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# Talking Our Way Out of Conflict:

## Critical reflections on 'mediated dialogue' as a tool for secondary level CVE

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## Abstract

Pathways into extremism are highly diverse, situational and not explicable through a single model. It follows that interventions to prevent or stem radicalisation must also be multiple, individually honed and context sensitive. This paper reflects on the experience of conducting an experimental intervention technique - a mediated dialogue between young people from an 'Islamist' milieu and from an 'extreme right' milieu - that emerged directly out of ethnographic research on radicalisation. The paper situates the intervention in the wider social-psychology literature on the effectiveness of intergroup contact in reducing prejudice as well as in sociological debates on social cohesion. It outlines, and critically reflects on, the intervention conducted and suggests how it might be developed for potential use as part of a community led counter extremism practice.

## Introduction

This paper outlines and reflects on the experience of conducting the first steps in undertaking an experimental 'mediated dialogue' intervention, which we call 'Talking our way out of conflict' (TOWOC). Although drawing on existing techniques in conflict transformation, the novelty of this intervention is three-fold. First, it consists of a researcher-practitioner collaboration that emerged organically from ethnographic research being conducted by the academic researcher members of the team<sup>1</sup> with young people engaged in an 'Islamist'<sup>2</sup> milieu<sup>3</sup> and in an 'anti-Islam(ist)'/ 'extreme right'<sup>4</sup> milieu respectively. Secondly, since the intervention is being conducted with participants drawn from those milieus, it constitutes, according to Caplan's (1964) trifold prevention matrix, a 'secondary prevention' aiming to prevent the solidification of extremist attitudes or behaviour (Köhler, 2018: 11). While 'secondary intervention' is not novel as such, it targets a particularly hard-to-reach group for CVE (Countering Violent Extremism<sup>5</sup>), namely individuals who are immune to 'primary intervention' (because they are already certain of their positions) but who are not identified as likely beneficiaries of 'tertiary' programmes of de-radicalisation because they neither identify themselves, nor are identified by formal agencies, as 'radicalised'. Thirdly, it engages young people as subjects rather than objects of intervention. This subject status stems from the fact that the intervention was inspired by individuals from within the research participant group articulating a

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the DARE project, 'Islamist' is used to describe a broad range of positions which have at their root the interaction between Islam and politics, as manifested in the discursive and actual positions on ideology and governance in Muslim states and societies.

<sup>3</sup> In this context a milieu is understood as the people, the physical and the social conditions and events in which someone acts or lives while a milieu of radicalisation is a space where radical/extreme messages are encountered - online or offline - for example via presence of recruiters, people who are especially receptive to radical messages and/or people who have participated in radical/extreme activities.

<sup>4</sup> In the DARE project, a wide range of right-wing activism is captured under the umbrella term 'anti-Islam(ist)'/ 'extreme right'. By 'anti-Islam(ist)', we mean active opposition to what its proponents refer to as 'radical Islam' or the 'Islamification' of western societies but often includes a more general antipathy towards Islam or Muslims. By 'extreme right' we refer to a spectrum of political ideology characterised by opposition to democracy and which frequently espouses biological racism and anti-Semitism.

<sup>5</sup> CVE is used here as an umbrella category for prevention oriented initiatives (i.e. before a person radicalises to the point of using violence) and intervention oriented initiatives (i.e. deradicalisation and disengagement of persons who are already radicalised to the point of using violence).

desire for dialogue with the 'other'. It is reflected in the intervention practice of 'dialogue' itself and will be central to the determination of future steps in the process.

As detailed below, the initial mediated dialogue session led to a second event, which in turn has spurred a desire for further dialogue and interactions between the young people. TOWOC has thus developed into an ongoing process. In this paper, we reflect on that process so far. We do this by, first, situating the intervention in the wider social-psychology literature on the effectiveness of intergroup contact in reducing prejudice, as well as in sociological debates on social cohesion. Secondly, we critically reflect on the intervention conducted so far. Finally, we suggest how TOWOC might be developed for potential use as part of a community led counter extremism practice.

## **'Intergroup Contact Theory': out of the laboratory and into the community**

Intergroup Contact Theory developed out of Allport's (1979) formulation of the 'contact hypothesis'<sup>6</sup>, which proposes that contact between groups experiencing conflict can improve relations, reduce anxieties and fears of the 'other' and challenge prejudice<sup>7</sup> between the in-group and out-group. It is in this classic work - *The Nature of Prejudice* - that Allport also makes the link between classical theories of the authoritarian personality<sup>8</sup> (Adorno *et al.*, 1950) and prejudice by identifying the authoritarian individual's need for clear cut categories (Billig, 1978: 59). Alongside Rokeach's (2015) typology of the 'open' versus the 'closed' mind (Allen, 2010: 67-8), Allport's understanding of prejudice as the outcome of an individual's need for dichotomous categories to order the world has been central also to more recent conceptualisations of anti-Muslim prejudice and 'Islamophobia'.

Reviewing more than half a century of studies on intergroup contact, Hewstone and Swart (2011: 375) conclude that the prejudice-reducing effect of contact is no longer a hypothesis but a 'fully-fledged theory' (ibid.: 380). The evidence base for this is drawn, not least, from Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006: 751) meta-analysis of studies (n=515) employing Intergroup Contact Theory, which found not only that 'intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice' but that the potential for the generalisation of positive intergroup contact effects beyond the immediate group in the contact situation is much greater than previously thought (ibid.: 766). This meta-study also found that intergroup contact could work even where the 'optimal' conditions identified by Allport - equal status between the groups, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support of authorities, law or custom - were not present; these conditions maximise the achieved effect but are not 'necessary' to it (ibid.). Recent research, drawing on Allport's pioneering work, has begun to develop a much better understanding of exactly how contact theory works (Hewstone and Swart, 2011: 376). Studies of mediators of contact, for example, show that contact reduces prejudice by both decreasing negative affect (e.g. inter-group anxiety) and inducing positive affective processes (e.g. empathy and perspective taking) (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008).

