

PEACEWORKS



Behavioral Science and Social Contact Peacemaking

By Josh Martin, Meghann Perez, and Ruben Grangaard



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

NO. 185 | OCTOBER 2022

PEACEWORKS

NO. 185 | OCTOBER 2022



ABOUT THE REPORT

This report, which asserts that behavioral science is a complementary approach to innovation in any discipline, does not attempt to reinvent peacebuilding but instead focuses on what might be preventing certain types of peacebuilding programs from performing to their potential. It is supported by the Inclusive Peace Processes and Reconciliation program at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Josh Martin is an internationally recognized expert in behavioral science as applied to peacebuilding, governance, and development policy. Behavioral design consultant Meghann Perez was previously vice president at ideas42 and worked at USAID's Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance and with UN agencies in sub-Saharan Africa. Ruben Grangaard is a monitoring, evaluation, and learning director at DAI and previously was a program officer on the Learning, Evaluation, and Research team at USIP.

Cover photo: Women attend a community dialogue in Uzo-Uwani near Nimbo in Nigeria's southeastern state of Enugu on August 4, 2016. (Photo by Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters)

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

© 2022 by the United States Institute of Peace

United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

(202) 457-1700
(202) 429-6063 (fax)
usip_requests@usip.org
www.USIP.org

Peaceworks No. 185. First published 2022.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-895-1





Contents

1	Introduction
7	Effective Actions in Peacebuilding Programs
10	Why Are Critical Behaviors Often Missing?
19	Testing Behavioral Interventions for Peacebuilding
21	Conclusion

Summary



In the drive to make peacebuilding more effective, programs increasingly have been targeted at the structural roots of conflict rather than at the individual. Research on what works in practice has underlined skepticism in the technique that remains at the heart of the peacebuilding field—social contact theory, the principle of which is that encountering individuals from other groups can lead to greater understanding, empathy, and trust.

This report argues that social contact theory, far from being ineffective, simply has not been adequately supported with emerging insights from the study of human behavior. The report provides a framework to help identify behavioral patterns, address them with science-informed techniques, test them more rigorously, and scale them to ensure that changes in individual behavior are reflected in the peacefulness of entire societies. Effective action in social contact–based programs depends on three categories of participant behavior: coming forward to participate, staying engaged, and taking action in their communities once their participation is complete. Many peacebuilding program designers instead target attitudes or beliefs, thereby simultaneously underappreciating the impact they are having and missing opportunities to increase it further by closely analyzing the decisions and actions of their participants and designing programs to better support them.

In exploring the value of behavioral science to peacebuilding, the report provides practical insights and recommendations to improve peacebuilding efforts by more effectively factoring human behavior into the design and implementation of social contact interventions. Taken together, these highlight underexplored pathways to reducing violence at scale without resorting to more costly and complex solutions at the structural level.



Passengers wait for buses during floods caused by heavy rains on July 12, 2020, in Yangon, Myanmar. Many factors may affect participation in peacebuilding programs, including transportation and scheduling challenges. (Photo by Thein Zaw/AP)

Introduction

Peacebuilding is a broad term that encompasses a large set of efforts by diverse actors at the global, regional, national, subnational, and individual levels. Peacebuilders work to transform societies by promoting inclusive social and political processes, bridging divides, strengthening security, providing socioeconomic opportunities, and advancing justice. As knowledge of conflict drivers has increased, peacebuilders have become more sophisticated in designing interventions to address these root causes, particularly efforts that help prevent conflict and build resilience as a way to durable peace. In addition, over the last few years, international actors have increasingly emphasized locally led processes to foster local ownership and adaptability.

At the same time, the scope and ambition of the peacebuilding field has expanded, burdening techniques

originally designed for facilitating negotiation between elites with expectations of generating peaceful outcomes for an entire population. Most programs with the potential to achieve maximum scalability rely heavily on social contact theory, which holds that encountering someone with a different group identity—whether by living near them, participating in shared activities, or simply engaging in dialogue—can lead to greater understanding, empathy, and trust. Plenty of evidence supports this theory, which has become the bedrock of most peacebuilding initiatives in recent decades.¹

The literature provides room for optimism that social contact can be meaningful for individuals, even transformative, but major doubts remain over the ability of programs that feature social contact to actually prevent violence, whether at the community, society, or country

level.² Too often, the impact of a designed encounter dissipates over time or fails to resonate in the community.³ Thus the observable impacts of social contact peacebuilding in the community only rarely justify the cost of facilitating the encounters they depend on. Because peacebuilding program budgets seldom have the capacity to accommodate more than a few hundred participants at a time, social contact programs have yet to claim more than a fleeting influence in a broader conflict ecosystem.

Nor can technology alone provide a silver bullet by driving down the marginal cost of social contact programs. On its own, digital engagement has less immediate impact than in-person interactions and faces even greater extension challenges in time and space.⁴ Moreover, the mere ability to interact with others over technology channels, if not carefully managed, can easily reduce rather than increase the potential for opposing groups to find common ground.⁵

The failure to look beyond technology and use all innovative techniques available is one of the reasons social contact peacebuilding remains limited—or at least not keeping pace with the expansion of global conflict. The need is therefore urgent to refine the practice of peacebuilding by rigorously identifying, applying, testing, and scaling promising approaches from other disciplines. In particular, peacebuilding as a field has proved puzzlingly impervious to the latest science on decision-making and taking action, even though the primary focus among peacebuilders is on shifting behaviors of conflict parties and engaging broader communities in nonviolent resolution of conflict. In fact, a common critique of peacebuilding has been that institutional actors too often offer only technical or structural solutions to conflicts deeply rooted in individuals' perceptions and patterns of behavior. A serious attempt to innovate is therefore long overdue.

As one United States Institute of Peace colleague noted, “Many of us have come to realize that we have

been underestimating the human dimension: perceptions, fears, trauma, identities, affinities, biases, decision-making processes, and so forth. Even when we do recognize the full impact of such factors, we typically do not know what to do about them.”

BEHAVIORAL INNOVATION

It is hardly novel to suggest that further innovation in social contact should involve a deeper understanding of the role of cognition. After all, the ability to regulate emotions, overcome perceptions of threat, set aside the influence of past trauma, and—through a number of possible mechanisms—humanize the other is critical to how an encounter with a member of a hostile group might reduce the potential for future conflict. An immense body of scholarship, from Enlightenment-era dualism theorists to recent studies of trauma, takes up the case for paying careful attention to how human neurological circuitry can either facilitate or inhibit attempts to build peaceful relationships across group membership lines.⁶ The rise of what are called trauma-sensitive peacebuilding techniques is one example.⁷

Despite all the attention given to the brain in these studies, what is missed are helpful clues from the “shallower” part of human cognition about how “deeper” brain phenomena can be turned on and off by aspects of the context in which people make decisions and take actions. Practitioners preoccupied with trauma exposure or identity formation may view the situational aspects of the programs, such as the time of day at which program participants fill in their registration forms and whether they do so alone or in a group setting, as minor details to be worked out later. These factors matter, however: psychological research has provided ample evidence for situationally mediated behavior since the first half of the twentieth century.⁸ The main contribution of the more recent behavioral movement in both psychology and economics is to assert that they deserve a more prominent position.

As a body of practice, the field of applied behavioral insights teaches program designers that paying extra attention to previously overlooked aspects of the participant experience can, incrementally and over time, significantly increase impact at negligible additional cost.

In various fields of social policy, from financial literacy to early childhood education, techniques from behavioral science—how people make decisions and take actions—have helped extend the impact of a transformational moment or training curriculum, bridging the gap between initial intention and eventual action.⁹ Simple tweaks such as adding reminders or helping people set goals can overcome the natural tendency to forget at the moment when action needs to be taken. Nudges to “tell a friend” can get more members of the community involved. Simplifying and gamifying a user experience can make it easier to engage productively with a stranger over a technological medium. These are isolated examples. As a body of practice, the field of applied behavioral insights teaches program designers that paying extra attention to previously overlooked aspects of the participant experience can, incrementally and over time, significantly increase impact at negligible additional cost.

