



## Matt Waldman

**Overview:** Parties' interests, process design or the formulation of political settlements has received much attention in international mediation, however, the role of empathy has been comparatively neglected. Yet, it is a critical resource for mediators furnishing them with important information about the mindset, emotions and perceptions of antagonists. The author explores how and why the emphasis on empathy can increase the prospects for the resolution of conflict.

**Übersicht:** Interessen, Prozess Design oder die Ausarbeitung von Friedensabkommen haben in der internationalen Mediation grosse Aufmerksamkeit erhalten, während Empathie vernachlässigt wurde, obwohl sie eine bedeutungsvolle Ressource für MediatorInnen sein kann. Durch Empathie lässt sich Aufschluss über die geistige Verfassung, Gefühlslagen und die Wahrnehmungen der Antagonisten erhalten. Der Autor geht den Fragen nach, wie und warum Empathie neue Konfliktlösungsansätze ermöglicht.

**Keywords:** Empathy, conflict resolution, international mediation.

# Neglected Tool: Empathy in Conflict Resolution

In the field of international mediation a great deal of attention has been directed towards important areas such as mapping the parties' interests, process design or the formulation of political settlements. An issue that has gained comparatively little attention in the literature or training is empathy. Yet empathy is a critical resource for mediators.

Over the course of 2016 and the first half of 2017 the Center for Empathy in International Affairs<sup>1</sup> (CEIA) convened several roundtable discussions with experts, academics, mediators, diplomats and peace-builders to consider the role of empathy in conflict resolution and mediation. This article attempts to encapsulate the insights, ideas and case examples generated by those discussions.

In short, experts and practitioners believe empathy furnishes mediators with important information about the mindset, emotions and perceptions of antagonists, helps to build trust between the parties, enables individuals to feel recognised and respected, and can catalyse new approaches to conflict resolution. Before exploring these factors, we should consider the meaning and attributes of empathy itself.

## The Meaning of Empathy

The term empathy has several meanings, and a conceptual distinction must be drawn between cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy broadly means imagining or grasping another's thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Affective empathy involves sharing another's feelings, with a distinction sometimes made between empathic distress and empathic concern. As this article considers empathizing as a professional skill, it is principally concerned with cognitive empathy.

Empathy is often mistakenly equated with sympathy and compassion, which involve or evoke pity or sorrow. But empathy is a way of thinking that may or may not elicit such feelings. Similarly, empathy does not equate to agreement or approval, just as the absence or opposite of empathy is not disagreement or disapproval.

At first thought, empathy might be considered to be unidirectional: I, for instance, empathize with you.

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1) For more information see: <http://www.centerforempathy.org/>.

» But empathising often affects our thinking and behaviour, which in turn provokes a cognitive, affective or behavioural response on the part of the person with whom we are empathizing. Empathy therefore often has an interactive and dynamic quality.

In one sense, empathy is instinctive and immensely variable. Different people empathize differently. Yet, as with most social skills, we can improve our ability to empathize through training – a point confirmed by numerous academic studies.<sup>2</sup> We can also choose when we empathize and with whom, such as individuals or different groups within society.

### Insight and Understanding

Empathy's unique attribute is that it requires a change in perspective. Because the way we process information depends on our experience and viewpoint, and is almost always distorted by intrinsic biases and sentiments, the imaginative and perceptual shift that empathy requires can significantly change our understanding of other individuals and groups, and interpretation of events, even with the same information at hand.

This is especially useful for those who engage in diplomatic and mediation work to resolve conflict because it can enhance their understanding of the parties. Specifically, empathizing can throw light on at least four crucial areas: first, who people really are, their character, beliefs and values, as well as how they see themselves; second, their state of mind, emotions and attitudes; third, why they fight and what they want – their driving motivations and objectives; and fourth, their varied apprehensions of reality and perceptions of others.

In acquiring this deeper, holistic sense of the parties, empathizing can help a mediator to identify where in a party's narrative there is scope for a new attitude and approach. This is especially important during conflict, when narratives are so often warped by anger and hatred. Empathizing may also furnish important information about the relationships between different actors, misperceptions or false assumptions that drive hostilities, fears that block engagement, as well as opportunities for negotiation.

