


Divided we fall: Constructive dialoguing about our political differences within family therapy training

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Abstract

Widespread political polarization throughout the United States is a threat to the time-honored democratic tradition of utilizing civil discussion and respectful debate to express divergent views and strive for common ground. The political differences that divide us now are so deep and rife with toxic emotion that they threaten to undermine our social well-being at both the micro and macro levels. While family therapists are trained to work with relational tensions and to help family members to constructively negotiate their differences, the severity of the hostility and resentment tied to divergent political orientations has made this work increasingly difficult to achieve. This article explores how family therapy training programs can help trainees deepen their capacity for constructive political dialoguing that includes learning how to effectively manage their reactivity to those whose values and views may be dramatically different from their own so that they can support clients in doing the same.

KEYWORDS

MFT training, nationalism, political polarization

Each must for himself alone decide what is right and wrong, and which course is patriotic and which isn't. You cannot shirk this and be a man. To decide it against your convictions is to be an unqualified and inexcusable traitor, both to yourself and to your country, let men label you as they may.

— Mark Twain (Denton, 1974, p.5)

I want there to be a place in the world where people can engage in one another's differences in a way that is redemptive, full of hope and possibility. Not this "To love you, I must make you something else". That's what domination is all about, that to be close to you, I must possess you, remake and recast you.

— bell hooks (Hooks, 1996, p. 153)

INTRODUCTION

The political divide between those holding liberal and conservative views has led to increasing extremism and a lack of civil discourse within the United States. Current political conversations exemplify the problematic communication styles of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling that John Gottman's (1999) landmark research demonstrated to be the death-knell of relationships, hence why he referred to these as the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. This division occurring at the macro level of society also occurs at the micro level of the family. Recent presidential elections have resulted in the political divide deepening across the nation, with increasingly sharp divisions over a myriad of complex and intersecting issues (Morris, 2020). Upcoming elections will predictably continue this trend. People on all sides of the divide are saturated daily with news of alarming political battles where no one is free from having their political position heatedly critiqued and, in many cases, viciously attacked (Carmichael et al., 2017).

POLITICAL ISOMORPHISM

For many, the intensity of the emotions and reactions linked to the political divide is shaped by political party affiliation and to the deeply held core values that guide people to align with a political party (Lee et al., 2013). Belongingness theory suggests that the emotions driving the political divide tend to be quite primal and often are linked to the human need to belong to social groups. A component of this involves clearly distinguishing who are members of the group and defending the group against those who are not. This is a problematic phenomenon when this occurs within the same family system. This is linked to the increasing political tribalism and can be a useful lens from which to view both nationalism (the shadow version of patriotism) and party loyalty. In politics, political tribalism contributes to partisanship, which is a prejudice in favor of a political party that is characterized by a biased, emotional, and often-uncompromising allegiance to a party and its stances (Ashokkumar et al., 2019; Clark & Winegard, 2020). Once established, political affiliation has been found to be remarkably stable over a lifetime and a central component of identity, not unlike gender and ethnicity (Green & Palmquist, 1994). As a core element of our identity, an attack on one's political party can be experienced as an attack on one's personhood (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). People on all sides

of the political spectrum feel that their ideals are in peril and many experience the views held by members of differing political parties as being intensely threatening, unreasonable, and even dangerous.

Isomorphism, a foundational systemic concept that suggests that patterns are often replicated at multiple levels within a system, provides a useful lens (Liddle & Saba, 1983; White & Russell, 1997). As our nation is politically divided with the vitriolic battles occurring between conservative and liberal constituencies, these divisions and the potential tension associated with them are more intimately experienced within couple and family relationships, and within the context of family therapy training. Therapists are not above the fray, and we too are prone to struggling with the same reactivity and rage when faced with differing political positions.

In our 2013 article on critical patriotism, we argued that when the differences between political parties become rigidified and extreme, the resulting polarization tends to result in a lack of civil discourse (Platt & Laszloffy, 2013). We suggested that the field of family therapy has thus far focused scant attention on the differences between the left and the right and how these differences may influence clinical training and practice. While our article briefly discussed the highly emotional nature of political conversations and how the differences between conservative and liberal patriotism can lead to silence and a lack of critical dialogue, that was not our primary focus. In the years since, we have facilitated extensive political dialoguing within the context of teaching and supervision with trainees who have been diverse in terms of race, nationality, social class background, religious identity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and most significantly, political orientation.

As increasing polarization has occurred, we have noticed challenges of reactivity, contempt, defensiveness, and the struggle to engage across differences. We have also experienced hopeful interactions where humanization has occurred through a deepening of mutual understanding. While trainees have reported finding it stressful to engage in political discussions, they also have acknowledged the relevance to their work as clinicians.

In this article, we focus attention on how the values linked to political party affiliations influence United Statesians and we present recommendations for how family therapy training programs can address political differences within the training context to prepare trainees who will be able to effectively manage political tensions in the context of therapy. Before therapists can effectively help clients to contend with the differences that divide them, first, they must be aware of their own political positions and emotional triggers linked to politics and how these may influence what they do (and do not do) in therapy. Therapists must be able to create safe holding environments where differing and often opposing values across the political spectrum can be expressed. Being able to fully hear and understand differing viewpoints makes it easier for therapists to be nonreactively present with clients whose viewpoints they strongly disagree with and may even find harmful. The more therapists can sit nonreactively with views that they disagree with and even oppose, the better able they will be to help clients to do the same, which is a key component in helping couples and families who are struggling with the tensions generated by their political differences.

A CALL FOR UNITY OR ASSIMILATION?

Patrick Henry, an American revolutionist and founding father, famously called for unity in his final public speech in March of 1799, saying, “United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy that union upon which our existence hangs” (Henry, 1891,

p. 609–610). Similarly, when the nation was divided over the issue of slavery, Abraham Lincoln (1858) warned that “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Versions of this call for unity have been conveyed throughout our history as a nation, including in the present. In his first message as President Elect, Donald Trump (2017) referenced Lincoln and this theme, saying, “President Lincoln called upon Americans to speak with ‘one voice and one heart.’ That’s just what we have to do.” Similarly, in President Joe Biden’s (2021) inauguration speech, he stated, “Politics doesn’t have to be a raging fire, destroying everything in its path... this is our historic moment of crisis. And unity is the path forward.” Such calls for unity rarely are achieved easily. While Lincoln’s caution about a divided house is often quoted in calls for unity, in that same speech, Lincoln went on to suggest that the path to unity would depend on the triumph of one set of values over the other. “I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.” We should remember that it took a long and bloody civil war to resolve the divide of Lincoln’s day and we should be aware that despite the level of unification that was eventually achieved, today, we are a nation very much divided.

