

## Cultural Relations Collection

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# Deep listening as an approach to tackle polarisation

Emily Kasriel

Cultural relations  
and peacebuilding

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# Acknowledgements

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## Special thanks to

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Jane Grantham  
Angelina Twomey

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**Christine Wilson** has worked in the British Council since 2004. As Director Research and Insight, she oversees a global portfolio spanning education, arts and culture, youth and skills, as well as exploring the role of cultural relations in supporting the UK's soft power aims. She is accountable for global standards and practice, ethics, programmes, partnerships and networks. She directs the Next Generation research series, which aims to engage youth voices around the world and contribute to improved policymaking. She previously directed the Hammamet Conference, which brought together leaders from the UK and North Africa, and co-chaired the steering group for Peace and Beyond, which marked the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement by exploring international approaches to sustainable peacebuilding. Christine is an Advisory Board member at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

## The British Council

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We work directly with individuals to help them gain the skills, confidence and connections to transform their lives and shape a better world in partnership with the UK. We support them to build networks and explore creative ideas, to learn English, to get a high-quality education and to gain internationally recognised qualifications.

## DOI

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Citation: Kasriel, E. (2023). Deep listening as an approach to tackle polarisation. British Council. Available online: [doi.org/10.57884/5JND-PE73](https://doi.org/10.57884/5JND-PE73)

# Foreword

The Cultural Relations Collection essay series, produced by the British Council's Research and Insight Team, asks early-career and established researchers to examine the theory and practice of cultural relations. We invite fresh perspectives on what has been the British Council's business for almost 90 years – building connections, understanding and trust.

This edition explores how cultural relations can contribute to peacebuilding in different settings and contexts.

Peacebuilding, and the erosion of peace, are intimately connected to many major challenges facing us nationally and internationally. No community that is divided by conflict, or the expectation or experience of conflict, can give adequate attention to less immediate but equally destructive threats, such as environmental degradation or economic instability.

Yet those same factors, left unaddressed, can only increase the likelihood of conflict. The result is a vicious circle which is increasingly difficult to escape.

These essays help us to understand what is meant by a cultural relations approach to peacebuilding and to demonstrate that this approach is both valid and valuable.

Each of the essays comes from a different disciplinary and regional perspective, but some common themes are evident.

One is Galtung's concept of positive (as opposed to negative) peace: peace as an active participatory experience, rather than simply the absence of violence. This supports proponents of cultural relations – and is a riposte to those who argue that soft power interventions in hard power situations are mere wishful thinking.

Also implicit in many of the essays is the importance of enabling safe spaces in which cultural relations can take place. Inclusivity and an atmosphere of trust are a *sine qua non* if citizens and communities are to experience a sense of their own agency.

Related to this is deep listening (listening experienced as a positive and empathetic activity, rather than simply an absence of interruption), a topic explored in depth by one of our essayists. Listening to others' truth and speaking our own, not only to power but to ourselves, is at the core of cultural relations – and especially in our peacebuilding efforts. No true or lasting peace is built on half-truths and evasions.

Indeed, the importance of facing up to our own organisational and national history is addressed directly in one of these essays; and behind several authors stands the shadow of colonialism.

As in previous editions of this series, there is much here for readers, and the British Council itself, to reflect on and absorb. Peacebuilding is a complex and constantly developing subject, to which these essays make a valuable contribution.

The British Council supports peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. To meet that goal, we will continue to explore with researchers, artists and peace practitioners how our cultural relations work can contribute to peacebuilding globally; this series is just the start.

**Scott McDonald**  
Chief Executive, British Council



# Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

Welcome to the latest edition of the Cultural Relations Collection. As always, it has been stimulating to read fresh perspectives on cultural relations by new voices in the field. Previous editions in the Collection have examined cultural relations and climate change, and the impact of COVID-19 on cultural exchange. In 2022, we invited submissions on cultural relations and peacebuilding, given our renewed emphasis on the role of building trust and connections as central to the conditions required for sustainable peace, and in the spirit of what John-Paul Lederach calls ‘an approach that addresses the culture of violence by transforming it into the culture of dialogue’.

This is not a new area for the British Council, which emerged from the global crisis leading up to the Second World War in the realisation that building trust and understanding between the UK and the rest of the world was crucial. In 2018, which marked the centenary of the end of the First World War, the centenary of Nobel Peace Laureate Nelson Mandela, and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement, the British Council worked with partners in Northern Ireland on the conference *Peace and Beyond*<sup>1</sup>, an examination of global approaches to building lasting peace including reflections from contributors from countries including Lebanon, South Africa, and Colombia.

In 2023, the need to examine the conditions for peacebuilding are as relevant as they were in 2018. Colleagues around the world continue to work in communities affected by conflict, such as Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Yemen, to name but three. At the time of writing, we are working on research on the role of cultural events in addressing conflict and sharing the values of freedom and international co-operation, given the UK’s role in hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine.

And so, to the individual contributions herein. At the 2018 *Peace and Beyond* conference, Judith Thompson, Chief Commissioner for the Commission for Victims and Survivors<sup>2</sup>, said: ‘Building social trust [...]in a society transitioning from

conflict is an essential ingredient to [...] building a better future for everyone and the generations that follow.’ This collection builds on that imperative by breaking down varied approaches to the building of trust.

Alice Naisbitt examines the role of science as a peacebuilding tool in two ways: that the connections built reinforce the trust vital to harmonious relations; and that the outcomes of scientific co-operation address drivers of conflict, such as resource scarcity. As with Hannah Dalgliesh’s contribution on the soft power of astronomy in a previous collection<sup>3</sup>, Naisbitt underpins the role of science as providing neutral, common ground for collaboration.

Naisbitt does not shy away from the historic challenges that have been presented to the British Council over the years, and the accusation that cultural relations – in science, arts, language, or education – run the risk of being instrumentalised for the soft power outcomes, rather than their development objectives. This theme is picked up in Daniel Feather’s fascinating history of educational co-operation between the UK and South Africa, including through the apartheid era when South Africa was globally isolated. He draws the distinction between cultural

diplomacy and cultural relations, although highlights where those lines can become blurred. While not uncritical of the role of the UK and the British Council over this period, his essay makes a powerful argument for the place of education in supporting a country’s transition from structural violence to a more equitable and peaceful state.

