

# New Study Finds Storytelling Reduces Political Polarization

*Controlled study of 380 high school students finds exchanging stories reduces affective polarization and promotes empathy.*

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-- A groundbreaking new study from the University of Oxford and The Ohio State University reveals compelling evidence that storytelling reduces polarization and measurably strengthens emotional connection, active citizenship and social cohesion among high school students.

The longitudinal, controlled study tested the efficacy of a storytelling intervention in five diverse Kentucky school districts, in partnership with global nonprofit organization Narrative 4, which uses storytelling to promote social change. The study compared the experiences and perspectives of students who took part in this storytelling intervention to peers in a control group.

"In these times, when so much seems to be about difference and isolation, it is good to affirm that personal storytelling can bridge the distance between two people," said Narrative 4 Co-Founder and CEO Lisa Consiglio.

The study — Promoting Empathy, Connection, and Pro-Sociality in American High Schools: A Collaboration Between Academics and Practitioners — evaluated 380 10th- and 11th-grade students across a politically diverse spectrum during the 2024–2025 school year. Researchers Dr. Emily Kubin, University of Oxford, and Dr. Kurt Gray, Ohio State University, measured empathy, curiosity, perspective-taking, classroom climate and civic readiness before and after the young people shared stories with one another. Compared to students in the control group, the study found that students who participated in the storytelling intervention experienced the following key benefits:



The study found that storytelling reduces polarization and measurably strengthens emotional connection, active citizenship and social cohesion among high school students.

Intervention participants experienced reduced political polarization, with affective polarization toward political opponents decreasing by 4.37%.

Those who participated in the storytelling intervention gained empathy not only toward their classmates (+13.30%), but also toward people in their communities who are different from themselves (+10.62%).

Respect for others in class (+5.40%) and people students disagree with (+7.24%) also increased.

Participants who engaged in Narrative 4 programming (as compared to those who did not) experienced an increase in perspective-taking, i.e. the act of perceiving a situation from a different point of view, such as that of another person. Perspective-taking toward classmates increased by 6.35%, while perspective-taking toward people different from themselves increased by 6.78%. The research also showed gains in active listening and curiosity in the classroom, as well as increased willingness to become involved in civic engagement and engage with diverse perspectives (+8.99%).

The intervention, Narrative 4's Story Exchange methodology, has been used in over 30 countries worldwide, with more than one million stories shared to date. The Story Exchange is a structured group workshop in which participants prepare a story about a significant personal experience and share this story with a partner. Participants then retell their partner's story to the group in the first person, as if it were their own.

Dr. Emily Kubin, University of Oxford, commented: "At a time when polarization is rising, Narrative 4 programming shows promise as a tool to decrease division in diverse classrooms and communities. Our research points to the intervention's promise for other high schools across the United States and beyond."

Dr. Kurt Gray, Ohio State University, added: "We find storytelling-based interventions highly successful in promoting empathy, curiosity, and perspective-taking. This program also promotes pro-sociality by increasing civic engagement, respect for others and even reducing affective polarization."



Dr. Emily Kubin from the University of Oxford conducted the research with Dr Kurt Gray.

“Across the globe, and particularly in American high schools, young people are facing a crisis of connection,” said Narrative 4’s Consiglio. “Our method is that you tell my story, and I tell yours, then together we can cross the divides. It builds compassion, respect and civic connection. We don’t have to agree with one another, but we absolutely must try to understand one another. In the end, the shortest distance between us is a story.”

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## [MEDIA ASSETS](#)

A selection of images can be found [here](#).

## ABOUT THE STUDY

[Link to the research.](#)

[https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/tghwp\\_v1](https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/tghwp_v1)

## ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Emily Kubin is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Oxford who studies the role of narratives (especially related to victimhood) and the media in driving political conflict. Her research also focuses on developing interventions that reduce polarization.

Dr. Kurt Gray is a Professor and Endowed Chair in Social Psychology at The Ohio State University. He researches how morality influences many aspects of our lives including politics, religion and artificial intelligence.

## ABOUT NARRATIVE 4

Narrative 4 is a not-for-profit with a mission to equip young people to harness the power of stories to drive change in their communities. Founded by artists, educators and students, the organization is established in 12 countries across Africa, Europe and North America, with over a million stories shared to date. To learn more, visit: <https://narrative4.com/>

## CONTACT

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Dr. Emily Kubin, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Oxford, and Lee Keylock, Vice President of Global Impact, are both available for an interview.

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