Research indicates that in the years leading up to the 2016 election, “the level of polarization in Congress was the highest since the end of the Civil War and shows no sign that it will abate” (Hare & Poole, 2014 p. 413). According to a Pew Research Center study, before the pandemic, United Statesians were more ideologically divided than any of the other 19 countries surveyed, and since the pandemic, the divisions have deepened even more (Dimock & Wike, 2021). According to a Carnegie study that “used a five-point scale, with 0 indicating a country with very little partisan polarization and 4 indicating a country with extreme polarization, by 2020, the world polarization average had increased significantly from prior decades to a score of about 2.4. But in the United States, polarization accelerated much more sharply, growing to a score of 3.8. No established democracy in recent history has been as deeply polarized as the United States (Mounk, 2021).

Researchers Finkel and Wang (2020), along with 13 other scholars from related disciplines, refer to this surge in political polarization as political sectarianism, which they define as the tendency to align based on moralized identities rather than shared ideas or policy preferences. According to Wang, “It’s not just that people only trust or associate with their own side, it’s that they’re contemptuous of the other side, whom they see as ‘other’ and as less moral—an existential threat.” And, according to Finkel, “polarization is not the problem... clear, well-articulated differences across political parties are a good thing. The problem is that Americans have grown hateful toward opposing partisans based more on a religion-like social identity than on actual disagreements about policies” (p. 1).

We do not know whether the future will bring a more balanced and harmonious version of conservative and liberal values or if one will triumph over the other. Regardless, there will be clinical implications that therapists will need to be prepared to address. In many aspects of our lives, it is possible to be surrounded by like-minded people and perspectives, creating a political echo chamber (Boutyline & Willer, 2017). After all, we can choose our friends and social forums, and because of how unseen algorithms operate, we are largely fed what we already believe through social media and online news sources. But when it comes to family and professional relationships, we may be forced to contend with others whose views may differ from our own and this can become a basis for tension. As family therapists, we know that the ideal scenario is when people can discuss their differences in honest, yet respectful ways, and if need be, agree to disagree. All too often, though, such differences result in unhealthy responses, whereby people either distance from and cut each other off or they are openly hostile and

antagonistic. As the political differences within our nation have become acutely polarized, tensions within families where political differences exist have become increasingly strained. At times, these differences are so intense that they are part of what informs the presenting problem that brings people to therapy. In other cases, these differences are not necessarily part of the presenting issue, but it becomes apparent that the bitterness that can be tied to political differences is part of the dynamic that informs the presenting problem. Consequently, there is a growing need for family therapists to be equipped to address political differences and the tensions that result in skillful and nonreactive ways. This is where the work of family therapists is vitally important.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has documented the psychological and interpersonal effects associated with the tension that political polarization produces. Sameera et al. (2021) studied the effects of divisive partisanship on mental and physical health and found that participants who reported an increase in polarization had 52%–57% higher odds of developing depressive and anxiety disorders, compared with participants who perceived no change in polarization. Similarly, Yousafzai (2022) found that nearly 40% of Americans reported that they were stressed out by politics, while nearly 20% had lost sleep due to political stress, while Smith (2022) reported that political divisiveness contributed to persistent fatigue, damaged friendships, and even suicidal behavior among many in the United States. And, according to a Wakefield Market Research Report from 2017, since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, political discourse in the United States has been more tense and divisive than ever, with nearly one in three Americans reporting that political clashes over Trump have had a negative impact on their relationship (Bedard, 2017). The study also found that there was a marked increase in relationship break-ups caused by political differences. They estimated that 11% of Americans ended a romance because of politics.

Despite the serious psychological and relational consequences of political polarization, there is limited clinical scholarship to aid therapists in working effectively with clients to address political tensions and their consequences. There is even less literature examining how political issues and differences shape the process of therapy. One of the exceptions is a study conducted by Solomonov and Barber (2019), who examined whether therapists disclosed their political orientations and values to clients, and how politics shaped the therapeutic alliance. Surveys of therapists across the United States following the 2016 presidential election found that 87% had discussed politics in their sessions and 21% had explicitly disclosed their political orientation to a client. They also found that therapists were more likely to report a strong therapeutic alliance with and greater empathy toward clients who share their political orientation. This finding is especially noteworthy, given that the therapeutic alliance is a strong predictor of therapeutic outcomes (Flückiger et al., 2018). More recently, Winter's (2021) research in the UK revealed that therapists' experience politics as influencing therapy in a myriad of ways and most reported that while they believe it is important to attend to politics in therapy, doing so is challenging, especially since most felt that their training experiences had not prepared them.

Within the field of family therapy, there also is limited literature focusing on politics and political polarization, both as it affects clients and the process of therapy. William Doherty's work is one of the exceptions. Doherty coined the term "citizen therapist" to refer to his work collaborating with people in the community to co-create productive ways of coping with public stress by acting as active agents of change in their personal and civic lives (2008, 2013). In

response to his citizen therapist work, following the 2016 election, Doherty was contacted by David Blankenhorn, the founder of a start-up nonprofit organization called *Better Angels*, renamed *Braver Angels in 2020*, that brings together people who hold opposing political views and facilitates constructive dialoguing. In partnership, Doherty and Blankenhorn brought together Clinton and Trump supporters to facilitate conversations aimed at bridging the partisan divide by highlighting the participants' common humanity and shared desire for a strong democratic republic (2017a, 2017b, 2017c). The organization now regularly offers a large range of both online and in-person trainings and debates, as well as a yearly conference, all with the aim of facilitating useful political dialogues and easing the tension generated by the political divide. MFT programs seeking an external resource to aid in dealing with reactivity linked to politics and promoting constructive political dialoguing might benefit from utilizing the *Braver Angels* trainings.