Three essays focus on arts and culture as tools for building peace. George Wilkes et al. consider the role of the cultural relations organisation in bridging the local and the global; the need not to overlook the smallest detail of any given conflict, while still recognising the power of building links across borders and amplifying the voice of those affected by conflict. Their emphasis on the need to deal with memory, whether of previous friendships, or of deep trauma, also harks back to contributions in *Peace and Beyond*<sup>4</sup> by Candice Mama and Cindy Mizher.

The role of the arts to make visible what may previously have been hidden, as well as to imagine new futures, is central to the essay of Daniela Fazio-Vargas and Carlos Pineda-Ramos. They make a powerful case for artistic expression as a means by which different voices can be elevated and building a space in

1 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace>

2 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace>

3 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-series/cultural-relations>

4 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace>

which difference is recognised and valued, and that only in this way, can true peace be achieved. Nar Bahadur Saud takes this up in his essay that reminds us that before the arts can support peace and justice, they too must recognise difference. His contribution centres on the need to empower and enable disabled people to express themselves through the arts, and that in doing so not only addresses the inequalities they face as individuals but will contribute to more equitable and peaceful societies.

2022 brought sport to the fore in the discourse on positive peacebuilding – that is, not just addressing violent conflict, but addressing the drivers of conflict, such as inherent violence against marginalised communities, or the continuation of structural inequities. Many people looked to the World Cup in Qatar with mixed feelings, as to whether this was ‘sportswashing’ or an opportunity to open up a human rights dialogue on the world stage. In his essay, Grant Jarvie explores the link between sports and diplomacy, and suggests a more prominent role for sport in development, particularly in peacebuilding, given its emphasis on team spirit, co-operation, and solidarity.

Lastly, Emily Kasriel examines a concept at the heart of peacebuilding – listening. Her essay on deep listening illustrates an approach that prepares individuals for encounters across any divides they find within their communities, however they are experiencing conflict. Drawing on both theory and practice, she draws out the transformational nature of this method, and the impact it has had on individuals and communities around the world, enabling them to truly see, hear and understand the person opposite them.

One of the participants in a deep listening exercise said it allowed her ‘to create an atmosphere of inclusivity, trust and positive discourse’. It feels as if we are in a time in which that approach is urgently needed. I hope too that this Cultural Relations Collection makes a similarly positive contribution, and I urge all readers to embrace that spirit.

**Christine Wilson**

Director of Research and Insight,  
British Council

# Deep Listening as an approach to tackle polarisation

By Emily Kasriel, Senior Visiting Research Fellow, The Policy Institute, King’s College London

## Abstract

Deep Listening is a transformational approach to engaging with others which enables people with diverse perspectives to have a meaningful dialogue and to connect with each other at a profound level. This approach enhances cultural relations by building trust and mutual understanding. Deep Listening is especially important in more divided societies in order to help create more social cohesion at local and national levels. Deep Listening is distinct from Active Listening; more reflective, more cognisant of the speaker’s dignity, with a transformative model. Importantly, with Deep Listening, we listen to ourselves first. In this essay, after explaining what Deep Listening is, we will discuss types of fragility and polarisation which Deep Listening can address, drawing on academic literature and evaluations from British Council Deep Listening projects. Finally, the essay will examine the challenges and opportunities of scaling this approach.



# What is Deep Listening?

People and cultures around the world encounter each other now more than ever, as observed in research<sup>1</sup> on cultural relations and public diplomacy. Deep Listening provides tools to give citizens the confidence to embrace encounters across divides and creates a way for these encounters to be transformational for the listener, for the speaker and also for their societies – in this way strengthening communities and building connections between communities. Thus, Deep Listening is especially relevant in less socially cohesive societies and those with high levels of internal tensions. In such contexts, individuals and communities practicing this approach are empowered to discuss controversial topics and develop genuine understanding of others, however different their background, nationality or beliefs.

The Deep Listening approach that I have evolved draws heavily on the work of the late psychologist Carl Rogers<sup>2</sup>, Professor of Organisational Behaviour Avraham Kluger<sup>3</sup>, Associate Professor Guy Itzchakov<sup>4</sup> and conflict mediator Gary Friedman<sup>5</sup>, together with my own practice as an accredited Executive Coach and mediator and editor of the BBC

Crossing Divides season, plus academic research by psychologists, lawyers, therapists, coaches and mediators, as well as First Nation listening practitioners and individuals who have refined their listening practice in some of the most high-stakes contexts. It is different from Standard or even Active Listening:

## Standard Listening is *transactional*.

It is an exchange. We often only truly listen momentarily, going through the motions as we are ‘pre-loading our verbal gun with ammunition’<sup>6</sup> ready to fire. Then we jump in to explain our own ideas, our solutions, interrupting meaning and destroying thinking. Even if we have learned to listen better—by participating in, for example, an Active Listening course that has taught us to ask open questions, watch body language and reflect back—we tend to treat the speaker as a resource. We listen to them to extract information, or because it is expected – whether they are a colleague, a client or a partner. This type of listening blinds us to what is *not* said, and can leave our speaker feeling ignored, dismissed or used.

## Deep Listening is *transformational*.

When we practice Deep Listening, we acknowledge the other’s humanity, granting them respect and the empathetic space to think and reflect so they can share a more authentic story. After checking in with ourselves, we hear from the speaker, asking if what we hear and intuit reflects the core of their thinking. The speaker can then acknowledge where we have understood and correct us where we have misinterpreted or clarify their meaning if our response has sparked new ideas. Through this interactive process, the speaker crystallises their thinking which allows us to understand them more profoundly.

