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Designing for Discussion

The Development of a Methodology to Enable Inter-Faith Dialogue: The Birmingham Conversations. Sian Nicholas

A synopsis of the methodology developed through the Birmingham Conversations convened by The Right Revd David Urquhart, The Bishop of Birmingham



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Introduction

One approach to increasing understanding and communication between different groups has been the use of inter-group dialogue¹. Although this carries with it conceptual problems over the definition of 'group' and the measurement of 'increased understanding and communication' it remains a tool that is used by disparate groups to engage on contentious or problematic issues. According to Schirch and Camp:

Dialogue is a communication process that aims to build relationships between people as they share experiences, ideas and information about a common concern. It also aims to help groups take in more information and perspectives than they previously had as they attempt to forge a new and broader understanding of a situation.²

The purpose of dialogue is to 'listen for understanding'³ and is meant to engage the intellect, emotions and spirit⁴ and in so doing enable a change of thinking, feeling and level of connectedness with other participants. Research indicates that attitudinal changes can take place when people interact with a different cultural setting⁵ although this is not necessarily always the case. Smock outlines a number of scenarios in which inter-religious dialogue has been used including amongst grassroots participants although none of them are specifically for the purpose of enabling listening and understanding for its own sake, but as means by which to contribute to a peacebuilding process.⁶ In addition most inter-religious dialogues focus on religious scriptures and doctrine. In contrast the Birmingham Conversations focus upon the 'lived-faith' experience of the participants: that is how their religious belief is expressed on a daily basis within their own cultural contexts⁷.

This paper sets out the process of developing a model of inter-religious dialogue to enable an opportunity to discuss contentious issues to provide a greater understanding of concerns, needs and hopes of members of different faith communities.

Rationale

In 2014 allegations were made that that schools were being run by 'hard-line' Muslims seeking to import their views into the classroom⁸. Further allegations were made and the resultant investigation into the Islamization of schools was termed 'Trojan Horse'. As a result 6 Birmingham schools were placed under special measures by OFSTED⁹ and nine other

¹ Atkinson, M. Intergroup Dialogue – A Theoretical Positioning, *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, 1,1,2013, p63

² Schirch L., and Camp D., *Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*. Intercourse: Good Books 2007, p6

³ Ibid.

⁴ Schirch L., and Camp D., *Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*. Intercourse: Good Books 2007, p13

⁵ Abu-Nimer, M., *Conflict Resolution, Culture, and Religion: Toward a Training Model of interreligious peacebuilding*, *Journal of Peace Research* 2001; 38; 685

⁶ Smock, D., *What Works? Evaluating Inter-faith dialogue programs*, Special Report 123, Washington: USIP 2004

⁷ Abu-Nimer, M., *Conflict Resolution, Culture and Religion*

⁸ Birmingham Muslim MP Khalid Mahmood says city schools are being targeted by Islamic Fundamentalists, *Birmingham News*, 1 April 2014

⁹ Office for Standards of Education

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schools were marked as 'requiring improvement in leadership and management'.¹⁰ Ultimately only one school demonstrated any incidences of radicalisation or extremism.¹¹

Britain seeks to be a multi-cultural society, in which 'several distinct ethnic, religious, and cultural groups attempt to find ways of preserving their identities and maintaining their lifestyles.'¹² However, this construct of pluralist living appears to be under threat by these allegations and the response to them.

The Bishop of Birmingham, the Right Revd David Urquhart, believed that the 'Trojan Horse' issue had brought into sharp relief the disparate and potentially contentious viewpoints around the area of education, but believed that these areas of contention were 'not limited to schools or to one community'.¹³ At the same time it was felt that there was no space where these issues regarding the 'lived faith' of people in Birmingham could be discussed, and where difficult conversations around these topics could take place. To this end a group was convened to seek to develop a methodology to enable conversations between people of different faith backgrounds to discuss contentious issues around their 'lived faith' experience in a 'Post-Trojan Horse' Birmingham context. The group sought to establish definitions for the purpose of the discussions, and they were coined the 'Birmingham Conversations'.