ADDRESSING POLITICAL ORIENTATION WITHIN FAMILY THERAPY TRAINING

While the field of family therapy has focused scant attention on political orientation, given the intensity with which politics and political affiliations have divided our society at large, and couple and family relationships in particular, it seems that the time for attention to turn in this direction. Doing so will require that family therapists possess the awareness and skills to facilitate client conversations about political differences, while also being able to understand and manage the impact of their own beliefs, blind spots, and triggers on how they relate to and work with clients. In short, therapists will need to possess a robust capacity for constructive political dialoguing that we define as the ability to have open, direct, spirited yet respectful conversations about differing political issues, views, and values.

In the remainder of this article, we explore how family therapy training programs can create a context and teach specific skills that will enhance trainees' capacity for constructive politically dialoguing. There are two underlying goals associated with fostering trainees' capacity to engage in constructive political dialoguing: (1) to enhance therapists' ability to effectively manage their reactivity to clients whose values and views are dramatically different from their own and (2) to sharpen therapists' skills related to helping clients to have open, spirited, yet respectful dialogue about the political differences that may be dividing them.

GUIDING CONCEPTS

Our approach to working with trainees to enhance their capacity for constructive politically dialoguing is shaped primarily by four guiding concepts: (1) differentiation; (2) the importance of the self-of-the-therapist work; (3) the ability to engage in meta-conversations about process over content; and (4) promoting contextual awareness and both/and thinking.

Differentiation

To engage in dialogues about a topic as emotionally charged as the political divide, it is important for the participants to be differentiated, a concept developed by family therapist

Murray Bowen. Differentiation is “the ability to be in emotional contact with others, yet still autonomous in one’s own emotional functioning” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Those who are differentiated are able to be present with their thoughts and feelings in a way that is grounded and nonreactive while remaining emotionally connected with others, even in the midst of relationships that are defined by a difficult history and/or divergent viewpoints. Differentiation “entails working toward a state of self-definition that does not rely on the acceptance of others for your beliefs and way of relating to others. It encourages you to work toward being emotionally connected to the others in your family without needing to defend yourself or attack anyone else” (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 44). For therapists, differentiation leads to clinical competencies that include the ability to self-soothe when facing differing viewpoints, maintaining a solid enough sense of self so as to be clear about what belongs to oneself versus what belongs to others, staying in emotional contact and engaged without preaching or taking a one-up position, and avoiding the need to rush a discussion or immediately and superficially “fix” problems. (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Our emphasis on differentiation is based on our belief that healthy functioning and fruitful dialogue are correlated with the degree to which we know our truths and can convey and express our truths with minimal anxiety or reactivity. Additionally, differentiation is characterized by having the ability to allow others to have reactions to our truth without a reactive need to control their process. It also entails having the ability to remain present enough to accurately hear the views of others. In terms of political dialogues, higher levels of differentiation allow for the consideration of other viewpoints and the option of expanding our views to include new ideas without the emotional sense of losing ourselves in the process. Differentiation is the key difference between a real dialogue about political differences versus the false versions that we primarily witness in much of contemporary society.

Self-of-the-therapist

Self-of-the-therapist work involves helping clinicians to deepen their awareness of themselves and how their identity influences what they see and do not see, as well as what they do and do not do in their clinical work (Laszloffy & Davis, 2017). In clinical training, trainees may be encouraged to get on this path of deeper self-understanding by exploring how their family of origin and sociocultural factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration experiences, gender, religion, social economic status, and sexual orientation have shaped and influenced their identity and how they view themselves, others, and the world. A clinician who has competently addressed self-of-the-therapist work can nonreactively articulate an awareness of how influential contextual variables inform them as clinicians.

A critical part of self-of-the-therapist work is helping trainees to identify the issues that trigger emotional reactivity and that therefore may potentially interfere with their ability to clinically function effectively. Relatedly, trainers must help trainees to recognize how aspects of their identity, values, beliefs, and biases may influence how they perceive and interact with clients depending on the client’s background, identity, values, beliefs, and biases. While a clinician’s political position has not been identified as a variable to consider when guiding therapists to engage in self-of-the-therapist work, we propose that this is a critical variable that can have profound clinical ramifications and ought to be attended to in future clinical training. As with any facilitation of self-of-the-therapist educational experiences, the intent on the part of MFT trainers must be based in a desire to create contexts of growth that foster trainees’ professional and clinical development (Aponte, 1994).

The very topic of self-awareness is currently a hotly debated topic within US politics and is being weaponized by both sides of the political spectrum for political gain. On the left, there are versions where one-upmanship (contempt) and attempts to dictate and limit what topics are permissible or not permissible to discuss have replaced consciousness raising and dialogue. On the right, there are groups who see exposure to considering any historical or present inequalities as oppressive or unpatriotic and thus refuse to engage (stonewalling).

Meta-conversations on process over content

Engaging in dialogues about political differences can be quite challenging because such dialogues have a high probability of leading to tension, conflict, and even hostility. This propensity often increases when either of the parties involved has an investment in changing the position of the other. It also increases if either party resorts to denigrating the position held by the other, or worse, denigrating the others' intelligence and/or integrity because of their belief in their position. One way to enhance the capacity to talk openly and directly about political issues, views, and values in a spirited yet respectful manner is by using the technique of meta-conversating. In short, a meta-conversation shifts the focus from the content, which is *what* is being discussed, to the process, which is *how* the content is being discussed.

To concretize what it looks like to focus on process and not content, imagine two persons discussing the topic of abortion, each with sharply contrasting positions. If the participants start out focused on content, each will advance specific arguments to support either a pro-choice or a pro-life position. If they shift to a focus on process, and start meta-communicating, the conversating would shift to focus on how they are interacting. They might observe how they started the dialogue in a relatively calm and easing going way, and then gradually each started to exhibit some irritation with the points the other was making, resulting in an increasingly defensive stance on both sides. They might also have noticed the passion and fervor that each appeared to feel with respect to their positions. By discussing these observations with each other, the participants are talking about how they are talking, which is meta-communicating, and this may allow them to consider other options. Focusing on process over content, for example, meta-communicating, allows speakers to become “unstuck” when their adherence to their positions leads to an impasse. It is a way of allowing different positions to be reflected while de-escalating the tensions that such differences can breed.

Meta-communication is most effective when parties can focus on their own behavior and the role that their own behavior may play in influencing the other's behavior. This focus on self is a key component of avoiding blaming the other, which is important because blaming is a conversation blocker. For example, one person might wonder to himself, “Hmm, I certainly don't like what Marie is doing, I wonder how my behavior in response to her behavior maintains the behavior that I don't like. Indeed, my attempted solution in my attempts to change her behavior may well have become my problem.” This kind of self-talk is an invitation to meta-communication.