The Colombian peace process illustrates this facet of empathy. In a CEIA expert consultation in Washington D.C., a diplomat involved in that process described

how empathy was key to building trust and overcoming a major obstacle to progress. During talks the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) guerrilla movement had insisted on a long period between the signing of a peace agreement and their eventual disarmament. The Colombian government, however, saw this as entirely unrealistic, and the difference between the parties on this issue created an impasse. However, through a sustained dialogue, mediators were able to 'tune in' to the thinking of FARC leaders. In doing so they found that the FARC's position on disarmament was largely due to their mistrust of the Colombian government and their fear that it would renege on the agreement – a concern rooted in their experience of events of the 1980s. In that period, after the FARC had engaged in talks with the Colombian authorities, some 3,000 of their supporters were massacred by groups that sometimes acted in collusion with government security forces.

It was not until mediators grasped the depth of these concerns that they could address them by way of agreed steps and reassurances. Mediators and third parties were able to explain to the FARC that the Colombian security forces had gone through a process of reform and professionalization, and that the entire international community was invested in a successful outcome. The Colombian government made a commitment to contain the threat posed by paramilitary forces. By this means, facilitators were able to convince the FARC that the day they disarmed they would be safer than at any previous point. This was crucial in order for enabling talks to move forward.

The mediators had made efforts to get inside the heads of its interlocutors and gauge their priorities – in other words, their unique sense of who they are and what mattered to them. Doing so enabled them to discern and address the FARC's core concerns, and keep the process moving forward.

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2) See, for example: 'The Efficacy of Empathy Training: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials', Emily Ted-ing van Berkhout and John M. Malouff, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 2016, Vol. 63, No. 1, 32–41, and 'Empathy Training: Methods, Evaluation Practices, and Validity', Tony Chiu Ming Lam, Klodiana Kolomitro, Flanny C. Alamparambil, *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, July 2011, Volume 7, Number 16, 162–200.

### Trust-building

Success in peace processes is often attributable to a range of factors, which might include the existence of a mutually hurting stalemate, self-interest, third party assurances, and courageous leadership. However, the bedrock of most peace processes is trust-building, typically fostered by mediators, in which empathy plays an important role. Trust involves confidence in the reliability and predictability of others. In other words, it involves expectations of another's behaviour. Such expectations are heavily influenced not only by the other's behaviour to date, but also a reading of the others' minds – their thoughts, feelings and perceptions. That requires empathy.

A compelling case example is empathy between diplomats and policy leaders in the U.S. and Iran during the course of recent nuclear talks. Strong relationships between key officials of both sides, based on an appreciation of the others' characteristics, motivations, aspirations and constraints, helped to build trust that sustained the process and bring it to a successful conclusion. Notably, these relationships were both strengthened by and reflected in a series of gestures between Iranian and U.S. officials, such as Kerry and Zarif's lakeside walk in Lausanne<sup>3</sup>; Zarif's historic handshake with Obama; or the condolences offered by the U.S. negotiating team to Rohani's brother on the death of his mother. Steps such as these had symbolic value, reinforced personal relationships and sent a message of confidence and respect to publics on both sides.

Strikingly, empathy on each side extended to how their adversaries would handle their domestic opponents. Each refrained from reacting to provocations by hardliners on the other side, such as when U.S. Senators wrote a public letter to the Iranian leadership in March 2015, stating that they would tear up any agreement. Thus, each party helped the other shape domestic public opinion and manage constituencies who were opposed to the process, which was crucial to securing a final agreement.

### Recognition

Disputes and conflicts are often instigated or aggravated because one group feels that they are not being taken seriously and that their concerns and grievances are being dismissed. They feel they have no alternative but to fight. Empathy is a vehicle for enabling a party

to feel heard, respected and understood. In this way, empathizing not only helps a party to acquire a better understanding of an adversary, but it can also help to mitigate the other's hostility towards them. That can enable constructive talks to take place. In addition,

» a party that demonstrates empathy is often seen by the other party as more reasonable and trustworthy.