The emphasis in the conversations was upon 'lived faith' in which the focus was upon the daily practice or expression of faith which is most personal and intimate to that individual,¹⁴ rather than a theological or doctrinal approach to a subject. In this way it was hoped that participants would be able to contribute at a personal level rather than feeling they were representing an institution or faith tradition.

Process Development

The purpose of the conversations was at this point not to find resolution or consensus on any issues, but to act as evaluative research, whereby participants actively fed into the process of conversation development. This type of research is not as participatory as action research in that the participants are not designing the outcome of the sessions themselves, but enables user feedback to be included in the design of the methodology which steers the sessions. Programme evaluation approaches seek to gain information from the participants on how they experience the dialogue and use this feedback in the dialogue design.¹⁵ Where those designing the process are actively interested in researching the process, the process can evolve into action research where no 'distancing' methods are involved and the research is aimed at bringing about social change.¹⁶ However, as the social change is limited to the

¹⁰ Trojan Horse: Six schools 'to be placed in special measures' by Ofsted, Birmingham News, 20 April 2014

¹¹ MPs mark down OFSTED on response to Trojan Horse allegations, The Guardian, 17 March 2015

¹² Bartoszewicz, M. G., Muslims and the Educational System in Great Britain: a Trojan Horse or a Parade Pony?, in *The future of Education and Society through the eyes of social researchers*, ed. A. Odrowaz-Coates and M. Kwiatkowskiego, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2014, p100

¹³ Definition of terms for Birmingham Conversations, October 2014

¹⁴ Definition of terms for Birmingham Conversations, October 2014

¹⁵ Hurtado, S., *Research and Evaluation on Intergroup Dialogue*, Eds. Schoem, D., and Hurtado, S., Intergroup Dialogue, Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace, Michigan: Michigan University Press 2001, p31

¹⁶ Ibid

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development of the process, rather than a substantive change in the communities of the participants then this limits the scope of participatory action research.

The steering group was initially comprised of four people who were from a Christian tradition, three of which were from an Anglican tradition, in most part because these were the resources that the Bishop of Birmingham had available to him. However, it was agreed at the first joint meeting that following the first 'conversation' the steering committee would seek to co-opt participants of the 'conversation' to increase diversity on the steering committee. Consequently at the first dialogue session a general invitation was issued to participants and a Buddhist, a Muslim and two Christians, one of which was from a different tradition, were co-opted onto the steering committee. The role of these members was to gather as much feedback as possible from participants, alongside the 'formal' evaluators and to discuss this at the steering committee.

Abu-Nimer states that in inter-religious dialogue it is helpful to have symmetry in selection of participants, facilitation, and structure and process of encounter.¹⁷ Due to the presence of the Bishop of Birmingham in the conversations it was not possible to have complete symmetry between religious leaders attending the conversations. However, the Bishop sought to contribute from a 'lived-faith' perspective rather than as a leader within the Anglican Church, which to a large extent negated this lack of symmetry. Birmingham itself is a 'super-diverse' city¹⁸ which did mean that it was possible to invite a group of people from a broad cross section of religious expression, both across faith traditions and within faith traditions. The steering committee sought to gain symmetry in facilitation and structure through the co-opting of participants from the group onto the steering committee, although the main facilitation of meetings was conducted by the author.

Participant selection was limited to 24 active participants, not including facilitator and evaluators, which enabled many faith traditions to be represented. Potential participants were contacted directly by the Inter-faith director who knew them all personally, who discussed the process with them and asked them to contribute, as well as emails and written invitations. The initial conversation did demonstrate a representation of faiths and traditions from across the faith spectrum within Birmingham.

The conversations were timed at monthly intervals over a six month period. This was specifically planned to enable participants and steering committee to process each conversation, to hear feedback and to plan for the next meeting. It enabled the evaluators to conduct further conversations outside of the main conversation, and it was also to encourage those attending the conversation to share what had been discussed in the conversations according to 'Chatham House Rules'. It was hoped that in this way the impact of the conversations would be greater than just those present in the room.