Asserting that behavioral science is a complementary approach to innovation, as this report does, makes it clear that much should be preserved in the current system of peacebuilding programs, particularly within social contact programs. Both the expanded use of new technologies and a heightened sensitivity to neurophysiological preconditions such as trauma exposure are marked progress. What is missing is adequate attention to the way these developments foster a cohesive, supportive, and environmentally attuned experience that facilitates productive (that is, peace-promoting) decisions and actions on the part of program participants. This report does not attempt to reinvent peacebuilding as a discipline, but instead focuses on subtle factors that may prevent certain types of peacebuilding programs from performing to their full potential. In fact, many peacebuilding practitioners will be well aware of the behavioral challenges

identified here. In many cases around the world, practitioners are already addressing them explicitly. The aim here is simply to provide a framework for identifying behavioral problems more systematically, addressing them more robustly with science-informed techniques, testing them more rigorously to see whether they work, and scaling them more diffusely to provide ever greater impact.

This report focuses on a common peacebuilding method: programs that attempt, using social contact as the theory of change, to bring together people from different or hostile groups. These include a variety of practical models, from activity-based joint encounters to dialogue meetings—often referred to as community dialogues or track 2 or 3 dialogues—to interventions targeting semi-elites, sometimes referred to as grasstops leaders. In exploring the value of behavioral science, this report provides practical insights and recommendations to improve peacebuilding efforts by more effectively factoring an understanding of human behavior into the design, implementation, and evaluation of social contact interventions. Focusing on this modality throughout allows careful exploration of decision points common to most instances despite differences in size, geography, target population, and other variables. Social contact programs such as dialogues are also the foundation of many projects, a significant base from which to expand to other types of programs in future.¹⁰

This report does not directly consider the question of whether social contact works. Empirical evidence aside, finding people who have personally participated in a structured dialogue with someone from an opposing identity group who believe their experiences have been positive, even transformational, is not difficult. Taking a behavioralist perspective, the



People play soccer in eastern Mosul, Iraq, on February 8, 2017, following four months during which the field was closed because of fighting between Islamic State and Iraqi forces. (Photo by Bram Janssen/AP)

report addresses not whether such programs work in their current forms, but instead how they can be made to work by reinforcing the likelihood of behaviors that include ideal participation and eventual follow-through. This approach follows Nobel Prize-winning economist Esther Duflo's call to "[take] care of apparently irrelevant details . . . and important logistical decisions that are fundamental to a policy's functioning," recognizing that program success is often more sensitive to such features than to the choice of the given policy in the first place.¹¹

Arrayed against the potential impact of social contact programs are minute decisions that program designers regularly need to make: How to word the initial radio announcement to maximize the chance of bringing in the right balance of people who are open-minded enough to engage with members of a hostile group but

are not simultaneously predisposed to getting along with them. How and who to choose as facilitators for structured dialogue events to avoid the perception of partisanship or rigging. How to foster the type of communication that might increase the chances that participants in a Muslim-Christian soccer league stay in touch with each other—that is, maintain social contact—once back in their home environments so that the positive effects of their participation may persist beyond the initial program and long enough into the future to prevent actual outbreaks of violence.

Practical details such as these have broad utility for any peacebuilding organization, big or small, local or international, wanting to maximize its impact by better understanding the assumptions on which its programs rest. The report emphasizes the achievable goals of improving existing programs through relatively cost-effective

approaches that can be easily scaled to reach and influence behavior among a large number of people.

APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE DEFINED

Applied behavioral science—or behavioral economics—as a discipline has crystallized in recent years from the output of several seminal collaborations in academia, the first and best-known being the Nobel prize-winning work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in the late 1970s. Marrying economics and psychology, their work complicated traditional economic models of rational responses to changes in price and information with the context in which economic actors made decisions and took actions. Since then, a growing body of literature has unearthed myriad ways in which human behavior is systematically and unavoidably biased by contextual determinants that are often underrecognized—such as perception of peer group behavior (social norms), the possibility of procrastination (present bias), or the visual salience of arbitrary information (limited attention).

Behavioral economics emphasizes the effect of context on the way humans form intentions, make decisions, and take action. Classical economic thinking and common sense both hold that one's desires and preferences remain more or less consistent across time and place. If this is true, small changes in the way a message is worded, priming aspects of identity, the order in which options are presented, or the number of steps required to complete a task should not affect a person's actions. Other related notions are that awareness and information alone are generally enough to change behavior, that if people value a resource or service highly enough or need it badly enough, they will do what it takes to access it. The evidence, however, directly contradicts these concepts: over and over, studies have demonstrated the power of the situation to affect behavior, often outside people's awareness.

As behavioral science has gained adherents and renown, however, interest in psychologically oriented innovation overall has also exploded, giving rise to a

plethora of techniques. These include management principles for product design from the technology sector to academic disciplines from the natural and cognitive sciences, leading to frequent confusion among would-be innovators and practical challenges in integrating cross-disciplinary techniques. First, then, it is important to define behavioral science and how it is distinct from parallel approaches such as human-centered design, social and behavioral change communication, and applied neuroscience so that policymakers and program designers can more efficiently select the approach that fits their needs.

Behavioral science—or, more accurately for the purposes of this report, *applied* behavioral science—is characterized by its focus on three core principles: problem-driven design, using scientific findings to explain how context influences behavior, and testing to determine whether a solution delivers the expected change in behavior. Leading organizations in the field have developed a procedure for systematically working within these principles on real-world applications.

First, begin with a problem—meaning the systematic, observable behavior to be changed, stripped of any assumptions about how it is produced. In peacebuilding, for instance, focus could be on reducing dropout among youths who attend the first session of a dialogue program but then fail to attend the following sessions. Defining the behavior so narrowly restricts focus to a finite set of contextual features, such as the routine aspects of daily life for a particular youth population.

To reveal reasons for behavior that might be unclear, these contextual features are then matched with findings from the literature on how humans make decisions and take actions. Thus, in the simplest of scenarios, the long delay between sessions might seem to make it more likely that even those clearly intending to attend a subsequent session would forget some important logistical detail, fail to attend, and consequently drop out of the program. With this insight, designing a solution

becomes an almost trivial exercise: if people are forgetting important details, a simple reminder is likely to make a measurable difference in session attendance.

This may seem self-evident, but faith in a solution is not possible until it has been tested. A rigorous impact evaluation provides evidence of meaningful improvement (or the lack thereof) in real-world behavior relative to a business-as-usual scenario.¹² Once designers can estimate impact, they can make incremental improvements to the design and iteratively test until its value is maximized.¹³

Adherence to these principles may differentiate an applied behavioral approach from other innovation

approaches.¹⁴ Classic human-centered design, for instance, does include an emphasis on problem-driven design, but the link between context and behavior is generally subordinate to that of insights from consultation with local populations. In social and behavior change communication, rather than move from a behavioral problem toward an open set of solutions, designers tend to focus on mass media that can convey explicit messages rather than on other channels to adjust subtle features of the context that behavioral designers might prioritize. Finally, applied neuroscience approaches do not prioritize eventual behavior and thus do not always lead to solutions effective on a population-wide scale.¹⁵

Effective Actions in Peacebuilding Programs



Systematic data on peacebuilding program types are difficult to find. Nevertheless, the portfolio of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and those of its partners can be used to develop a typology of basic forms of social contact–dependent peacebuilding programs. Understanding the common architectures of these programs helps in isolating the behaviors participants need to undertake if they are to achieve success as program designers define it.¹⁶ These behaviors are the departure point for any analysis of contextual drivers.

Community dialogue has been defined as “a facilitated, conflict intervention process [at the community level] that brings together various stakeholders in a conflict, or around a problem or concern, to express, listen to, explore and better understand diverse views in order to transform individual, relational, and/or structural drivers of conflict.”¹⁷ In other words, a community dialogue is any process that convenes two or more stakeholder groups to increase intergroup awareness, understanding, and tolerance or to build intergroup consensus on how to address a mutual problem, challenge, or opportunity. Both of these have a broader aim to transform individual, relational, or structural drivers of conflict. Dialogue processes often aim to achieve both objectives concurrently. Processes may have different features depending on the type or level of participants engaged, such as actors on a track 1 or track 1.5 process.¹⁸

Facilitator training programs in peacebuilding typically have two broad purposes. The first is to build conflict mitigation capacity with targeted influential individuals and to provide support through resources, mentoring,

and coaching so that these individuals can and do directly intervene in conflicts at various levels. The second is to enable a rapid and relatively cost-effective increase in the number of skilled facilitators who can effectively implement dialogues. This is done through the traditional training of trainers model, in which a few individuals are trained in both conflict mitigation techniques and pedagogical skills to prepare them to train others.