Deep Listening empowers both speaker and listener to fulfil one of humanity’s most important needs – the need to connect – whilst at the same time improving the wellbeing, mental health and self-awareness of both speaker and listener. If individuals learn and are courageous enough to practice this approach, they can understand others more completely, even if the person they are listening to comes from a different background or there is a power divide. The approach is useful for those working in local and civic organisations as well as NGO leaders as they seek to include more perspectives and engage a more diverse set of stakeholders. Critically,

this approach does not require the listener to agree with the speaker. Freed from this pressure, the listener can open themselves to authentically connect, including across challenging differences.

## The Deep Listening model encompasses an array of skills.

We first need to listen to ourselves, forging a more productive relationship with our subconscious shadow world so it no longer hijacks our conversations. We then create a place of safety for our speaker, physically and most importantly psychologically, so ideas, including difficult and honest thoughts, can flow freely. A challenging yet impactful dimension of Deep Listening is our presence, which transforms standard listening into a more meaningful encounter. We need to cultivate an open-hearted attention, learn how to focus that attention towards others, acknowledging to ourselves the speaker’s humanity whatever they believe. We then need to use non-verbal backchannel tools to communicate to the speaker that they are being heard, with an awareness of silence. Deep Listening encourages us to use a rich open-hearted stillness to signal to the speaker our true respect, giving them the space to think, reflect and share.

Deep Listeners then need to reflect back to the speaker, to check their own understanding not only of the speaker's words, but also of the notes between their words, and of the speaker's emotions. Though granting the speaker a non-judgemental space to reflect, the speaker is able to crystallise their thinking and reveal profound narratives that lie hidden below the surface of most conversations. Finally, we take the time to step back after each Deep Listening conversation to deeply reflect on what happened and what we can learn about ourselves and our listening practice from the experience.

We must also consider any ethical questions raised by Deep Listening, especially important when we are listening to someone where there is an acute power divide, or where our listening has provided a trusted space in which the speaker has inadvertently revealed something which they perhaps did not intend.

## Building Peace: The relevance of Deep Listening for cultural relations and less socially cohesive societies

While there is no universally agreed definition of cultural relations<sup>7</sup>, a literature review<sup>8</sup> on soft power and cultural public diplomacy argues that the very purpose of cultural relations includes greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and cultures. In addition, the recently published comparative analysis of soft power and cultural relations<sup>9</sup> defines cultural relations as creating the conditions for collaboration between like-minded people and countries for the pursuit of the common good. While Deep Listening can also enable cultural relations between people who aren't like-minded, and it is here that its greatest value may lie, both these conceptualisations of cultural relations require the bedrock of Deep Listening in order that they can be realised in their truest sense, with authenticity and respect. Indeed, it is through focussing on listening that cultural relations allow "a deeper level of engagement with others than would the more promotional cultural

diplomacy."<sup>10</sup> After participating in Deep Listening training, one participant eloquently summed up how Deep Listening can contribute towards social cohesion.

*Deep listening helps break down biases, creating an environment of trust. An environment where interlocutors are respected and not belittled, regardless of the opinion expressed. If the other person really listens to you, then it is easier to listen to the other person. There is a greater chance of broadening your horizons and helping others to understand your story and the basis of existing beliefs*

*Female Deep Listening Participant in Riga, Latvia*

In considering the power of Deep Listening to enhance peace in highly divided states, we can draw upon a framing<sup>11</sup> of peace that goes beyond a binary opposition of peace and conflict. Johan Galtung<sup>12</sup> made the case that positive peace should be framed as 'the integration of human society'. Furthermore, in a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2016, sustaining peace is expressed as both a goal and a process in order to build a



common vision of society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are acknowledged. This acknowledgement should address vertical inequalities (between individuals and households) and horizontal inequalities (between groups, typically culturally defined). However, in many cases, in both fragile and more stable states, minorities and demographic groups with less power are not only denied equal resources but do not have equal opportunities to express their voice in the public space and help determine national outcomes, contributing to these groups being excluded and marginalised from the joint project of nationhood.

As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt asserted in her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, individuals cut off from others are much more likely to be persuaded by authoritarianism and other forms of propaganda, thus increasing the likelihood of alienation and discord. Arendt distinguished between loneliness and solitude: Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply when you are in the company of others, but without being able to establish contact, and therefore, I would argue, deprived of the benefit of being really listened to or feeling heard. Bringing Deep Listening to disaffected individuals and communities can play a role in engendering feeling of belonging and strengthening community ties and social relations, in order to counter this threat.

## Evidence for the impact of learning how to deeply listen

One of the most important aspects of learning a Deep Listening approach is the confidence it cultivates in participants so that they can embark on a conversation with those that think differently. In 2022, to celebrate the BBC Centenary, a joint project was conducted by the BBC and the British Council to recruit 1000 young people from at least 100 countries in order that I could train them in Deep Listening in a project called *Crossing Divides around the Globe* (Global Project). Analysis conducted by Netta Weinstein and Tia Moin from the University of Reading into this project, compared the change in attitude among participants who had undertaken six hours of Deep Listening training over three weeks, concluding with a conversation with someone with a very different perspective about a controversial topic, with the change in attitude of a control group who had a similar conversation without any Deep Listening training.

The evaluation established, with over 95 % confidence<sup>13</sup>, that those trained in Deep Listening, compared to those untrained, significantly increased their level of confidence in speaking to someone with an opposing opinion. The participants were diverse,

representing 119 countries. However, they were all young, 18–34, had chosen to take part in this Deep Listening training, and were selected for their ability to communicate in English as well as their motivation. Interestingly, the impact of the training in increasing confidence was similarly demonstrated across a diversity of countries including the most represented states: the UK, Iran, Malaysia and New Zealand.

At the same time, the University of Reading analysis also found that the group taking part in the global Deep Listening training, compared to the control group, significantly increased the extent to which they found that listening to people with opposing views was annoying and uncomfortable.<sup>14</sup> This finding may be a reflection of the fact that the training exposed participants to multiple conversations with those who had very different backgrounds to theirs, perhaps for the first time, and the response of those trained in Deep Listening is thus a measure of their feelings of discomfort in these conversations. Expression of such sentiments could also be the result of the greater self-awareness gained during the training. It would be interesting to evaluate if repeated





exposure to different perspectives while practicing a Deep Listening approach reduces these negative feelings.