Promoting contextual awareness and both/and thinking

When political rancor intensifies, often what underpins it is either/other thinking, which results in “I am right and good, and you are wrong and bad.” When our perception of those

who hold divergent views is that they are simply wrong or bad, we are failing to see their complexity and their humanity. This tendency toward either/or thinking is rooted in the Cartesian dualism that shapes life in modern postindustrial society by splitting reality in opposites and then assigning differential values to those opposites. In contrast, systems theory posits that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and reality cannot be reduced to simplistic, linear, either/or categories. Reality is complex and multidimensional and to understand a given person, group, or phenomenon, contextualization is necessary.

In terms of political dialoguing, contextualization can help to humanize us to each other, and it can illuminate underlying common ground between parties that might not otherwise be obvious during de-contextualized dialogues. For example, growing up in a rural, suburban, or urban community, and in a particular region, as well as one's social class background, religious upbringing, racial or ethnic identity, and migration/immigration experiences, are all parts of our context that inevitably shape our political views. Knowing these contextual dimensions helps to humanize us to each other, which makes it easier to understand how and why we have come to hold various beliefs.

Moreover, when political dialoguing is shaped by either/or thinking and a decontextualized view of those holding differing political beliefs, the risk for vilification of the other person or group increases and the hope for civility decreases. Either/or thinking must be replaced with both/and thinking. The value of both/and thinking is that it allows two seemingly conflicting realities to co-exist simultaneously. Hence, I can think your ideas are inscrutable while thinking you as a person are very good. Both/and thinking make it possible to disagree with someone's position while still seeing the good in their intention or in their nature. As such, family therapy trainers must assume an active role in encouraging trainees to take the time to learn about each other's contextual realities, while also challenging them to replace either/or thinking with both/and thinking. Doing so is vital to civil dialoguing.

ADDRESSING “SAFETY CONCERNS” RELATED TO “TALKING POLITICS”

Therapy is inherently linked to politics. Of the vast array of topics that can and do arise within the context of clinical training (and in clinical practice), most if not all of these have political implications. The positions that we take in relation to these topics reflect our political orientations and these are often also reflected in our clinical goals, the interventions we select, and how we define success in our work. It is also communicated in how clinicians define what is ethical, what is worthy of advocacy, and whom within society they view as being vulnerable. Certainly, politics involves strong emotions and “talking politics” can be uncomfortable and anxiety provoking, as is most self-of-the-therapist work. And for those whose position is in the minority in a group context, or who may hold lesser power than the person(s) with whom they are interacting, such discussions may be experienced as downright threatening. For example, the social sciences and the majority of academics tend to lean left politically (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Klein & Stern, 2005; Langbert, 2018). Consequently, it may be particularly challenging for conservative students to overtly share their views. While we operate from the premise that, just as one cannot not communicate (Watzlawick et al., 1967), one cannot not express one's politics, we acknowledge that openly and directly “talking politics” may potentially place a trainee in a vulnerable position. Trainers have a responsibility to be attuned to the ways that a trainee's beliefs might result in peer ostracism and/or faculty retaliation.

Guided by this awareness, trainers must be prepared to recognize and manage any of their own reactivity toward trainees whose views they find objectionable and they must be equipped to effectively moderate discussions where diverging beliefs have resulted in moralizing judgments and character attacks.

The therapist is the primary tool of the profession and thus engaging in self-work and increasing one's self-awareness is of paramount importance. And as previously discussed, self-of-the-therapist work involves exploring how the various dimensions of self (family of origin, social class, race, ethnicity, regional location, gender, sexual identity, religion, nationality, and so forth) influence what a therapist does and does not do. Political identity is one of these dimensions and it very much intertwined with all other dimensions of self. Whether or not programs directly address political values and beliefs, these are always integrated into and influence the training context and the process of therapy. Even silence on a given topic communicates something. Just as one cannot not communicate, unless one intentionally maintains a consistently false persona, one cannot not expose her/his political leanings.

It appears that few people are truly above the fray when it comes to politics. Trainers and trainees alike should be aware that one way people attempt to skirt around talking overtly about their political views is by refusing to identify with the two dominant parties and/or by identifying as independent. Klar and Krupnikov (2016), drawing on robust research, have demonstrated that most people who identify as independent still lean toward one of the two main political parties. "Klar and Krupnikov also present convincing evidence that people concerned with making a good impression on others (high self-monitors), particularly in an environment in which partisan disagreement is high, are more likely to identify as independent and less likely to make public displays of partisanship or persuade others that they should vote for one of the parties or candidates" (Banks et al., 2017, p. 93).

Given that politics is always "in the room" and affecting what occurs, the question to be answered is, how overtly will its presence be addressed? It is our conjecture that training programs have a responsibility to directly acknowledge that political communication naturally occurs, whether overt or covert, and for this reason, they must consciously and intentionally create space to address politics openly. Doing so is what increases the level of safety because when we can "go meta" to the dialogue by acknowledging that we are having the dialogue; this allows for the expression of potential fears and worries around doing so. As family therapists, a key part of the work that we do involves helping people to speak openly and directly about the truths that they worry will result in criticism, disapproval, reprisal, or worse, and trainers have a responsibility to do this with trainees as a necessary developmental step in cultivating the competencies that trainees will need to help their clients to do the same.

While we believe that it is critical for trainers to prepare trainees who will be able to adequately work with clients when politics are "in the room," we also believe it necessary to provide a disclaimer about the potential risks of asking trainees to openly dialogue about their political leanings. For those who are in the ideological minority, despite the best efforts of trainers, this request may leave trainees feeling unnecessarily vulnerable and they may perceive a lack of safety that is unhelpful to their growth. Certainly, a lot depends on the composition of the class and the faculty, as well as the ideological leanings and overall values of the program, the wider university context, and of course, the political climate in the nation. But whatever the case may be, we want to underscore the great responsibility that trainers have to be attuned to all these dynamics and sensitive to fostering a safe environment whereby trainees are not pressured or coerced into making disclosures that they do not wish to make, and no one is ostracized or treated punitively for the beliefs that they hold.