Developing networks of facilitators, both creating new networks and supporting existing systems, is common for various reasons. The most basic motivation is the belief—supported by research—that when individuals coordinate, collaborate, and bring unique capacities to a group, it leads to impact greater than the sum of its parts. This report discusses networks of trained facilitators or conflict mitigation experts, often called facilitator networks, and often made up of individuals or organizations with diverse backgrounds and complementary skills. The network creates a mechanism for members to share and learn from one another, collaborate, and coordinate to more effectively mitigate conflict.¹⁹

BEHAVIOR 1: COMING FORWARD TO PARTICIPATE

The first requisite in the peacebuilding efforts described is to have the right people in the room. One of the most common critiques of social contact peacebuilding is that typically engagement (such as dialogue) only occurs between those already predisposed to engage with the other, not between those yet to be so inclined and thus whose voices are most needed at the table. The failure to reach the right people

People who begin to participate must continue to do so. Peace, like trust, can only be built over time. No matter how powerful or transformative a program, it will likely require more sustained engagement to have a meaningful and lasting impact on participants and their communities.

depresses initial impact and reduces the chance of spreading positive effects to others in the community; by virtue of being easier to reach, those involved are also less likely to help program designers reach others.

The challenge is not so much in reaching the right people per se—their determining characteristics, including places of residence, are usually well known—but more in inducing them to express interest, sign up to participate, and ultimately come to the first session or complete the first action required by a program. To be sure, they may not wish to do so for many reasons. Former or current combatants, of course, face real threats both from the opposing parties, fearing perhaps they may be led into a trap, and from their community, for stepping outside the prescribed norm. Political or even grassroots leaders may have constituencies that they risk disappointing by demonstrating conciliatory intent. Extremists of any stripe or class may either fear the corruption of their belief system if they engage with the other side or experience a profound sense of psychological threat (real or imagined) at the prospect of doing so.

For many other hard-to-attract participants, the choice to attend a peacebuilding program is just that—a choice. These people, arguably the majority in most societies, have no explicit, overriding ideological, political, or survival motivation to avoid engagement. They may be curious about the other side, hopeful for a peace agreement, or even ignorant about the benefits that can come from reaching out to others (perhaps having made futile attempts in the past). Given no underlying explicit motivation or incentive, their failure to come forward cannot be interpreted as an intentional decision; it may just as easily be because they forgot the deadline for registering, could not make room in their schedules, did not want to be the only one attending from the community, or happened to miss some key piece of information in the program materials.

BEHAVIOR 2: STAYING ENGAGED

People who begin to participate must continue to do so. Peace, like trust, can only be built over time. No matter how powerful or transformative a program, it will likely require more sustained engagement to have a meaningful and lasting impact on participants and their communities. Participants who do not complete the full course of sessions, or do not participate in all activities of a given program, stand little chance of improving the prospects for peace. Dropping out could possibly make things worse, in fact: dialogue programs, for instance, often complete several sessions before participants develop a level of comfort with each other; leaving before this occurs risks entrenching hostility, the opposite of the intended effect.

Why might participants drop out of a peacebuilding program? The most typical answers to the question are the high cost of transportation, boredom, and a sense of hopelessness—exacerbated, perhaps, by changes in the climate of negotiations, such as violent attacks in the community. But these reasons are not the whole story. Could these costs be so high in all cases as to completely obscure the ultimate benefits of peaceful collaboration or coexistence? Although participating may come at some cost, it holds the promise of moments of true illumination and breakthrough if participants stay through to the end.²⁰

A portion of those who drop out of peacebuilding programs—such as negotiating partners who walk away from the table—may, of course, do so for immutable or exogenous factors beyond the control of the program conveners. Many, however, likely leave in response to subtler contextual influences that can readily be counteracted. Programs that involve a regular series of meetings, for instance, are vulnerable to the same barriers that students who must attend classes or patients who

need to take every pill in an antibiotics course face: forgetting, failing to plan, miscalculating risks, and more. Programs that incorporate features designed to protect against these influences are likely to see much higher levels of completion than those that do not.

BEHAVIOR 3: APPLYING LESSONS

Those who successfully participate need to apply what they have learned in their home contexts. Most peacebuilding programs seek to effect changes in either the individual participant (such as developing skills or shifting perspective) or in the collective dynamic (improved cooperation). The sustainability of these changes relies on participants behaving differently on a routine basis in their daily lives. Participants need to stay in touch with other participants, for instance, or intervene to prevent casual discrimination against vulnerable members of their community when they see it. In some cases, programs may also be targeted at specific one-time behaviors such as voting during an upcoming election or advocating for a peace agreement.

Many peacebuilding program designers do not articulate the ultimate behavioral objectives of their

programs, targeting instead explicitly held attitudes or beliefs. Much evidence in behavioral science, however, emphasizes the difficulty of bridging the gap from intention to real-life action, particularly when the context in which the intention is formed (a highly curated peacebuilding environment, say) is quite different from that in which actions must be taken. Even powerful psychoeducation tools, such as interventions that successfully shift individual's implicit biases, have found difficulty stimulating impact on actual behavior that may be far removed in space or in time.²¹

If people who have participated in peacebuilding programs return to their communities evincing little or no change in their behavior then or later, it cannot be assumed that the program was ineffective. It may be simply that the context in which people experience the transformational effects of dialogue is very different—in time, space, and social environment—from that in which they routinely make decisions and take action. Examining this difference closely therefore offers the potential to help program designers intentionally reinforce action over time and thereby recover much of the true unobservable impact of their programs.

Why Are Critical Behaviors Often Missing?



Behavioral scientists recently honed a methodology for unearthing pivotal insights that explain why an expected behavior may be missing. The first step is to develop a deep understanding of the context, charting the decisions and actions of relevant actors and constructing hypotheses to explain how certain contextual features might influence behavior through known scientific mechanisms. Then these hypotheses can be confirmed (or disconfirmed) by observing and interviewing community members to understand their process for making decisions and taking action.

Analysis based on this process yields an initial set of interrelated behavioral barriers—or how specific contexts interplay with human psychology and inhibit desired behaviors—that may relate to a variety of peacebuilding programs that incorporate intergroup contact. They are summarized in a set of insights, together with specific examples from the body of practice. Each insight highlights potential ways program designers can address the behavioral barriers in peacebuilding programs to maximize impact.

INSIGHT 1: PEACEBUILDING REQUIRES MENTAL EFFORT.

Research in behavioral science shows that people have a finite amount of cognitive bandwidth (mental energy) and can only perceive, process, and act on a fixed amount of information at any given moment.²² In response to scarcity of a key resource—such as time, food, or money—the human brain tends to “tunnel” (focus exclusively) on whatever is most urgent. Populations in conflict settings experience a scarcity of

safety and security, and meeting other basic needs is often difficult as well. Trauma exposure can further sap concentration and deplete cognitive bandwidth.²³

Although useful as a survival mechanism, tunneling effectively reduces the ability to allocate mental energy to other tasks where it may be needed. This is particularly deleterious in the presence of seemingly minor inconveniences, or hassle factors—obstacles that can impede follow-through and require concentration to overcome.²⁴ Other higher-order cognitive functions—planning for the future, remembering complicated protocols, or resisting temptation—can also decline under limited cognitive bandwidth. The challenge of regulating emotions in the presence of active environmental triggers requires further concentration that may be lacking, leading to markedly different behavior in what some psychologists call a hot versus cold emotional state.²⁵

In a peacebuilding context, the people who have most to gain from coming forward are generally, for the reasons outlined, the same ones who experience the most severe effects of cognitive scarcity. It should come as no surprise, then, that in community-level conflict, the most sought-after participants are often so focused on securing immediate safety from present dangers of conflict or stability—in crisis settings at least, though such effects may persist long after the immediate crisis has passed—that they may fail to consider participation in programs that can ease the conflict in the future. Burma is a case in point: “Given the coup and the current situation in the country,” observed a member of USIP’s Burma program staff, “people are more concerned about survival at this

Box 1.