Intergroup Contact Theory remains the subject of robust critique. In designing the TOWOC intervention, we were particularly cognisant of the fact that intergroup contact takes place not in the laboratory but in societies already structured by power dynamics and between groups identified

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<sup>6</sup> Allport himself drew on earlier formulations and engagements with intergroup relations and intergroup contact, including Williams' (1947) identification of 102 testable 'propositions' on intergroup relations (see: Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006: 751).

<sup>7</sup> 'Prejudice' is defined by Allport (1979: 9) as 'an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization'.

<sup>8</sup> Theories of a fascist personality type, first found in the work of Reich and Fromm and later operationalised by Adorno *et al.* in their classic study of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), suggest the traits of an authoritarian personality include a cognitive style that prefers simplicity, needs to categorise the world neatly and is threatened by ambivalence and complexity.

in relation to those dynamics as, for example, majority/minority groups or communities. The groups with whom we worked – identified through their association with milieus understood in our research to be ‘Islamist’ and ‘anti-Islamist’ – have been the subject of considerable attention over the past two decades in policy making concerned with community cohesion and social inclusion (Thomas, 2011; Casey, 2016), although, as Beider (2015) points out, with little policy attention being paid to White working class communities. We address this in more detail below, here it is important to note that communities can be affected *negatively* by contact-based interventions when these are pursued through assumptions about ‘what works best’; often based on reductive understandings of ‘community’ needs and capacities. Hewitt (2005), for example, notes the negative youth experiences of contact in schools following the promotion of ‘mixing’ in the wake of concerns about ‘parallel lives’ after the 2001 disturbances in a series of northern towns and cities. Thomas and Sanderson (2011, 2013) point to public debates around community cohesion as prompting certain types of social interactions, which subsequently led to greater hostility toward the ‘other’ among communities similar to those with which we worked. This alerts us to the danger of employing contact at surface level only such that it improves majority group members’ intergroup attitudes via greater mixing whilst failing to address wider societal inequalities (Hewstone and Swart, 2011: 379).

However, a critical approach also opens the way to thinking about contact as more than single events of direct contact. Where opportunities for direct contact are lacking, for example, ‘extended contact’ (knowing about or observing inter-group friendships) or ‘imagined contact’ (an imagined interaction with others) can also have a positive impact on intergroup attitudes and reduce prejudice (Hewstone and Swart, 2011: 377; Crisp and Turner, 2012). Moreover, even where direct contact is possible, or routinised, it may be ineffective in reducing prejudice if it is not *meaningful* contact. This was recognised more than a decade ago in the Commission on Integration and Cohesion’s (2007: 110) ‘Our Shared Future’ report which found that although relatively large numbers of people interact with others in everyday settings such as the workplace and the shops, these chance interactions are not being always translated into *meaningful contact*, that is, conversations in which people move beyond superficial communication to exchange personal information or talk about each other’s differences and identities, where people share a common goal or interest or where contact is sustained long-term. It is such meaningful contact between people from different groups that has been shown to break down stereotypes and prejudice (ibid.: 112).

The importance of this distinction between contact and meaningful contact has underpinned – albeit not explicitly – sociological debate on the fate of multiculturalism, specifically claims that co-existence or convivial mixing of cultural difference is threatened by the emergence of Islamic radicalism. This debate has been driven primarily by widespread public and policy concern about apparent ‘segregation’ and the leading of ‘parallel lives’ by ethnic communities sharing the same urban space following the 2001 riots noted above.<sup>9</sup> The implication here is that what appeared to be multicultural communities on the surface were in fact communities living in non-meaningful contact with one another. This has led to numerous policy interventions in the area of community cohesion, where the focus has been on addressing separation, withdrawal, parallel lives and potential for conflict in areas or communities identified as places of danger and festering extremism, and which pose a problem for achieving a cohesive narrative about national life (McGhee, 2008, Hussain and Meer, 2018).

The ‘no-contact’ thesis has not gone unchallenged, however. The literature on new geographies of multiculturalism (Neal *et al.*, 2013), in particular, has been concerned with showing culture to be a moving and evolving phenomenon bringing multicultural drift (Hall, 2000) into new places - the suburbs or towns of England - while in older places of multiculturalism, such as cities, culture is not contained in ghettos or spaces of segregated community but becomes cosmopolitan in nature (ibid.;

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<sup>9</sup> Although concerns about Asian youth and the rise of religious fundamentalism were addressed earlier, for example in the work of Alexander (1998) and Bhatt (1997).

Watson and Saha, 2013). This approach characterises contact and encounters between difference - embedded in everyday routines such as entering and leaving public spaces – as allowing strangers or others to be proximate and indicative of an ‘indifference to difference’ (Jacobs, 1961; Sennett, 2011; Tonkiss, 2003). ‘Contact’, therefore, is often viewed as a key element of campaigns to promote cultural awareness and cohesion between different communities.