Relatedly, just as there may be risks to trainees relative to engaging in political dialoguing, there may also be risks to trainers for encouraging this. Even though self-of-the-therapist work is a foundational component of training therapists, this type of training may no longer be possible in all settings. Because training programs within the United States exist within a highly litigious and economically competitive society, and students have increasing power to influence what occurs in training (Ogden 2007), trainers must also consider the possible risk of arousing the ire of trainees who may be aggrieved by efforts to foster open political dialoguing. Thus, trainers have a dual responsibility to create a truly safe learning environment, while also evaluating possible risks to themselves if they encourage dialogues that may leave some trainees feeling unsafe and in need of higher levels of intervention. For trainers who are in contexts where it may be too risky to directly encourage open political exploration, examination, and dialoguing, an alternative might be to connect with external organizations like *Essential Partners* and *Braver Angels*, who may be able to foster opportunities for such dialoguing outside of academia.

THE ROLE OF THE TRAINER

Just as trainees/therapists need to know their political beliefs, values, biases, and triggers, and be able to manage these with enough efficacy to constructively dialogue with people who hold opposing positions, the same applies to trainers. This is, in fact, their ethical duty to their trainees. Trainers set the stage for the training experience, and it is paramount that they model what trainees are expected to learn, both how to manage reactivity as well as an ability to communicate understanding, empathy, compassion, contextualizing, and genuine curiosity toward people of all political persuasions. As educator Hooks (1994) explained, faculty often maintain the status quo of oppressive societal structures by remaining hidden in the role of “... all knowing silent interrogators,” whereas, “when education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess” (p.21). It is crucial that trainers be aware of their own political biases and be introspective about the educational implications, while modeling openness about their political leanings as they ask trainees to do the same. However, the caveat is that trainers need to have done whatever internal self-of-the-trainer work is needed to ensure that they can sit in the presence of expressed opinions and viewpoints that they may vehemently disagree with, and even find offensive or dangerous, without becoming anxious, reactive, or hostile (i.e., without becoming triggered). Nontriggered engagement is at the center of effective dialogic facilitation and creates an environment consistent with the concept of multidirectional partiality (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1966), an attitude of empathy, and the ability recognize the merits of different perspectives. When trainers can model the capacity to nonreactively listen to and consider perspectives that challenge their own, they create an environment of trust and safety that encourages trainees to risk openly and honestly sharing their political values, beliefs, biases, and triggers. Importantly, they also model for trainees how to do this with their clients.

A critical component of cultivating a training context that encourages open, honest sharing, even when doing so is provocative, involves trainers openly acknowledging power differentials between themselves and trainees, as well as power differentials based on various dimensions of diversity such as gender, race, ethnic background, religion, age, and so forth. Making power differentials explicit is a necessary step in creating trust and safety. Just having open, direct, nonattacking dialogues about political values, beliefs, and biases fosters safety and trust; it also

creates safety and trust when trainers openly acknowledge power differentials and encourage honest discussions about how this shapes what occurs in training, in therapy, and in life.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICALLY DIALOGUING

According to Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1972), dialogue is the foundation of true education. He explained that traditional teaching methods are based on a linear banking approach to education, where teachers input information in the minds of students, who absorb it. In contrast, Freire advocated for a dialogical approach to education where learning is a reciprocal process and information is freely shared by all participants in a way that deepens each person's knowledge and understanding of themselves and of others. According to Freire (2000), "without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education" (p 92). We very much agree in the critical importance of dialogue and because few receive direct training in acquiring this capacity, we believe that training programs need to devote purposeful attention to teaching trainees how to dialogue effectively. This is an essential precondition for being able to authentically express one's political positions while learning how to nonreactively hear and understand others' positions, even when divergently different.

To set the stage for how to engage in constructive dialoguing, we start by presenting a framework comprised of principles for participating in the process of dialoguing. The framework that we use is adapted from the work of the Essential Partners (formerly the Public Conversations Project), a team of family therapy educators who developed a comprehensive model for how to foster constructive conversations about divisive and polarizing issues (Chasin et al., 1996). They offer a methodology and a wealth of resources that can be used to create a context where individuals and groups who have become marred in redundant patterns characterized by stereotyping, polarizing rhetoric, and defensive reactivity can engage in new ways that deepen their understanding of one another (Herzig & Chasin, 2006). The framework that we use to guide how trainees to engage in difficult dialogues draws heavily from the Essential Partners work, although we have made alterations and additions to suit our work as clinical trainers.

The framework that we use is defined by 10 principles for how to constructively dialogue about differences. These are as follows:

1. Participants will speak from an "I" position and hence speak for themselves while allowing others to speak for themselves.
2. Participants will refrain from judging or criticizing others' views.
3. When participants feel tempted to judge or criticize, they will consider asking questions to deepen their level of understanding, even if they still disagree.
4. Participants will refrain from trying to change other people's minds.
5. When participants feel emotionally triggered, they will try to ground themselves by empathizing with and focusing on the humanity of the person whose comments caused the triggering.
6. Participants will be mindful of sharing space in an equitable manner.
7. Participants will refrain from interrupting, except to indicate if they did not hear what the speaker said.

8. Participants will share of themselves, although they are free to choose the timing. If asked to share/respond before one is ready, it is okay to say “pass for now.”
9. Participants will respect confidentiality by not sharing outside of the group.

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE CAPACITY FOR DIALOGUING ABOUT POLITICS

Once the framework has been established for how to constructively engage in conversations about differences, we recommend several activities that trainers can assign to aid trainees in identifying and making their political positions and values conscious and overt while enhancing their ability to nonreactively hear the positions and values of others with whom they may disagree. These activities are (1) writing a Political Position Statement; (2) engaging in Politically Focused Freirean Dialogues; and (3) discussing issues related to Politically Oriented Mental Health Scenarios. Each of these activities is designed to help trainees gain a deeper understanding of their own political values and positions, and of the values and positions held by others who see things very differently. These activities are a way of creating a space where divergent views may be expressed and where the capacity to hold divergent views may be deepened, both within the training context, in the trainee's lives outside of training, and in clinical work with clients.