This can also put mediators in a better position to facilitate negotiations.

Recognising an adversary and acknowledging their point of view can also help to reduce the prospects for future conflict. Paradoxically, recognition is most required when one side is prevailing and least sees the need for it. For instance, some analysts believe that Putin's belligerent behaviour in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe is partly attributable to a lasting sense of humiliation at the collapse of the Soviet Union, and resentment at what was seen as a lack of respect and recognition from the West. That sense of grievance was not inevitable. The West could have framed the post Cold War period as a tremendous opportunity to work together to build a new world order to the benefit of all. Instead, the West acted triumphantly and consolidated its position through the steady eastwards expansion of NATO. The point is not that this in any way justifies Russia's confrontational behaviour and violations of international law. Rather, it is to acknowledge that failing to discern and adapt to Russia's state of mind, and concerns about NATO expansion, laid the seeds for future discord.

### Empathy as a Catalyst

More often than not, warring parties dehumanize each other, which creates powerful obstacles to constructive engagement.

» Empathy humanizes.

It enjoins us to see the other as a human being and to appreciate the thoughts and emotions they may be experiencing. As such it has the potential to mitigate hatred, elicit restraint in a party that is engaging in aggressive behaviour or induce greater openness to reconciliation.

3) United States secretary of state John Kerry and Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif, March 2015.

Empathizing also has the potential to remove blockages, such as assumptions and stereotypes, which prevent the parties imagining a way through violence or confrontation.

All too often parties are so preoccupied with their own grievances that they take little time to consider where the adversary is coming from. In certain cases, where it would not be seen as insensitive or inappropriate, mediators can encourage a party to take the other's perspective, which can act as a catalyst for innovative and productive approaches to resolving the conflict. In acquiring a greater appreciation of the situation, motivations, as well as the constraints and pressures an adversary faces, often from powerful constituencies, a warring party may open its mind to compromise.

An interesting case example of this is track 'one point five' (semi-official) efforts to facilitate talks in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict during the 2000s. At one point, to help reframe the talks, facilitators invited the parties to conduct a role-play. Observed by the Abkhaz, Georgians role-played the Abkhaz discussing what would be acceptable to them in order to facilitate progress and what factors obstructed progress. Participants on both sides were stunned by how well the Georgians played the Abkhaz, creating a powerful resonance for those involved. Both sides' eyes were opened to factors that explained the other's behaviour. The insights derived from these discussions led to senior Georgian officials drafting a series of options for moving forward that were presented to the new Georgian President in 2004. Those options formed the basis for negotiations under the auspices of the UN for the next two years.

### Limits of Empathy

Empathising has limits and is not without potential drawbacks that need to be taken into consideration. However, as discussed below, none of these limits or concerns eclipse empathy's potential to contribute to conflict resolution.

First, and most obviously, a party may empathize but get it wrong, especially given the complexity, ambiguity and access constraints involved in most conflicts. Moreover, there are huge challenges in discerning another's mental state, emotions and perceptions. Yet, many kinds of information gathering, intelligence work or analysis are difficult to accomplish with certainty and accuracy. That does not mean they are not worth doing.

» **Empathizing should be undertaken with the understanding that it requires hard work, and must be practiced on the basis of extensive information about the subject.**

Clearly, mediators must draw on knowledge of the culture, sociology, ethnography and history of a country or region, as well as biographies of key decision-makers. At the same time, they should practice empathy in a deliberate, self-critical and managed way, exercising care not to unduly empathize with one party over another.

Second, empathy may not always work in favour of peace. Individuals and groups who empathize in conflict may, through a better appreciation of the enmity or fear of an adversary, become even more disillusioned about the prospects for peace. This has been reported, for example, by those engaged in peace-building work between Palestinians and Israelis. Nevertheless, there is always a risk that greater understanding has negative effects. That does not mean that ignorance is preferable. At worst, empathy may be exploited by one party to gain advantage over another or to exploit the other's vulnerabilities. However, virtually all analytical tools and skills can be misused. This does not detract from empathy's positive potential.

