Yin further suggests that a wide case study database, and a researcher that maintains a clear chain of evidence, increase the reliability of a study. Finally, Yin says that a reader of the report should be able to follow the researcher’s steps from question creation to final conclusions.

For this study, I adhered to the principles Yin lays out to increase the validity of the findings. I was the primary data collector and analyzer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2017). I collected data from each participant regarding the sociopolitical event experienced during the 2021–2022 school year. I then analyzed the experience of each educational leader separately, and performed a cross-case analysis to explore both the unique and shared experiences of the selected educational leaders. To triangulate data for each leader, I used multiple forms of evidence. Specifically, I conducted three interviews, gathered any relevant

documents, administered the PEW and Moral Foundations surveys to determine ideological viewpoints, and participated in an ongoing email correspondence.

Interviews

The primary method of data collection utilized was a series of interviews conducted with each participant. When conducting intensive studies about a few select individuals, interviews are the best method of data collection (Merriam, 2009). Interviews are frequently used when researchers desire to ascertain what “is in and on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 2014, p. 341). Patton adds, “We cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions. ... the purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (pp. 340–41). The research sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of school leaders (SL) as they recounted past lived experiences. Dialogue provided the greatest insight.

I conducted and recorded all the interviews. Specifically, I conducted three interviews with each participant of the study. The initial interview was an effort to build rapport and gather background data about the participants and where they work. During the second interview, I utilized questions from the MFQ developed by Mohammad Atari, Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham, and Morteza Dehghani (2017) as well as the most recent PTQ developed by the Pew Research Center, which asks participants 16 questions to place them into one of nine political groups (Political typology quiz, 2021). The third interview utilized a semi-structured approach (Vogt et al., 2012) in order to explore the participants’ lived experience of leadership through a controversial culture war event.

A “good interview” (Roulston, 2010) is one in which the interviewer creates at least three to five open-ended, relevant questions as a guide to the interviewer. Prior to conducting the research, I created interview protocols to use throughout the interviews (Appendix B). Roulston

further recommends selecting a location with limited distractions and interruptions and one that is comfortable to the participants. Interview times and locations were chosen by the participants. Roulston also recommends that questions begin easy, move on to harder questions, and then finish with easy questions. I began with basic demographic questions and built to more personal and probing questions to attempt to relax participants and elicit descriptive information.

Specifically, interview questions for interview one focused on gathering background information about the participants, the context in which they currently work, and the context in where they were at the time of the event in question. With this background information I could begin to understand their experiences as educational leaders. These questions generated responses about the participants' leadership roles and duties and helped to begin to determine their individual political ideology. Interview two included questionnaires designed to more precisely identify the participants' political ideology. Questions for interview three enabled participants to tell stories of their experiences in education that they determined were controversial. Further, to elicit responses to the specific event under study, my goal in interview three, was to not only have participants share "war stories," but to also share the impact these events had on their leadership and on the solutions they could envision.

In creating questions, I followed Roulston's (2010) advice on developing "good" interview questions. Good questions are open-ended, short, and concise. Binary or leading questions should be avoided. Interviewers should clarify any terms used by participants, ask probing questions, and use participant's words in the following questions. I created guiding interview questions for each interview that were short, concise, and open-ended, as Roulston suggests. Merriam (2009) recommends avoiding yes or no questions, and instead using questions that begin with phrases such as "Tell me about," which are likely to elicit stories. Whenever

possible, binary questions were avoided; however, some questions from the Pew Research Center's PTQ and from the Moral Foundations Questionnaire regarding political ideology and moral foundations are binary or on a Likert scale. During the interview process, I took interview field notes to attempt to determine comfort level from nonverbal cues. This is important when talking about controversial topics, so that the researcher can know when to allow participants the opportunity for breaks, or even when it might be best to terminate the interview.

I informally piloted most interview questions with a school leadership colleague I have worked with in the past. Previous trusting relationships allowed for piloting of these questions without fear from the pilot participants. Questions about the specific event could not be asked in the pilot, as pilot participants did not experience that event. This mock interview allowed for the development of potential follow-up and clarifying questions and were to be used in subsequent interviews. Overall, I conducted what Merriam (2009) refers to as semi-structured interviews. It was assumed that each leader will have defined his or her experience in a unique way, so the interview questions provided in the protocol served as a guide rather than a script.

Questionnaires

During the second interview, the MFQ was administered to each participant. The MFQ was developed as a way to measure moral foundations and link them to political ideology. I also administered the PTQ (2021), to each participant. The answers to these questionnaires were delivered by me verbally, and responses were recorded and then entered into the databases created by the creators of both surveys. Results were then used to determine the ideological stances of each participant.

The MFQ is one way to attempt to measure each participant's political ideology by determining which moral foundations they self-select as important to them. The self-scorable

MFQ has two sections. The first section contains 16 questions measuring how each participant determines whether something is right or wrong. Answers are on a six-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all relevant) to 5 (extremely relevant). The second section of the MFQ contains 16 questions asking for the participant's agreement or disagreement with statements. This section is also measured on a six-point Likert scale. There is one test question in each section to "catch people who are not paying attention." Answers to the 30 active questions are then tabulated to determine a score for each foundation of morality. The foundations the MFQ separates these scores into are: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Average politically moderate scores on this measure are 20.2 for harm/care, 20.5 for fairness/reciprocity, 16.0 for in-group/loyalty, 16.5 for authority/respect, and 12.6 for purity/sanctity. Each question is then matched to one of the five moral foundations. Typically, those who identify as liberal score slightly higher than 20.2 on harm/care and 20.5 on fairness/reciprocity, and much lower than average on the other three foundations. Conservatives generally show the opposite pattern. (The self-scorable MFQ appears in Appendix C.)

The Political Typology Quiz (PTQ) is a questionnaire developed by the Pew Research Center. I used the most recent version of the PTQ, which was released in December 2021. The Pew Research Center has been using the PTQ to collect data on political typology since 1990. This questionnaire contains 16 items. It asks participants to select between two statements that most closely match their view on a range of political topics including both social and nonsocial issues. It then uses the responses to categorize participants into one of nine political types. The liberal types, from most polarized to centrist, and the percentage in which they appear in the general population are as follows: Progressive Left (6%), Establishment Liberals (13%), Democratic Mainstays (16%), and Outsider Left (10%). The conservative types, from most

polarized to centrist, and the percentage in which they appear in the general population are: Faith and Flag conservatives; (10%), Committed Conservatives (7%), Populist Right (11%), and Ambivalent Right (12%). The final type is Stressed Sideliners, which are defined as those disconnected from politics and holding mixed views on topics; they constitute 15% of the population (“Political Typology Quiz,” 2021). (The PTQ appears in Appendix D.)

One recent study has confirmed the reliability of the MFQ with respect to identifying political positionality. High scores in the care and fairness foundations are negatively correlated with political conservatism, and authority, loyalty, and sanctity foundations are positively correlated with political conservatism (Kivikangas et al., 2021). The connection to political ideology of the care and fairness foundation is generally weaker than the connection to political ideology of authority, loyalty, and sanctity. The Kivikangas et al. study concludes that this difference in degree of connection to political ideology suggests that caring and avoiding harm are “more widely regarded as important across the political divide” (p. 87). Further, the foundations of authority, loyalty, and sanctity were slightly more strongly correlated with a social-political orientation than an economic-political one. This study thus “confirms and expands the relation of moral foundations and political orientation” (p. 88).

Debrief of Interviews

Following each interview session, I shared the preliminary findings and a tentative analysis of the data with the participants. I asked the participants to verify their interpretations of their experiences and presented them with tentative answers to my research question. I treated each participant as a collaborator in the research by allowing them to modify, add, or delete information as they saw fit. Member checks with participants were conducted via email

throughout the research process to answer questions that arose or discrepancies that were found during the data analysis.

Data Management

Having a data management system is important to keep data organized and easily accessible during both the analysis and the writing processes (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2017). To manage data, I first identified each piece of data by the case it was collected from. I used the initials of the educational leaders to identify each case (for example, TF). I also coded each piece of data by type and date collected (for example, TF_interview_12.20.21). All data was then organized into a case study database. I created an inventory of common themes from each case. Each time a new piece of data was collected, it was added to the database and the inventory. The data itself was organized in electronic folders labeled with each individual case (for example, TF). A folder was also created to hold cross-case memos containing researcher notes written during data analysis. Inside each case folder were subfolders differentiating the type of data collected: survey, interview, document, and memos. This created an electronic database saved to my password-protected computer. A narrative account of each individual case was included in the written report on each case. This narrative included direct quotes of participants to support interpretations of the data (Yin, 2017). The case study database supported me in creating this narrative as at the same time it supported organizing data for analysis.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam (2009, p. 175), “Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data.” Consolidating, sorting, and interpreting what educational leaders say and email, any documents they provide, and their questionnaire responses helped make meaning from the data. The data analysis process is the means of determining answers to the research questions.

Merriam notes that data collection and analysis are often done simultaneously in qualitative research. I therefore analyzed data as I collected it. This constant analysis may affect the type of data collected in future stages of data collection. Merriam argues that all qualitative data analysis is inductive and comparative, drawing heavily on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method. Although grounded theory was the method that Glaser and Strauss used the constant comparative method to establish, Merriam considers it an analysis technique adaptable and frequently used in all types of qualitative research. While using the constant comparative method, the researcher is able to construct and revise categories by continuously comparing patterns and themes that emerge from the data. In this study, I used the constant comparison of themes and patterns to lead to a deeper understanding of the experiences of the school leaders.

The initial step of qualitative data analysis is to break down data into smaller segments (Merriam, 2015), so that these smaller pieces of data can be compared to each other and then be connected back together to answer the research questions. In this study, a single interview was broken down into themes/categories and then compared to similar themes/categories in other interviews or questionnaires. Merriam defines categories as "conceptual elements that 'cover' or span many individual examples of the category" (p. 181). The theme/category is not the data, but rather a construct coming from the data that illustrates recurring patterns. Through the research process, themes may merge with each other or separate into subcategories. These themes/categories can be viewed as "buckets into which segments of text are placed" (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 159). Creating themes/categories is an inductive process as the researcher must begin with data, and then it must be broken into segments, clustered, and named. As more data was collected, the process became more deductive as I determined if new data fits into existing themes previously created.

Themes can be created from one of three places: the researcher, the participants, or prior literature (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). A few general themes such as spiral of silence (Journell, 2017; Noelle-Neumann, 1993), preference falsification (Kuran, 1997), and dehumanization (Leidner et al., 2013) will be borrowed classifications from prior literature. Merriam (2009) warns that borrowed classifications can impact the development of future themes that will emerge from the data. Most themes, however, were created by me or the participants from points found in the data collected. According to Merriam, themes constructed during analysis will be: a) responsive to the research question and aligned with the research purpose, b) illuminating the nature of the data, c) encompassing all relevant data, d) mutually exclusive whenever possible in that a relevant data point can only be placed in one category, and e) congruent to all other thematic concepts (pp. 169-208).