Activity 1: Writing a Political Position Statement and written dialogue

To assist trainees in becoming more conscious of what informs their political views, we ask them to write a Political Position Statement. To prepare this statement, trainees are asked to consider:

1. How have your life experiences led to the political beliefs you hold?
2. What emotions do you experience around politics and political dialogues?
3. How has your family's political views influenced your views?
4. How does your cultural context influence your political views (e.g., how does your identity/location in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and immigration status shape your political views)?

It is necessary to respect that some trainees may not want to disclose their political affiliations, and it is essential that trainers do not require them to do so. Accordingly, this activity is framed in a way that allows trainees to explore the experiences and factors that inform their political identity without necessarily claiming their political affiliation. Furthermore, if a trainee does not want to participate in the activity, we recommend that there is an option to “take a pass.” Should this occur, we suggest that the focus might shift, instead exploring what about the activity felt challenging. For example, trainers might ask, “Without declaring your political views, can you say something about the life experiences you have had that contribute to your reticence to disclose your political beliefs? And can you talk a bit about what kinds of things you worry might happen if you did declare your views here?”

After writing their PP Statements, trainees read these out loud to the class. Following this, their classmates, in the role of responders, prepare written feedback. Responders are asked to

write from their most centered, grounded versions of themselves and to write to the solid and best version of the original author. They should also attempt to avoid the problematic communications identified by Gottman: criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt. In their responses to the PP Statements, responders are asked to stay close to the text that their fellow classmates have written and to engage with the author's position.

To ensure that interactions are open, honest, and direct, yet respectful, trainees are reminded of the 10 Principles for Constructive Dialoguing. Additionally, trainees are asked to frame their responses in terms of the following:

1. Mention something you learned.
2. If you heard an idea that interests you, add to it.
3. Ask a question to deepen your understanding of something the author wrote.
4. If you heard something that disturbed you, first check to see if you understood it correctly. Then share what was disturbing and why (Herzig & Chasin, 2006).

Additionally, if trainers intend to grade trainees, it is important to clarify that the focus is on the demonstration of dialogical engagement rather than on any particular content. International students may have unique gifts to add to the dialogue about US politics. Kissil et al. (2013) described the unique meta-perspective that international students have and their gift to see outside the cultural box of the United States. We suggest that there may be value to inviting international students to serve as a reflecting team, in addition to giving their own responses, after the exercise to share their observations of the overall dialogue process.

Each of us (Tracey and Jason) decided to share our Political Position Statements for illustrative purposes and in the spirit of transparency (Tables 1 and 2).

Activity 2: Engaging in Politically Focused Freirean Dialogue

Freire (2002) asserted that “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (p.87) and his life was spent in efforts to create transformative dialogues. For dialogues to be transformative, Freire stated that the foundation must be based in *love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking*. Without this foundation, he asserted that we are likely engaging inauthentically, without transformative action or reflection, and “the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating blaaa” (Freire, 2002, p. 87). For significant and lasting change to occur in the world, we first need to be able to give voice to our lived experiences. Following Freire's views on the importance of dialogue, Table 3 presents a set of Freirean-Informed Generative Dialogue Prompts.

The purpose of using these prompts is to stimulate trainees' exploration of their political positions and beliefs while guiding them to respectfully and constructively explore the differences that may exist between them. More important than the actual ideas, beliefs, and positions (the content) that trainees share in response to these prompts is how (the process) they participate in the conversation in terms of listening to and understanding others and expressing and sharing of themselves. Again, it is recommended that trainers establish the context within which these dialogues occur by using the 10 principles for how to constructively dialogue about differences. Additionally, the ultimate goal is to help trainees see the links between what emerges from these dialogues and their clinical practice. Hence, it is critical for trainers to be attentive to helping trainees make these connections and explore the implications (Table 3).

TABLE 1 Tracey's Political Position Statement.

<p>(1) <i>How do you identify politically?</i></p> <p>I identify myself politically as liberal and as a Democrat. I believe that government has a responsibility to provide for its citizens. I believe in equal rights for all. I value diversity and think we are strengthened by a diversity of all kinds. My positions on issues are politically liberal. I am pro-choice, I support social welfare programs, I favor gun control, I believe that access to healthcare is a human right, I believe in raising corporate taxes, I think our defense budget is bloated and needs to be reduced, I support legislation that protects the rights of women, racial/ethnic minorities, LGBTQ persons/communities, those with disabilities and other vulnerable populations including nonhuman animals. I support legislation that protects the environment, and I am deeply concerned about climate change and think we need to take extreme, immediate actions to change our fuel sources, reduce use of plastics and pesticides, and reduce pollution of all kinds, especially industrial pollution, and consumption of meat.</p>
<p>(2) <i>What emotions do you experience around politics and political dialogues?</i></p> <p>The emotions I experience around politics and political dialogues vary depending on the topic and the way that those with whom I am speaking present their views and react to mine. I am enthusiastic about talking about the things I believe and why I hold my beliefs and I enjoy hearing from others. However, if I perceive others as being condescending or judgmental and/or, if I feel attacked, then my emotions tend to be defensive anger and possibly even, hurt.</p>
<p>(3) <i>How have your family's political views influenced your views?</i></p> <p>Both my parents were politically liberal, and they openly talked about and discussed their views with me, and with others, while I was growing up. We frequently engaged in social and political conversations as a family, and I think this is why I now feel comfortable discussing political issues. I also had the chance to observe my parents conversating with others who had values and views that were more conservative and that taught me how to talk about political differences in a respectful way. I do remember a few occasions when I was growing up when the conversation between my parents and certain family members became heated and I felt very uncomfortable, but then I saw how after the moment passed, things settled down and people were okay with each other, so that was reassuring. I also should add that the conservative views of other family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) shaped my views. Interacting with their perspective helped to clarify why I did not believe what they believed. Hearing them and talking required me to get clear about my values so I could represent/defend them when I was challenged by various members of my family.</p>
<p>(4) <i>How does your cultural context influence your political views (e.g., how does a trainee's identity/location in terms of their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and immigration status shape her/his political views)?</i></p> <p>As a Jewish family, we experienced discrimination and I think that made me sensitive to issues of equality and fairness, and the importance of policies and laws that protect the rights and freedoms of all people, and also other animals as well. At the same time, I had/have many privileges based on my race, social class, sexual orientation, mental/physical ability, and so forth. and I do wonder how these parts of me influenced my strong liberalism. I think once I started to become aware of and understand my many privileges and the inequalities that they reflect in our society this fueled my liberalism by making me feel more passionate about wanting to support policies that lead to a more equitable and just society.</p>