Beyond the main finding that Deep Listening increases confidence to have crossing divides conversations, the very practice of learning how to Deeply Listen, especially if diverse and divided communities are trained together, provides a platform in itself for meaningful dialogue. The training gives participants the experience of becoming aware of their own pre-judgements and prejudices so that they can see beyond them to penetrate the deep feelings of others. In the final session, participants in Deep Listening training have the opportunity to develop their skills in open-hearted non-judgemental listening by practicing with someone who strongly believes in an alternative perspective, be it about immigration, junk food or marriage:

*I had swept myself into the legal and social norm side of agreeing that marriage remains essential. It wasn't until I listened to my partner that I realised the taught bias present within myself.... growing up in a society where religion holds a core value to society made me see marriage as the goal, and whilst I do not agree with marriage 100%, I didn't realise that my own view was clouded by the majority society. Another thing that I realised through listening, sharing and further*

*conversation were the large differences in the focus of equality in different countries and places. I realised that the main focus of my own equality advocacy is at a different place than others. Talking and listening to my group allowed me to rebalance myself into a wholistic/balance view of equality. It then allowed me to further explore and to 'tell more' about the similarities held between our countries and the impact that marriage, religion and the state had on us. It allowed for a greater exploration and deeper look into the why rather than the what.*

**Male Participant from New Zealand, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training**

With the Deep Listening evaluation of the Global project, the University of Reading concluded that there was a significant positive difference, with at least 99% confidence<sup>15</sup>, in feeling of self-awareness, openness and attitude change between the group who experienced the training with a crossing divides conversation at the end of it compared to the control group who had no training.

These quantitative findings from the University of Reading evaluation of the global project align with a similar, though more geographically focussed previous study related to the impact of high-quality listening in facilitating self-insight and openness to change, resulting in a change of attitude<sup>16</sup>.

Participants in Deep Listening training are invited to become more self-aware by listening to themselves first, in preparation for a difficult conversation. This self-listening helps participants surface and begin the journey of coming to terms with their own internal shadows. These negative emotions and behaviours often lie concealed just beneath the surface masked by our more proper selves – unexplored territory to most of us, as we bury the qualities that don't fit our self-image.<sup>17</sup> These shadows are triggered when we try to listen to someone whose ideas challenge us fundamentally, when flames of emotion consume us, leaping up from our subconscious basement, argues author and psychoanalyst Loch Kelly<sup>18</sup>. Becoming aware of our shadows gives us options to behave differently in difficult conversations, as illustrated by the following reflection from a Deep Listening training participant:

*I have always been a controlling person with the attitude to lead a team, even interrupt them without meaning to. This experience taught me to surrender, to take a step back and listen more, wait more, instead of being a control freak. It was a precious experience for me. I really appreciate every moment and every connection I made with people.*

**Female participant from Iran, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training**

The possibility of greater self-awareness and openness assumes a particular resonance in a country such as Latvia, where distrust between Russian and Latvian speakers has increased since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The following thoughts from a Russian-speaking Latvian participant suggest that the experience of Deep Listening training and an encounter across difference, led to her to changing her attitude, reframing her identity – shifting from an emphasis on her Russian culture to one which placed her family in a larger Latvian nation:

*Previously I felt that Russian is an important language and Latvian shouldn't be the main language – after all, language is about tradition and culture. After Deeply Listening to someone with a different perspective I now understand why my daughter should learn in Latvian. She is the future of this country.*

**Female Participant in Daugavpils Latvia, British Council Deep Listening training**

In a separate project in 2021, The British Council and I delivered Deep Listening training to 150 Lebanese citizens (Lebanese project) and evidenced similar results. Before this training, 74% of participants felt confident to talk to someone with a different opinion. Immediately after the training, 97% felt confident to have these encounters. One year later, 90% of those returning the

evaluation survey still expressed confidence.

A year after the Lebanese project, Hawraa Ibrahim Ghandour, a Lebanese Muslim participant with a traditional upbringing, reflected upon the impact of learning how to Deeply Listen on what she now views as her previous fanaticism and intolerance.

*If a Muslim woman who wore the veil decided to unveil, I would consider that she is a bad person and didn't deserve to be my friend. If I met her, I would bully her. I used to be against Syrian refugees in Lebanon, thinking of Syrians here as not taking care of their hygiene and not living a proper Lebanese life.*

Today, Hawraa works one afternoon a week at a school for Syrian refugees and has developed a close friendship with a refugee nurse.

*In the past, maybe I did not communicate effectively with those people before, or maybe I was just listening to the media which plays a role in stigmatising people. If we listen to each other, we find we have many commonalities – human feelings that we share.*

When people learn how to Deeply Listen, and recognise that understanding a different perspective doesn't threaten their own core beliefs, they are far more able to accept a different perspective – whether or not they agree. In addition, having the experience of

applying the Deep Listening approach to a conversation with someone else about a controversial topic over which the speaker and listener disagree, not only provides the opportunity for new thinking about the topic under discussion, but also encourages a higher order learning, about the benefits of entering into a dialogue about any controversial topic with an open mind:

*After the debate on the subject we didn't agree on, I felt the need to reassess what happened in my life that made my opinions what they are. I never asked myself nor I have been asked what led to me having the opinions I have, and asking this question puts things into new perspective I very much want to discover.*

*Female participant from Poland, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

## Deep Listening can contribute towards sustaining peace by addressing various aspects of fragility.

### Societal Fragility

A primary way Deep Listening can contribute to an integrated and cohesive society is by countering **societal fragility** that 'exacerbates economic, political, and social exclusions and contributes to grievances among marginalised groups'<sup>19</sup> If this fragility is not addressed, political and security fragility can follow. A Deep Listening approach embodies core democratic values of inclusivity with a recognition of political pluralism, the right of communities to hold different ideas while peacefully co-existing.