» **It is the mediator's task to encourage and deploy empathy in a way that reinforces mutual understanding.**

Finally, individuals may face social and political costs for empathizing during conflict, which puts them at variance from or at odds with wider narratives and attitudes which tend to disparage, vilify or demonize adversaries. But many kinds of behaviour, such as speaking truth to power or resisting oppression, involve risks and costs. That does not mean those risks and costs are not worth bearing. Whether or not those risks are worth bearing depends on many factors, including the potential benefits. Moreover, this strengthens the case for empathy to be more widely acknowledged and incorporated into standard practices rather than left to courageous individuals. In fact, none of the limitations or drawbacks noted above suggests that empathy should be rejected. Rather, that it should be practiced in a self-conscious and controlled fashion. Empathy should be institutionalised.

### Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, leading practitioners in mediation and conflict resolution, including diplomats, should acknowl-

edge the importance of empathy, conceived as efforts to grasp what others think, feel and perceive. For those who seek to resolve conflict, it should be standard practice to empathize, based on social, cultural, political and historical knowledge, in order to acquire a deeper understanding of others.

Empathy's limits and potential drawbacks should be acknowledged and it should not be seen as a substitute for other skills or approaches. Rather, it should be deployed in conjunction with other relevant skills.

»» **Empathizing should be understood not as a sentimental impulse, but as a rational and useful tool that can be enhanced through effective training.**

Empathy should become a core component of mediation training and mediation support, based on the latest insights from the behavioural sciences. Simulations and role-plays could be useful training tools, reinforced by experiential learning. Empathy should be incorporated into the work of mediation organisations and into the mediation support units of international organisations, including the United Nations, European Union, African Union, and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

More broadly, all those with international responsibilities, including diplomats, UN officials and NGO practitioners, should undergo training to enhance their ability to empathize. Empathizing should be incorporated into the standard operating and decision-making procedures of governments, international organisations, and NGOs. In addition, specialised units should be formed within states and international organisations, tasked with drawing on a wide range of sources to discern the mindset, emotions and perceptions of others. Comprehensive empathy audits should be carried out in specific conflicts, involving analysis of the thoughts, feelings and perspectives of the actors involved, based on expert knowledge, as well as direct engagement.

The forces that shape international armed conflict are so complex, powerful and dynamic that no single skill can guarantee positive results for those engaged in mediation. Yet, the task of preventing, mitigating and resolving violent conflict is too important not to take advantage of every potentially useful tool. We must not neglect the value and utility of empathy.<sup>4</sup>

## Zusammenfassung

### Empathie:

#### Ein vernachlässigtes Konfliktlösungsinstrument

Der Artikel stellt die Ergebnisse von ExpertInnengesprächen dar, die 2016 und im Mai 2017 geführt wurden (siehe Fussnote 4).

### Empathie als Methode

Alle ExpertInnen sind der Ansicht, dass Empathie der Schlüssel zu einem tieferen Verständnis des Konflikts und aller daran Beteiligten sein kann.

Es wird zwischen affektiver und kognitiver Empathie unterschieden. Empathie wird oft mit Sympathie und Mitgefühl gleichgesetzt. Empathie ist aber eine Denkweise, die diese Gefühle auslösen kann oder auch nicht. Empathie bewirkt auch nicht Zustimmung, genau so wenig bewirkt die Abwesenheit von Empathie Ablehnung. Empathie beeinflusst unser Denken und unser Verhalten und damit beeinflusst sie auch das Verhalten der Person, mit der wir empathisch sind. Die Fähigkeit zu Empathie ist eine soziale Fähigkeit, sie ist individuell und sie kann durch Übung verbessert werden. Empathie führt zu einem ganzheitlicheren Verständnis der Antagonisten.