EASING RECRUITMENT

In planning workshops, the United States Institute of Peace's program in the Central African Republic has taken steps to make recruitment easier for participants, such as reducing hassles or other nonmonetary costs. The program offers transportation stipends and has an in-country partner who can directly coordinate with participants beforehand, explain the topic, confirm that the program will handle the logistics, and respond to any concerns participants might have at the outset. It also attempts to mitigate hassle factors when scheduling workshops, typically does not plan any that last more than three days, and considers weekend workshops to accommodate participant schedules. It is attentive to religious holidays and careful to avoid hosting workshops when people are fasting. In general, if a workshop is half a day or longer, the conveners serve a meal. Similarly, USIP's Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding (SNAP) program takes participants' work schedules into consideration, often timing webinars so that participants can use the internet at their workplaces and avoid the headache of searching for other suitable sites that have reliable internet service.

point. There aren't any real solutions . . . other than to focus on their priorities: safety and security."

In addition, getting participants at the community leadership level to come forward can be difficult given the many demands on their time, which further sap the already limited mental energy they may have for peacebuilding programs. For instance, people engaged in advocacy or community organizing often focus on the urgent needs of their communities.

Even those who do consider participating may find that actually coming forward is laden with unforeseen hassles. Registering for a social contact initiative may require multiple steps, leading people to avoid starting or to get stuck before finishing. In addition, training hours or dialogue meetings may conflict with other commitments, making the demands of participation seem too burdensome. In community dialogue programs, for instance, it may also be a hassle to discern who is responsible for organizing participants and how and in which ways to be involved. That organizers may not be from the community may prompt potential participants to avoid the awkwardness of inquiring about important details of the program. Those

identified within the community to lead dialogue processes might find it challenging to participate in the required training beforehand. In knowledge-sharing program modalities, peacebuilders might intend to participate in networking sessions, but having to identify time and transportation to the session can be enough to convince them that they should not participate.

When participants need to attend numerous training, dialogue, or networking sessions, each one competes with their other responsibilities and mental burdens, making it more difficult to see a program through to completion. The longer a program continues, the more the participants may feel associated hassles. Programs can lose momentum over time and as background conflicts rise and fall in intensity, making it all the more likely that a small procedural hindrance could derail a participant's continuing in the program. In dialogue programs in particular, feelings of futility can set in as sessions drag on without resolution, making it harder to maintain focus and increasing the likelihood of dropout.

Limited cognitive bandwidth also affects the ability to retain information, effectively recall it, and apply it to

Box 2.

SYNERGIZING NONVIOLENT ACTION AND PEACEBUILDING

The Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding (SNAP) program is a strategic framework that gives peacebuilders and activists the opportunity to explore the intersection between nonviolent action and peacebuilding approaches to develop the capacity and skills necessary to assess conflict, build coalitions, mobilize constituencies, balance power, and consolidate gains as they work to address injustices and build inclusive peace processes.^a To help participants cultivate peacebuilding habits, the program attempts to make nonviolent action relevant through popular education adult-learning strategies. In workshops, participants are asked to identify and analyze issues in their community, an experience participants report as being unique in comparison with other workshops they have joined. This methodology enables participants to begin conceptualizing how they will apply the strategies learned during the workshop and increases the likelihood that they will draw on these new skills when they return to their communities. For example, in an exercise titled “The Ideal Community,” facilitators ask participants to draw a map of their ideal community. The facilitators then pose as prospective investors in the community from an extractive industry. These investors first express interest by complimenting the community but return to tear up the map participants have created. The participants are then tasked with determining how they will challenge this development through nonviolent action and peacebuilding strategies.

Note:

- a. United States Institute of Peace, “Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding: An Action Guide,” www.usip.org/programs/synergizing-non-violent-action-and-peacebuilding.

future experiences. Training sessions can be full of material that is unfamiliar or even foreign to participants; retaining all the relevant information can be cognitively taxing, especially when considering the differences in time and space between the initial exposure and the moment the information is to be used. After sessions, participants may become so reimmersed in daily life that the mental energy they need to expend to recall and apply what they had learned is prohibitive. As discussed, this is particularly true for those living in active conflict environments where exposure to instability, violence, trauma, migration, and other factors presents additional and severe demands on cognitive bandwidth.

In addition, people in “cold” emotional states—for instance, when sitting in an air-conditioned workshop space in a secured compound—have difficulty picturing themselves in “hot” states, such as those they face in their home context, which can lead to unpreparedness

to take action when in a different environment. For example, participants in conflict mitigation training sessions may learn certain dispute resolution skills in a classroom environment but not have the concentration necessary to both recall and quickly activate these skills when a real conflict arises outside the classroom because of the difference in context.

Overall, peacebuilding program designers can maximize impact by both limiting the demands programs are making on participants’ cognitive bandwidth (rather than simply their time) and intentionally designing ways to “give bandwidth back” to participants. To reduce demands on attention, designers should focus on making the initial stages of the program as easy as possible to complete and the program itself as context specific as possible. Minimizing awkwardness, hassle, and other nonmonetary obstacles by eliminating unnecessary complications can make it easier to participate and engage in a program (see box 1

on page 11). Providing clear channels for action is also essential to matching actions and intentions, especially when a process is by nature complicated or confusing.

Program designers can also tailor program requirements to participants' available time and energy, taking into account existing mental loads and creating schedules accordingly, such as offering youth programs outside exam season or community programs before election season. Behavioral research also demonstrates that limiting the unnecessary information presented and decreasing the choices presented can free up cognitive bandwidth for other tasks.

Finally, program designers can provide scaffolding to support the translation of takeaways from one context to another (see box 2 on page 12). In a training context, trainers should first recognize that each target action must happen at a particular time and place and then should attempt to simulate the conditions under which each one will occur to reduce the psychological distance involved and thus increase the likelihood of successful recall and activation when needed. Another tactic is to provide a commitment mechanism, allowing participants in a session to commit to taking a specific action when they leave and following up later to remind them of their commitment.

INSIGHT 2: SUBTLE FACTORS INFLUENCE VALUATION OF COSTS AND BENEFITS.

All decision-making is about weighing costs against benefits. The absolute values of these costs and benefits can be affected by the time horizons on which they occur: humans are naturally disposed to value benefits and devalue costs more in the short term than in the long term, an entirely rational phenomenon that economists call *discounting*. Decades of research in behavioral science, however, reveal that discounting in real-world settings can work in puzzling ways. Benefits and costs that occur immediately rather than in the abstract short term receive highly disproportionate weight in many people's consideration, known as *hyperbolic discounting* or *present bias*.²⁶ Procrastination, for instance, comes from overvaluing the

immediate costs of a particular course of action, such as spending today identifying how to enroll in a training or even attend, compared with its future benefits, such as using lessons learned to improve individual or communal outcomes. Moreover, the way benefits are presented and framed can affect outcomes. For example, benefits not prominent at the moment of decision can easily be missed and not calculated into decision-making.²⁷

Given the material and cognitive deprivation often found in conflict settings, it is reasonable to expect even greater distortions to the cost-benefit calculation. Much remains to be discovered about the degree and type of these differences, but what is known can help in forming hypotheses about how subtle factors in a peacebuilding context might influence participants' likelihood to become involved in, stay engaged with, and effectively learn from peacebuilding programs.

The framing of benefits and costs is essential when attempting to get the right people to the table. For those in current conflict, the promise of spoils of war, being better known and thus less abstract, may outweigh the long-term benefits of living in a stable community. Similarly, training programs, dialogues, institutional reform, and other peacebuilding modalities all require participants to give their time and energy—a clear if objectively insignificant cost—in the present for a more abstract benefit in the future.

Peacebuilding program objectives are often framed in broad terms, such as furthering peace, and individuals may not see how participating would directly benefit them. For example, community members not involved in direct combat or conflict may not see a benefit to participation in conflict mitigation or dispute resolution training, even though such sessions may include skill-building that would be beneficial to them in other aspects of their lives. Even when training is explicitly framed as a livelihood benefit, participants may still misidentify its true purpose because of simultaneous peace branding, given that programs often use the labels concurrently. In other cases, peacebuilders may frame programs in ways



As part of a peacebuilding program organized by Catholic Relief Services, Muslims and Christians work together to clear a drainage system in Boda, Central African Republic, on March 13, 2018. (Photo by Lynsey Addario/New York Times)

that fail to connect the purpose of trainings to everyday life. Without proper framing, programs may inadvertently and implicitly exclude participants needed to achieve critical impact in communities.