Prior to data being placed in themes, data must be coded by the researcher. First, data was sorted into the data management system (Yin, 2017). Each time new data is collected I added it to both the database and the inventory. For example, after the first interview with each participant, I printed, examined, analyzed, and transcribed interviews and field notes and began coding these notes. Coding is “the process of mankind notations next to bits of data that strike you as potentially relevant for answering your research question(s)” (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). Coding allowed me to capture the participants’ thoughts, stimulate ideas for themes, and create future interview questions. The purpose of coding was to identify themes that current and future data could be sorted into.

In early stages of data collection, I used an open coding strategy. I was open to any possible answer, pattern, or theme that arose from the data. Assigning open codes led to the development of themes. Merriam (2009) calls this grouping of similar codes analytic coding. As

data was added to the database, coding became more and more analytical. I created a running list of code groups in a separate memo. Initial analysis of political ideology questionnaires during interview one influenced future interview questions.

Following each interview, I transcribed data and saved it to the case study database. After transcription, I continued the coding process. I first coded each piece of data by participant's initials, type of data, and date collected. This system allowed me to retrieve data quickly and easily. Each school leader's interview was read multiple times, and notes were added in the margins commenting on the data. In addition, I wrote case memos/reflections for each SL, including utilizing field notes to comment on the affective domain of the participant during each interview. These memos included emerging patterns and identified areas to pursue in future communications with participants. After each interview, I wrote cross-case memos, allowing me to reflect on themes that emerged across cases. Constant comparative analysis was done within and across cases to strengthen the validity and reliability of claims and to assist in the final analysis. (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2017).

Constant comparative analysis also allowed me to organize and refine themes emerging throughout the study and supported the development of the final analysis. Ongoing data analysis is important to help the data not be "unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming" (Merriam, 2009, p. 171).

Cross-Case Synthesis

According to Yin (2017), there are four general analytic strategies that can be used in any combination while conducting qualitative research: relying on theoretical propositions, developing case description, using both qualitative and quantitative data, and examining explanations. He further argues that researchers need a predetermined strategy prior to engaging

in case study data analysis. I chose developing a description as my guiding strategy for this research. The research questions are grounded in response to polarizing events, the conflict they create, and how educational leaders respond. Thus, my data analysis led to themes relevant to those case descriptions. This provided a holistic narrative account of each case. Each case was thoroughly described. Simultaneously, I explored theoretical propositions, as this research is tangentially tied to conflict theory and how school leaders respond to conflict. While I relied heavily on qualitative data, the MFQ and the PTQ generated quantitative data for each school leader. While the sample size was too small to generalize, questionnaire results helped to assess the political ideology of the participants.

After one chooses an analytic strategy, Yin (2017) suggests utilizing one of five analytic techniques in case study research: pattern matching, explanation building, time series analysis, logic models, or cross-case synthesis. I selected the cross-case synthesis technique as this is an exploratory multiple case study. According to Yin, each case in a cross-case synthesis technique is treated as a separate study. I analyzed each unique case to determine the answer to the research question. I explored each educational leader's individual experiences with living through and navigating solutions to a polarizing educational topic. I utilized individual case memos and the running code list that emerged throughout the constant comparative analysis process to assist in sorting individual data. An individual case analysis was written for each educational leader and saved into the database. After analyzing each case individually, I conducted a cross-case synthesis to determine common themes and explanations to answer the research question. I relied on cross-case memos and individual case analyses to compare and contrast the experiences and solutions of the educational leaders.

Ethics

Ethics include, but are not limited to, the protection of participants from harm and the protection of their right to privacy. Researchers should get informed consent prior to data collection and not use deception throughout the research process. I obtained informed consent from all participants (see Appendix A) before any collection of data. Participants were provided with the purpose of the study and an overview of the research process in order for them to make an informed decision about their participation. Due to the potentially controversial nature of the research topic, participants were given the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions about the research prior to beginning participation. Participants were also reminded that they could withdraw at any time from part or all of the study.

To protect the participants' right to privacy, confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher masked the identities of the school district, schools, and participants by using pseudonyms on all data files and documents. All data was coded and stored in the researcher's password-locked, firewall-protected computer. Any identifying code sheets naming participants and their schools were kept separate from the data in a locked drawer in the researcher's personal office. Any identifying documents, including but not limited to audio recordings, were destroyed upon completion of the research study, leaving only deidentified data.

Despite all efforts, researchers impact the environments of those they study. My desire was to minimize any negative effects. During the course of the study, I considered how the study's purpose, the collection methods, the analysis, and the presentation of data portrayed the participants and the event. Since the purpose of the study is to investigate ways to support educational leaders during polarizing events, my goal was to allow school leaders the

opportunity to explain their experiences for themselves through their interviews and member checks. One way to minimize bias is to recognize it; to that end, I completed the questionnaires personally, prior to the beginning of the study. I discussed my subjectivity in Chapter 1 and continually looked through the lens of minimizing bias by separating my personal experiences and perceptions from those of the participants.

Finally, member checks were conducted to ensure that any conclusions made by the researcher matched the understanding of the participants. I performed member checks at the stage of individual case analysis and through emails to clarify findings as needed. Participants acted as collaborators throughout the research process. I promoted validity and reliability in the findings by utilizing member checks, multiple cases, and rich case descriptions. I kept the best interest of participants in mind and gave them credit for their time, effort, and input.

Limitations

Often qualitative case study research is time-consuming and expensive due to its longitudinal nature and the need to gather rich, thick data from multiple sources (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2017). It also relies on the cooperation and commitment of both participants and researchers for extended periods of time. Having a limited sample also impacted the generalizability of this research. Due to the limited number of eligible participants, which was required by the research criteria, this was unavoidable.

This study may be criticized due to its results not being generalizable to all educational leaders as the sample is small and each leader's experience is dependent upon their individual context and world view. Reliability and validity concerns sometimes arise in case study research due to its qualitative structure. The use of member checks, multiple cases, and rich descriptions decreased these limitations in this study.

Summary

In this chapter I have provided an account of the design, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis processes to conduct a multiple case study of educational leaders in the U.S. who have experienced a polarizing political event in their district. Participants were selected by a predetermined selection criteria and recruited through the efforts of a gatekeeper/key informant. After providing informed consent to participate in the study, participants engaged in three interviews. Using constant comparative analysis and cross-case synthesis, I coded the data and included it in an electronic database. Data was continually analyzed to determine emerging themes to attempt to answer the research question.

The following chapters will provide results of the research study. Chapter 4 will present the results of the research, including a rich and thorough case description for each individual case and a discussion of the cross-case analysis. Finally, Chapter 5 will contain a summary of the findings, any conclusions that may be drawn from the research, limitations of this study, and suggestions for future research on this topic.

Chapter 4: Results

Specifics of This Case

There are many possible polarizing social conflicts in schools today. This case involves the implementation of a school policy, based on state law, that allows transgender students the right and ability to use bathrooms and locker rooms of their self-identified gender. In this case polarization was in play, with various stakeholders including students, parents, staff, administration, community members, board members, and outside advocacy groups. The implementation of this policy led to a lawsuit that was moved through the legal system to federal circuit court and eventually to a request for an appeal to be heard at the United States Supreme Court level. This requested hearing was denied by the supreme court. The school district's policy of allowing transgender student access to bathrooms of their choice was upheld in all court proceedings. In order to preserve anonymity, the results in chapter 4 and the analysis in chapter 5 will only discuss this case in general terms to provide context, and will contain no specific references to the district or lawsuit.

Polarization of ideas and divisions across stakeholders, and even within families, is very well illustrated by both participants in this research. In this case, the issue of transgender bathrooms not only split the school community but families as well. One participant explained it this way:

We had a student leave the middle school, come to the high school and say, "I'm transitioning." We sat down with the student to meet with the parent and the parent wasn't in favor of what the student was doing, yet, as a school [we had to follow] the guidance we were getting [from the state], we had to do certain things, and so that was a

conflict that just was really not resolvable with the parent, led to community outreach and difficult conversations.

This conflict between parent and student led to further divisions among groups and the “difficult conversations” led to a lawsuit in which the parent of the transgender student was trying to block the school from allowing their child this access. He continued:

The mother of the transgender student was the one who sued the district. In this particular case the student had LGBTQ backing from organizations, the real fight was between her and her parent... This big old fight was happening because we followed the law and allowed the student to make the choice and honored the student’s preferred gender and name change, we got sued by the parent. One group sided with the parent and the LGBTQ groups sided with the student.

Limitations of Sample

I recognize the limitations inherent in the selection of these participants. Both are white, both are male and near the same age. Both participants have similar experiences and length of time in public education. It is important to note that both participants identify as cisgender and therefore don’t have the shared experience of those in the LGBTQ community. These limitations were unavoidable due to the small number of possible participants, as all possible participants needed to come from the same bounded system. As Table 1 shows, these two participants have shared similar educational roles. Even though both participants scored in the same category on the PTQ there are important differences between the participants in their political identities and in aspects of their worldview. Similar scores on the PTQ will be explained in each individual case study write up.

Case by Case Analysis

Table 1: Participant details

Name	Sex	Years	Roles in education	Political Identity
Pete	Male	22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coach - Elementary teacher - Elementary Counselor - Elementary Principal - Director of Curriculum and Instruction - Superintendent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-Report: Liberal on Social issues, Conservative on “government” ones - PTQ: Stressed Sideliners - MFQ: Politically Moderate
John	Male	22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High School Teacher - TOSA – Dean of Students - Middle school principal - High School Principal - Superintendent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-Report: Conservative - PTQ: Stressed Sideliners - MFQ: Politically Conservative

Pete

All three interviews with Pete were conducted and recorded via Zoom. The interviews were each conducted five to seven days apart. Pete selected to have these interviews during the school day and therefore they took place in his private closed-door office. Pete has a direct and confident style that shows through even on Zoom.

School Leadership

Pete is a 50-year-old, white, male administrator with 22 years of educational experience. Pete’s path to school leadership began in coaching. He originally attended college to, “major in wrestling 101.” He then went back to school “eight or nine years later” to get a teaching license before teaching fourth and fifth grade for “six or seven years.” While teaching he was encouraged by his principal to become a school counselor to fill as Pete put it, “the hidden job as an assistant principal,” and help with discipline. He states he “reluctantly went into administration,” being moved to the counseling job, but quickly realized that he could impact larger groups of people as a principal. Later, Pete transitioned to principal in the same building in which he was a counselor, when the previous principal moved to the district office. Pete spent 10

years as principal in the same elementary school until he too moved to the district office as director of curriculum and instruction. It was during his time as principal of the elementary school that this polarizing event occurred. The first twenty years of his experience all occurred in the same school district in the western United States. Three years ago, Pete moved to become the superintendent of a different small school district in the western United States where he currently works.