*'I have a very controversial perspective on a lot of topics, and I feel dismissed outright. Being listened to not only made me feel more expressive and reduced my tendencies for sarcasm, but it also made me more receptive to listening to the perspective of others'*

*Male participant from Guyana, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*It was great to deeply listen and hear other points of view that you don't agree with. In the very first*

*instance I was thinking that they don't have points, or they are just wrong; however, it's **when I listen to their point of view I can see their perspectives in a way I was even not aware of before. This doesn't mean I agree with them totally or I changed my stance about the subject but simply understanding what works or fits me don't work for them or fit. It's more like accepting them.***

*Male participant from Somalia, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

Acceptance of others in their full humanity, even if they hold beliefs that we may find abhorrent, is a significant step. Building on the framework of the report *Cultural relations – Key approaches in fragile contexts*<sup>20</sup> we can argue that Deep Listening can act as a catalyst for embodying an inclusive approach to development which authentically engages with the rights, identities and expression of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, and thus critical for establishing strong cultural relations, especially in less socially cohesive states.

Another application of the Deep Listening approach to tackle fragility is in the realm of culture, story creation and storytelling. Deep Listening can be a powerful approach to deploy in the creation of alternative, deeper, more authentic and even joint narratives about history and society, with the contributions of a diverse set of cultural actors and broader civil society.

### Political fragility

With regards to **political fragility**, Deep Listening can support civil society organisations that are committed to fostering democracy and human rights by giving these actors the skills to lead more effectively. Academic research <sup>21</sup> demonstrates that good listeners are more effective leaders, communicating better with those around them, improving their colleagues' self-knowledge and creativity, and catalysing more effective relationships based upon real understanding and trust. The Deep Listening approach encourages leaders to include input and contributions from a far more diverse set of stakeholders, both within their teams and external to their organisations:

*Deep listening has made me realise how important this skill is for dealing with everything from challenging projects, misunderstandings, and conflicts among colleagues to office politics. This course is vital for leaders who typically are reluctant*

*to change their points of view or accept others as equals.*

*Female participant from Spain, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

### Environmental fragility

**Environmental Fragility** is becoming increasingly important, with climate change leading to forced migration, internal and international refugees and resource depletion. Research<sup>22</sup> is also evidencing that the climate crisis and cascading risks associated with it are also furthering inequality and polarisation, as well as being caused by them. Many climate debates are framed as black and white, pitting those who are responsible for substantial contributions to greenhouse gasses and who support prioritising economic growth over pro-environmental activities in sharp opposition to the communities challenged by the consequences of climate change and climate activists. Through training people to be aware of their judgements, and temporarily putting these aside so that they can seek to genuinely understand a different perspective, both climate activists and those reluctant to engage in the need to make changes necessary for a healthier planet can learn to understand each other better – an important step in building consensus on how to move forward and make the necessary transformation needed, with more effective buy in.

## Polarisation

All types of fragility are exacerbated by polarisation.

A poll <sup>23</sup> published in January 2023 by the global communications firm Edelman indicates that across the globe the social fabric of countries is weakening and divisions are deepening. 53% of the 32,000 citizens polled across 28 countries said that their countries are more divided than in the past. When respondents reflected upon their attitude towards someone who disagreed with their point of view, only 30% of people would help those they disagreed with if the others were in need, 20% would be willing to live in the same neighbourhood, and 20% would be willing to have them as a co-worker.

“In our public debates, it seems that we no longer just disagree. We reject each other’s premises and doubt each other’s motives. We question each other’s character. We block our ears to diverse perspectives” argues a report about the USA <sup>24</sup> from More in Common, an NGO with the ambition to build more united, inclusive and resilient societies. The NGO’s characterisation of what’s happening in the USA is common to many other nations. Indeed, polarisation reflects and contributes to exacerbating

fragility in the most vulnerable states, but also fulfils a similar function in less vulnerable but extremely polarised societies<sup>25</sup>, such as Argentina, Colombia, South Africa, Sweden and the USA.

There are two primary types<sup>26</sup> of polarisation:

**Affective polarisation:** when individuals begin to segregate themselves socially and to distrust and dislike people from the opposing side, irrespective of whether they disagree on matters of policy.

**Ideological or issue Polarisation:** when individuals are divided between one or more policy positions or issues. Some also argue that to be meaningfully polarising, issues need to be important to a large section of the public, not just a minority of people with strongly held views.

Deep Listening has the power to tackle both types of polarisation but in particular *affective polarisation*, a dangerous brew permeating many societies and threatening democracy. Our tolerance for an opposition, our trust with those who think differently and our appetite to encounter and engage with people who we perceive as different to ourselves are all contributing factors to a state or

region's cohesion through helping promote strong cultural relations, mutual understanding and sustainable dialogue.

### Drivers of polarisation

The human brain gathers coarse, gist information based on what we see, hear, or even smell from another person, and automatically uses this information to predict what will come next, including what the person may or may not say, according to Harvard Medical School neuroscientist Kestutis Kveraga.<sup>27</sup> These quick judgements, which we are mostly not conscious of, can sort those we encounter into groups – an in group and an out group.

Authors of *'The Power of Us'*<sup>28</sup>, neuroscience professor Jay Van Bavel and psychologist Dominic J Packer argue that when relations between groups harden and people start to see their interests as fundamentally opposed to the other group's interests, the natural positive emotions and empathy they feel toward their own groups can shift in a dangerous direction.

"We start to think that we are not only good but that we're inherently good. And if that's true, then they must be intrinsically bad and should be opposed at all costs".

When we don't listen or understand a member of an outgroup, we no longer see the other as human

beings but as threats, so we use every means possible to avoid authentic encounters where we may become vulnerable.

"We see enemies within and without. We begin to believe that when it comes to pursuing our groups' interests, any means justifies the ends."