While mundane instances of contact between strangers or people who consciously see others as different, has been at the centre of Allport’s (1979) ‘contact hypothesis’, contact *per se* is not a guarantor for changing attitudes. Societal approaches help us recognise that encounters with others can lead to further prejudices as well as solidifying existing ones. For example, structural factors - such as material inequalities (Valentine, 2008) or the bio-politics of race (Amin, 2002; Swanton, 2010) - shape the way individuals apprehend others and affect attitudes of fear toward strangers. The recognition of the power of extra-personal factors in shaping intergroup relations opens space for considering how intergroup contact is also mediated. For Wilson (2018) encounters have transformational capacity in that they carry the possibility to move and affect in a number of ways, not always predictable. Something emerges from the unpredictable even in ‘organised encounters’. Thus, while the structured and mediated nature of organised encounters are designed – through the objectives and ‘risk’ assessment of the mediators - to remove the surprise or spontaneity that usually characterises banal contact between difference, possibilities for transformation emerge in the banal moments that occur *alongside* organised contacts (Mayblin *et al.*, 2016). The conundrum of mediated contact, therefore, lies in the dual aim of mediation to avoid the ‘discomfort’ that could arise from encountering difference (and tackle the inequality and violence underpinning it) while retaining the potential to affect different sensibilities and even repeat contact. This requires investment from the individuals involved as well as reflexivity on behalf of the mediators. Below we present in more detail a bespoke mediated dialogue in which these conundrums were addressed.

## **Talking our way out of conflict (TOWOC)**

The TOWOC intervention follows Allport’s understanding of ‘inter-group contact’ as being, first and foremost, a process of bringing members of different groups together in face-to-face encounters to reduce inter-group hostility. However, it was designed not to ‘test’ a particular element of the ‘contact hypothesis’ but as a response to the expressed desire by young people participating in ongoing ethnographic research on trajectories and milieus of radicalisation to have the opportunity for such contact. A detailed description of the process of implementation (What?) is included as an annex to this report. In this section we offer a brief background to the nature of the ‘groups’ being brought into contact (Who?), as well as the process through which the initiative emerged (How?). The section closes with a reflection (Why?) on the participants’ motivations and the resultant possibilities for contact work in the context of territory, which has been a key feature of public and policy concern in this area.

### **Who?**

The project was initiated with a specific set of participants, namely young people already involved in the H2020 DARE project by virtue of their belonging to milieus identified by researchers as ‘Islamist’ or ‘anti-Islamist’/‘extreme right’ and the young people’s identification of the other milieu as the out-group. However, whilst there was a desire to work with those ‘at risk’ on the spectrum of extremism, it was key that the participants would be individuals who had not perpetrated or promoted acts of violent extremism and who were open to dialogue. With these criteria in mind, three young people

from each of the opposing milieus were invited to participate in an initial 'mediated dialogue' event.<sup>10</sup> From the 'Islamist' milieu, participants were part of a 'street based Salafist' peer group:

- Mo John<sup>11</sup> - a 19 year old, south Asian Muslim male who has spent much of his educational years in an Islamic schooling and madrasah environment. He chooses to spend a lot of his time in an area that was defined as an 'Islamist milieu' for this research.
- Moby – a 22 year old, British-Somali Muslim male who was studying Islamic sciences abroad with the hope of doing outreach work in the UK. He is now completing an Access to Higher Education course. He works part-time in a school and is active in doing 'dawah' on the streets of his home city and across the country.
- Imran – a 29 year old, South Asian Muslim male could be referred to as a 'street pastor'. He works part time teaching English and spends most of his time doing outreach with young people in deprived neighbourhoods. He also convenes a weekly night-time social gathering with young men to discuss contemporary issues facing Muslims.

These three participants were well known to each other, being part of the social gathering convened by Imran.

From the 'anti-Islamist'/'extreme right' milieu, participants were active in, or shared the sentiments of, street movements opposing extremism, especially Islamist extremism:

- Thomas – a 24 year old, White English man who has been active for a number of years in 'anti-Islam(ist)' street movements, most notably in the English Defence League. He is not married but has a long-term partner and is full-time employed and agnostic.
- Gareth – a 24 year old, White British man who is not active in any movement and considers himself not as 'far' right as his friend Thomas. However, they share many values, such as a strong sense of community, and actively discuss politics from similar starting points on the political spectrum. He is single, employed and studying for a Law degree part-time. He is a non-practising Roman Catholic.
- Mikey – a 33 year old, White English man who is active in the Democratic Football Lads Alliance and the Justice for the 21 campaign and volunteers on a weekly basis with a local charity helping rough sleepers. He is single, full-time employed and a practising Christian.

Thomas and Gareth had been friends for many years and Mikey and Thomas were acquainted with each other through demonstrations they had both attended.

While recruited to the DARE project because of their identification with these respective milieus, it is important to note that none of the individuals who took part in the TOWOC intervention considered themselves to be radicalised or 'extremist'. Thomas, for example, identified himself as 'a right-wing activist. Not far right, but just right'. However, prior to the intervention, he believed that the roots of Islamist terrorism lay in the Qur'an, which 'makes the majority of Muslims violent'. Mo John identified himself as a committed Muslim who, aware of Islam's reception in the world, felt a duty to defend it. Prior to the mediated dialogue he also stated that 'if anyone's going to insult Islam, then sorry I'm not going to talk to you, it's going to end up in violence'.

Perhaps most significant about the recruitment and engagement phase is the fact that the process involved 'doing with', not 'doing to'. All participants were known to the respective researchers for more than six months prior to the dialogue process and these trustful relationships were built upon by the dialogue facilitators. Moreover, notwithstanding the high level of hostility to the 'other' in their

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<sup>10</sup> Although considerable thought was given to the implications of the gender exclusivity of the group, the narrow pool from which we were drawing participants led to the conclusion that securing gender balance, in this instance, could detract from some of the wider aims and intentions of the work.