Although this polarizing event primarily centered in one of the high schools in the district, and Pete was a principal at one of the elementary schools in town, he was part of the leadership team that “had weekly meetings while this controversy was happening.” Pete was an integral part of leadership discussions and decisions during this polarizing situation. Pete recalls one specific event where the entire leadership team attended a meeting at the city center that was attended by many community members, several outside organizations, and the district lawyers. Pete recalls:

We actually had our lawyers present that day, and you could tell that everyone of us that was asked to speak was very careful about the words we were sharing and how we were sharing it. We were prepped ahead of time about how to say what we needed to say. It was a little bit hard not to just say the way I felt, but at the end of the day it wasn't greatly deviated way from [what I wanted to say], it's just that I couldn't elaborate as much as I wanted to on some things.

Strengths and Challenges of Leadership

Pete considers the social emotional domain and focusing on the “whole child” as one of his strengths. “We kind of have a mission here of [focusing] on multiple aspects to a kid's education.” He sees helping to create a strong vision and mission as a vital role of a leader and

considers it another strength stating, “I just spend a lot of time with our administrators, trying to help support them in vision and mission work...I don’t ever want to micromanage, but I do want to make sure we’re all on the same page and headed in the same direction.” Finally, Pete enjoys being involved in instructional leadership: “I am really blessed in that I get to spend a lot of time with instructional leadership.”

Pete sees several challenges to current school leadership, among them the current climate and culture and its polarization in society:

Everybody’s getting out of this [educational leadership] just because of the climate and culture. I think what’s allowed me to go home at night and go to bed and put my head down, and be able to sleep is that at the end of the day, we just keep making decisions that are based on what’s best for kids, and as long as I can keep doing that, I can take the heat from anyone else.

This polarization divided on moral lines can make it difficult for leaders to move the organization forward smoothly. Pete states it this way: “knowing how hard to push...especially when it comes to my own beliefs and morals...I’ll just want to come storming out and say this is the way it’s got to be...but you kind of have to play that balance [and] still keep moving the dial in the direction you want to go.” He further believes that this polarization seems to continue to grow, “I would say this last year’s been even more difficult, just because of all the polarization ...just the venom that comes out with some groups.”

Survey Results

Pete considers himself as moderate and middle of the road. He self-identifies as liberal on the social issues and conservative on the fiscal ones. “I tend to ride the middle and then I’ll bounce toward liberal when it comes to student needs...social justice and what not, and then I

tend to be conservative when it comes to government and those kinds of pieces, so I kind of bounce, kind of down the middle.” This is a self-reflection that matches his results on both the Political Typology Quiz (PTQ) designed by the Pew Research Center (2020) and the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) (2015).

On the PTQ overall measure, Pete’s scores place him in the “stressed sideliners” (SS) category. This placement is exactly in the middle of the road politically on this measure. It represents 15% of the public and 13% of registered voters. 23% of survey participants that fall in this category consider themselves republican and 19% consider themselves democrat. The vast majority identify as independent or something else.

While Pete’s overall measure places him in this category, there are differences between his and some typical beliefs of most SS. On economic issues 72% of SS generally lean liberal while Pete self identifies as conservative in this area. On social issues SS are “somewhat more conservative (Beyond the Red vs. Blue, p. 72), while Pete states he is more liberal in social issues.

At the conclusion of the PTQ Pete noticed differences in his responses based on the content of the question, “I’m going through it, I’m like man, I am kind of all over the place. I think one way then another. I tell everybody all the time I kind of tend to run down the middle and lean one way every now and then.”

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ-30) is a self-report measure that was designed to assess the degree to which people prioritize five foundational domains in moral decision-making: Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity (Graham et al., 2011). Researchers have found that people's sensitivities to the five moral foundations correlate with their political ideologies.

The average politically moderate American scores 20.2 in the harm/care foundation, 20.5 in the fairness/reciprocity foundation, 16.0 in the ingroup/loyalty foundation, 16.5 in the authority/respect foundation, and 12.6 in the purity/sanctity foundation on the MFQ-30. Pete's scores were 22, 21, 20, 17, and 22 respectively. With the exception of the much higher than average outlier score of 22 in purity/sanctity (average moderate score of 12.6), Pete's scores are close to the average moderate scores across all foundations. This matches his self-reported "down the middle" statements. A limitation of the MFQ-30 is that while it is able to compare scores to an overall American average, it does not allow in-depth analysis on the individual foundations.

Challenges of This Case

Pete noted several challenges he faced that were specific to this case. The first concerned the various stakeholders' response to district decisions, where differences of thought provoked some strong reaction, "We had some verbal threats. We had some people that said, 'If a boy would enter the bathroom where my daughter was at, then that principal, I'm going to come down and take care of that principal.'" While there were stakeholders that shared these feelings and statements, Pete considered them to be the voices of a minority opinion. He said, "I still don't believe it's a majority that comes forward, but a louder minority. They are much more vocal about how opposed they are to certain things." He continued, "We have a couple of very strong people in the community...with very strong opinions, and then people will just jump on board with them." These characteristics: the lack of civility in speech, illustrated by verbal threat, the louder minority being more vocal, and stakeholders "jumping on board" with a few strong leaders, are features of what is called "group think" (Janis, 1991; Tsikerdekis, 2013; McCauley, 1998), and the "echo chamber" (Calhoun, 2000; Bell, 2013; Rodrigues, 2022). One of Pete's

strategies in responding to these issues was to build a coalition with other groups of stakeholders. He explained, “We have a core group of key communicators that when someone does put down something negative [on a social media platform] toward a specific person or group of people these key communicators are pretty quick to just jump in.”

Pete was also challenged by the fact that many stakeholders in the conflict focused on adult concerns rather than student concerns. This was a trap he fell into himself from time to time. He recalled, “I found it was pretty easy to get upset or frustrated about an issue.” Pete then worked to shift the focus onto the needs of the students, to “put a ‘real live person’ to that issue and you have to face that person and experience what they are going through.” He was sure to keep this focus, “regardless of my personal beliefs or feelings.” To attempt to help stakeholders gain a wider perspective Pete reframed the issue from one of transgender bathrooms to one of privacy: “Instead of a transgender issue, we turned it into a we just want to respect the privacy for all [issue].”

Changes in Leadership Due to This Case

Pete considers his leadership to always be changing and growing. Experiencing this polarizing event has changed his leadership as well. It has helped him solidify his position on doing what is best for kids: “I guess what I’ve transitioned to over my years is that I’ve become less worried about what others think and more worried about what I morally feel is right for kids.” It has also helped him solidify the values he believes in when it comes to education: “It was surprising how I bounced back and forth on the issue. I would listen to one side and get fired up about something that was on the other side...it’s really helped me to find more of what I believe in.” Finally, it helped Pete to increase his listening to, and understanding of, the perspectives on all sides of an issue. He says, “I’ve really become a better listener, and really

trying to understand the perspectives from both sides. It's given me a lot more compassion for groups that originally, if I didn't believe in a stance, I might shut off in the past, now I am more open and try to figure out where they're coming from."

John

John's three interviews were conducted over a 10-day timeframe. Due to time constraints and COVID regulations all three interviews were conducted and recorded through the Zoom meeting format. These interviews occurred during the school day and were held behind closed doors in his school office. John started the interviews cautiously but quickly fell into a confident friendly rhythm.

School Leadership

John is a 52-year-old, white, male administrator with 22 years educational experience. John's career started in a very small rural district as a science teacher where he was, "the middle school science department" for two years. From there he moved to another district to teach high school science. After four years in the classroom John was asked by his principal to move into a teacher on special assignment (TOSA) position of dean of students where, he says, "that's really where my administrative journey started." From the dean of students John moved to a middle school in the district to become principal. He was middle school principal for five years before moving on to be high school principal, again in the same district, for the last 11 years. John will be moving into the superintendent role in his district next year.

It was during his time as principal that the community and school went through the polarizing event surrounding an LGBTQ student seeking access to the locker room and bathroom of their choice. John states, "our transgender situation, it really polarized this community." Even though John considers himself to, "have some pretty conservative views," he states:

I fundamentally believe that everybody has a right to come to school in a safe environment. I don't care what religion, race, gender, anything. I have a responsibility to make sure you got a safe place to come to school. That's where I was able to find kind of that happy place of fighting for and working for kids.

He asserts that sometimes when personal views conflict with policy he grounds his job in what is right for each student.

John recalls the same meeting Pete shared at the city:

I remember being in a board meeting held at our city center, and it was packed. The school board was there, we had lawyers there and I was the one that had to answer every question, and just felt alone, [like] I just got grilled by what felt like a mob of people...it's not a place you want to pioneer.

Strengths and Challenges of Leadership

John's favorite part of school leadership is what he considers one of his strengths. It is working with kids, and supporting staff to work with kids that, "may not always be making the best decisions in their personal or school lives." He ties this to his own life: "I've made lots of mistakes and people took a chance on me and kept working, they didn't give up on me and I don't want to give up on kids." He tries to separate the behavior from the emotions that come with the behavior: "Look past the misbehavior and the disrespect, to try to get to know what really makes them click, and how to make that relationship happen so they want to come to school instead of dreading it every minute."

The first leadership challenge that John discussed was school finance and, "not ever feeling like you have enough resources to do the job that you need to do." Challenges quickly turned to the feeling of some stakeholders' mistrust of schools and their motivations, John states:

Most recently is the disrespect that is now more prevalent than ever with the profession, and everybody questioning everything that you do, and that you've got a hidden motive. People telling me you believe this or that...I don't have an agenda. I've always felt like schools is a tool that parents need to use to educate their kids. I don't think people trust [and] there's just a lot of skepticism...it makes it really, really difficult.

Survey results

John self identifies as conservative: "I definitely would put myself in the conservative category. I recognize that I'm in a very liberal profession...there are some things that might be viewed as being liberal just because you're in the school system." The MFQ instrument matched this self-assessment as John scored much higher (22, 24, and 27) than the average scores (16, 16.5, and 12.6) in the foundations of loyalty, authority, and purity respectively. These are three foundations that the instrument designates as attached to the conservative viewpoint. The PTQ, however, places John in the SS category, which indicates a middle of the road position.

While the PTQ places John as a SS there are some of his responses to this questionnaire that bear further analysis. One question that helps determine typology groups addresses negative and positive feelings about each political party. Participants are asked to rate their feelings on the democratic and republican political party on a 0-100 scale, with 0 feeling as cold and negative as possible and 100 as warm and positive as possible. John rated both parties at 80, qualifying this way, "I don't think it matters if they're Democrat or Republican or Independent. I could care less about what they are. It's the person that I need to be focused on so I'm warm to all." A closer look at individual questions place John as conservative on social issues and more liberal on fiscal ones. This is the exact opposite of Pete.