### Am Beispiel von Friedensverhandlungen

Bei Verhandlungen der kolumbianischen Regierung mit den FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) wurde durch die Fähigkeit der MediatorInnen, sich empathisch auf ihre Bedenken einzustimmen

4) For the full reports of CEIA discussions on which this article is based, please see: *Changing Minds: Empathy in Mediation*, April 2016, which summarises a discussion held at the European Institute of Peace; *Empathy in Conflict Resolution: If, How and When*, June 2016, a publication which summarises a roundtable discussion at the United States Institute of Peace; *The Software of Geopolitics: Empathy in international Affairs*, December 2016, which summarises a roundtable at the UK's Royal Institute of International Affairs – Chatham House; and *Hard Feelings: The Role of Empathy in Engaging Armed Groups*, May 2017, which summarises a discussion at Conciliation Resources in London.

und dadurch deren Ängste verständlich zu machen, der Durchbruch in den Verhandlungen erreicht.

Bei Friedensverhandlungen ist der schwierigste Punkt der Aufbau von gegenseitigen Vertrauen. Kann darauf vertraut werden, dass die andere Seite sich auch an die Abmachungen hält? Kann ich den anderen «lesen», d.h. seine Gedanken, Gefühle und Wahrnehmungen? Ohne Empathie ist dies unmöglich.

Bei Verhandlungen zwischen dem Iran und den USA wurde durch die Beziehung zwischen Kerry und Zarif, die von Respekt und Empathie geprägt war, unter anderem bewirkt, dass sich beide Parteien nicht durch die Hardliner der eigenen Seite beeinflussen liessen.

Eine Partei, die empathisches Verhalten zeigt, wird eher für vernünftig und vertrauenswürdig gehalten, als eine, die das nicht tut.

Empathie und Anerkennung für die Sichtweisen des anderen sind paradoxerweise dann besonders notwendig, wenn sein Verhalten dies schwermacht. Putins kriegsrisches Verhalten in der Ukraine wurde auch dadurch begünstigt, dass der Westen keinerlei Empathie für die durch den Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion ausgelösten Ängste der Russen zeigte, sondern die eigene Position, Verschiebung der NATO nach Osten, mit Triumphgebahnen verband. Ein empathisches Vorgehen hätte zu mehr Verständnis für beide Positionen führen können. Sein Ausbleiben führte letztendlich zu dem jetzigen militärischen Konflikt.

### **Empathie als Katalysator**

Kriegführende Parteien entmenschlichen einander. Empathie hingegen befähigt uns, den anderen in all seiner Menschlichkeit wahrzunehmen und seine Erfahrungen und Gefühle anzuerkennen. Dadurch fällt aggressives Verhalten schwerer. Parteien können die Perspektive des Gegners besser einnehmen und bleiben nicht im eigenen Leid befangen.

### **Der Abchasien-Georgien-Konflikt**

Die VermittlerInnen veranlassten die Parteien zu einem Rollenspiel, bei welchem die GeorgierInnen die AbchasierInnen spielten. Alle Beteiligten waren verblüfft, wie gut die GeorgierInnen die AbchasierInnen spielen konnten, und allen wurden die Augen für Faktoren geöffnet, die das Verhalten der anderen verständlich

machten. Es entstand ein Papier, auf dessen Grundlage über Frieden verhandelt wurde.

### **Grenzen der Empathie**

Fehler sind oft in der Komplexität und Mehrdeutigkeit der Konflikte begründet. Es braucht sehr viele Informationen sozialer, kultureller, politischer und historischer Art, ausserdem biographisches Wissen über die Personen in den Schlüsselpositionen. Solche Informationen sind nicht einfach zu bekommen. Empathie begünstigt aber nicht immer Frieden. Durch grösseres Verständnis der anderen kann auch erkannt werden, dass keine Friedenschancen bestehen, wie dies über israelisch-palästinensische Friedensbemühungen berichtet wurde. Mit dem Gegner empathisch zu sein, kann negative politische oder soziale Folgen für die MediatorInnen haben.

### **Ausblick**

Empathiefähigkeit sollte durch entsprechendes Training auch eine Kernkompetenz in der Friedensmediation werden, basierend auf den neuesten Erkenntnissen der Verhaltenswissenschaft.

Deutsch zusammengefasst von Iris Fillié-Utz



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