The content of the conversations was directed by the participants and through further feedback to the steering committee. The initial conversation was aimed at highlighting issues that significantly impacted the ability of faith groups to express their 'lived faith' as they would wish to in a Birmingham context. In this the committee sought to allow the conversations to

¹⁷ Abu-Nimer, M., 2001, p696

¹⁸ Smith, A. 2014 Super-Diversity in Birmingham

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develop organically. However, during the design and set-up of the conversations it became clear that the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby would be part of the fourth conversation. Although this skewed the symmetry of those attending further for one session, it was felt that his presence would also act to motivate and encourage participants to attend. In addition the Archbishop sought to be an observer during the conversation, and was also asked to outline a practical model of reconciliation to those attending. This model of reconciliation was then used to inform the remaining conversations. The sessions particularly focussed on risk-taking as part of inter-religious dialogue for participants and resourcing reconciliation.

Challenges

Although participants had been drawn from a broad cross section of faith traditions and within faith traditions and commitments had been made to attend the six sessions, the reality was that other factors significantly impacted the ability of participants to attend the six 3-hour sessions across the six months. As a result although the first conversation had very good attendance of 24 people, this number dropped during the course of the conversations to between 15 and 20, with the notable exception of the conversation attended by the Archbishop. In addition, there was only one group member of dual heritage from Britain and the Caribbean with no other participants from the Caribbean, and on a few occasions no women from a Muslim background in attendance. These two factors significantly impacted discussions around 'identity and lived-faith'. Furthermore on occasion there were only two people of a Muslim background present, which limited the range and variety of Muslim perspective in the group. Although a number of people were present from a Hindu background there was limited representation from a Sikh perspective, and we only had Jewish representation on two occasions. In order to address the impact of low representation further invites were issued to potential new participants, although this had limited success.

The conversations relied heavily on the development of a 'safe space' whereby participants felt 'able to freely express the deeply held convictions of those within their faith traditions with each other'.¹⁹ In order to do this it was important to develop relationship between people in the group which meant that there had to be some focus on paired and group work to enable relationships to develop. This approach was frustrating for some who wanted to hear the opinions of the whole group in open discussion, although at that point a 'whole group' discussion for a period of time was more difficult for some to participate in. Furthermore time constraints were such that on occasion participants were cut short during conversations after difficult and contentious issues had been raised, which was frustrating for all concerned. The later sessions had fewer relationship building activities and focussed more on discussion and risk taking. However, it was also evident from feedback that participants found the process of sharing with those of other faith traditions difficult and painful at times, and that the initial hope that had been experienced at the outset felt flattened by the reality of non-compatibility of the views being expressed.

Although the Archbishop's presence was an encouragement to the process, it did however significantly skew the procedures during the 4th conversation. The usual 3 hour discussion period was effectively reduced to 2 hours, and at least 2 other 'uninvited' participants

¹⁹ Definition of terms, Oct 2014

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appeared to observe the proceedings. As this particular conversation was taking place in a public building and because the facilitator was uncertain who at that point was actually invited, this was difficult to monitor. Additionally the limited time for open conversation was frustrating for participants at this point.

These conversations were intentionally about 'lived-faith', and so it was important to meet in neutral territory for all faiths that was not a worship space. Birmingham University's multi-faith Chaplaincy centre kindly offered their facilities for the meeting to enable this. In order to recognise the spirituality of those attending a water feature and candles were used as a visual reminder that all the group participants had spiritual resources to draw on in the conversations. Each conversation ended with a brief period of silence and reflection.

Methodology Outline

The overall aim of the conversations was to develop 'A means of enabling difficult conversations around 'lived faith' in a 21st century city We began using Schirch and Camp's model of inter-group dialogues,²⁰ but it became clear very early on that this was too 'results focused' for the purposes of these conversations, so although some principles were retained, such as trying to end on a positive note, seeking consensus was not an aim of the conversation.

The evaluative research approach to the conversations meant that once we completed a conversation we reviewed this as a steering committee with input from the participants in order to assess where we were in the relationship v. risk-taking. The other ongoing feature of the methodology was the research component: evaluative research of the process itself, and seeking to understand the issues that significantly impact 'lived-faith' of the different faith traditions living in the Birmingham context. These components are represented in fig. 1, which represents the key constructs considered by the end of the Birmingham conversations.