<sup>11</sup> All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves as part of the DARE research project. These are retained in this paper although it is worth noting that the young people introduced themselves to each other using their real names and preferred to be known that way.

milieu, participants themselves had spontaneously expressed a desire to engage in contact with one another. As Thomas put it, 'I'd like to actually sit opposite a radical Muslim or someone with thoughts of being radical and have a talk with them, and just find out why, why it is he feels that way'. All the young people who engaged in TOWOC, therefore, did so as the subjects not the objects of the intervention.

## How?

The Peace Foundation practitioners brought to the intervention a contact-based practice and participatory methodology. Employing this approach, individuals or groups are brought together in order to facilitate the development of new reference points (which may go on to exist alongside or replace existing ones) and forge change through broadening perspectives and relationship building. This process cannot be rushed, and it is essential to engage in the work in stages.

This practice provides the opportunity for the expression of views in ways participants may not consider as expression (e.g. through play) but which develop esteem and confidence. Consulting with the participants individually (through pre-intervention interviews) before taking them through a series of structured activities and mediated discussions (dialogue) during the inter-group contact, also helps create Allport's 'optimal conditions' in which intergroup contact can be successful in reducing prejudice and fear of the 'other' (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006: 766). These conditions - that all participants have equal status and platform, have a common goal (of wanting to engage in dialogue), are cooperating in a shared space and have support and structure through guided facilitation - were also recognised as crucial to success by participants. In his pre-intervention interview, Gareth, for example, stressed the importance of the dialogue allowing 'A variety of questions that challenges both sides. Not just having one side defend their principles and one side attacking theirs.' Moby also entered the process positively but with realistic expectations about what might be considered 'success', noting before the first dialogue that 'even if the other side moves 0.01 per cent then it will have been worth it'.

A key aspect of the contact approach used by the Peace Foundation is that facilitators, are on occasion participants in the discussions and activities, which helps establish trust and legitimacy for when challenge takes place. Additionally, and in line with the literature on contact-based practice, key activities around perspective taking (Hewstone *et al.*, 2005; Gaertner *et al.*, 2000) and the perceived importance of the contact (van Dick *et al.*, 2004), are further utilised to mediate contact effects. Intervention by facilitators is not intended to avoid important issues. The role of the Foundation practitioner is one of engagement in dialogue and deliberate stimulation to steward people in the experience and the journey. The idea is that important content is gradually approached, concurrent with the developing of relationships, so that when tense issues and differences are discussed they are done so with reduced panic and positioning. Moreover, during design and delivery of the intervention, considerable attention is paid to how to ensure open and fair access to the discussion when controversial topics are brought into the arena. Given that individuals with strong - perceived by others to be 'extreme' - views were entering a space in which they may feel they have something to prove, it was essential to consider these dynamics and create a 'safe space'. In this sense, numbers helped and thus the researchers and the facilitators all had a role in the process in a way that maintained a playing field that felt level, balanced and enabled rapid response to multiple situations.

Given that, in this case, the participants' narratives about the 'other' were salient prior to contact, and that the planned contact time was relatively short, the contact sessions were carefully mediated. This meant sessions were designed to include variety and shifts of modality so that, for example, concepts triggered by one activity could be used and contemplated in another and each individual participant would have different opportunities to express, challenge and be challenged. This mediated approach also helped to moderate intergroup anxiety and prejudice towards the

'other' and was facilitated by the exploration of individuals' anxieties - relating to concerns about how they should act, what they wanted to say, how they might be perceived, and whether they would be accepted - through pre-intervention interviews with all participants. These interviews drew on theories of 'imagined contact' (Crisp and Turner, 2012) and asked individuals how they imagined contact with the unknown 'other' participants in the dialogue would be. These interviews revealed that Moby imagined being offended by the anticipated expression of agnosticism by others ('How can someone not believe in God?') while the 'first image' that came into Gareth's head was that of a discussion format he associated with a TV boxing show. For both Gareth and Thomas, however, the most negative imagined contact was that there would be a lack of real contact. As Thomas put it 'You could turn up and they don't want to know'.

Finally, considerable thought was given to ensuring that each contact was closed responsibly. This is partially because of the safeguarding issues involved but also in order to prevent participants disengaging from the learning or experiences or 'regretting' participation, not least because after the session, they would return to the challenges and rhetoric of their own contexts. Successful closure, we anticipated, would allow participants to process the experience in a way that would facilitate more (sustained) encounters, either within the session room or outside.

## Why?

The process of TOWOC prompted a series of reflections on the motivation for, and investment in, the dialogue process among the participants, which invite us to rethink issues that supposedly preclude such interaction. For example, the notion that these two 'groups' are inimical to community cohesion or that their contact is likely to result in the fuelling of 'cumulative extremism' is challenged by the fact that the desire to engage in dialogue with one another was initially expressed by our participants *themselves* and that subsequent dialogue, following their first encounter, was driven also by them. The process was not unproblematic of course. Both Thomas and Mikey faced challenges from some members of their 'own community' when they posted images of the first meeting to social media or accepted a request from one of the 'other' group to join online discussions. The responses of all the participants to these delicate situations revealed both their commitment to being involved and continuing the dialogue as well as a combination of sensitivity to the feelings of others, willingness to stand by the 'transgressions' they had made and the ability to talk to each other in order to find solutions. Thus, paradoxically, it was these conflictual moments in-between direct contact that indicated that the participants would be able to manage moving from the safety and 'controlled' nature of a neutral space of encounter to the uncertainty of the public realm.