The longer peacebuilding programs continue, the more challenging it becomes for participants to envision the benefits and the easier it becomes to remember the annoyances, hassles, and monetary or other costs. Programs that facilitate in-person social contact can be taxing for everyone involved. They require financial backing, time away from regular responsibilities, and mental effort to counteract natural threat perceptions that accompany the prospect of engaging with conflicting groups—all for a seemingly indefinite period. As dialogue continues without resolution, each session and action taken can feel more costly than the last and future benefits less likely or further off than before (see box 3). For

training and other skills-building modalities, the marginal benefit of each additional session seems to have less impact over time and the future benefits seem less salient, leaving people less likely to attend later sessions.

Taking action in the community risks upsetting the status quo; and that, in at least some cases, might represent a potential loss for the participant. Former training participants, for instance, may opt to not use newly gained skills for fear of losing carefully acquired social capital. Using them to improve future prospects might seem unrealistic or risky. For example, a combatant who has participated in a conflict mitigation program may believe that using de-escalation skills from the program would risk their being perceived as weak or conceding to others, and the chance to gain from preventing violence appears abstract. Further, it is easy in any home context to procrastinate taking nonroutine actions that might

Box 3.

EXPECTATIONS

To ensure continued engagement, USIP staff working in Iraq carefully discern the scope of the intended discussions based on what can feasibly be addressed in a single dialogue and at the start set clear expectations as to what will and what will not be discussed. They recognize that broad structural issues cannot be changed in a single dialogue, so they choose three problems to tackle and steer the conversation to keep it within the established parameters, avoiding contentious tangential issues that could derail the process. Although facilitators have observed that it usually takes multiple dialogue sessions to reach an agreement, they never state the length of the process in their introduction due to the risk of participants becoming discouraged and dropping out if they perceive that the issues will not be resolved by a particular point. Ultimately, people are more likely to stay if they see progress than for any other reason, so by identifying areas of consensus being reached and articulating what is coming up next, the facilitators have maintained a high level of retention.

come with some sacrifice and for which the potential benefits are unclear. This is particularly true for socially risky actions such as staying in touch with a member of an out-group, but it is also true of safer tasks such as visiting a health clinic if they are not part of one's routine.

Peacebuilding program designers can mitigate the distortions that shape real-world cost-benefit calculations by making future benefits more salient relative to present or near-term costs. They can do so by communicating with more intentional emphasis on these benefits, making them as understandable and context specific as possible to speak to the needs of participants. A related tactic is to help individuals make an active choice about their participation by highlighting the implicit trade-offs they face, such as by having them sign a pledge in which they acknowledge that, by dropping out of the program, they are forgoing the chance to learn valuable skills.

Beyond simple emphasis, another promising technique is to offer micro-incentives, or economically insignificant rewards (such as attractive locations, accommodations, and venues) that, despite their small size, aid in refocusing individuals' attention on what is to be gained from taking a certain action rather than on what is to be lost. Taking advantage of people's natural aversion to loss,

such incentives can be strengthened by handing them out in advance when possible, and warning that they may be taken away or reduced if compliance wanes (for instance, if participants stop showing up to sessions).

Care must be taken, however, in the use of incentives, even small ones. Interventions that offer monetary incentives or frame benefits in terms that seem lucrative risk externalizing the motivation for participating, focusing participants on financial gain at the expense of intrinsic rewards.²⁸ Thus adherence to the program may decrease when incentives are reduced if motivation is built extrinsically.

INSIGHT 3: PROGRAMS CAN TRIGGER HIDDEN IDENTITIES, NARRATIVES, AND NORMS.

The human brain has evolved to deal with the uncertain and incomplete information the senses provide by making assumptions. Such shortcuts often use experiences and exposures that influence how the individual views themselves, their peers, and the world around them. In a conflict setting, many contextual features can trigger these shortcuts, meaning actions may be taken in line with a particularly salient aspect of one's identity, a (potentially false) perception of what others are doing, or another simplistic association or narrative.

Box 4.

UNDUE INFLUENCE

Some stakeholders in Burma perceived peacebuilding programs to represent an imposition of “Western secularism” and “an attempt to influence Burmese society.” These perceptions are particularly damaging given the history of the military fomenting division among communities around narratives of westernization and secularization in Burma. United States Institute of Peace (USIP) staff in Burma therefore worked to build trust with skeptical actors in face-to-face engagement, during which they clarified the intentions of the program. For example, a hard-line Buddhist community opposed a program, expressing anxiety about certain concepts its members perceived to be Western; but after significant engagement with the program, they came to support it and even requested that more programming be implemented. In contrast, in Sudan, negative perceptions about peacebuilding did not pose a significant challenge. In some very small villages, USIP’s Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding (SNAP) workshop often becomes the talk of the town. In this context, so many people want to participate that the workshop facilitators have to limit numbers given capacity constraints.

Mental models is an umbrella term that refers to the concepts, stereotypes, causal narratives, and worldviews that shape one’s ideas about the world and one’s place within it, often without one’s awareness.²⁹ For example, if a community member only observes high-status participants in dialogue programs, they may develop a mental model of such programs as simply negotiations between leaders and be less inclined to sign up or show up. If members of peacekeeping forces or national armies are required to complete training, they may perceive the training as a formality and thus be less likely to absorb the content and apply it to their experiences. Personal experience also plays a role: individuals who have participated in unsuccessful peacebuilding initiatives may develop mental models of such programs as ineffective and wasteful.

Who supports or facilitates the peacebuilding program can influence the mental models developed about the program. Organizers of peacebuilding programs are often external to the conflict itself; potential participants may thus believe that facilitators are too far removed or do not understand the situation (see box 4). Because peacebuilding organizations are often supported by governments, recruiting materials may unwittingly play into latent narratives in which such programs are simply political tools for elites.

Just as many models of the world exist, people have similarly multiple identities. For instance, a person can simultaneously regard himself as a combatant, a father, a husband, and a son—each carrying different goals, values, and expected behaviors. Different facets of identities are activated at certain moments; for example, an individual may exhibit loving and protective behavior at home when interacting with children but be stern and unforgiving outside the home in combat situations.

The ways people can be primed to think about their identity can have an adverse impact on their cooperation in peacebuilding activities.³⁰ For example, a member of a militant group who participates in a dialogue just after completing a military exercise may think of the facets of their identity that relate to their participation in conflict and thus not see themselves as a potential peacebuilder. As a result, they may be less cooperative during the activity or fail to learn from the experience. Facilitators conducting workshops based on USIP’s Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding (SNAP), a strategic framework that gives peacebuilders and activists the opportunity to explore the intersection between nonviolent action and peacebuilding approaches to develop capacity and skills, noted that

“some of the participants . . . in Sudan have relationships with the SPLM-North or other violent resistance movements, [and] these affiliations mean they’re inherently skeptical of nonviolent action, making their participation tenuous.”

Perceptions of peer group behavior can also exert powerful influence. Social norms are rules or standards shared by a group that guide or constrain behavior. These often originate in the cursory observation of what a significant number of peers are doing, referred to as *descriptive social norms*.³¹ These norms are in fact often false, especially when some choices are highly visible, such as manning a checkpoint in the street or participating in a violent public protest, and others less so, such as the much larger number of people choosing every day to take peaceful actions to effect change in their communities.