As coach Nancy Kline contends, in such a scenario, listening with interest to someone with extremely opposing views feels like risking personal annihilation, as we subconsciously believe:

*Who I am is what I believe.*

*I am entirely right and you are entirely wrong.*

*If I become interested in your view, I will have to adopt your values, and so I will stop being me;*

*I will be an inferior person.*<sup>29</sup>

Deep Listening mitigates this risk, as it provides a powerful framework granting the listener a permission to listen to and aim to better understand the roots of opposing views, with the understanding that listening does not entail taking on this alternative perspective. This internal transformation, which impacts both speaker and listener, relies upon a number of mechanisms:

## Mechanisms by which Deep Listening can tackle polarisation:

### Creating a place of safety and acceptance

A Deep Listener learns to create a place of safety for the speaker, and ultimately for themselves. Through putting aside their judgements and practising open-hearted empathy, the listener encourages the speaker to feel free to express attitudes and experiences without the speaker feeling vulnerable, exposed or judged, enabling a genuine connection of understanding even across significant divides. These two Deep Listening participants found the experience of safety to be transformational:

*I think the biggest part of the experience for myself was the ability to feel safe within my environment. As soon as I felt safe conversing with my partner, the tension, expectations and anxiety fell away and I can be truly curious about the other individual's point of view. I feel that being in an open and inviting environment allows for more abstract and controversial discussions without the negative feelings that are normally associated with difficult conversations. It was really refreshing listening to someone without wanting to rebut the argument straight away as well as being listened to.*

*Female participant from South Africa, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*Humility and empathy is such a beautiful combination that brings safety and genuineness to the conversation that allows for all sorts of breakthroughs and heals to take place between two people.*

*Female participant from Belize in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

### Creating an I-thou encounter

This deeper connection between speaker and listener is possible given a new type of relationship which is created between listener and speaker. The late philosopher, Martin Buber, distinguished between:

**I-it encounters**, these are contractual, we each want something from the other, so we treat them as an instrument or an object with

**I-thou encounters** where we temporarily surrender ourselves in order to step into a new space co-created by us and the person with whom we are speaking. These relationships are transformational for us both.

To transform an 'I-it' dialogue to a far more meaningful 'I-thou' encounter, Buber suggests that we need to stand alongside the other person and let go of any desire to extract value from them.

### I-thou encounters are ends in themselves

*Deep Listening makes you have the feeling of being able to connect with somebody's soul as they speak*

*Male participant from Kenya, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*My colleague shared how her uncle had a heart attack due to a high meat and fat content diet. I instantly softened. Felt almost out of my body. I was caught off guard. **I saw her as a human being with a story rather than someone to win an argument with.***

*Female participant from South Africa, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

### Creating openness and willingness to embrace the new

The University of Reading research on the *Crossing Divides Across The Globe* project demonstrates the presence of underlying psychological mechanisms driving a transformational impact on the participants. Those participants who had a crossing divides conversation

after learning how to Deeply Listen, compared to the control group who had a similar conversation without the benefit of such training, felt more connected to the person they were speaking with, safer to express themselves, learned something new about themselves, embraced a new way of thinking and felt more confident to make changes in themselves.<sup>30</sup> These findings are consistent with previous, nascent findings on listening. However, in this study unlike previous studies, there was no significant difference between the trained and controlled group when it came to feeling understood.

The potential of Deep Listening to enable meaningful encounters in a polarised context is illustrated by the story of Ana Luiza Ribeiro, a 26-year-old lawyer working on social projects from Sao Paulo, Brazil, who was a participant in the *Crossing Divides Across The Globe* Deep Listening training. Ana Luiza lives with her mother and stepfather, Manoel, an engineer:

*"My stepdad and I, we are really similar in lots of ways, but when it comes to politics we are totally opposite. We would row about climate change and sexual orientation, or he would defend our (former) President Bolsonaro. We would get mad – like really mad. The mood was horrifying. No one was listening."*

After Ana Luiza took part in the Deep Listening training, Ribeiro taught her stepfather what she had learned. They both agreed to be present in open-hearted awareness, stay curious, not interrupt and reflect back the very heart of the other's thinking. Hearing the other's story fully, challenged their belief that there was only one way to look at the world.

*"Nowadays, when we are talking about something we disagree on, Manoel raises his finger waiting for his turn to talk. Yesterday we talked about the elections – we both really listened, and it went ok. I now understand he sees things through an economic point of view, he lived through the dictatorship before the 80s, and I see things through a human rights perspective, but I now understand how he gets to his conclusions. We aren't trying to convince each other anymore. It's been a big journey – for both of us"*

Listening to someone who thinks differently, while embracing authentic curiosity, empathy and humility, can feel hugely risky. The listener may be altered in some way by this encounter; they may end up changing their minds. But making themselves vulnerable in this way is precisely what gives Deep Listening its potency and allows the speaker to be honest and vulnerable themselves.

To investigate the neurological basis for the profound connection that can be created between speaker and listener, Uri Hasson, a Professor at the Princeton Neuroscience Institute, used an fMRI scanner to peer inside the minds of a speaker and listener during an exchange. Soon, the patterns of the listener's brain waves started to resemble the speaker's brain or 'couple' with the speaker's waves. The more fully the listener understood the story, the stronger the resemblance.<sup>31</sup>



## Deep Listening across divides of power

The evidence that has emerged from the analysis of the Deep Listening projects builds upon research conducted by the peace and conflict neuroscientist Emile Bruneau who designed interventions that would help opposing groups bridge the imagined gulf between them by understanding that they were not as far apart as they believed. He was especially interested in how to create meaningful engagements across power divides.

Bruneau carried out research<sup>32</sup> in Arizona evidencing how being listened to impacts those who have more power (white Americans in Arizona) and those with less (Mexican immigrants in Arizona). In one experiment, the Mexican immigrants showed greater positive attitude change towards White Arizonans after they had a chance to give their perspective, to feel heard. For White Arizonans, those with more power, the impact of listening to their Hispanic neighbours was more transformational. Bruneau also carried out similar research between Israelis and Palestinians. Such experiments showcased the transformative power to create a greater openness and positive regards towards the other side, when those with more power do the listening and those with less power have an opportunity to voice their thoughts and feelings.