Space - in a contested frame - has been at the centre of much discussion on contact initiatives. Thomas (2011) considers the ambivalent role that territory plays as a marker of difference between ethnic groups similar to those we worked with, but also how it masks intra-group conflicts too. He thus challenges straightforward assumptions about home and belonging. Yet, most community cohesion policy is premised on the understanding of place-attachments as a precursor of conflict between different groups; where one group's neighbourhood or territory becomes a 'no-go zone' for others. In the TOWOC initiative, space was invoked *and* mobilised in different ways. The first event took place in a 'neutral' setting (the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Foundation centre); this served the purpose of breaking down anxieties that existed about visiting the 'others'' area. Neutral territory enabled us to broker a meeting between two sets of people who would usually not venture into each other's 'territory'. As Mikey expressed after the first event:

It was the togetherness, to have a group of people in the room that perhaps under normal circumstances wouldn't speak to each other or wouldn't even walk on the same side of the street.. and just to have that conversation was great.

However, after getting to know each other, neutral space quickly became an uncomfortable place to inhabit. This was expressed by participants already at the end of the first dialogue when they spontaneously invited each other to their home cities. This revealed the desire for deeper and less mediated dialogue in more 'natural' spaces that were part of participants' day to day lives.

The second encounter was thus arranged and took place in Thomas's home city. What facilitated the ritual of welcoming the 'other' here, was Thomas's own sense of ambivalence towards the city; as a place of deep attachment but one that was, simultaneously, unwelcoming of *his* politics. This attunement to his city - a desire to belong but also escape it - revealed itself in the ease with which he explored parts of it with Mo John as an 'outsider'. Thomas introduced Mo John to places of local interest to him, which led to dialogue in which they exchanged views on the significance of these to each other. For example, when discussing the impact of immigration on an area, for Thomas this was something to lament, whereas for Mo John, immigration reflected part of his heritage and was treated with a degree of pragmatism: 'if the immigrants didn't come here then who else would do the work to keep the country going'. Yet, as a consequence of their dialogue Mo John echoed recalcitrance toward ethnic neighbourhoods in his own city which he saw as 'ghettos'. Between them they were fashioning an alternative discourse of place that was neither about it as territorial for Thomas or unwelcoming for Mo John. Through their movement and dialogues throughout the day they enacted transgressions – where they traversed spaces beyond salient definitions of them.

## **Reflections on the future development of TOWOC as a community-based CVE tool**

At this stage, evaluating the potential of TOWOC to be used as part of the toolkit for community-based CVE is difficult as it remains a work in progress. However, the very fact that participants have chosen to remain engaged suggests that the potential is real. At this point, therefore, we provide not an evaluation and recommendation but a set of 'lessons learned' and pointers for future work.

Lessons learned:

- The experience of TOWOC confirms the value of interventions that are as focussed on process as they are on product. The intergroup contact facilitated, whilst structured to achieve particular aims and objectives in the pursuit of engagement and expression, were not focussed exclusively on achieving specific attitudinal or behavioural changes. TOWOC thus suggests the importance of dialogue as an end in itself.
- Recruitment and initial engagement has to be voluntary, collaborative and developmental. The participants need to feel they have equal stakes and that the intervention is 'done with' and not 'done to' them. However, participants need to be engaged with honestly about what the process is there to do – to convene dialogue on 'difficult' and contentious issues.
- The facilitation and process has to be collective and collaborative. There are no passengers and no 'goldfish'. Dialogue has to go in different directions to bring in different perspectives.
- It is possible to achieve progress and learning outcomes alongside developing relationships and maintaining engagement but this requires patience and a pace that means participants are able to engage at their own speed. Rushing the process creates the potential for trauma to set participants back or lead to disengagement.

Materials for future development:

- TOWOC has established a set of evidenced reference points (specifically the filmed interviews and interactions), which can be shared with both vulnerable groups (and individuals) and practitioners as proof that those using divisive rhetoric can engage in processes with the 'other' and develop relationships.

- This material - along with the film material - could be very useful, not necessarily in suggesting a specific route or indeed technique for countering extremism, but in countering the belief that division is permanent and unchangeable and as a tool to reduce panic around radicalisation/extremism.
- The activities and process developed for the two TOWOC dialogues could act as an adaptable template for targeted interventions in appropriate contexts.

#### Challenges ahead:

- The researcher-practitioner collaboration worked well in this instance in facilitating recruitment among a 'secondary intervention' target group that is hard to identify and access. Should the intervention be rolled out, consideration needs to be given to the potentially difficult, and time-consuming, nature of recruitment not least because success depends heavily on the trustful relationships built. Youth and community workers, sports or creative arts trainers and facilitators, who engage with young people regularly but outside of formal institutions, are likely to have such relationships although not necessarily have experience of involvement with CVE interventions.
- Evaluating interventions such as TOWOC requires the measurement of success on the basis of engagement and individually-tailored understandings of what constitutes 'success'. Progress may consist in turning up and committing, not how eloquently someone can recant their previously held views. Participants should be actively involved in reviewing their own progress and determining their next steps. This form of evaluation may not be the most 'attractive' to funders.
- This is not an intervention that can be conducted without training for facilitators and convenors. Training needs to be trauma informed, conflict sensitive and radicalisation aware. While the programme and activities developed for TOWOC could act as a template, they need to be adapted to suit the group and thus facilitators need to understand the principles of practice more than be able to follow a lesson plan.