A potential participant’s perception of the disposition of other potential participants can greatly influence their likelihood of becoming involved themselves. For example, because many people in social contact programs are starting from a baseline of mistrust or adversarial relations, they may perceive the exercises as futile given their mental models of other participants as uncooperative. This is particularly true in settings of intractable conflict or cyclical violence because the historical experience of progress being followed by backsliding into conflict can lead to increased cynicism, mistrust, and feelings of entrapment—all of which have the potential to lead to resistance (or lack of openness) to solutions.³² In community-security dialogues, community members may have mental models of security forces as incapable of peaceful conduct given the extensive history of violent actions against their communities. In these situations, community members may view the dialogues as destined to fail; they also may think that their participation would have negative consequences given security entities’ power to use force in retribution. In addition, the tendency to cherry-pick information that confirms existing beliefs, known as *confirmation bias*,

may make it more difficult to accept the other group as cooperative despite available evidence.³³

Moreover, when approached to consider participating in an intergroup contact program, potential participants may have trouble connecting the program with an existing compatible identity. This can be the case when local populations are unfamiliar with the language or jargon of the program or when the facilitators and supporters are from an out-group. In the absence of any community members primed to think of themselves as peacebuilders (or at least as responsible representatives of their community), participation is likely to be limited.

Last, people may fail to come forward because they do not see others in their in-group doing so, leading them to believe it is against the norm for people like themselves to participate. The extent to which this is true is likely to depend on how visible the program is and whether an individual’s participation is recognized by others in the community. For example, community members may be more inclined to participate when they can easily recall someone in their network who has already done so or are shown evidence (visual or informational) that more people from the community are participating than they might have guessed.

In active conflict settings, as bombs explode and casualties mount, people participating in peacebuilding programs may come to think of them as drops in the bucket. Conflict is often the result of a failure of coordination, and individuals have little evidence to justify the belief that anyone else’s behavior is going to be changed by their own. During recurrent and government-sponsored conflict, war may seem to be imposed externally, leaving little agency for individuals or even entire communities. A particularly disheartening or destabilizing event—a mass casualty event, for instance—may bring such feelings of futility to the fore, hastening dropout even among individuals who might not think of themselves as quitters.

Box 5.

INCLUSION IN IRAQ

In Iraq, politically oriented activities, including dialogue processes, are traditionally male dominated in alignment with Iraqi tribal customs. In communities where tribal leaders resist the inclusion of women, facilitators need to work carefully within existing norms by creating parallel tracks of dialogue for women, and then strategically introducing their insights and consideration into the leaders' track without attribution. Not all of the leaders resist the inclusion of women and youth, however. It is the job of the facilitators to assess at the beginning whether the leaders are amenable and to plan accordingly. Dealing with these social norms is complicated: the facilitating team may need to make certain concessions to continue making progress in a community, but they know that if ultimately they can demonstrate the value of including women and youth, highlight successes resulting from inclusion, and convince top leaders to amend their exclusionary practices, this decision will flow down to all levels of Iraqi society, setting a new precedent for dialogue proceedings.

How and when certain identities are activated can also be particularly problematic when participants attempt to apply experiences from peacebuilding programs in their everyday lives. In the face of conflict between two people, the altercation leads each to think about their differences and, therefore, their identity that relates most to the conflict. People are primed to act according to this identity and thus think less about their ability to resolve conflict and build peace.

People may also fail to apply their experiences from conflict mitigation and dispute resolution trainings because they do not observe others using similar tools. Instead, participants may mirror the ways others respond to conflict scenarios because those responses seem like the norm, particularly because others do not respond to conflict in the same ways taught in the training sessions. How facilitators connect these skill sets to everyday life in the communities that participants call home can have an impact on whether people use them later.

Above all, it is important to consider how people's underlying cognitive schemas—their perceptions of themselves, their peers, and their circumstances—may interact with their participation in peacebuilding programs (see box 5).

Program designers often make the mistake of attempting to counter these narratives head-on through messaging. Available research, however, shows that a better strategy is to simply highlight underrecognized but valid alternative narratives. For instance, when faced with a deleterious social norm, it may be helpful to emphasize the large numbers of community members, possibly hidden from view, who do not exemplify the norm. In understanding how a potential participant or group may perceive a peacebuilding intervention or those facilitating or participating, program designers can create more effective outreach that speaks to the needs of those they intend to reach.

Program designers have several options for engaging with identity. Light-touch strategies to trigger the salience (priming) of certain identities that may support engagement with peacebuilding programs include text or visuals that remind individuals of their responsibility to their community. In the face of a mounting sense of futility, techniques for affirming self-described identities and values can increase an individual's sense of agency and optimism about the future.³⁴ Such methods are still being developed and tested by researchers and should be treated with a high degree of sensitivity to the specific situation and local environment.

Testing Behavioral Interventions for Peacebuilding



Testing the impact of social contact programs—including behaviorally informed implementation enhancements such as nudges toward such programs—is how practitioners know, with quantifiable confidence, that they work, regardless of the theory of change at play.³⁵ Even when a program has been tested at length in another country, with another population, or in a different programmatic setting, testing is what indicates whether it still works as anticipated in a new context. Because surprises are common, testing has become a foundational element in behavioral science.

Peacebuilding as a domain has proved notoriously difficult for empirical study, however. Low sample sizes—a consequence of relatively small programs that target a particular community of elite individuals rather than entire populations—reduce the reliability of results. Outcomes are difficult to define, and the data that measure these are often difficult to access or collect in the field. Moreover, outcomes often take a long time to manifest. As in many medical trials, random assignment poses ethical challenges, and the lack of a clean, systematic setting in which to operate often means too many potential confounding factors to lend credibility to quasi-experimental methods that do not involve randomization. Moreover, the feasibility of testing in conflict zones is never guaranteed because of the danger present, participants' shifting circumstances, and other environmental concerns. The empirical academic literature on what works in peacebuilding, as a result, is particularly thin.³⁶

As opposed to most empirical testing, however, testing in applied behavioral science necessitates a particularly

agile approach to help circumvent the traditional barriers to evaluating peacebuilding. Given that they aim to change behavior in the short term, behavioral scientists tend to focus on measuring observable proxies (such as responding to a recruitment call) rather than abstract constructs (such as trust). This makes testing a relatively low-stakes affair by reducing the cost of measurement and thereby allowing for multiple attempts in case of failure. Moreover, applied behavioral science is about improving incrementally on existing practice, limiting the practical and ethical challenges associated with randomization.

In testing behavioral interventions in fragile or conflict settings, several clear best practices stand out:

Test early and often. Environments in which peacebuilding programs operate are often unstable, characterized by periods of violence, migration, and hardship that are difficult to predict. They are also fraught with barriers to the flow of information, meaning that it may not always be possible to understand exactly what is happening on the ground at all times. In the absence of information on the basic environmental circumstances, the best strategy is to plan to test as many times as possible, anticipating that failures—interruptions in data collection, say, or irregularities in the implementation of the treatment—are likely.

Focus on immediate impacts. Behavioral interventions, obviously, target changes in behavior. This report focuses on attendance in a program, full engagement in that program, and applying techniques and lessons in routine aspects of daily life as core outcomes that every peacebuilding intervention needs to consider

The utility of knowing whether a social norms–based intervention outperforms one based on mental models most often pales in comparison with the utility of knowing that behavioral science, writ large, has a productive role to play in improving outcomes.

before assessing success in, say, reducing community violence or promoting positive peace. These do not usually require months or years to assess yet still have a high theorized linkage to ultimate outcomes. The speed at which they can be both changed and measured is critical: unpredictability in the environment also means that any evaluative exercise needs to be quick to take advantage of favorable circumstances that may not last. Even the utility of a particular kind of evidence required by program designers to make a decision may change with the times as programs evolve to meet changing needs on the ground, necessitating shorter feedback loops.

Use administrative data or cheap surveys. Surveys are often the primary cost driver of an empirical impact evaluation. To reduce the cost envelope to the point where frequent testing is possible, rely on administrative data as long as these data are reasonable quality (most often the case in NGO-administered programs). Surveys, of course, will still be needed to track any behavior or other outcome taking place away from the sites or systems the program administers. In such cases, simple two- or three-question surveys can be inexpensively developed and distributed via SMS,

MMS, or social media. The low sample sizes in many peacebuilding contexts will require survey designers to leverage behavioral design principles to maximize response rates.

Prioritize identifying impact. Program designers can sometimes find it tempting to test several versions of an intervention in parallel. The analytical benefit of the additional information gained from a multi-arm behavioral trial, however, is rarely worth the additional expense and complication. This is particularly true when testing behavioral interventions because the utility of knowing whether a social norms–based intervention outperforms one based on mental models most often pales in comparison with the utility of knowing that behavioral science, writ large, has a productive role to play in improving outcomes. For this reason, and because interaction effects of behavioral interventions (at least those delivered through similar intervention channels) are usually negative, behavioral scientists usually combine as many theory-driven behavioral elements as possible into a given intervention's design, hoping for as large an identifiable impact as possible. This in turn allows for a reduction in the needed sample size and the possibility of doing additional testing *ex post* with the money saved.