The components show a greater proportion of relationship building activities in the initial stages of the conversations which were reduced as relationship developed. Risk-taking strategies were increased during the conversations as there was increasing relationship. The entire set of conversations and post-conversation activities comprised research into the ongoing experiences of people of faith in the Birmingham context, and were to inform further dialogic or inter-religious activities in the future.

The monthly conversations were broken down into four components which are represented in fig. 2.

Session Title: Overall Discussion Concept	Timings
Phase One: Establishing Norms and Common Intent	
Phase Two: Activities to build relationship, and to enable small group discussion	
Phase Three: Activities to explore commonalities, positive attitudes – larger group discussion	
Phase Four: Review and Evaluation – Pause for Reflection	

²⁰ Schirch and Camp, 2007, Chapter 5

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The timings of these activities varied from week to week depending upon our place in the process. Due to the regular late start of the conversations phase one was often shortened to allow the discussions to run to time. This meant that discussion around ground rules and use of them was often curtailed. It is essential to work on reinforcing ground rules with participants so that people feel able to challenge comments and this was negatively impacted by the squeezed time.

In Phase Two there was often a paired activity which might then be shared with the wider group to lead into a topic. These were often high energy discussions, though participants weren't always sure of the purpose of these discussions. Further time to explaining the process for the day would have been beneficial in Phase One for participants to engage with the purpose of the activities more directly.

Phase two also included the smaller group work. This was varied from week to week to seek to get the maximum number of people talking to each other. On occasions having offered the group a variety of topics to choose from some topics or discussions were jettisoned in favour of more popular discussion topics. Generally energy levels around small and focus groups are higher than in the large group discussion. As the conversations continued there was a change in this dynamic and energy levels increased in the open discussions.

Phase Three sought to look at commonalities and finish the conversation on a more positive note. This often proved to be more difficult and may have been a consequence of the conversations focussing on discussion rather than joint activities. As the weeks progressed the number of people contributing to the open discussion increased, and the length of these open discussions increased accordingly to allow greater space for all to contribute. Phase Four was specifically aimed at wrapping up the session, thinking about the next session and giving a brief time to pause and reflect before participants left the room and headed back out into their normal day.

The sessions were divided up into the following topics during the course of the conversations:

Session One: What impacts our ability to live our faith as we would want in the Birmingham context

Session Two: Children and young people: formal education and conflict between children and young people of different faiths.

Session Three: Identity and Lived Faith

Session Four: Globalisation

Session Five: Race and Identity, Evangelization and Conversion

Session Six: Class and Caste, Formal Education and lived faith.

During these sessions the format of the small groups was accommodated to try to allow people to listen to take part in as many conversations as possible. However, in the last session although groups were due to change halfway through the group members continued in the ongoing discussion rather than change to a new subject.

Reflections

The process of the conversations was not, and never had been intended to be a process where either resolution or transformation of conflict was attained, it was to provide a space for difficult topics to be aired. This may have contributed to the general consensus that the

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faith groups were very far from being able to 'build bridges' with each other, as the conversations were not focussed on working together, but in talking together. Dialogue for dialogues' sake is often criticised because it does not seek to bring about change in behaviour through disparate groups working together,²¹ and this reality was felt in the conversation process.

It was evident during the process that given an interesting question and a disparate group of people that conversation flowed, so that moving groups onto the next topic or component of the discussion was always difficult. This delay in moving on significantly impacted time-keeping, as did the late start of every conversation due to various difficulties participants had in arriving on time.