## Conclusion

Prejudice among majority group members is not the sole, or even necessarily the main, problem of inter-group relations between members of majority and minority groups of unequal status and power, and we need to address the advantages and any disadvantages of inter-group contact, for members of majority and minority groups, with an open mind. (Hewstone and Swart, 2011: 379)

The process in which the participants in TOWOC have engaged has not been one of learning about prejudice and how to overcome it. The young people involved came into the process not ignorant but as reflective, engaged, socially-minded individuals convinced of their own rightness about things they saw that are 'wrong' in the world and what is needed to make a better society. Those understandings of the world are generated by the place from which they experience that world; on the surface, vibrant multicultural cities but in practice, urban spaces in which they are positioned as 'majority' or 'minority' and in which the contact they have with each 'other' is experienced as equally meaning-less.

The process of intergroup contact begun in TOWOC, therefore, was one of bringing meaning to that contact through, to date, two sessions of 'mediated dialogue'. Out of this, we have witnessed, on the one hand, simple recognition of similarity as well as difference. Thomas had started work for the same company as Mo John used to work for. They both enjoy boxing and mixed martial arts but only one of them loves football. The mediated dialogue brings a sense of 'togetherness' and a sense that in the future they might walk down the same side of the road as opposed to crossing it to avoid one another (Mikey). Quite simply, Thomas says of Mo John, 'I see a lot of me in him'. This is significant not least because it is an opening to being affected, moved by the 'other'. After hearing Mo John

recite from the Qur'an (see Appendix), Thomas's view of it as a literal text and the source of Muslim violence, was challenged by the visceral impact of the recitation, which he described as 'a peaceful sound' (Thomas). On the other hand, Mo John, Moby and Imran were shaken by discovering that their interlocutors believe a civil war is impending and this spurred them to seek opportunities for dialogue. The fear or possibility of encountering violence is tempered by the knowledge and experience that mediation can help affect alternative moods and dispositions toward Muslims and Islam. Mediated knowledge is probably also the safest way they can come into contact with people from the 'other side'.

This does not mean any of the participants have shifted their opinions. There remain doubts; the moment after Thomas allows himself to be moved by the recitation from the Qur'an, he draws back, qualifying the feeling with a concern that, since it was in Arabic, he did not actually know what the words recited meant. This almost instantaneous relocation back to the former standpoint, is magnified when the participants return physically to their previous places and face rebuke from within that old space. But, nonetheless, it continues and the contact has prompted a desire to be involved in more dialogue; dialogue that gives space to neither confirm nor refute 'prejudice' but to move beyond the negative impressions forged from little or no meaningful contact, to find out what they *did not* know or encounter something new or, in the case of the Qur'an, *anew* and to discuss taboo subjects that are ordinarily not open to interrogation. These desires for, and commitments to, openness, movement and critical enquiry all speak to the potential for such interventions to prevent the solidifying of extremist attitudes/behaviour and thus their usefulness among the tools of CVE and youth work practice.

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## Appendix

### What? The process of implementation

To date 'Talking our way out of conflict' consists of two mediated dialogues between the young people facilitated by practitioners from the Peace Foundation with the participation also of the two academic researchers and filmed by Lee Rogerson.

**The first TOWOC dialogue** consisted of a one-day session for all six participants<sup>12</sup> preceded by pre-intervention interviews and followed by one-to-one post-intervention interviews with each of the participants in their home areas. Preparatory telephone conversations and interviews allowed participants to build trust with the facilitators but also gave space for participants to ensure that their issues, concerns and objectives were heard. This meant that the facilitators and researchers were better able to understand participants' motivations and in turn influenced content and how the process was stewarded.

The programme for the first dialogue was designed with three key objectives in mind:

1. To provide an opportunity for contact with 'the other' that would ultimately challenge prejudices and often deeply held perspectives and perceptions;
2. To provide a safe space for dialogue – the ability to express views and perspectives, as well as to hear from the other;
3. To change behavioural responses to stress and tension through the deployment of conflict transformation techniques.

Below we outline briefly the activities in which participants engaged. The descriptions provided here should be read in context of the discussions above about the overall approach and principles to the intervention, the recruitment of participants (and especially their role in the process as subjects rather than objects).

An **Introduction** reminded participants what to expect from the session and gave participants, facilitators and researchers an equal voice in the process of devising a shared agreement on how everyone could best benefit from the process. This included principles of 'listening without prejudice' and remembering 'dialogue is listening as well as speaking'. Whilst these exercises are sometimes considered perfunctory in their role, they can form an important function in allowing people to express at the outset and to have the sense that their needs are being listened to.

**Anyone Who** was the first interactive exercise and is a game familiar to many practitioners. It sees the group sitting in a circle with a chair each. One person is standing in the middle without a chair. The person in the middle makes a statement of something that is true about themselves. The others decide if it is also true about them also; if it is not, they stay where they are but if it is then they must move seats. The game started with simple and 'low level' statements such as 'Anyone who has a cat' but progressed to statements pre-prepared by facilitators that asked people to move based on whether or not they agreed with the statements. Statements such as 'Anyone who wants to make a change' saw all participants move but other statements elicited diverse responses. People were asked to say more about why they had chosen to move and what lay behind that decision. The exercise was well received and immediately generated a good discussion in terms of participants' self-awareness of their own positioning and tactics used during the game. It did, however, also give rise to one of the more significant points in the event when two participants (Thomas and Mo John) clashed quite forcefully over their differing views about the statement 'anyone who thinks extremism is a problem in this country', which engendered confrontation and challenge such as 'what do you mean by that?' and 'are you saying...'. The exchange was allowed to play-out to some extent, but facilitators intervened and asked the participants to return to their places whilst confirming that the subjects that had started

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<sup>12</sup> In fact the dialogue event central to this first intervention had five participants as one member of the group – Gareth – was unable to attend as he was called into work on the morning of the event.

to come up would be returned to a little later. The intervention was made not to stop the exchange from taking place but to reduce the possibility of discomfort and alienation experienced leading to early disengagement. On reflection, in the post-intervention interview, Thomas talked about this early but difficult exchange positively in as much as it showed that although it had threatened to turn the dialogue 'sour' before it had even begun, in fact it was managed in a way that ensured that did not happen.