Conclusion



This report articulates how, why, and under what circumstances behavioral science methods can be applied to improve the effectiveness of peacebuilding programs based in social contact theory. The goal is not to revolutionize the practice of bringing opposing groups of people together. It is instead to suggest practical ways that real-world programs currently deployed in violence-affected communities can reach their full potential. Preventing violence requires delivering at scale, which few peacebuilding programs have successfully done, either because of insupportable per-participant costs (in the case of large-scale person-to-person initiatives) or impacts that do not last long enough in communities to build mass resiliency (as with technology-enabled contact or many training of trainers models).

The failure to leverage all potential sources of innovation is nothing less than a crisis for intergroup contact practitioners. An appreciation of the cognitive and neurological factors that predispose individuals to conflict—such as past trauma or explicit animus—only goes so far in predicting how individuals will act in a given situation; as behavioral research demonstrates, a critical missing link is in the context in which people make decisions and take resulting actions. What people observe others doing, how they feel at the moment, the habits they have built over time, these and many more contextual factors exercise outsize influence over adherence to the principles of peace in critical moments, whatever people’s underlying sentimental or dispositional attachment to them.

Hidden in plain sight, the influence of context can mean the difference between the unlikely success or spectacular failure of a peacebuilding initiative. Each such initiative—whether based in dialogue, training, or another modality—at bottom requires participants to take action

at three critical stages: coming forward to participate, staying committed through completion, and applying what has been learned in the appropriate time and place. A fault at any of these stages can lead to one of the myriad commonly recognized reasons for failure in peacebuilding at the local level, such as the wrong people being in the room, participants slipping back into the community, or the content of facilitated sessions being seen as irrelevant to local realities. Now that the actions at the root of these challenges are identified, it is clear that they are not necessarily structural flaws built deeply into the foundation of peacebuilding, but rather—in many cases at least—relatively superficial problems that can be resolved with tools that preserve the surrounding framework.

The ways in which context can intervene are numerous and require specialized tools, honed through careful adaptation to local realities, to excavate. This report describes how small hassles, subtle mental models, hard-to-break habits, and ubiquitous social norms present sticky barriers to following through on critical actions. But these patterns of behavior arise from even subtler features of the environment: the wording used to announce a new program during a radio advertisement, which reminds people of a different initiative years earlier that was known to have failed; the public visibility of a location in which sessions are held, which prompts fears that participants will be recognized by members of the community; or the lack of opportunities to use skills learned during a session, which leads to a high likelihood of forgetting. Indeed, for any given peacebuilding program, a careful examination could well unearth hundreds of potential barriers that threaten success to differing degrees. The key skill in behavioral design, often enough, is not in generating deep hypotheses about contextual influence but in carefully prioritizing those that have already been generated.

Pinpointing the subtle barriers to achieving impact opens the door to a new and frequently counterintuitive class of solutions that, with their ability to scale, offer the potential to stave off preventable outbreaks of violence.

Such a painstaking focus on the details of context is a challenge in a field that often seeks to move quickly to adapt to emerging threats. But pinpointing the subtle barriers to achieving impact opens the door to a new and frequently counterintuitive class of solutions that, with their ability to scale, offer the potential to stave off preventable outbreaks of violence. Could dialogue programs in the farmer-herder flash points of the Sahel be sustained and continued after the program by introducing commitment mechanisms that remind participants of how they felt during the sessions? Could a breakdown in negotiations between local leaders of armed groups in Syria be prevented through framing the process as one they had already paid to participate in rather than one that would result in an uncertain future windfall? Could small tweaks such as these help unlock the transformative potential of peacebuilding interventions?

It is not possible know until they have been tried and their impact carefully tested. The power of these exciting

new directions, however innovative, comes not from their newness but from their basis in science. This means remaining open to the possibility that they do not deliver on their promise and adapting the approach accordingly. Testing must be rigorous, frequent, and iterative. The requirements of research can be unforgiving and mean hard choices for peacebuilding practitioners in the field. Political and public relations challenges come with randomizing; data may be hard to reach; and the temptation will remain to try something out on an entire population before it is properly piloted.

For all its promise to prevent conflicts, stop wars, and promote coexistence between societies, the peacebuilding field has so far eschewed rigorous attention to how participants engage with the nuts and bolts of program design. If the elusive notion of peace can be defined by the behaviors of individuals, then behavioral science offers tools to help construct these behaviors one by one until the world is free from avoidable violence.

Notes

1. The classic meta-analytic work of Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp underscores this claim, examining 515 studies across 38 countries and finding, among other things, a significant inverse relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice. See Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (2006): 751–83.
2. For an updated critical review of the social contact literature, see Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Seth A. Green, and Donald P. Green, “The Contact Hypothesis Re-evaluated,” *Behavioral Public Policy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 129–58.
3. See, for example, Matt Lowe, “Unity in Cricket: Integrated Leagues and Caste Divisions,” *Ideas for India*, May 23, 2018, www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/2018.05.23-lowe-ideasforindia.pdf; Salma Mousa, “Creating Coexistence: Intergroup Contact and Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq” (working paper, Stanford University, January 11, 2020), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59a360bacd0f681b1cb27caa/t/5e1a022212be5b2164b47bd7/1578762793288/mousa-jmp-4.pdf>; and Alexandra Scacco and Shana S. Warren, “Can Social Contact Reduce Prejudice and Discrimination? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Nigeria,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 654–77.
4. Emile Bruneau et al., “Intergroup Contact Reduces Dehumanization and Meta-Dehumanization: Cross-Sectional, Longitudinal, and Quasi-Experimental Evidence from 16 Samples in Five Countries,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 47, no. 6 (2020): 906–20.
5. Christopher A. Bail et al., “Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 37 (2018): 9216–21.
6. For an excellent summary of extant research on brain science and peacebuilding, see Colette Rausch, ed., *Neuroscience and Peacebuilding*, 3 vols. (Fairfax, VA: Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University, 2021), www.neuropeace.org/volumes.
7. See, for example, Craig M. Zelizer, “Trauma Sensitive Peace-Building: Lessons for Theory and Practice,” *Africa Peace and Conflict Journal* 1, no. 1 (2008): 81–94.
8. Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).
9. Alejandro Drexler, Greg Fischer, and Antoinette Schoar, “Keeping It Simple: Financial Literacy and Rules of Thumb,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 6, no. 2 (2014): 1–31.
10. Additional research can explore the role of behavioral science in national mediation efforts, reconciliation initiatives, and so on.
11. Esther Duflo, “The Economist as Plumber,” *American Economic Review* 107, no. 5 (2017): 1–26.
12. The approach elevates the need to measure ultimate actions taken in naturalistic settings as opposed to solely cognitive changes (beliefs, attitudes, and so on) or behaviors measured in lab settings, a significant departure from earlier work on similar topics in cognitive psychology.
13. This method, versions of which are used by most practitioners of applied behavioral design, has its origins in the scientific method and is most closely related to the recent technique of problem-driven iterative adaptation that Matt Andrews describes. See Matt Andrews et al., “Building Capability by Delivering Results: Putting Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) Principles into Practice,” in *A Governance Practitioner’s Notebook: Alternative Ideas and Approaches*, ed. Alan Whaites et al. (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015), 123–33.
14. Heterogeneity is substantial in the methods examined here. Characterizing the main points of emphasis of each domain is helpful for nonspecialists, however.
15. Such studies often use functional magnetic resonance imaging techniques to measure changes in brain activity rather than observed behavior in a realistic setting. Nevertheless, the insights produced in neuroscience labs have frequently informed advances in cognitive psychology and behavioral science that have led to scalable solutions in other fields. Levels of the stress-producing hormone cortisol are now routinely measured in impact evaluations of cash transfer programs in the developing world, for instance, because of the well-researched links between stress and financial health. Although the application of both neuroscientific and behavioral methods to peacebuilding is still young, the significant potential for similar complementary innovation to occur in future is clear.
16. This report focuses on influencing participant behavior. Future research could lay out a series of questions and considerations for funders and donors to consider in how they approach theories of change and project outcomes.

