

Working with Polarized Groups

I. Definitions:

A. “Polarization *refers to a phenomenon wherein the decisions and opinions of people in a group setting become more extreme than their actual, privately held beliefs.*” (Renee Grinnell, <http://psychcentral.com/encyclopedia/2009/group-polarization/>)

B. “Polarization *is an effect that drives people so far apart on an issue it is as if they are at opposite poles. The people become emotionally attached to one side of an issue and become almost incapable of seeing any virtues in the opposing position or any faults in their own. It makes responsible thinking about the issue difficult or impossible. It may lead to personal animosity towards people who take the opposing viewpoint. Most of us have issues about which we are at least partially polarized.*” <http://www.truthpizza.org/polarize.htm>

C. “Group polarization *occurs when the dominant point of view in a group is strengthened to a more extreme position after a group discussion.*” <http://www.sparknotes.com/psychology/psych101/socialpsychology/section8.rhtml>

D. “*In a striking empirical regularity, deliberation tends to move groups, and the individuals who compose them, toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by their own pre-deliberation judgments. For example, people who are opposed to the minimum wage are likely, after talking to each other, to be still more opposed; people who tend to support gun control are likely, after discussion, to support gun control with considerable enthusiasm; people who believe that global warming is a serious problem are likely, after discussion, to insist on severe measures to prevent global warming. This general phenomenon -- group polarization -- has many implications for economic, political, and legal institutions. It helps to explain extremism, “radicalization,” cultural shifts, and the behavior of political parties and religious organizations; it is closely connected to current concerns about the consequences of the Internet; it also helps account for feuds, ethnic antagonism, and tribalism. Group polarization bears on the conduct of government institutions, including juries, legislatures, courts, and regulatory commissions....*” Cass R. Sunstein (1999). “The law of group polarization,” Chicago Working Papers Series, University of Chicago Law School: <http://www.law.uchicago.edu/Publications/Working/index.html>

E. “Group polarization refers to a group’s tendency to talk itself into extreme positions. In this case, a group gets so focused and energized about a decision that it creates an internal fuel, so to speak, which pushes itself forward faster than originally intended. Imagine a group of protesters, all agreeing and deciding to picket. You can see how this could get out of hand because opposing views (Group Think) are not considered and the push to move forward for the cause is fueled internally (Group Polarization).” <http://allpsych.com/psychology101/groups.html>

F. “Polarization is the process whereby a social or political group is divided into two opposing sub-groups with fewer and fewer members of the group remaining neutral or holding an intermediate position. When polarization occurs, there is a tendency for the opposing sides of an argument to make increasingly disagreeable statements, via the “pendulum effect”. Thus, it is commonly observed in polarized groups, that judgments made after group discussion will be more extreme on a given subject than the average of individual judgments made prior to discussion.” Wikipedia

G. “Being in a group tends to influence the way people make decisions. Group polarization occurs when members in a crowd or group of people choose sides. Members on opposite sides take positions that are increasingly farther from the views of the other side. The groups may define themselves by their beliefs and their opposition to the same enemy.” Jennifer Melville, What causes group polarization? http://www.chow.com/about_5245305_causes-group-polarization_.html#ixzz17dSp3waz

II. Issues where it’s common to find polarized groups:

- Nationalism: Rivalries which go on for centuries occur between neighbors such as English vs. Irish, French vs. Germans, Norwegians vs. Swedes, Bosnians vs. Croats vs. Serbs vs. Albanians, Greeks vs. Turks.
- Racism: Animosity between whites, blacks, Orientals, Native Americans, and other groups may start with a dominant group exploiting those of other races and resentment by those victimized, but racial tension may occur between any groups who distrust people who look and act differently.
- Religion: Religious conflicts can be particularly bitter because each side is likely to feel that they represent good and so anyone who opposes them must be evil.
- Politics: Republican vs. Democrat, Liberal vs. Conservative, Socialist vs. Libertarian, sexism, gun control, abortion, taxes, management vs. labor, homosexuality, and many other issues all can bitterly divide people.
- Workplace issues: People often get into serious disputes with coworkers about workplace issues and policies.

- *Personal and family feuds: Divorce often involves very bitter polarization between the people involved, and romantic disputes are a common cause of murders. Other long lasting family feuds can result from issues as trivial as not attending a social occasion.*
<http://www.truthpizza.org/polarize.htm>

III. What causes polarization?

A. *“Group polarization begins with an escalating conflict. Ideological sides emerge and polarize. These sides grow and become more extreme, cutting off most peaceful communication with each other and blaming each other side for their problems. Further escalation increases polarization. For example, a gay marriage amendment that failed a statewide vote may polarize the gay rights movement, making pro-gay marriage leaders more vocal and adamant about their position.*

Group polarization can lead to militancy and war, although the result is not always violent.”
Jennifer Melville [What Causes Group Polarization? | eHow.com http://www.chow.com/about_5245305_causes-group-polarization_.html#ixzz17dSp3waz](http://www.chow.com/about_5245305_causes-group-polarization_.html#ixzz17dSp3waz)

B. *“Each person can share what he or she knows with the others, making the whole at least equal to the sum of the parts. Unfortunately, this is often not what happens As polarization gets underway, the group members become more reluctant to bring up items of information they have about the subject that might contradict the emerging group consensus. The result is a biased discussion in which the group has no opportunity to consider all the facts, because the members are not bringing them up. . . . Each item they contributed would thus reinforce the march toward group consensus rather than add complications and fuel debate.”* (Patricia Wallace, *The Psychology of the Internet*, 1999)