Activity 3: Small group discussions of politically oriented scenarios

To assist trainees in connecting what they are learning to their clinical work, another activity that we use involves posing and discussing a variety of politically oriented scenarios that might present clinically. Based on research on the ideal group size for dialogue, we recommend that trainees work in small groups of three to five people (Krems et al., 2016). Each group is given

TABLE 2 Jason's Political Position Statement.*(1) How do you identify politically?*

Historically I identified as conservative and currently as liberal. Growing up I believed in absolute truths and had faith in authoritarian figures and organizations, but I have become more critical and relativistic in my thinking and few things seem black and white to me anymore. I am registered as an independent and feel little loyalty to any political party, although I have voted for democratic candidates during the past decade. I have concerns about tribalism and increasing extremism in the two-party political system and I want to base my voting decisions on candidates' political platform rather than their political party. If I am honest with myself though, I also think identifying as an independent was, in part, an attempt to avoid conflicts, hide my partisanship and to distance myself from the negative baggage associated with the two dominant parties. I am clearly left leaning in my thinking. On the other hand, it might also be reflective of a process I am currently in of attempting to integrate the conservative and liberal values I hold that often feel at odds with one another.

(2) What emotions do you experience around politics and political dialogues?

I feel sadness, hopelessness and at time rage when discussing politics. If the discussion is with a member of my conservative Latter-Day Saint (LDS) family, I can feel sadness, frustration, and reactivity. I am an outlier politically in my family and it can be uncomfortable and lonely being different from them. I am keenly aware that I have further work to do on my own differentiation because I feel an absence of peace in discussing politics with my family. I feel less reactive discussing politics with people outside my family. Though I also feel dread when I see the polarization in the United States and the lack of civil discourse. The divide makes me fearful for the future of the nation

(3) How has your family's political views influenced your views?

My subjective experience is that being liberal or voting for a democrat, within my family and faith community, is viewed as a movement toward apostasy and/or as having a questionable moral compass. Loving both my family and the religion in which I was raised, I felt pressure to conform with conservative political views. Questioning traditional views in my family was a sign of disrespect and a lack of faith. This led me to be hesitant to explore my own views for a significant part of my life. During my twenties and thirties I did start to question things very gradually, leading to barely noticeable and incremental shifts in my thinking. My family is wary of institutions of higher education and view them as hostile toward conservatives. And in fairness, my educational experiences did in fact play a role in my shifting spiritual views and my increasing liberalism. This contributed to internal and external tension because my family had/has strong negative views of people they perceive as being liberal. For example, when they would say that they hate democrats and then state that they would never vote for "my party," I would hear them saying that they hated me. That was difficult for me. It really was not until 2016 that I began to more openly talk to my family about our political differences. This helped me to become clearer about my values and political beliefs. I would like to say, at age 44, that openness is no longer difficult. Politics remains very personal and often painful. For example, when I lost my father to COVID in 2021, I felt he had died because of politics. Others in my family also blamed politics, but from a very different interpretation of reality.

(4) How does your cultural context influence your political views (e.g., how does a trainee's identity/location in terms of their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and immigration status shape her/his political views)?

I inherited many powerful stories from the cultural context in which I was raised, particularly the narratives that existed in small town 1970s Utah. These stories were largely aligned with a conservative and an LDS worldview. Examples include views linked to gender roles (men are to be the leaders in the home), sexual orientation (homosexuality is a sin), class (wealth is linked to hard work, self-reliance, thrift), and nationality (the United States is a chosen place i.e. special to God). A component of my conservative and religious cultural context also included the message that questioning those stories was disloyal, unpatriotic, and perhaps sinful.

These views influenced my political values and voting history for many years. I think my evolution toward a more liberal worldview occurred as I moved into different cultural contexts and as began feel greater permission to question my own thinking. This included moves to Louisiana, New York, Oregon, and eventually Mexico. It also shifted from my views being challenged during my university years and by being exposed to other worldviews and cultures. I have also now lived in Mexico for nearly 20 years. This has made me far more aware of my US privilege and how the US effects the global system. This has led to me engaging in more of a critical and questioning relationship to the United States, which I would say is more liberal than conservative. This has led to adoption of more liberal views such as that there are not specific gender roles, sexual orientation is on a continuum, oppressive social structures influence wealth and poverty, and that we are part of a global system and that nationalism is as problematic as any of the other isms. These more liberal values now are dominant for me and influence my political values and how I vote.

20 min to review a written scenario, discuss the dialogue prompts, and recommend a course of action to best resolve the dilemma. There are a core set of dialogue prompts that we use with all scenarios, with space given to consider additional prompts that are specific to the case at hand. These prompts are as follows:

1. What are clinical concepts and ethical guidelines that ought to be considered in this scenario?
2. How might the values of liberalism and conservatism factor into the difficulties occurring in this scenario?
3. How might therapists' political views shape what they do or do not do in this scenario?
4. What would success look like for this scenario?
5. What additional politically based prompts would you want considered for this scenario?

Each group is directed to choose a representative who will report to the larger group. The facilitator then guides the larger group to share what they saw as the strengths and weaknesses of what was reported by each small group representative. They are also directed to add to what was shared by offering their own reactions to the scenario in terms of the dialogue prompts. Finally, the facilitator wraps up the experience by highlighting themes that emerged during the experience, followed by asking the group to highlight the main points that they learned from the exercise.

What follows are two examples of scenarios that may be given for consideration and discussion.

Scenario one

Jen and Alison are sisters from a white family who were raised in the Midwest. They have rarely spoken since Thanksgiving. At the pleading of their mother, the two scheduled a therapy appointment. Jen began by stating, "I deleted my mom and sister from Facebook. They treat me like a villain because I am a Democrat and I support the rights of the GLBTQ+ community and Muslims. I feel like I cannot talk to them about human rights without it becoming miserable. What is the point of even trying?" As Alison listened to what Jen was saying, she began to cry and said, "She knows me. Does she really believe I am so hateful? She is so reactive that I do not even know what to say to her. We both were taught to love everyone. It is bad enough that she keeps accusing me of horrific things like racism and homophobia, but the thing that is even

TABLE 3 Freirean-informed generative dialogue prompts on political position.

