

# NEWS

## CSP Hosts SIETAR Conference on Ideological Polarization: *Lessons and Takeaways*

BY BROOKE STEIGAUF

**W**E ARE LIVING IN a uniquely challenging time; Media has immense power and influence, the course of the future seems to be at its crossroad, and our brains are programmed to confirm our beliefs regardless of the reality in front of us. In response to high anxiety and frustration, SIETAR USA and SIETAR Minnesota organized a conference titled, “Walk the Talk: Achieving Civility and Respect in Times of Polarization,” at CSP on November 17<sup>th</sup>.

Bill Doherty kicked off the event by explaining an activity from an organized movement called Better Angels, in which bipartisan citizens work together to create mutual understanding. He explained that the goal behind combining two opposing groups is not to change anyone’s beliefs, but rather to have participants define each other beyond stereotypes and political identification; to find commonalities.

This alone relieves the pressure. Beyond that, participants also talk to other like-minded people about their opinion while the other party listens, as opposed being placed in a position where they must defend their beliefs. Better Angels divides participants into “reds” and “blues,” asking each side to generate the top-five, most commonly-held misconceptions about their party. Then they are asked to redefine the misconceptions, stating their truths and exposing their values; The foundation or intention of the beliefs are almost guaranteed to be shared by both parties in some capacity.

While there is plenty of common ground, Doherty is no fool. He explained reds and blues as two different cultures, each with their own language, concerns, objectives, and perspectives driving their visions for social change.



Photography provided by Brooke Steigauf  
Pictured above is Key Note speaker Basma DeVries

For example, “blue language” includes words like “privilege, marginalism, safe space,” etc., whereas “red language” contains words such as “American greatness, religious, liberty, service.” There is nothing inherently bad about any of these words, and yet, we have gut reactions and strong connotations attached to them. To learn about another culture, one is challenged to shed their preconceived notions and ideas about how the society “should” operate, in order to take a more objective and respectful look at something different. Doherty says this is the same approach we must take to bipartisan conversations.



Photography provided by Brooke Steigauf  
Pictured above is the SIETAR conference in action

Nagesh Rao led an activity in which participants were to hold a conversation with someone new, without asking any questions. This was a surprisingly difficult task, but led to a dialogue during which people searched for commonalities from which they could build their responses. Through this exercise, Rao exposed the profound difference in freedom of speech between, “Where do you work?” and “Tell me about your work.”

Keynote speaker Shannon Murphy Robinson explained the neuroscience behind stereotypes and the role it plays in polarization. She said, “We’ve inherited a brain that focuses on fear and otherness,” since our brains were first designed to be protective of our

bodies. “If the brain senses otherness, the empathy centers don’t engage, or at least not to the same extent,” Robinson continued. She explained that this function, which is supposed to trigger us into imagining what life might be like for someone else, not only shuts off but is replaced with a feeling of discomfort, which registers as disgust in our brain. When the brain kicks into this instinctive functioning, it leads to reduced access to our frontal cortex, therefore the brain feels unmotivated to seek more information and is less equipped to make a cumulative decision.

To counteract this, Robinson pleaded that we work to become more aware of our gut reactions, challenge them, and repattern our brain. To decrease fear, Robinson said, “Make unfamiliar situations familiar, build connections, and note micro affirmations,” (micro affirmations are seemingly small acknowledgements of worth and value that can make a large impact). Robinson concluded her session by stating, “My advice for people seeking relationships with un-like-minded people? Evaluate yourself.”