Bruneau argued that the reason the impact differs between these two groups lies in the key psychological difference between dominant and non-dominant groups: The latter often feels disempowered, objectified and voiceless – sentiments which are dialled down through the powerful experience of being truly heard by someone from the dominant group. This research suggests that it is especially important that the dominant group listens to those with less power. Bruneau adds that when there is a significant power divide, letting the party with less power speak first can also be impactful.

In addition, as Deep Listening surfaces more authentic insights from the speaker rather than superficial sound bites, the approach can provide the space to gather more insightful contributions from less powerful minority communities. These insights can be incorporated into holistic policies which cater to the needs of all sections of society – a mechanism to create social cohesion.

Creating the space for those with less power to speak is not the same as delivering on their needs but is an important step to establishing what their needs are.

## The potential of Deep Listening to reduce extreme attitudes

High quality listening can also reduce the levels of extreme perspectives that the speaker may harbour. Research<sup>33</sup> conducted by Guy Itzchakov, Avraham Kluger and Dotan Castro provides evidence that when people feel truly listened to, they feel less defensive and psychologically safer and so become more open to seeing both sides of an argument. The academics from Universities of Jerusalem and Haifa conducted a series of investigations. In one study, undergraduates read a short newspaper article about an Israeli court decision to return the bodies of Palestinians who committed a suicide attack to their families—a highly contentious subject in Israel. Half the students were paired with a high-quality listener, the other half paired with an inexperienced listener.

Across all their studies, Itzchakov, Kluger and Castro found high quality listening reduced the speakers' social anxiety, so the speakers became less defensive, and their attitudes became more complex and less extreme, whether the subject was the Palestinian Israeli conflict, their ability to become managers in the future,

taxing junk food, or euthanasia. Moreover, in some studies, the research demonstrated that speakers who were listened to felt a lower urge to convince the listeners of their position and did not feel especially torn about holding an attitude that was ambivalent.

The pioneering psychologist Carl Jung described the impact experiencing truly curious non-judgemental empathetic listening can have on us: (We) “become more emotionally mature, more open to their experiences, less defensive, more democratic and less authoritarian”<sup>34</sup>. This new openness can also extend to considering the speaker's ideas, which previously the listener may have disregarded, as exemplified by this Deep Listening participant:

*“During the session, I realised when I'm passionate about something, how eager I am to share my thoughts and relay my opinion. However, the Deep Listening skills gave me the chance to embrace silence and a new perspective. The pause in time and reflection of thoughts helped me sit with the alternative perspective and better understand that there is no one way of looking at something.*

*There are no absolutes. I am so appreciative of an opposing view because it allowed me to reconsider my own opinions and my reasoning for these opinions. Deep Listening allowed me to create an atmosphere of inclusivity, trust and positive discourse.”*

**Female participant from Barbados in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training**

## Differences across gender

Given widely held perceptions that men and women listen differently, and significant power differentials between men and women in almost every country, it is worthwhile considering the question of gender. There is substantial historical literature illuminating differences between the way that men and women listen. Traditionally, “Women were the purveyors of emotions, men the arbiters of fact. One group was expected to listen; the other, to speak”<sup>35</sup>. In the last two decades, researchers began to move from an emphasis on biological differences to a focus on the way that cultural expectations and power shape the different ways that women and men relate to listening.

Training in Deep Listening has the potential to shift this power balance by providing a clear structure for listening and speaking: The dialogue practices during the training follow a very strict format: the participants are instructed to listen or speak for a period of time before swapping roles. This format reduces the possibility that speaking and listening role are gender-defined. As the training as a whole emphasises the powerful impact of listening, the experience may also change its perception among men.

Prior to taking part in the Crossing Divides around the Globe Deep Listening programme, men were significantly more confident than women in taking part in a conversation with someone with a different opinion.<sup>36</sup> Following the training, both men and women experienced similar improvements in their confidence in holding such conversations<sup>37</sup>. A similar pattern was also observed in the Lebanon project data – with men on average more confident than women in holding conversations with someone with a different opinion prior to the training, and both men and women experiencing improvements.

In all the Deep Listening training that I have conducted, it is apparent that women are more attracted to sign up than men. For the *Crossing Divides around The Globe* project, two thirds of the eligible participants were female. In Latvia, with far smaller number of participants, the proportion of women was far higher and one of the training sessions attracted an exclusively female group of participants. Therefore, one of the challenges for Deep Listening as an approach is promoting it in a way that overcomes gender norms around listening so that more men are motivated to participate, and experience the impact on their lives.



## Putting Deep Listening into practice

After the Crossing Divides Around The Globe training, 99.3% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they planned to use the training in their personal or professional life.

*As a psychologist and ER nurse, this training was a beautiful and positive addition to my professional knowledge. I have learned new ways to be better at my job just by listening better to my clients*

*Male participant from Ghana, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*I work in a Women Empowerment organization. I intend to use this training to understand the needs of the women I work with.*

*Female participant from India, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

Three months later, 88% of the Crossing Divides Around The Globe respondents still agreed or strongly agreed that they would use the training in their personal or professional lives. Following the training, they shared the ways that they are using or intending to use this approach:

*My interest in Deep Listening has piqued which has motivated me to read materials and watch videos on how to engage in quality and sincere dialogues which are not purely transactional. I have also applied Deep Listening techniques in my interactions, interviews and psychotherapy sessions with victims of child trafficking after rescue operations and during their rehabilitation.*

*Male participant from Ghana, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*Since I attended the Deep listening training, I realised that people feel more able to open up and talk to me – their trust means everything to me! This tool has made me feel that I finally can fit and belong. I now have a purpose - to be able to practice compassion for myself and others as well. Even my self-talk has become more compassionate - which is very much needed, as I grew up in a strict family and this rigidness caused a lot of pain to me and those around me. I quit my job to look for opportunities where I can be more useful to society with my skills and experiences. I'm now gravitating towards kids, and how to make their childhood more emotionally secure.*

*Female participant from Hungary, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*I'm an economics lecturer and researcher at the University of Benghazi. Since we finished the training, I started diving deeper and deeper and doing my best to make Deep Listening an essential part of my being. I submitted a proposal to my department leader to conduct sessions on Deep Listening for our students and she welcomed the idea with widely opened arms.*

*Male participant from Libya, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*





# Opportunities and challenges of scaling and cascading the Deep Listening approach

The potential for scaling Deep Listening training is evidenced by the positive Net Promoter Scores that the training consistently achieves, the measure used globally across organisations to measure customer experience and predict future growth by asking how likely participants are to recommend a product or experience to a friend or colleague. In Daugavpils, Latvia, a large town near the Russian border, the Net Promoter Score following the six-hour training was 9.4/10, and 7.7/10 among participants in the capital Riga, who experienced a more limited four hours of training. The far larger Crossing Divides Across The Globe six hours Deep Listening training achieved a Net Promoter score of 9.1/10. Three months later, the global Net Promoter Score was 9.3/10, pointing to a long-lasting perception of value and desire to share the experience among others.