17. Jack Froude and Michael Zanchelli, "What Works in Facilitated Dialogue Projects," Special Report no. 407, United States Institute of Peace, June 2017, www.usip.org/publications/2017/07/what-works-facilitated-dialogue-projects.
18. National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, "Engagement Streams Framework," July 2013, revised August 2014, www.ncdd.org/uploads/1/3/5/5/135559674/2014_engagement_streams_guide_print.pdf.
19. For more on facilitator networks, see Ruben Grangaard and Carlisle Levine, "Nurturing and Sustaining Facilitator Networks: Key Considerations for Support Organizations," Peaceworks no. 177, United States Institute of Peace, September 2021, www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/nurturing-and-sustaining-facilitator-networks-key-considerations-support.
20. More cynically, the benefits of participation for individuals, particularly those at the community leadership level, may be counted instead in the form of the political capital they may receive from their community in return for bettering relations with the other side. The point still holds, however, as these benefits, if realized, would certainly be significant.
21. Frederick L. Oswald et al., "Predicting Ethnic and Racial Discrimination: A Meta-analysis of IAT Criterion Studies," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 105, no. 2 (2013): 171–92.
22. For a clear description of this literature, see Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* (New York: Times Books, 2013), www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/cid/publications/books/scarcity-why-having-too-little-means-so-much.
23. Sean A. Clouston et al., "Traumatic Exposures, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and Cognitive Functioning in World Trade Center Responders," *Alzheimer's & Dementia: Translational Research & Clinical Interventions* 3, no. 4 (2017): 593–602.
24. See, for instance, Eric P. Bettinger et al., "The FAFSA Project: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment and Next Steps" (faculty paper, Stanford University, Harvard University, and University of Toronto, July 2013), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/btl/files/bettinger_long_oreopoulos_-_the_fafsa_projects_-_description_7-25-13.pdf.
25. Specifically, people in a cold state have difficulty picturing themselves in hot states, minimizing the motivational strength of visceral impulses, leading to unpreparedness when visceral forces inevitably arise in hot states. See, for example, Joop Van der Pligt and Frenk van Harreveld, "Visceral Drives in Retrospect: Explanations About the Inaccessible Past," *Psychological Science* 17, no. 7 (August 2006): 635–40.
26. Ted O'Donoghue and Matthew Rabin, "Doing It Now or Later," *American Economic Review* 89, no. 1 (1999): 103–24.
27. Leslie Zebrowitz McArthur and Elise Ginsberg, "Causal Attribution to Salient Stimuli," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (1981): 547–53.
28. Robert J. Vallerand, "Toward a Hierarchical Model of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 29 (1997): 271–360.
29. William F. Brewer and Glenn V. Nakamura, "The Nature and Functions of Schemas," in *Handbook of Social Cognition*, vol. 1, edited by Robert S. Wyer Jr. and Thomas K. Srull, 118–60 (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984); Susan T. Fiske and Patricia W. Linville, "What Does the Schema Concept Buy Us?," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 6, no. 4 (1980): 543–57.
30. George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, "Economics and Identity," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115, no. 3 (2000): 715–53. See also, for example, Judd B. Kessler and Katherine L. Milkman, "Identity in Charitable Giving," *Management Science* 64, no. 2 (2018): 845–59.
31. Robert B. Cialdini, Raymond R. Reno, and Carl A. Kallgren, "A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: Recycling the Concept of Norms to Reduce Littering in Public Places," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58, no. 6 (1990): 1015.
32. Daniel Bar-Tal et al., "A Sense of Self-Perceived Collective Victimhood in Intractable Conflicts," *International Review of the Red Cross* 91, no. 874 (2009): 229–58.
33. Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175; Eva Jonas et al., "Confirmation Bias in Sequential Information Search after Preliminary Decisions: An Expansion of Dissonance Theoretical Research on Selective Exposure to Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80, no. 4 (2001): 557.
34. For example, David K. Sherman et al., "Deflecting the Trajectory and Changing the Narrative: How Self-Affirmation Affects Academic Performance and Motivation Under Identity Threat," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 4 (2013): 591–618.
35. This report uses *testing* rather than *monitoring and evaluation* because testing implies simultaneously a broader range of methods and a more objective focus on iterative improvement (rather than accountability) than are usually associated with monitoring and evaluation.
36. Organizations such as JPAL/IPA, EGAP, DevLab@Duke, and 3ie are increasingly testing peacebuilding programs through experimental research and rigorous evaluation. However, the capabilities of the peacebuilding field to generate and effectively use evidence to improve programming is still in early stages. On the potential for greater rigor in the field in a six-country evaluation of community policing programs, see Graeme Blair et al., "Community Policing Does Not Build Citizen Trust in Police or Reduce Crime in the Global South," *Science* 374, no. 6571 (November 25, 2021).

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE



The United States Institute of Peace is a national, nonpartisan, independent institute, founded by Congress and dedicated to the proposition that a world without violent conflict is possible, practical, and essential for US and global security. In conflict zones abroad, the Institute works with local partners to prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict. To reduce future crises and the need for costly interventions, USIP works with governments and civil societies to build local capacities to manage conflict peacefully. The Institute pursues its mission by linking research, policy, training, analysis, and direct action to support those who are working to build a more peaceful, inclusive world.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

George E. Moose (Chair), Adjunct Professor of Practice, The George Washington University, Washington, DC • Judy Ansley (Vice Chair), Former Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor under George W. Bush, Washington, DC • Eric Edelman, Roger Hertog Practitioner in Residence, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC • Joseph Eldridge, Distinguished Practitioner, School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC • Stephen J. Hadley, Principal, Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel LLC, Washington, DC • Kerry Kennedy, President, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Washington, DC • Ikram U. Khan, President, Quality Care Consultants, LLC, Las Vegas, NV • Stephen D. Krasner, Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA • John A. Lancaster, Former Executive Director, National Council on Independent Living, Potsdam, NY • Jeremy A. Rabkin, Professor of Law, Antonin Scalia Law School, George Mason University, Arlington, VA • J. Robinson West, Former Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, DC • Nancy Zirkin, Executive Vice President, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, Washington, DC

MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State • Lloyd J. Austin III, Secretary of Defense • Michael T. Plehn, Lieutenant General, US Air Force; President, National Defense University • Lise Grande, President and CEO, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

THE UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS

Since 1991, the United States Institute of Peace Press has published hundreds of influential books, reports, and briefs on the prevention, management, and peaceful resolution of international conflicts. The Press is committed to advancing peace by publishing significant and useful works for policymakers, practitioners, scholars, diplomats, and students. In keeping with the best traditions of scholarly publishing, each work undergoes thorough peer review by external subject experts to ensure that the research, perspectives, and conclusions are balanced, relevant, and sound.

PEACEWORKS

NO. 185 | OCTOBER 2022

One technique remains central to the peacebuilding field: social contact theory. The principle behind it is elemental, that encountering individuals from other groups can lead to greater understanding, empathy, and trust. This report argues that the theory, far from being ineffective, simply has not been adequately supported with emerging insights from the study of human behavior. The report provides a framework to help identify behavioral patterns, address them with science-informed techniques, test them more rigorously, and scale them to ensure that changes in individual behavior are reflected in the peacefulness of societies. It does not attempt to reinvent peacebuilding, but instead focuses on subtle factors that may prevent certain types of peacebuilding programs from performing to their full potential.

OTHER USIP PUBLICATIONS

- *Beijing's Strategy for Asserting Its "Party Rule by Law" Abroad* by Jordan Link, Nina Palmer, and Laura Edwards (Special Report, September 2022)
- *Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan?: Opportunities and Obstacles, 2001–21* by Steve Brooking (Peaceworks, August 2022)
- *Promoting Peace and Democracy after Nonviolent Action Campaigns* by Jonathan Pinckney (Peaceworks, August 2022)
- *The Persistent Challenge of Extremism in Bangladesh* by Mubashar Hasan and Geoffrey Macdonald (Special Report, June 2022)
- *Global Trends and Challenges to Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief* by Jason Klocek and Scott Bledsoe (Special Report, June 2022)



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037
(202) 457-1700
www.USIP.org