The PTQ instrument asks participants their opinions about many political topics. Topics include but are not limited to: trade, equality, transgender feelings, immigration, size of government, crime, etc. When asked about his impressions about the PTQ questions John responded:

I think that [the questions on the survey] is kind of a microcosm of what we're dealing with in America and in society right now, the debates between some of those topics...how divisive they are and you know I think what's really missing is people being able to sit on both sides of those questions and disagree and yet still be civil, and that's really where our biggest challenge is.

It is interesting to note that this instrument scored both as SS despite significant differences revealed in a deeper analysis.

John places himself in the conservative right. Even though he places himself there he holds moderate stances. He shares, "I'm not so far to that alternative right that I can't try to still see what others are thinking." Seeing alternate viewpoints is very important to John. "I have dear friends that I disagree with on lots of things because we are right and left." He adds, "I think together we are stronger having different viewpoints."

Challenges of This Case

John shared some similar challenges to those that Pete did. He called out the strong emotion of the community. He described the community in general this way: "They didn't have pitchforks and things but they were still pretty angry and opinionated and scared of the unknown. [They] didn't really know what it was all about." The community opposition got stronger when it appeared to several groups of stakeholders that the district, and the high school in particular, were not letting students who opposed the transgender bathrooms have a voice. Students created

a petition wanting the school to not allow this policy to be put into practice. The district had to stop the petition from being circulated as it was considered discriminatory and targeted one student. John stated that there were “some petitions at school wanting to kind of target a student. We wouldn’t let the petition happen because of the way in which they were written.”

Students weren’t the only ones that were concerned about the school’s decisions: “We had some really conservative families that went to the point of the petition and to the school board and all those avenues of communication.” John recalls that this didn’t last long after the initial concerns saying, “About a year or two down the road it really just kind of went away.” John believes that this was due to the recognition of individual student needs by the community. He further thinks that working with individuals rather than groups of folks was helpful to calm things down:

When all that stuff [petitions and community meetings] started to simmer down, you recognize that the issue was a student just wanted to be comfortable in school and accessing education a specific way, that is when we started to begin to resolve some of the conflict personally and with individuals within the building... we got to pay attention to both sides of that argument.

Even with staff there were some challenges brought on by this case. John noted how important it was to give voice to staff concerns: “With staff we still had to kind of keep working our way through, giving them voice, giving them a way to process through.” He also shared that there are times where staff needs to occasionally take actions that they may not agree with in a public-school setting. He talked about this process with staff saying, “There’s always that part in every contract that you can respectfully disagree with your employer, but you must comply. So, we had to do that with some folks that I just need you to comply.”

Finally, John called out how polarizing conflict increases the number of difficult conversations a leader needs to engage in, and the importance of depersonalizing these conflicts. He found it important to not worry about pleasing people, and to help them find a location for them to direct their frustration. When thinking about dealing with these conversations John says it is important not to be “just worrying about the reaction of the parent, and trying to please ...[rather] being able to redirect the anger to a policy, or a behavior,” rather than at an individual.

Changes in Leadership Due to This Case

John sees change in leadership as a constant process throughout his leadership journey. This polarizing event is no exception. In fact, he considers it as still having an impact on his leadership. One impact has been to reaffirm how important it is for him to see all sides of the issue: “How is it [still] changing? I am far more understanding of all the different needs that exist. The stereotypes on all sides of the conflict.” This increase in understanding impacts his action, in that it has improved his listening skills, and improved his ability to understand those that may be frustrated. He says, “[I] just make sure I’m listening and trying to ask the right probing questions to truly deeply understand the person that I’m talking to.”

The improvement in his ability to listen and understand both polarized positions have John also thinking that his decision-making process has improved as a result of this polarizing event. He considers it important to not dehumanize others:

Right now, it is really easy to put someone in a box and ... put labels on people ... and if you get to know people you find for the most part, they are just like all of us. It’s not my job to judge and so I try to see the needs of the people ... what it is like to be them, and try to make decision with that in mind.

This change in leadership perspective wasn't always easy and occasionally needed to be disconnected from his, or others, personal feelings and opinions on this issue:

I had to come to terms and to grips with [the fact that] I don't lose my rights to have differing opinions, but I can't really push those opinions on others. I had to work on that personal conflict first, and I was able to do that because every student does have a right to come to school and feel safe.

The polarization and the conflict also produced some questioning on whether he wanted to stay in the profession. John recalls, "There were definitely days where I wanted to quit. Looking back on it I think it makes you stronger." Ultimately it was John's student focus that led him to continue. He fundamentally believes that everyone has the right to come to school in a safe environment:

I don't care what religion, race, gender, anything. I have a responsibility to make sure you got a safe place to come to school. That's where I was able to find kind of that happy place of fighting for and working for kids.

Personal Impact

It is important to note that this polarizing event did have a personal impact for him. John is very involved in the same community in which he is a principal. He attends church there, lives there, shops there, and his own children attend schools there. For John there was a real impact in his life outside of the school setting. John recalls running into stakeholders that disagreed with the decisions the school district was making with regard to transgender students use of the bathroom of their self-identified gender. He recalls thinking there were many times he just wanted to be a "general church patron" or normal grocery shopper. Occasionally, it got to the point that he considered just going to church out of town:

People just didn't understand that it wasn't the avenue where I wanted to spend time trying to address it. I would say, come, schedule an appointment with me in my office, I'll be happy to talk to you, and most of them would not. They just wanted to grab me and use it as a place to get my ear.

Now, years later, as the event fades into time, this case is no longer a consistent topic that is brought up to him in church or the community: "about a year or two down the road it really just kind of went away."

Summary

In the results chapter I introduced the specifics of this case, gave a summary of the participants, and laid out each individual case in narrative form. Chapter 5 will contain a cross-case analysis, a discussion of common themes, and a section on the implications of this research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The goal of this research was to provide a more complete and compelling narrative of how a polarizing event affected the school leadership of two different leaders. In this study there is an element of theoretical replication (Yin, 2017) because both subjects experienced the same polarizing event. However, this is where many of the similarities between the subjects end. Although these leaders were from the same district, they worked in different buildings at different levels. While they shared some characteristics of the same political ideology, there were significant differences in many aspects. Specifically, one participant self-identified as liberal, and one as conservative on social issues.

In this chapter I will first talk about emerging themes uncovered through a cross-case analysis. I will then discuss one possible solution in particular that both participants saw as valuable. This chapter will conclude by discussing the implications of this research for future theory development, SL practice, and future research.

Addressing Generalization

As previously mentioned, the goal of a multiple case study is not generalization. Each leader's experience is independent of the other's and should be treated as such. However, Stake (2000) explains that it is sometimes difficult to separate commonalities that emerge during data analysis, and generalizations of these kinds are impossible to avoid. It is important to remember that commonalities in this study are isolated to these two research subjects. For instance, each of these leaders might indicate they respond to conflict in the same way. This does not mean we need to infer that all leaders should respond in the same way. Creating research that is rich enough that it allows others to generate their own informed interpretation seems to be a better goal than trying to generalize findings. "Researchers [strive to] describe the cases in sufficient

descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions (which may differ from those of the researcher)” (p. 439).

Conservative Community

In both case studies the ideology of the community was noted as an important aspect of the polarization. Both participants mentioned the religious makeup of the community. “You’ve got a really strong religious base and that very conservative place to be,” recalled John. Pete agreed with this assessment, “[The town], if you are aware of [the town] is a pretty conservative town. I think there’s 40 churches in town.” Further, this community is considered rural and consistently votes Republican, often indicators of a more conservative mindset.

Exact demographic information of the school will only be shared in generalizations in order to maintain as much anonymity as possible in this case study. This school district is in the western United States. John placed the current enrollment of this high school at around 1000 at the time of this polarizing event and currently around 900. He describes the school and community as “predominantly white...Our diversity percentages can go up and down if one student [in a specific demographic] shows up that we didn’t have before.” Since this polarizing issue revolves around transgender locker room use it is important to touch briefly on the LGBTQ demographic group. The LGBTQ population of the school at the time of the event was nearly nonexistent. John states it this way, “If you were to have asked the building, ‘Do we have transgender student in the building?’ It would have been a ‘No,’ across the board. Nobody would have known that we had any at all.” This demographic is much more open now. The school is now much more aware of this population: “I know of at least a dozen plus and probably many more that I don’t know of, it’s just far more prevalent as a demographic now, says John”

Cross-Case Analysis

Several themes emerged across cases. These themes, and several participants' quotations to illustrate these themes, are listed in Table 2 and discussed further in this chapter.

Table 2. Themes across cases

Themes	Quotes
Opposing Ideologies	<p>"I try to find a way to start with their viewpoint and have empathy for where they're coming from, and then transit to the point I'm trying to make." - Pete</p> <p>"You're having those conversations and you're trying to do the middle of the road, and understand their point of view." - Pete</p> <p>"I said, you know I understand where you're coming from, but we've just got to agree to disagree on this... and this is why I believe what I believe." - John</p> <p>"We definitely had groups of individuals that came in with the morality viewpoint, those things that get attributed to the right. The liberal side came in advocacy for all the things that are attributed to the liberal left." - John</p> <p>"Developing the relationship and the trust, we really need to know each other well." - John</p>
An Increase in Polarization	<p>"I think that there was a time when there was an us and them but we were still all kind of working together. It just feels lately like you have to pick us or them. You don't get to pick down the middle anymore because if you're down the middle, then you're not committed. I think if we could find a way to get back to common ground, we'd be a lot better off." - Pete</p> <p>"Once upon a time you would go home and they wouldn't even question what you gave them as information from the school to now, they are questioning just about everything that you say as a school." - John</p> <p>"There's this conflict piece that's where we live these days, so [we are] definitely seeing a lot more of that as the politics as the gender things happen, you know things about whether you're building a wall or not building a wall. Just all those things. People have opinions, and are not really even as willing to debate and discuss and be civil, that just seems to be missing." - John</p>

