Liberal or conservative, Hongkongers must learn to listen to those they disagree with

Michael B. Wong, Spike W.S. Lee, and Josephine Au | September 7, 2019 | SCMP

As Hong Kong's astonishing summer of discontent rolls on into autumn, people on both sides of the political divide find themselves in a gridlock. While Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor's decision to withdraw the extradition bill is a welcome step, the saga may not end here.

The city remains deeply polarised. How can we reach closure in our collective nightmare? Social science research points a way. Consider a pair of opinion polls that asked people at two rallies the same question, "Which two of the following do you consider to be Hong Kong's most important core values?"

Those at the July 21 demonstration organised by the Civil Human Rights Front overwhelmingly chose freedom and democracy. By contrast, those at the July 20 "Safeguard HK" rally organised by the pro-establishment camp chose lawfulness and economic development.

These results shed some light on the nature of the conflict playing out on our streets. The clashes are not just expressions of anger about economic woes; they are manifestations of sharp disagreements over which values deserve priority.

According to research by psychologists Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt and others, people are guided by at least five fundamental intuitions about morally acceptable behaviour. These are: care of the young and weak; fairness and justice among equals; loyalty to and sacrifice for the group; deference to authority and respect for tradition; and sanctity and avoidance of contamination.

These intuitions are moral foundations, structuring people's reasoning about right and wrong. Collectively, they form the basis of societal construction of virtues, rules and practices.

The problem is that people with different political leanings implicitly prioritise different intuitions. Studies around the world show that the more liberal people are, the more they tend to value care and fairness, hence their emphasis on human rights, equitable allocation, and fair treatment under the law. When a traditional hierarchy is repressive, liberals are more inclined to speak up for the oppressed. They prioritise social justice and progress over stability.

By contrast, the more conservative people are, the more they tend to value loyalty, authority and sanctity, hence their emphasis on obedience to the law. Public order and security are precious and fragile unless defended, so conservatives are more inclined to support institutionalised authority. To them, the responsibilities that bind the group together are paramount and should at times be prioritised over individual freedoms.

The protests in Hong Kong have triggered powerful yet predictable responses across the divide. For example, images of wounded civilians – especially those who are female and young – infuriates liberals who believe police should care for civilians, not harm them.

The same events elicit different responses from conservatives, who are more likely to argue that protesters shouldn't have taunted police or be spreading civil disobedience.

Take another example: police officers' failure to show their warrant cards and their delayed response to triad violence. Liberals have demanded an independent commission of inquiry to ensure fairness and impartiality.

However, the suggestion of such a commission offends conservatives' sense of loyalty to the established order; they think the government should not turn its back on front-line officers who were working under immense pressure to keep the protests under control.

When each side insists on its own principles and points out the other side's logical fallacies, it is hard to change minds on either side. Research by psychologist Matthew Feinberg and sociologist Robb Willer suggests a more persuasive approach: identify the moral foundations of the other side, acknowledge them, and use them – as opposed to one's own moral foundations – to reframe the issue at hand.

Instead of condemning protesters for causing economic damage and engaging in unlawful behaviour, our government and its supporters must continue to assuage protesters' moral concerns about police violence and equality before the law.

The government can take action to signal that it cares about the safety of all Hongkongers, including protesters. A demonstrated commitment to a future where there is fairness and transparency will also help. These signals must be loud and consistent to rebuild trust and alleviate anger.

Meanwhile, protesters ought to consider the merits of being attuned to conservatives' moral concerns about disorder and subversion. For instance, protesters can advocate non-violence and emphasise their support for Chinese sovereignty as well as proper execution of the Basic Law. A clear focus on orderly progress may dissolve some of the barriers to peaceful resolution with government supporters.

If both sides remain intent on demonising the other, our city will never heal. Spiralling violence will only strengthen resolve on both sides. Suppression will not quell opposition but only drive it underground, where it will festers before exploding again. More eggs will be broken, and no omelette will be in sight.

When we disagree with our opponents, it simply doesn't help to call them names or chastise them for being ill-intentioned or ill-informed. We must have the sophistication to listen with sincerity, understand their perspective, speak their political language and spot opportunities for give and take, even while standing up for our values.

Moral forces are bound to clash in any society with a history as complex as Hong Kong's and under a political arrangement as fragile as "one country, two systems". Recognising each of us values different things does not mean capitulating to each other's views.

Rather, it means we develop the capacity to respect each other as human beings with dignity and voices worth listening to – because that is how we want to be treated ourselves. It means we pave the way for progress and reconciliation.