As Deep Listening is fundamental to creating strong cultural relations and peacebuilding, there is a significant opportunity to implement this approach both as a stand-alone in-depth training to provide the skills and confidence to catalyse other

cultural relations and peace-building activities, and also embedded within a variety of other British Council activity. Deep Listening can enhance a multiplicity of British Council programmes in arts, non-formal education as well as teaching, including English language teaching.

Teaching teachers how to Deeply Listen so they can listen to colleagues and share the learning with their students is not only an effective way to scale the approach but also to reach young people whose opinions about those who are different are in a state of extreme flux. Although in the global training there was no special discussion of the role of Deep Listening in the classroom, a number of teachers and educators attended the workshops, and three months later reflected upon how they were sharing or planning to share the approach:

*I have already agreed to share the training at my school with my colleagues (I'm a high school teacher) and I want to do it with my fellow English teachers in my county. I'll try to recreate the training from my notes and hopefully it makes a great impact like it did on me. :)*

*Gender non-conforming participant from Croatia, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*As I am an educator, I took my colleagues to a special location for a Deep Listening workshop, where I delivered a session to all the leaders of my academy. The session was very productive and went well with interaction and with the Deep Listening demonstration, and I am closely monitoring the behavioural shift of all the educators involved.*

*Male participant from Nepal, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

*I have shared the techniques with my colleague who is creating a module for up-and-coming political leaders.*

*Female participant from Australia, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

The impact of Deep Listening in polarised contexts could be more powerful if participants from two communities on opposite sides of a chasm were trained together, so they could build trust over time and practice with each other within a safe space. A number of participants in the British Council Riga training felt that the training would have benefited from a greater diversity of participants.

*Really a very useful training but I would have liked it to be longer and maybe even more challenging, putting people in teams who really*

*have conflicting opinions about something.*

*Riga participant in British Council Deep Listening training*

In March 2023, the British Council delivered Deep Listening training in Vilnius for English language teachers from Russian and Lithuanian schools both inside and outside the capital, in joint sessions. In a country where the Russian state's invasion of nearby Ukraine has resulted in relationships between these two communities becoming more charged, this project has provided an opportunity for both communities to practice this approach with those from the other language community, and to cascade the training in their classrooms. The impact of this project will be determined after the publication of this essay.

One of the challenges of creating an even more significant impact with the Deep Listening approach is attracting adult participants who are neither interested in learning how to listen nor in engaging with others who hold different beliefs. It may not be possible to attract participants with the most extreme views, who pose the greatest risk to social cohesion and are far less likely to have exposure to alternative narratives. However, More in Common<sup>38</sup> has identified the existence of another group, people who are at risk of adopting extreme views, because they feel insecure and threatened, or

disrespected and shamed. This latter group could play a powerful role in furthering cultural relations if they embraced a Deep Listening approach.

In marketing such training, more emphasis could be placed upon Deep Listening as an essential skill to succeed in the workplace and with personal relationships. In addition, by incorporating this training alongside other training with widely perceived personal benefits, such as courses in English language or employment skills, a wider group of people would benefit from the approach.

Deep Listening could be normalised as a critical leadership skill. Including Deep Listening courses as part of high calibre MBA degrees could help to increase the perception of listening as an aspirational skill and frame the skill of Deep Listening as being equally valuable to both men and women. However, given the discrepancies between male and female participation in the training and gendered power gaps in many countries, new strategies need to be generated to attract men and in particular powerful men to the training.

In addition, given the power of social media to create and strengthen perceptions of others, especially in polarised societies where there are fewer face to face encounters across divides, Deep Listening training could include an opportunity for

participants to listen to each other in pairs or small groups as they reflect upon their social media behaviour. A before and after evaluation of published social media could be conducted not only into whether participants decreased their creation of polarising social media posts but also if they decreased their liking or sharing of such posts. Although social media wasn't specifically mentioned in the global training, in the final evaluation, 70% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the training changed the way they will communicate with others on social media. Three months later, one participant spontaneously reflected:

*Reading people's opinions in social media made me think of Deep Listening more. It made me reassess my opinions of the topic too. I realised more things afterwards, thus, the opinions of others made my perspective more reasonable or detailed.*

*Female participant from Philippines, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*

Though the implementation of a Deep Listening approach is still in its early stages, this essay evidences that learning how to Deeply Listen can have a profound impact on an individual's confidence to embark on an encounter and to build the self-awareness and openness which allows them to reach a greater understanding of another person,

even if the other's background, perspectives or beliefs may feel very different to their own. More research needs to be conducted, particularly in polarised contexts. However, accepting the rights of others to hold alternative perspectives can pave the way to creating authentic dialogues and building bridges – all fundamental to establishing more resilient societies, able to absorb shocks in a world with more wicked and fast changing challenges. We will conclude with the reflections of a Crossing Divides Around The Globe participant:

*My takeaway from this training is that we can't be intolerant towards intolerance. I work in peacebuilding and (previously) I lacked empathy for people's radical views. Emily helped me understand that we cannot have selective empathy and we cannot reduce people to symbols of ideologies. If someone lacks empathy, we still need to have empathy for them.*

*Female participant from Pakistan, in Global British Council BBC Deep Listening training*



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<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-series/cultural-relations>

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