Spiral of Silence	<p>“It was a little bit hard not to just say the way I felt, but at the end of the day it wasn’t greatly deviated away from, it’s just that I couldn’t elaborate as much as I want to on some things.” - Pete</p> <p>“We actually had our lawyer present that day, and you could tell that everyone of us that was asked to speak was very careful about the words we were sharing and how we were sharing it. We were prepped ahead of time about how to say what we need to say. It was a little bit hard not to just say the way I felt.” - Pete</p> <p>“I just didn’t know what to say I knew whatever I said just didn’t come out right. You’re trying to understand what the right side is frustrated about, you’re trying to support the left-hand side, and not be judgmental and try to resolve the conflict.” - John</p> <p>“I couldn’t say what I felt like I wanted to say in that meeting because I really agreed with a lot of what her frustrations were, but I can’t say this as a district representative. Take the principal hat off, go out for lunch with this individual, I’d have. Far different conversation, and I wanted to be able to say that to them.” - John</p>
Conflict Response	<p>“Listen, listen, listen. I think that in this society we tend to want to speak a lot more. It’s [listening] a skill I’ve had to grow. A lot of times I’ve listened but was preparing what I was going to say next. I’ve learned a lot about just sitting back, being patient, and listening.” - Pete</p> <p>“I’ve personally got a lot of work with Arbingner, which is developing and implementing an outward mindset.” - Pete</p> <p>“That is when we started to begin to resolve some of the conflict personally and with individuals within the building... we got to pay attention to both sides of that argument.” - John</p> <p>“The Arbingner institute and outward mindset. It has probably been more impactful than anything I’ve done in my career, mostly because it forces me to check where I’m at. Do I care about the needs, challenges and concerns of other people? Do I care or do I treat them as objects where they don’t matter ...everybody matters and that is my job, to get to know them and what are their challenges? I think that’s helped shape our district mission and vision.” - John</p> <p>“There are times where I can still sit in front of people and say, ‘So look I know you are angry; I know that you disagree, but this is the rule we are going to follow. You can still be angry at me, but I just need you to know that I know you are hurt. Your concerns matter, we disagree on them, but we can still be civil.’ So, it’s that ability to understand</p>

	conflict, and to address it in a way that isn't just digging in the heels and saying, 'I'm right you're wrong, we can still disagree, but your opinions matter to me.'" - John
Civility	<p>"If I can get them to understand their why, and then [have them] see what my why is...there's a way to common ground." - Pete</p> <p>"I think if people feel you care they're more willing to work with you, even if I don't believe what you believe in, I'm willing to listen. I'm willing to try to understand where you're coming from, and then hope that we can engage in a conversation together." - Pete</p> <p>"Civil is the important part. There are ways to have disagreement can be civil through it. You learn about it [issues], you put things on the ballot, you vote, you discuss your work to get influence with people who have an ability to solve that problem." - John</p> <p>"Developing the relationship and the trust." - John</p> <p>"We really need to know each other well; it sounds so simplistic but you see them as a person first. You need to dig a little deeper into who they are. When you know people it's a little bit more difficult to be deeply angry at them." - John</p>

Emerging Themes from the Research

Prior to conducting this research, I assumed that political ideology formed from Moral Foundations Theory would impact the participating leaders' responses. I believed there would be a marked difference in how each leader responded to aspects of this socializing polarizing topic. I found instead that despite differences in ideological mindset, their thoughts about, and responses to this conflict were very similar.

Opposing Ideologies

Throughout the interviews the existence of opposing ideologies impacting public education was noted by both participants of this study. Both participants noted in particular the issue of LGBTQ students using locker rooms of their identified gender. They both considered the positions of people on each side of this topic to be polar opposites. John pointed out the moral

dimension of the conflict. He recalled, “We definitely had groups of individuals that came in with the morality viewpoint, those things that get attributed to the right. The liberal side came in advocating for all the things that are attributed to the liberal left.” Both candidates considered the conservative position as the right and the liberal position the left.

While these opposing ideologies were discussed by both participants as existing in the stakeholder groups, both also placed more importance on how they could work with both sides of these ideological positions. Trust is important for leaders (Mineo, 2014). John believes that developing trust is a key factor in working with stakeholders on both sides of the conflict. “Developing the relationship and the trust,” is how John says he has been able to continue to work through ideological conflicts. He feels that in order to be able to accomplish this leaders need to have deeper relationships with those they serve. He says, “We really need to know each other well.” Pete also feels that relationships are key to dealing with opposing ideologies, particularly with those that may not match his own ideology. He says, “I try to find a way to start with their [the opposing] viewpoint and have empathy for where they’re coming from.” He thinks that two-way communication can follow this empathetic listening, and thus the interaction can still, as he puts it, “Transit to the point I’m trying to make.” He does find real value in trying to understand the other’s position: “You’re having those conversations and you’re trying to do the middle of the road and understand their point of view.”

Ultimately both ELs talked about eventually needing to just follow policy, contract, and law with those in holdout positions. Pete says that occasionally, despite attempts to build bridges and work with people that have ideologies that are opposed to decisions that the schools need to make, you have to just implement them while trying to share the “why” behind the decision: “I said, ‘You know I understand where you’re coming from, but we’ve just got to agree to disagree

on this... and this is why I believe what I believe.” John recalls an occasion where he had to do this with staff: “There’s always that part in every contract that you can respectfully disagree with your employer, but you must comply. So, we had to do that with some folks that I just need you to comply.” In this case, opposing ideologies continue to create environments that are polarized. In fact, both participants consider this polarization to be continually widening.

Increase in Polarization

The increase in polarization over the course of their educational career was mentioned by both participants. They share this in terms of how things used to be and don’t seem to be any longer. Pete brings this concept up this way:

I think that there was a time when there was an us and them but we were still all kind of working together. It just feels lately like you have to pick us or them. You don’t get to pick down the middle anymore because if you’re down the middle, then you’re not committed. I think if we could find a way to get back to common ground, we’d be a lot better off.

This idea of not being able to be “down the middle of the road” on ideas that Pete mentions here is, in part, a symptom of the increasing polarization that has been discussed in many recent studies (Nivola, 2010; Martherus et al., 2019; McCarty, 2019; Goldberg, 2020; Castle & Stepp, 2021).

John touches on the increase of polarization and its effect on the public trust in schools and their leaders:

Once upon a time they [students] would go home and they [parents] wouldn’t even question what you gave them as information from the school; to now they are questioning just about everything that you say as a school.

The distrust and lack of civility has been particularly noticeable recently to John with respect to social and moral issues:

There's this conflict piece that's where we live these days, so [we are] definitely seeing a lot more of that as the politics as the gender things happen, you know things about whether you're building a wall or not building a wall. Just all those things. People have opinions, and are not really even as willing to debate and discuss and be civil. That just seems to be missing.

This lack of civility and willingness to discuss differences was noticed throughout many different stakeholder groups. There were staff that disagreed with other staff in staff meetings, special interest groups in conflict or in support of community members, students in conflict with other students, and even family members in conflict with other members of their own family. These are examples of the increase in polarization highlighted in this study. There are several possible impacts on educators living in a world of opposing ideologies and increasing polarization. One such impact, the spiral of silence, was noticed by both participants.

Spiral of Silence

One theory outlined in chapter two is known as the spiral of silence. Created by Noelle-Newman in the 1970s (1974), this model states that groups that classify themselves as losing ground in the public discourse may be less willing to share their opinions. Both participants mentioned that they felt a shift away from trust in public education, and in the educators themselves. This mistrust can pressure leaders into making the decision to at times remain silent. Both Pete and John felt this pressure throughout this polarizing event.

While each participant stated that there were times when they made the choice to remain silent, each chose silence for different reasons. In Pete's case it was in the face of the

conservative backlash to the district implementation of this policy. He wanted to respond in defense of the district policy. At one meeting in which there was criticism of the policy Pete recalls, “It was a little bit hard not to just say the way I felt.” While sharing the district’s position, which was mostly being led by the superintendent and attorneys, Pete found that the message he wanted to share needed to be self-censored. He says, “It’s just that I couldn’t elaborate as much as I want to on some things.” Pete recalls one situation after the lawsuit was filed in which, though he was not silent, he needed to be very careful with the conversation:

We actually had our lawyer present that day, and you could tell that everyone of us that was asked to speak was very careful about the words we were sharing and how we were sharing it. We were prepped ahead of time about how to say what we need to say. It was a little bit hard not to just say the way I felt.

There are many reasons why silence may occur. John tells one story about a high-tension staff meeting that he led about the implementation of this policy. One staff member had personal experience with an LGBTQ family member and was very emotional on the subject. John wanted to be sure that he showed support for that staff member while still supporting those that didn’t share the same views:

I just didn’t know what to say. I knew whatever I said just didn’t come out right. You’re trying to understand what the right side is frustrated about, you’re trying to support the left-hand side, and not be judgmental and try to resolve the conflict.

In this case, finding a resolution to the conflict in the group setting required the silence on John’s part.

Sometimes fulfilling the obligations of the role of leader creates the perceived need for silence. John felt empathy for the parents of the LGBTQ student in this case. As a parent, John

understood their concerns, even though their efforts to block their child's access to bathrooms of their student's choice conflicted with school policy. He relates a frustrating interaction with the parents of the LGBTQ student in this case:

I couldn't say what I felt like I wanted to say in that meeting because I really agreed with a lot of what her frustrations were, but I can't say this as a district representative. Take the principal hat off, go out for lunch with this individual, I'd have a far different conversation, and I wanted to be able to say that to them.

Both Pete's and John's experiences with silence occurred in highly polarized settings in large groups. Very quickly both of their stories shifted to how to respond to this polarized conflict, and neither lived in the silence for long.

Conflict Response

Listening has been suggested by many scholars as a key for responding to conflict (Lloyd, 2009). It is "A labour of care, listening could be an active and open-ended disposition to revise and reconstitute social conditions" (p. 245). Listening with empathy is a key step, that both leaders mentioned, in response to this polarized situation. Pete believes this is the first vital component to helping resolve these conflicts:

Listen, listen, listen. I think that in this society we tend to want to speak a lot more. It's a skill I've had to grow. A lot of times I've listened but was preparing what I was going to say next. I've learned a lot about just sitting back, being patient, and listening."

John agrees and adds that often this listening process is more effective with individuals than in group settings. He recalls beginning this resolution process: "That is when we started to begin to resolve some of the conflict personally and with individuals within the building... we got to pay attention to both sides of that argument."

While listening is important, it doesn't always mean agreeing. John feels that even while making decisions that others disagree with it is important to acknowledge that those that disagree matter and their opinions matter:

There are times where I can still sit in front of people and say, "So look I know you are angry; I know that you disagree, but this is the rule we are going to follow. You can still be angry at me, but I just need you to know that I know you are hurt. Your concerns matter, we disagree on them, but we can still be civil." So, it's that ability to understand conflict, and to address it in a way that isn't just digging in the heels and saying, "I'm right you're wrong, we can still disagree, but your opinions matter to me."

Both participants agree that most conflict resolution starts with valuing others as people and looking at them through the lens of humanity.