Although we had developed ground rules for discussion, these were sometimes breached, it was the facilitator and the group's responsibility to state when a ground rule had been breached, however, this was difficult to monitor, especially in small groups and would need further development on empowering people to comment on ground rule infringements. The conversations were designed to build relationship between participants to enable them to see each other as more than just representatives of different faith traditions, there was a tension in the group as to the speed with which this developed. For some who are confident at speaking in a large group in public about their viewpoints and who are rarely offended by others the desire was to move on into more risky areas of discussion. For those who may feel confident talking in a large group, but who felt as if their viewpoint was under attack, there was an expressed need for greater relationship development. This disparity suggests that the process of moving through relationship building to risk taking depends very much upon the participants within the group and should remain an organic process. Furthermore the expressed frustrations that enough time was being given to discussions suggested that some participants were keen to being a more 'risky' approach to the conversations. Though other participants were less keen because of the emotional risk they felt in engaging in the conversations. However, during the final symposium to discuss the Birmingham Conversations participants stated that they felt they had developed relationships even with people of very differing viewpoints²².

The steering committee had also taken time and care at least to ensure that a representative range of religions and traditions were invited to the conversations. Further conversations would also seek to ensure a greater representation of participants from different ethnic backgrounds as well.

Future Developments

By the end of the conversations the group had developed a functioning methodology for engaging in discussions. There were lively conversations, and during the sessions people expressed moments when they had been challenged by the comments and views of others. However, the process was not without its difficulties and certainly participants did sometimes feel hurt, excluded or marginalised along the way due to the process itself. In re-running the sessions I would seek to ensure more explanation of process was included, more attention

²¹ Smock, What Works?

²² Participant feedback, Birmingham Conversations Symposium, 20th May 2015

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to relationship building and greater empowerment of the use of ground rules to avoid generalisations and labelling that occurred on occasion.

This methodology was specifically developed for use with inter-religious dialogue, but further research would be appropriate to discover its applicability to other forms of 'difficult conversations' which may or may not be linked with faith but concern intergroup dialogue such as intra-faith dialogue, or other significant identity and cultural markers in the community. It would also be relevant to assess whether this methodology is also applicable to other contexts outside of the 'super-diverse' context of Birmingham in 21st century. Furthermore, during the symposium at least one participant commented upon the paucity of space available for people of faith to discuss difficult issues together when the need arose, and that such spaces were essential for faith groups to meet at such times²³. The formation of 'formal' spaces for inter-religious dialogue to take place at times of social tension could be a valid use of this methodology although the aim remains not to seek consensus, but to enable difficult conversations to take place.

Conclusion

During 2014 the idea was formed to develop a method by which different faith communities could have difficult conversations regarding their lived faith experience in Birmingham. It is not surprising, given the 'Trojan Horse' allegations that significant time during these conversations was taken up discussing formal education of children and their rights to freedom of expression of religion as part of their school day. This was not the only topic of conversation that was contentious or difficult for groups to discuss, and a number of topics were covered during the course of the conversations including other aspects of children's lived faith, identity, class and caste, globalisation, evangelisation and conversion, and race and identity.

The methodology developed sought to enable these difficult topics, which were not at that point being addressed in an inter-religious setting, to be to be discussed in a manner which allowed people to share from their personal lived-faith experience. In this regard the process was successful. The meetings were at times tense but participants had the opportunity to listen to the voices of those from other traditions and cultural backgrounds in a mutual exchange of views, which was at times lively and engaged, and at other times more thoughtful and reserved.

The process enabled a variety of topics to be discussed in a multi-faith setting, with the aim of increasing understanding and awareness of the viewpoints of others. Certainly group members stated that they had felt challenged by comments made during the conversations and these comments had impacted how they viewed certain issues. There was also a sense of 'where do we go from here?'. The consensus of the group at the end was that far more work needed to take place before different faith groups could 'build bridges' together in the Birmingham context.

The methodology was not designed as a form of peacebuilding activity, but as a means by which to ask participants from different communities to engage in difficult issues and

²³ Panel discussion, Birmingham Conversations Symposium, 20th May 2015

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consider what is necessary to begin a process of reconciliation. The methodology could be used and adapted to develop these ideas further, but it is not an end in itself.

As people of faith living in Birmingham, it is essential for communities to begin to understand how they can communicate their needs and values effectively to their neighbours in a mutually affirming manner. The Birmingham Conversations have been a start in developing a process by which this can happen, and enable the inhabitants of this 'super-diverse' city to begin to live alongside each other with respect.