A short break was followed by **Identity Hands** - a less dynamic and more reflective, individualised activity aimed at encouraging participants to consider aspects of their identities important to them. The personal reflection is followed by sharing with the group and questions and discussions around what people have chosen and why. The exchange provides for a rich conversation around people's perspectives and lives in relation to their identities. The placement of this exercise at this juncture was designed to switch the mode and tempo of the session cognisant that the preceding exercise was one that opens up expression and even quite serious content. The revealed hands were varied yet had similarities in their make-up. Aspects of identity 'that are important' ranged from supporting football teams to religion. Importantly, this exercise allowed the group to learn about one another beyond the labels they may have projected hitherto. It allows participants to see commonality and difference with others, but importantly, it allows them to humanise and make sense of people in a way they may not have done. 'The other' supports things that I do. 'The other' shares my passion for x... and so on.

This exercise took place at an important juncture following a busy opening period of the session and the tension experienced during the clash between Thomas and Mo John. This restored calm and focus to the group, stopped the trauma of the previous exercise from lingering and encouraged people to de-role and move to the next phase.

**The Pulse game** divides a group into two teams. The exercise is essentially a team game that elicits behaviours that we see in situations of competition, tension and stress. The group engaged enthusiastically with the exercise and discussed what they had experienced and seen. One important benefit of games like the Pulse is that participants are thrown into a role that means they can abandon other pre-existing aspects of their identity and adopt new roles. Their loyalty is to a new team or to new objectives. They focus on the task – not on what went on before. Team members can suddenly find themselves pointing the finger of blame at their best friend or demanding suitable punishment for the opponent on the basis of perceived cheating. This is hugely important in demonstrating how stimulation (stress and tension) can alter our mental and behavioural states. The pulse game worked well with this group – indeed, it was one of the highlights of the session for Thomas who, almost shocked by his own engagement, reflected afterwards that 'I never thought I'd be sitting there playing a game with Muslims'. The debrief from the exercise reflected on modern day Britain and participants' own lives, encouraging reflection on the rumours and whisperings that are passed on about their groups and the consequences of these. It was also a chance to reflect on their behaviours both individually and as a team and relate that to how they respond, or react, in real life and how they might improve the efficacy of the message they wish to convey or to ensure that they 'win a point' differently in the future.

A classic exercise of taking a position in relation to a statement is the **Values Continuum**. A series of statements are read out (one by one) by the facilitator and participants are invited to take a position along the spectrum in relation to the degree to which they agree or disagree with that statement. Participants are invited to move at any point if their mind is changed in some way by what they see, experience and hear. This exercise proved to be popular with the group as it allowed that process of dialogue and the probing of one another's viewpoints and positions in a deeper way as participants took up positions on questions such as 'Britain's social and ethnic diversity have contributed to its strength' and 'A country should only ever deal with its own problems'. It also acted as a warm up to the subsequent activity which required a focus and a willingness to listen that may have proved challenging otherwise. This exercise provided the platform that some of the participants had been keen to attain; the opportunity to use statements to introduce their perspective and theories on the

world was taken up with enthusiasm. The 'debate' element invites people to platform and to express their views but by this stage, there was a willingness to listen even on topics on which all participants had strong and often quite different views.

**Monologues** was the final substantive element of the programme providing each individual with a platform to share their viewpoints and perspectives, uninterrupted. The brief was for each to speak individually about a topic they felt passionately about. They were then given preparation time of up to 10 minutes. Each individual then presented to the rest of the group for between 3-5 minutes. The content shared ranged from justification of the membership of their 'group' to one person reciting a portion of the Qur'an. A debrief followed the exercise during which participants were invited to reflect collectively on what they had heard, what challenged them and what surprised them and to discuss parallels and similarities. This was perhaps the most-high impact of the activities of the whole programme in terms of content. Each individual used the time to prepare their inputs with some quite different outcomes. Whilst there had been a visible shift in levels of comfort in and between the group, this exercise allowed the group to raise the issues and themes that underpinned the identities that had brought them to the process. Mo John's recitation from the Qur'an was perhaps the most surprising (in the most part because it was recited as a sung verse) and was a vivid indicator of where the group had got to. Levels of trust in the process and in one another had clearly reached a stage where people felt confident enough not only to stay but to admit they had been moved by it. As Thomas reflected afterwards:

I can't describe what the feeling was when I was listening to it. Part of me wanted to jump up and scream, but part of me was like, 'That's actually peaceful, like a peaceful sound.' I like the sound. But that stuck in my head as well, actually. I've never heard anyone do it like that.

An **affirmation circle** was the closing exercise inviting each person to comment and reflect to the rest of the group on what they had experienced and what they hoped for beyond the process.