Pete and John both discussed having a system for conflict response, and seeing others as human. The philosopher Martin Buber (2022) calls the way we look at others the "way of being." We can be in the world, seeing others as people, or seeing others as an object. Buber calls these two ways of being I-thou, looking at others as people; or I-it, looking at others as objects. Buber considers that in all interactions with people are always being either I-thou or I-it. The I-it way of being dehumanizes others. Pete and John make special mention of their work with The Arbinger Institute, which assists people in having an outward mindset in order to turn their way of being from I-it to I-thou. They both consider this work some of the most important they have done to help them through all conflicts and specifically this event. Pete says, "I've personally got a lot of work with Arbinger, which is developing and implementing an outward mindset." John is also clear on how it has helped him:

The Arbinger institute and outward mindset. It has probably been more impactful than anything I've done in my career, mostly because it forces me to check where I'm at. Do I care about the needs, challenges and concerns of other people? Do I care or do I treat them as objects where they don't matter ...everybody matters and that is my job, to get to know them and what are their challenges? I think that's helped shape our district mission and vision.

Pete uses the tools provided by Arbinger on a consistent basis. He reports, "I sometimes get up and chart out the stuff from Abinger on my whiteboard. He reports that he uses them so often his staff have noticed: "My staff sometimes tease me saying 'Here comes another chart.'"

Since both participants describe their work with Arbinger as so impactful in this lived experience, it is important to take a closer look at this model to answer the question: How can we serve people while living through this experience, and how do we change our way of being if needed?

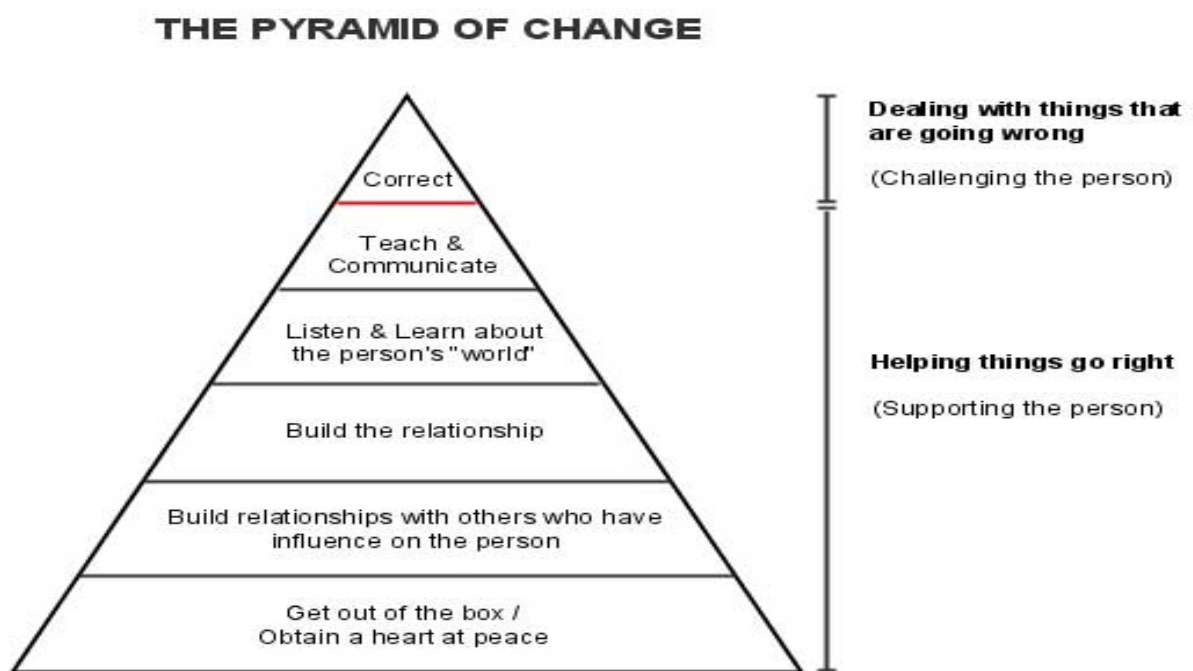
Conflict vs. Collusion

The first step in working through polarizing events is to attempt to recognize how they expand, so that one can try to stop this expansion. Arbinger proposes that how we disagree matters. In their model conflict is passive, it is happening with and to individuals, but in and of itself, it does not grow. Collusion, on the other hand, is being actively engaged in creating conflict and inviting the same behaviors we say we hate. Figure 1 (The Arbinger Institute, 2019) shows an example of conflict becoming collusion.

This makes it easy to retreat into the entrenched positions of I-it that created the collusion in the first place. The other reason it may be difficult to break the cycle is because one or usually both sides consider their position to be the right one. Breaking the collusion cycle does not force one side or the other to change their belief that their position is right, but it does require them to change their heart toward others that hold the opposite view. “The most important part of right or wrong is the way we treat and think about others” (The Arbinger Institute, 2020).

Arbinger proposes a change model called the pyramid of change. This model can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Pyramid of Change



It focuses on helping things go right and on raising the importance of supporting a person, rather than focusing on things that go wrong and thus trying to change a person. It recommends spending much more time on helping things go right than dealing with them when they go wrong. Both Pete and John talk about the choices in the bottom four levels of the

pyramid being much more important than those in the top two when dealing with a polarized event.

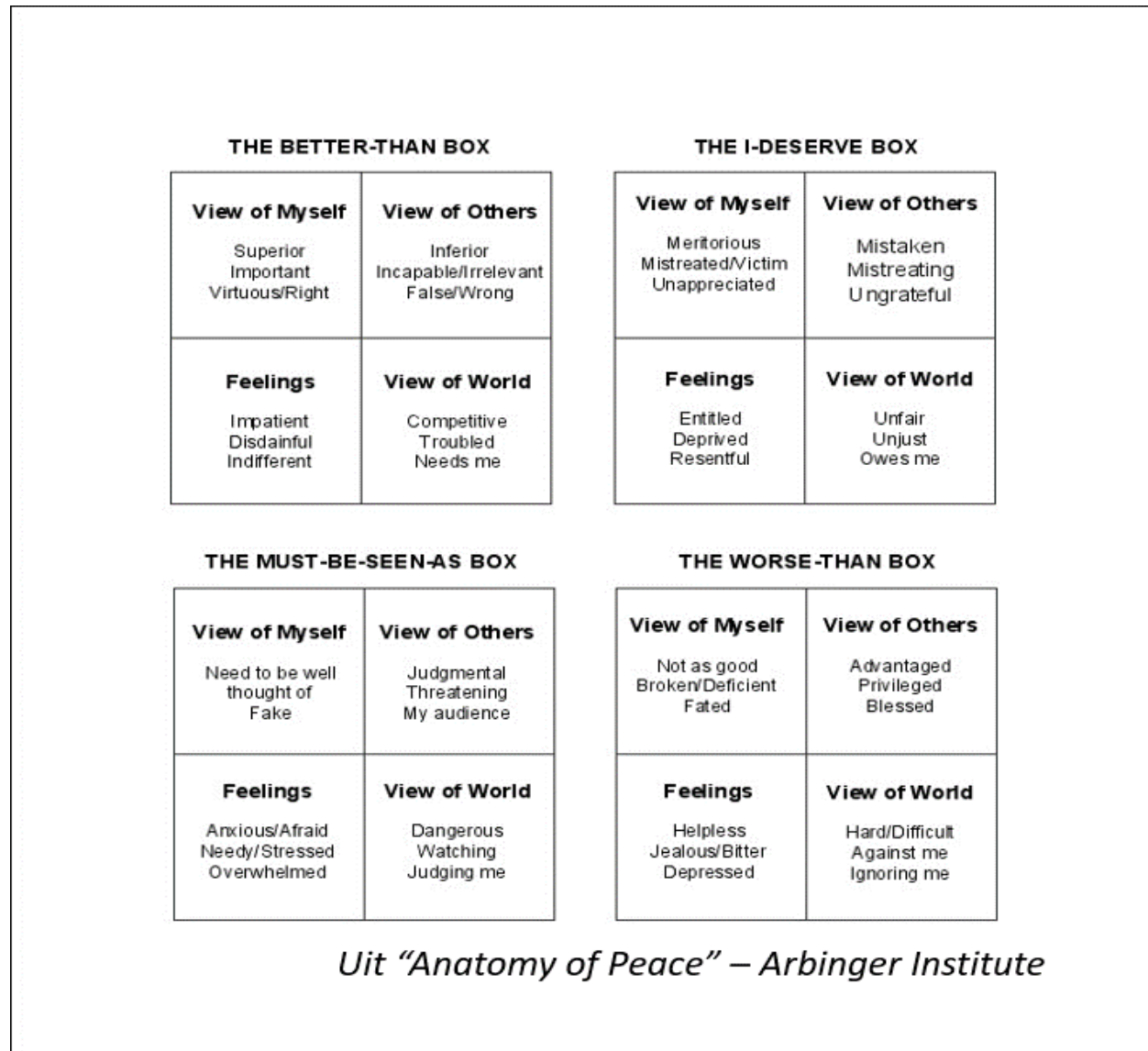
Inward or Outward Mindset

Mindset in the context of this research is defined as the way we look at others. The inward mindset connects to I-it, or looking at others as objects. The outward mindset connects to I-thou, or looking at others as people. Arbinger contends that how you look at others has a connection to entering or not entering the collusion cycle. “Our general approach to life is always either dividing or bringing together – either assuming and wielding splits that don’t exist or seeing and valuing the equal humanity in ourselves and others.” (The Arbinger Institute, 2019, p. 30). Predictably, in polarizing events the mindset toward the out group is different than that toward ingroups: “[O]ften people exhibit an inward mindset toward some people and an outward mindset toward others” (p. 68).

Those exhibiting the inward mindset see people as objects or others. When this happens, it is easy to find justification for their own behavior by focusing on others’ faults because “they give me proof that others have done me wrong” (The Arbinger Institute, 2019, p. 63). In this context, to justify means to put things straight. When we see others as objects, we see them as “crooked,” or wrong, and try to be justified in our position, often horribilizing or dehumanizing others. Arbinger categorizes this self-justification as putting oneself into the box. When a person is in the box they blame others, justify their own position, overemphasize their own abilities, inflate other’s faults, lack commitment, withhold information, etc. These “boxes” are labeled four ways: the better than box, the I deserve box, the must be seen as box, and the worse than box (The Arbinger Institute, 2019). Each box contains four sections: the way a person views

themselves, the way a person views others, the way they view the world and the feeling occurring in the box. Figure 3 contains examples of each type of in the box thinking.

Figure 3: Inward Mindset Box Example



A key to successful collusion management is to move your own mindset outward.

“A person whose mindset is outward sees others as people, so their needs, objectives, and challenges matter to him” (The Arbinger Institute, 2019, p. 43). There are four aspects of the outward mindset that builds it in oneself and in groups and organizations: building selflessness

and teamwork, caring for students and staff as people, giving a voice to all, and achieving task excellence. People with an outward mindset, “(1) see the needs, objects, and challenges of others, (2) adjust their efforts to be more helpful to others, and (3) measure and hold themselves accountable for the impact of their work on others” (p.86).