- What is your view about what constitutes a successful dialogue about political issues when speaking with someone who holds political views different from your own?
- What are theories, models, and interventions that guide family therapists in addressing systemic divisions in families that could be applied to systemic divisions linked to politics (e.g. the work of John Gottman, Sue Johnson, Genograms, Internalized Other Interviewing, Double Binds, Second-Order Cybernetics, Structural Coupling, etc.)?
- In your ideal world, would people holding different political persuasions than you exist? What would be the systemic implications and possible unintended consequences if they did not exist?
- What is something that you would hope others would understand about you as you share your thoughts about politics?
- When you have had meaningful dialogues about political issues, what factors were helpful in facilitating that experience?
- With whom do you believe it might feel risky to share your political views and what do you fear might happen?
- If you were to take a meta-perspective about political dialogues, what systemic patterns or phenomena do you think you might observe (e.g. recursive patterns, one-upmanship, negative or positive sentiment override, etc.).
- When you experience anxiety, how does that influence how you communicate to others about political topics?
- Are there things that help you to feel safe that might make others feel less safe? If so, how might that challenge be addressed in a helpful way?
- Significant political divides exist in other nations (e.g., Venezuela, Turkey, India, Mexico, Poland, Colombia, Argentina). Along what lines do those divisions exist and how do those divides make sense in those national contexts?
- How do you think the caustic US divide between liberals and conservatives effects the people living in other parts of the world?
- Do you consider yourself more conservative or more liberal? What aspects of yourself do you feel gets lost in conversations when limited to one of these terms?
- What do you think your political orientation might reflect about who you are and the values that you hold?
- When someone claims to be apolitical or not interested in politics, what does that reflect about their politics?
- When someone identifies as an independent, what does that reflect about their values or political viewpoints?
- What have you been told are the morals and values of people who hold different political values than you?
- What do you see as the ugly or shadow parts of the political party you most affiliate with?
- What might members of your party not be owning that may be immoral or problematic?
- Are you patriotic? How does your response perhaps reflect something about where you are on the political spectrum?
- Have you ever cut off from someone (e.g., deleted them from a social network) because they held political views different from your own? How do you know when cutting off from someone is due to anxiety and a lack of differentiation versus something else (e.g., a true threat of harm)?
- Have you had clients bring up elections or other political subjects? What do you think are the clinical competencies involved with discussing political issues with clients effectively?
- How can therapists best help those whose lives are negatively impacted by the political issues?
- Do you know the political leanings of your faculty or supervisor? How do you think their political views influence what takes place in your classes or supervision?
- Does knowing the political views of a trainer influence what you would or would not share in classes or supervision? What is the cost on your development if you remain silent?

- What do you believe are the ethical responsibilities of trainers when assisting trainees to address *self-of-the-therapist* issues linked to political identity?
- The values and vision for the United States were first articulated in documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. How familiar are you with the values that are described in these documents? What do you think are the implications if you know little about them?
- What do you know about political parties in other nations? What meaning do you think your answer to that question has when working with immigrant or international clients?
- What are the potential clinical implications of a therapist from one political party working with a client from a different political party?
- What are the ramifications of the fact that most faculty, supervisors, and therapists are liberal leaning? How might this fact influence our field's ability to be part of healing the political divide?

worse is that she has been implying such things to my children. That is not okay. I love her, but she is the one who has rejected the values we were raised with. The dumbest part is that I do not even care about politics. In the last few elections, we had to make our best choice and the rest of the family and I decided to continue to vote Republican.”

Scenario two

Jorge is a Colombian American doctoral student with a social work background. Before beginning his doctoral degree in Marriage and Family Therapy, he was deeply involved in advocacy work for undocumented Latin American immigrants. His partner is an undocumented immigrant from Mexico. Jorge is now completing an internship at a Midwest counseling center. Jorge's clinic supervisor, Nicole, was surprised to be contacted by a client receiving therapy from Jorge. The client explained to Nicole that she had initiated therapeutic services to deal with a recent profound loss and she felt derailed in the last session with Jorge when she perceived him as reacting with hostility after she briefly mentioned her conservative views on immigration. When the supervisor met with Jorge, he was agitated and expressed that he did not want to continue working with the client unless he could use some of their work together to educate her about her racism. He stated, “I am a social justice advocate and to do anything else would be to condone her support of hatemongering. That would be a betrayal to most of my clients and my partner.” Because all of Nicole's colleagues have been quite expressive about their liberal views, she has never declared her conservative views. Now, faced with this situation with Jorge and his client, Nicole felt tense. Normally, she would challenge any supervisee whose personal beliefs were having such a significant impact on the therapy process, but in this case, Nicole was hesitant because she was feeling her own reactivity to Jorge and was unsure how to proceed in a way that would hold him accountable without doing to him what she felt he was doing to his client.

Importantly, when trainees discuss these scenarios and share their thoughts, opinions, and reactions, how they share of themselves and react to each other should be guided by the 10 principles for how to constructively dialogue about differences. As previously mentioned, the purpose of these exercises is to teach trainees how to be aware of their own beliefs, view, values, and reactions and to share these openly and honestly, but to do so in ways that do not attack or denigrate others. At the same time, these exercises are aimed at teaching trainees how to hear others express beliefs, views, and values that they may disagree with, but to do so in ways that are open and nonreactive and hence create connections through deepening understanding in the midst of disagreeing.

SUMMARY

Just as family therapy training programs have integrated attention to the influence of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and religion into how therapists approach their clinical work and how these variables may influence what clients present with in therapy, trainers also need to incorporate political orientation into the training experience. Especially now when politics has become so intensely divisive, we need the kinds of skills that can facilitate constructive dialoguing across political differences while bridging strained relationships, at the macro and the micro levels. Before therapists can effectively do this, they need to be aware of their political values, beliefs, and biases, they must know where their sensitivities and triggers reside, and they must possess the capabilities to manage these effectively. Specifically, trainees need to be guided to identify their political orientation and to understand how this informs the way they work with clients whose positions may be similar to and radically different from their own. Additionally, therapists need to possess the skills to aid clients in engaging in difficult dialogues about the differences that may be contributing to relational strain and division. We offer the suggestions within this article as a tentative beginning toward preparing future therapists to be part of healing the political divide. The voices of many others within the field, with varying theoretical orientations and from different locations on the political spectrum, will be needed for this effort to be successful.

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