C. The whole country?

1. *“Election maps in the last few elections have been awash in red and blue states with observers warning of a real political and social divide between the two colors of states. The rise of partisan media from radio talk shows, 24-hour news stations, political websites to blogs have received considerable blame for the political polarization in this country.”* <http://mediaconvergence.org/blog/?p=260>

2. *“Confusing Positions with Choices. Polarization of people’s choices is not the same as polarization of their positions. Even if people are not polarized in their*

positions, if the candidates are polarized, then the choices that people make are more likely to be polarized. This is why we hear statistics such as “90% of Republicans voted for Bush and 90% of Democrats voted for Kerry.” If candidates were more moderate, then it would be possible for voters choices to be less polarized.” Morris P. Fiorina (2010), “Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America,” <http://maricjohn.blogspot.com/2010/03/culture-war-myth-of-polarized-america.html>

D. Becoming polarized, step by step:

“One side of an issue appeals to us. We seek out facts to support this side. We get most of our information from advocates of this side. We feel superior for being on this side. We like the people on our side better. We trust the people on our side more. We believe advocates for our side without analyzing them critically.

We distrust advocates for the other side. We feel the people on the other side have undesirable traits that led them to their wrong opinions. We jump on the slightest flaw in arguments made by the other side's proponents. We find negative stereotypes about the other side very believable. When our opponents make negative references to us, it is further evidence of their bad character.

Sources of information that treat us and our opponents almost equally must be biased, or they would recognize our superiority and the inferiority of our opponents.

Rather than enduring such unreliable sources or listening to our opponents' arguments directly, we learn of their misguided views and motives from our own trustworthy leaders. When an opponent is found to have done something unethical, it is reprehensible, but typical of what we expect from the people we oppose. When one of us is found to do something unethical it is not very important and possibly excusable if it aids our noble purposes.

We are good. They are bad.

The superiority of our view is so obvious that our opponents could not possibly be sincere. They are deliberately promoting evil, self-serving policies. They are our enemies, out to destroy us and our way of life! People like them should be ridiculed, stripped of power, silenced, punished, and perhaps even destroyed!

Not all polarized situations will involve all the factors above, but one characteristic that is a very common warning sign is anger and perhaps even hatred we feel towards those on the other side.” <http://www.truthpizza.org/polarize.htm>

E. Polarization is even a step in the process of genocide

“Genocide has eight stages or operational processes. The first stages precede later stages, but continue to operate throughout the genocidal process. Each stage reinforces the others. A strategy to prevent genocide should attack each stage, each process. The eight stages of genocide are classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, and denial.”

<http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/8StagesBriefingpaper.pdf>

F. Group polarization can cause people to go to extremes

“People may end up with more extreme beliefs than they would have expressed on their own, or do things they may not have otherwise done.” University of Chicago Law School, Jennifer Melville, What Causes Group Polarization? http://www.chow.com/about_5245305_causes_group-polarization_html#ixzz17dSp3waz

G. Group polarization can be planned or spontaneous

“Planned group polarization occurs when a leader chooses to create a community of like-minded individuals united by a common belief. Hitler did this, rallying millions behind his belief that Jews had to be exterminated.... Spontaneous group polarization occurs when a group of people rally around a cause without any prior planning.” Jennifer Melville, What Causes Group Polarization? http://www.chow.com/about_5245305_causes-group-polarization_html#ixzz17dSp3waz

IV. Functions of polarization

A. Belonging, unity

“As contrary as it sounds, the function of group polarization is unity. Group polarization unites a group of people around a common cause or belief system. For example, Nazis banded together around the concept of Aryan supremacy. This act caused them to feel group solidarity among themselves, and also to see outsiders as contrary to their beliefs. The more polarized they became, the more unified they felt. At the same time, they became farther removed from the rest of society.” Jennifer Melville, What Causes Group Polarization? http://www.chow.com/about_5245305_causes_group-polarization_html#ixzz17dSp3waz

B. Political manipulation

“When political campaigns turn negative it is pretty typical to accuse opponents of improper behavior or having outrageous views. Leaders of virtually all political movements work to find the most dramatic and extreme cases of questionable behavior by opponents in order to stir up our anger....

It is a common tactic for leaders to create and make use of polarization for their own political ends. If we want to make wise decisions about such leaders and their claims, and avoid being manipulated, we must recognize such tactics and resist becoming polarized.... As a more general rule, we should always be suspicious of any person or group that tries to get our support by inciting anger towards another person or group.”
<http://www.truthpizza.org/polarize.htm>

V. How to work with polarized groups as a third-party helper

A. How to be rich and famous

Exhibits A, B, C...

B. Nancy’s ideas:

1. The facilitator must be experienced, mature, and outstanding

Which includes, by definition, completely objective as well as authentic

Equal respect to both sides (doesn’t suck up to power; doesn’t “feel” for the “underdog”). “Always leave them feeling whole.”

Can challenge people’s statements and behaviors

Can “sit in the fire” throughout the process [externally and internally]

Tattoo on your forehead: People may be dealing with a “Sophie’s Choice” situation

2. Create and hold the group to a few very stringent ground rules
3. Create a communication process/structure that is unfamiliar to the group

Examples: “Round-Robin,” Fishbowl, taking turns reading, mindful inquiry

4. Create belonging and unity in ways that fit the culture of the group as a whole [meaning, that supercedes the polarizing issue]
5. Refuse to manipulate people

Telling the truth; this generally means that at times, you must admit that you don’t know what to do

Dealing with “what’s raw”

Leaving things without the closure you would have liked to achieve (facing the concept that a “win/win” may be impossible now)

6. The goal of facilitating a polarized group is for people to have the opportunity to have voice and to feel heard and acknowledged. The goal *is not* to have people magically decide to be of one voice, engage in a group hug, and live happily ever after.