**The second TOWOC dialogue** was initiated by the participants at the end of the first session when they spontaneously expressed the desire to meet each other again, exchanged mobile numbers, and uploaded photos taken together to their personal Instagram and Facebook accounts. More explicitly, they invited each other to visit their home cities. In light of the discussion above concerning 'meaningful contact', it is worth noting that the participants in TOWOC come from two major cities, which are usually celebrated as sites of cultural contact and mixing, but they narrate little or no contact with the 'other' in these urban spaces. We understood the specific mode of the next contact that the participants suggested, therefore, as the expression of challenge to claims of conviviality as an automatic virtue of the city as well as a desire for meaningful, as opposed to banal, contact. During the first session they had engaged with aspects of each other's lives, histories, values and day-to-day encounters and challenges and one of the shared values and desires that had emerged was for a strong, vibrant and caring local community alongside a shared concern that this was threatened by crime, 'ghettoisation', population change and lack of neighbourliness. Thus by inviting each other to their city, they expressed, on the one hand, a desire to show the challenges they each faced in urban spaces that were experienced as harsh and increasingly uninhabitable. For Thomas this took the form of political survival in a left/liberal city experienced as unforgiving and unaccepting of his right-wing politics while for Mo John, Moby and Imran, their city is home but also a place constrained by the 'backwardness' of earlier generations that have structured the Muslim scene there. On the other hand, all participants are deeply invested in their respective cities, their histories and their contemporary predicaments and they shared a deep emotional desire to be a 'caring host' and 'good neighbour'. For this reason, the second dialogue was envisaged as an opportunity to create a space for meaningful contact in participants' home cities that was facilitated but also allowed the opportunity for less structured contact.

Logistically it proved challenging to bring all original participants back together and, for this reason alone, the second dialogue took place between two participants – Mo John and Thomas – in Thomas's home city. The dialogue took place over the course of half a day, was facilitated by the same team from the Peace Foundation with participation also by the two academic researchers and filmed by Lee Rogerson.

The **Introduction** to the second dialogue took place in an indoor meeting room in the city centre. It began with participants, researchers and facilitators watching the short film produced from video footage from the first intervention and introduced by the film maker. When the final image closed, it was marked by a simple but meaningful handshake between the two participants in which they recognised the distance each had travelled and the significance of that journey. This was followed by a discussion of how the rest of the day would be structured and a shared agreement on the objective of the dialogue session. A discussion of events and issues that had been important for them since the last meeting - and might form the basis for their conversation - revealed that ongoing Brexit negotiations and the recent terrorist attack in Christchurch were a concern for Thomas while both participants continued to share frustration with what they felt was 'unfair' media coverage of events important to them. Interestingly, Thomas noted that since the last meeting he had moved away from concerns about Islam, saying 'I am not focused on Islam any more'. It was decided that the remainder of the session would be devoted to the two participants, accompanied by one of the researchers, having the opportunity to go into the city and use the time for unstructured contact. If issues came up, they would be explored but for Mo John, in particular, using the time just to get to know one another was the priority. Beyond the already agreed 'rules' of dialogue, the only requirement was that the participants come back at a given time to report on what they had done.

The **unstructured contact** time was spent, physically, engaged in two main activities. The first was a visit to a barber shop, at Mo John's request but selected - out of a row of similar Turkish barbers - by Thomas, as host. The barber shop could be seen as what Amin (2002: 959) refers to as a 'micro-public(s) of everyday social contact and encounter'; a place of organised and purposeful activity where men from a range of ethnicities were coming in and out. Judging by the fact that Mo John fell asleep for a short while in the barber's chair, the space felt comfortable and safe and the participants discovered a similar sentiment of the importance of trust (in your barber). The second activity was suggested by Thomas – a visit to 'the first mosque in Britain'. While ostensibly a brief encounter with the 'exotic' for Thomas, the experience was in fact a shared learning process; the mosque had a particular significance as the first recorded mosque in the UK but, having for a period been turned into a registry office, was also the place where Thomas had had his birth registered. Wanting to show the mosque to Mo John was an indicator of Thomas's welcoming the 'other' but also of his desire to demonstrate his knowledge, and acceptance, of the long history of Islam in the city. However, when, on arrival, Mo John negotiated entrance into the mosque, even though there was a 'non-Muslim' among them, he was touched. His first words on return to the venue to report back were an excited 'I've just been into my first mosque'.

The physical activities engaged in during the unstructured time did not close down debate. Over the course of the engagement, contentious subjects were talked about including immigration and the number of foreigners in their respective cities. On the question of immigration, this revealed that Thomas was focused not on presence but numbers. On the question of the Turkish barbers, for example, he commented, 'There's a lot of Turkish barbers. I do and I don't like it. There doesn't need to be a lot. Up on this road there's a lot.' In contrast Mo John speaks from the experience of coming from an area and community that identifies with immigration; for him immigration is not represented in figures but an experience expressed in the value of family networks and a feeling of community and cultural life. When they report back on the discussion, moreover, they agree that 'everyone is an immigrant' in some way. The pair also discussed the question of Israel and Palestine on which they hold opposing views. Reporting back their discussion, it transpired that the discussion had been stimulated by Thomas (an activist in a group frequently described as 'fascist' or 'Nazi')

expressing his disgust for the Nazi regime and reflecting on his concern about the amount of 'conspiracy theory' about Jews that can be found on the web. Whilst the researcher who accompanied the young men on their walkabout commented that 'they seemed to be just warming up' when they needed to return to the session, Thomas and Mo John were clear about the benefits of not having forced any agenda and using the time to genuinely relax and get to know each other.

The **closing** part of the session saw them share their ambitions for the future of their engagement with each other and with the process. They both expressed a desire to 'do more'. This meant further dialogue with their peers (Mikey, Imran and Moby) as well as with one another. A desire to share their stories and their journey outside of the group was also strong. 'Other people should be doing what we're doing – maybe we could help others to come together like this' reflected Thomas. Mo John felt that he was already doing similar work through his local mosque – offering to speak to people from outside the mosque in dialogue. They both, however, understood that there were other members of their respective milieus that would not engage in activities such as that without a degree of engagement and persuasion and expressed a desire and commitment to supporting such work. This is evidence of the creative energy and potential of these young men that could usefully be deployed, with constructive facilitation.