Changing a mindset from inward to outward is four times more likely to succeed in managing conflict/collusion, and in improving results, than attempts at changing behaviors. Trying to think about a person differently, in effect to humanize them, creates lasting change (The Arbinger Institute, 2019; 2020). There are multiple models of conflict response that are similar to the Arbinger model of focusing on the problem or issue and not the person. Braver Angels is an organization that attempts to depolarize individuals and groups through discourse using “the Braver Angel’s Way” (Braver Angels, 2016).

There are several actions Braver Angels suggest that parallel ideas Pete and John have shared from their work with Arbinger. Some similar tenets include: 1) We state our views freely and without fear. 2) We welcome opportunities to engage with those whom we disagree. 3) We treat people who disagree with us with honesty and respect. 4) We seek to disagree accurately, avoiding exaggeration and stereotypes. 5) We look for common ground where it exists and if possible, find ways to work together. 6) We believe that all of us have blind spots and none of us are not worth talking to. 7) We believe that, in disagreements, both sides share and learn. Neither side is teaching the other or giving feedback on how to think or say things differently (2016, Our Approach section). In the words of former president Abraham Lincoln (*Lincoln's First Inaugural Address*, 1861; *Abraham Lincoln's Annual Message to Congress – Concluding Remarks*, 1862):

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will yet

swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surly they will be, by the better angels of our nature...The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion.

Those from Braver Angels consider working together and seeing each other as people, and not as things, vital to the public discourse.

Religion can be a factor during interactions with others in conflict for leaders, staff members, and the public that is served. This can particularly true when the conflict is about polarizing issues with moral implications. In this study religious and moral implications were called out by both participants, for both leaders and stakeholders. Responses to, and interactions with others can be looked at thru a religious lens. There are religious concepts directly tied to interactions with, and how to treat others in conflict.

The Biblical concept of “*imago Dei*” means in the likeness (*imago*) of God (*Dei*). The *imago Dei* or image of God is a phrase used to describe the inherent value and dignity of all humankind. Originating from Genesis 1:26-27 (The Holy Bible: New King James Version, 1983), this theological truth states that all people are created in God’s image. This means that all people regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, people group, ability level, etc. have inherent and equal dignity, value, and worth. Human beings do not earn their value through work, culture, government, society or belief. *Imago Dei* affirms that all humans are equal and deserve to be treated with complete dignity (*Imago Dei & Human Dignity*, 2000). Because they are created in God’s image, each person has innate value. While others in society may disregard or dehumanize certain other out-groups, Christians are called to treat all populations in an egalitarian manner reflecting their status as being created in the *Imago Dei* (Hodge & Wolfer, 2008). I would argue that the concepts of looking at people as people proposed by The Arbinger Institute and the

Braver Angel ideals earlier in this chapter, are very similar to what Christians are called to do under the concept of imago Dei.

The outward mindset, Braver Angels, and imago Dei are all examples of systems designed to help people look at other people as having value and worth rather than as objects or outsiders. While facing conflict during polarized times it important to try to find lasting solutions:

So, if we are going to find lasting solutions to difficult conflicts or external wars we find ourselves in, we first need to find our way out of the internal wars that are poisoning our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward others. If we can't put an end to the violence within us, there is no hope for putting an end to the violence without. (The Arbinger Institute, 2019, p.83)

Civility

The final common theme found in this research is the importance of how we interact with each other in polarized situations. While the previous section discussed the value of paying attention to how we feel and think about others, both John and Pete noted as well the importance of how we actually treat and talk to others. Engaging both sides in civil conversation is important. In disagreements, John feels that, “Civil is the important part. There are ways to have disagreements and be civil through it.” In thinking about how to do that effectively he goes back to trust and building relationships: “Developing the relationship and the trust.” This is how John has been able to continue to work through conflicts with those with opposing ideologies. In order to be able to accomplish this he feels that “We really need to know each other well.” John continues, “It sounds so simplistic but you see them as a person first. You need to dig a little deeper into who they are. When you know people it’s a little bit more difficult to be deeply angry

at them.” Finally, he believes getting to know all sides of the issues is important, “You learn about it [issues], you put things on the ballot, you vote, you discuss your work to get influence with people who have an ability to solve that problem.” Being civil through all the polarization is another way of proving you see others as humans.

Pete also puts a high value on civility. He believes that it starts with understanding. First, he tries to help each group understand why they have taken the position they have, and only then attempts to have them think about each other's why: “If I can get them to understand their why, and then [have them] see what my why is...there's a way to common ground.” Pete also ties caring for others into working in civility with others:

I think if people feel you care they're more willing to work with you, even if I don't believe what you believe in, I'm willing to listen. I'm willing to try to understand where you're coming from, and then hope that we can engage in a conversation together.

The civil citizen “simply seeks for points of moral agreement, [and] offers rationales that minimize the risk of her position being rejected” (Gutman and Thompson as quoted in Calhoun, 2000, p. 255). Klingwell agrees with this assessment of civility, stating that in his view civility requires a “willingness not to say all the true, or morally excellent things one could say,” especially when expressing a deeper moral conviction that is likely to be offensive, hurtful, or a conversation stopper (Klingwell, 1994, p. 44). This view of civility places it into the category of manners of polite society.

Perhaps a more interesting way to look at civility is that of civility as a virtue. Calhoun makes the argument that often the reason for civility is a display of respect, tolerance, and consideration thus recognizing a moral fact that others are worth treating with respect, tolerance and consideration. “That morally considerable fact might be the fact that she is a person, or that

she has feelings, or that she has views, tastes, or interests of her own, or that she has earned an authority position, or that she is my neighbor” (2000, p. 260). Calhoun also contends that like other virtues, civility to the heart or to the person is important even if social norms make it impossible to be civil to certain ideas. He uses the examples of racism and sexual harassment to illustrate this point (p. 270). The Civility Project (2022) contends that in times of crisis and polarization, civility toward others is becoming more difficult. They define civility as the process of treating others with respect and kindness regardless of differing opinions, perspectives, or political leanings. Importantly it is listening to another’s viewpoint and searching for the humanity behind a perspective or stance. This “search for humanity” sees civility as a virtue as well (The Civility Project, 2022).

Implications

My hope in this study is to create research that is rich enough that it allows others to generate their own informed interpretation. “Researcher’s [strive to] describe the cases in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions (which may differ from those of the researcher)” (Stake, 2000 p. 439). To that end there may be many implications in this study that may be inferred by the reader and not be explicitly discussed here.

Implications for Theory Development

Prior to conducting this research, I assumed that political ideology formed from Moral Foundations Theory would impact the participating leaders’ responses. I believed there would be a marked difference in how each leader responded to the elements of a social polarizing topic. What I found instead, was that despite the differences in ideological mindsets, thoughts about, and responses to, this conflict were very similar for both participants. While this finding does not

suggest that there is not a marked difference in the way moral foundations impact the way SL think about social issues on the political spectrum, the way these SL acted on those ideologies does bear consideration.

Implications for Practice

I began this research because I had started to feel a crisis of conscience in my own practice. There were times where I was feeling a disconnect between my personal morality and the way stakeholders from both extremes were moving or trying to move public education. Decisions that were being made at school, district, and state levels seemed more and more extreme one direction or the other. My ability to hold a centrist position seemed to be becoming untenable. In collaboration and through empirical, informal research with other educational leaders I found the feeling of disconnection to often be commonplace. Regardless of which ‘side’ (liberal or conservative) of a social issue the leader held personally on a particular issue, this was true.

One finding of this research that particularly impacts future practice is setting a change of focus from the issue to the person. Both Pete and John put high value on continuing to work with all stakeholders. Both Pete, who self-identified as liberal, and John, who self-identified as conservative believe it to be their calling to do so in public education. I expected SL reactions and the way they responded to this polarized issue to closely match each participant's ideology.

Specifically, I expected the liberal leader to place a high value on those that held liberal views, and I expected him to consider those that held conservative views as out-group members who were closed minded and needed to be overcome. Further, I expected the liberal SL to consider it as only positive that the school district was implementing the policy of students using the bathroom of their choice of gender, while thinking that the perspective of the conservative

side was closed minded. I expected him to consider the opinions of those on the conservative side to be less important.

I expected the SL that identified as conservative to place a higher value on the opinions of those that held similar views to his. In our polarized society today, often those that hold the conservative view frame issues in terms of morality. This can often cause them to look at liberals and their ideas as immoral rather than just different, which can cause dehumanization. The conservative SL in this study separated the person from the issue, which enabled him to work with both sides of the polarization.

Instead of leaders that were supporting their positional ideology I found examples of leadership that made efforts to be bridge builders and to bring sides together. Neither laid down their morality at the school door, but rather worked very hard to see all points of view in order to resolve conflict and stay out of the collusion cycle whenever possible. Even though this was a polarized situation there was unpolarized leadership.

It is important to have a plan in place prior to polarization and conflict, in order to respond in a way that does not increase the conflict. For Pete and John this was the outward mindset structure from The Arbinger Institute. Whether it be outward mindset, Braver Angels, or Imago Dei, this research suggests it is important for the leader to be prepared not only for how to look at a conflict, but more importantly, for how to look at the people in a conflict.

Implications for Future research

Both John and Pete chose to stay in the public schools through this polarizing event. More comparative research, using a similar protocol needs to be done with SL that have left the profession. I wonder if the moral foundations or political ideologies of those that chose to exit the profession reveal similar stories to those of John and Pete, or whether they would have a

more positionally polarized nature to them. In addition, expanding this research to attempt to look at regional differences, participant belief differences, or issue-based differences would be interesting.

This research showed two leaders that responded to polarizing issues in centrist ways. I wonder if this is a function of their similar experiences, or of the positions they have held. Research done on this topic with classroom teachers and other staff would be important. Is there a difference in the way staff respond based on positionality? Are teachers or classified staff more, or less polarized on these social issues than the leaders themselves? Further, what impacts do any possible differences have in a building culture. In my personal practice I have found teams that hold very similar views to each other and those that hold very different ones. This does impact how these teams work together.

Having two subjects in this research that were so similar had both advantages and disadvantages. The similarities led to being able to more isolate the variable of self identified ideology. However, having participants that were more dissimilar, for example differences in rural and urban population centers, males and females, length of service, differences in faith of participants, etc. would be worthy of further study.