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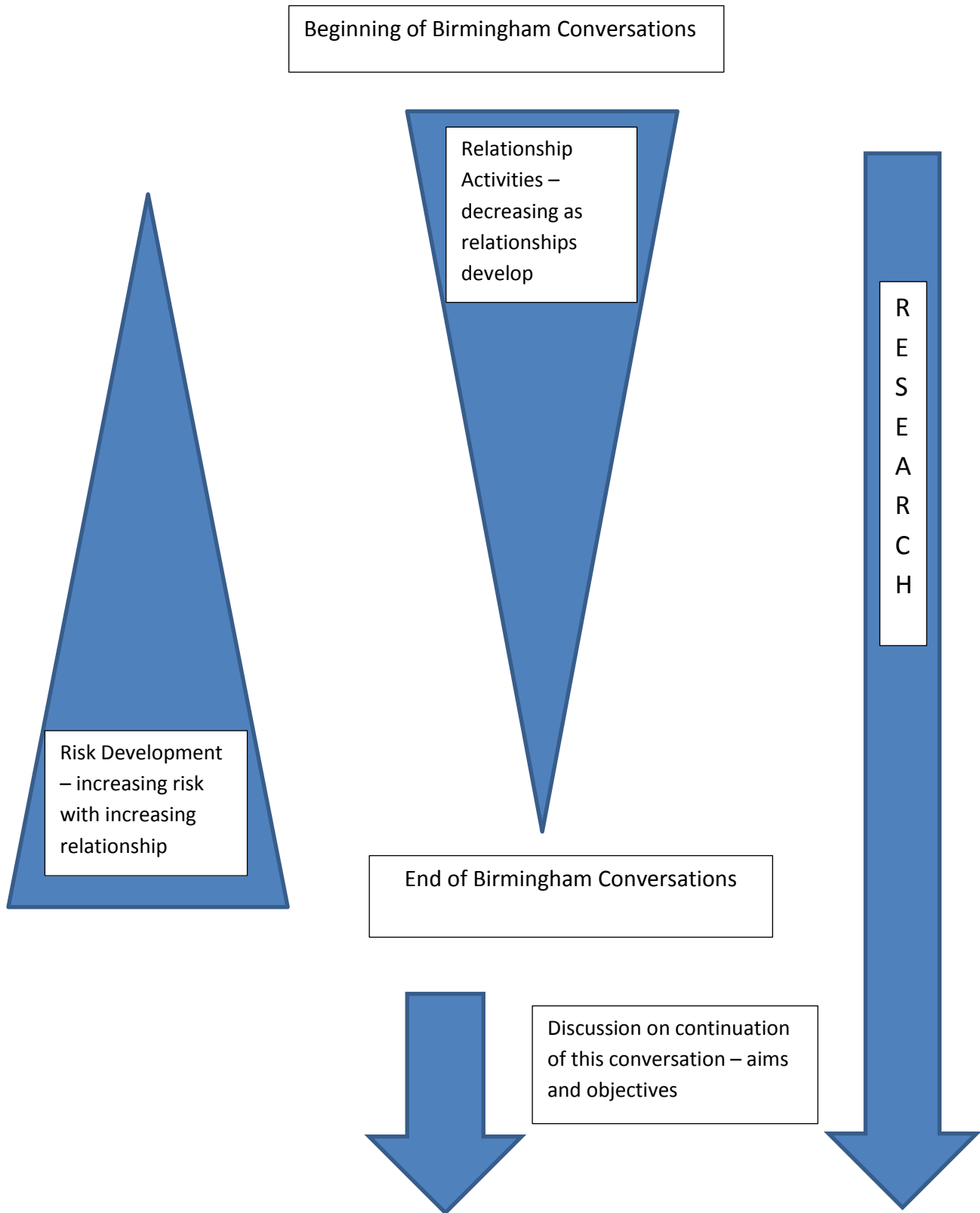


Fig. 1. Development of key concepts in Birmingham Conversation Methodology