At one point in this research, John stated that the conflict “Just kind of went away.” This begs the questions: “Did it really just go away?” and “Why did it just go away?” Researching the degree of decrease in the concerns of stakeholders on social issues might help to determine if the level of polarization did decrease or just went underground. Was this due to bridge building or resignation on the part of one group or another? What happens in the aftermath of these polarized situations to both sides of the political spectrum with a culture war “win” or a culture war “loss” bears a closer look.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of school leaders living through a highly contentious socio-political polarized event. Both cases have some very strong similarities in both their experiences and responses to this highly polarized event. The goal of this research was to find common themes in those experiences and to gain insight into how leadership decisions impact the event and the stakeholders in the event. The hope of this research is to provide other school leaders with ideas to use in their schools and lives to support them through events in a polarizing world.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

George Fox University
Department of Education
Informed Consent

Title: Lived Experiences of Liberal and Conservative Educational Leaders Navigating Solutions to Highly Contentious and Polarizing Sociopolitical Education Problems

Principal Researcher: Troy D. Fisher

I. Purpose

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate the experiences of educational leaders. You are invited to participate because you are a current or former educational leader in a district that experienced a polarizing socio-political event in your time as leader. Participation will require approximately 3-4 hours of your time.

II. Procedures

If you decide to participate, you will partake in three interviews with the principal researcher. Each interview is expected to take 1-2 hours. Interviews will be audio recorded and conducted at a location agreed upon by yourself and the principal researcher. Interviews will take place during the 2021-22 school year; exact interview dates and times will be agreed upon by yourself and the principal researcher. You may be emailed by the principal researcher throughout the course of the study to clarify any questions that arise. The total amount of time expected for participation in the study is 3-4 hours over the span of the 2021-22 school year.

III. Risks

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits

Participation in this study may or may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about how to help educational leaders gain strategies to be successful navigating polarizing events.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Troy D. Fisher, the primary investigator, will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (George Fox IRB Board, Dissertation committee). We will use your pseudonyms rather than your name on study records. The

information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet and/or on a password- and firewall-protected computer. Audio recordings will be downloaded and stored on a password- and firewall-protected computer and destroyed upon completion of the study. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. Neither you nor your school site will be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons

Contact Troy Fisher at 541-519-6365 or tfisher16330@gmail.com if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Printed Name

Date

Principal Researcher

Date

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Note: Interviews will be semi-structured in order to gain a deep understanding of each participant's unique experience as an educational leader. Thus, the following questions will serve as a guide for the interviewer to follow; however, questions may change as needed, and additional questions will likely emerge from the interviewees' responses. Ultimately, my goal is to get a thorough account of each educational leader's experience throughout a sociopolitical controversial event by eliciting thick, rich data depicting their unique stories.

Thank you: Hi, thanks so much for being willing to sit for an interview with me today!

Introduction: It is good to see you. I'm an EdD student at George Fox. I'm interested in learning more about your experience as an educational leader in a polarized world and I'm hoping to learn from your perspective and experience through our interview today.

Informed consent: Before we get started, I have a few formalities to take care of. Only myself and my dissertation chair will ever see the transcript of our interview. At the end of our interview today I will ask if there is anything you would like me to strike from the record. If there is, it will not be included in my analysis. When we meet next time, I might also have some clarifying questions for you or ask you check my interpretation of your story. And most important – you can stop talking to me at any time if you wish. All of that information, and more, is on the form for you to review.

Move into interview mode: Okay, so now we can get on with the interview...

Start recording

Interview #1

- Tell a bit about myself and this research.
- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me about your professional path.
 - How long have you been an educational leader?
 - Why did you become an educational leader?
 - How do you find work-life balance?
 - How long have you been/were you in education?
 - What roles have you played in public education?
 - Where have you been?
- Tell me about your current role.
 - What do you enjoy most about being an educational leader?
 - What do you find challenging about it?
 - How do you perceive others feel about it?
- Tell me about your leadership style.
- Describe a typical day.
- Tell me about ***** (school assignment during specific event).
 - What did you enjoy most about that role?
 - What did you find most challenging there?
- Is there anything else I should know in order to understand your role as educational leader?

Interview #2

Surveys will be read aloud to each participant and the interviewer will hand record responses. The MFQ will be hand scored utilizing methods outlined by survey creators and recounted in Appendix B. The political typology responses will be entered into and tabulated by the Pew Research website.

- Explain surveys.
 - Perform Pew questionnaire.
 - Opportunity for Follow up questions
 - Ask if there are any concerns or questions.
 - Perform MSQ.
 - Opportunity for follow up questions
 - Ask if any concerns or questions

Interview # 3

1. Tell me about dealing with controversy in your time as leader.
 - a. If it is different from the research topic, ask about specific controversy.
2. Tell me about specific learnings from the specific controversy.
 - a. What were the challenges?
 - b. What went well?
 - c. What would you do differently?
3. Tell me about a time(s) when you didn't say exactly what you wanted to.
4. How did different Ideologies impact dealing with controversy?
 - a. Stakeholders
 - b. Yours
5. Did this controversial topic change your leadership?
 - a. How?
 - b. How come?
6. How did dealing with this controversial topic impact your feelings about being an educational leader?
7. Tell me about working with others that may not share the same "worldview" as you.
8. Tell me about any solutions you see to the problem of this controversy.
 - a. What would you do differently?
9. What advice would you give to others going through the same situation?
10. Have you seen an increase or a shift in polarization during your time as leader?
11. Is there anything I haven't asked you about this situation that I should have?

Give opportunity for edits: As we wrap up our interview today, I want to give you the opportunity to pause and think over our conversation. If there is anything you'd like to add or have me strike from the record, please let me know.

At the end of the 1st and 2nd interview: I appreciate your willingness to speak with me today. I'm grateful for your time and thoughtfulness. When we meet for our second interview, I look forward to continuing our conversation.

At the end of the last interview: I'm so grateful to you for sharing your experiences with me. I'd like to tell you a little bit about what I will do with our interviews. I am going to analyze them along with my other interviews to reach some more general understandings about the experiences of school leaders in polarized settings. Then I will use some of the material to write about what I've heard from the stories you have shared with me. Again, I am so grateful for your time and willingness to sit down with me and share!

Appendix C: Moral Foundations Questionnaire

Part 1. When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking? Please rate each statement using this scale:

[0] = not at all relevant (This consideration has nothing to do with my judgments of right and wrong.)

[1] = not very relevant

[2] = slightly relevant

[3] = somewhat relevant

[4] = very relevant

[5] = extremely relevant (This is one of the most important factors when I judge right and wrong.)

- _____ 1. Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
- _____ 2. Whether or not some people were treated differently than others
- _____ 3. Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country
- _____ 4. Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
- _____ 5. Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
- _____ 6. Whether or not someone was good at math
- _____ 7. Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
- _____ 8. Whether or not someone acted unfairly
- _____ 9. Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group
- _____ 10. Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
- _____ 11. Whether or not someone did something disgusting
- _____ 12. Whether or not someone was cruel
- _____ 13. Whether or not someone was denied his or her rights
- _____ 14. Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty
- _____ 15. Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder
- _____ 16. Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of

Part 2. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement:

[0]	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]
Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree

- _____ 17. Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
- _____ 18. When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.
- _____ 19. I am proud of my country's history.
- _____ 20. Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
- _____ 21. People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
- _____ 22. It is better to do good than to do bad.
- _____ 23. One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.

- _____ 24. Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
- _____ 25. People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
- _____ 26. Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
- _____ 27. I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.
- _____ 28. It can never be right to kill a human being.
- _____ 29. I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.
- _____ 30. It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.
- _____ 31. If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.
- _____ 32. Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.

To score the MFQ yourself, you can copy your answers into the grid below. Then add up the six numbers in each of the five columns and write each total in the box at the bottom of the column. The box then shows your score on each of five psychological "foundations" of morality. Scores run from 0 to 30 for each foundation. (Questions 6 and 22 are just used to catch people who are not paying attention. They don't count toward your scores.)

The average politically moderate American's scores are 20.2, 20.5, 16.0, 16.5, and 12.6. Liberals generally score a bit higher than that on Harm/care and Fairness/reciprocity, and much lower than that on the other three foundations. Conservatives generally show the opposite pattern.

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ-30, July 2008) by Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian Nosek.

For more information about Moral Foundations Theory, scoring this form, interpreting your scores, or to take this scale online and see how you compare to others, go to www.YourMorals.org.

Open permission for researchers to use this questionnaire can be found at www.MoralFoundations.org

Appendix D: Political Typology Quiz**1. If you had to choose, would you rather have...**

1. A smaller government providing fewer services.
2. A bigger government providing more services.

2. Which of the following statements come closest to your view?

1. America's openness to people from all over the world is essential to who we are as a nation.
2. If America is too open to people from all over the world, we risk losing our identity as a nation.

2. In general, would you say experts who study a subject for many years are...

1. Usually BETTER at making good policy decisions about that subject than other people.
2. Usually WORSE at making good policy decisions about that subject than other people.
3. NEITHER BETTER NOR WORSE at making good policy decisions about that subject than other people.

2. Thinking about increased trade of goods and services between the U.S. and other nations in recent decades, would you say that the U.S. has...

1. Gained more than it has lost because increased trade has helped lower prices and increased the competitiveness of some U.S. businesses.
2. Lost more than it has gained because increased trade has cost jobs in manufacturing and other industries and lowered wages for some U.S. workers.

2. How much more, if anything, needs to be done to ensure equal rights for all Americans regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds?

1. A lot
2. A little
3. Nothing at all

2. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

1. Business corporations make too much profit.
2. Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit.

2. How much, if at all, would it bother you to regularly hear people speak a language other than English in public places in your community?

1. A lot
2. Some
3. Not much

4. Not at all
2. **On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 means you feel as cold and negative as possible and 100 means you feel as warm and positive as possible...**
 1. How do you feel towards Democrats?
 2. How do you feel towards Republicans?
2. **Which of these statements best describes your opinion about the United States?**
 1. The U.S. stands above all other countries in the world.
 2. The U.S. is one of the greatest countries in the world, along with some others.
 3. There are other countries that are better than the U.S.
2. **How much of a problem, if any, would you say each of the following is in the country today?**
 1. **People being too easily offended by things others say.**
 1. Major problem
 2. Minor problem
 3. Not a problem
 2. **People saying things that are very offensive to others.**
 1. Major problem
 2. Minor problem
 3. Not a problem

Which comes closer to your view of candidates for political office, even if neither is exactly right? I usually feel like...

- a. There is at least one candidate who shares most of my views.
- b. None of the candidates represent my views well.

In general, how much do White people benefit from advantages in society that Black people do not have?

- a. A great deal
- b. A fair amount
- c. Not too much
- d. Not at all

Do you think greater social acceptance of people who are transgender (people who identify as a gender that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth) is...

- a. Very good for society
- b. Somewhat good for society
- c. Neither good nor bad for society
- d. Somewhat bad for society
- e. Very bad for society

Overall, would you say people who are convicted of crimes in this country serve...

- a. Too much time in prison

- b. Too little time in prison
- c. About the right amount of time in prison

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

- a. Religion should be kept separate from government policies.
- b. Government policies should support religious values and beliefs.

In the future, do you think...

- a. U.S. policies should try to keep it so America is the only military superpower.
- b. It would be acceptable if another country became as militarily powerful as the U.S.