



Center for **Empathy** in
International Affairs

CHANGING MINDS

Briefing on Empathy in Mediation

April 2016



CEIA Briefing: Changing Minds – Empathy in Mediation

Summary

Empathy is a critical resource for mediators and peacebuilders. It draws attention to human psychology and emotions, can counteract demonization, and helps adversaries see others' perspectives and motivations. Empathizing can help mediators better understand conflict, especially the tumult in people's hearts and minds, and can enhance self-awareness. Empathy has cognitive and affective elements, is versatile and interactive, and can be regulated. The relative distribution of empathy is crucial: intense empathy for an in-group can motivate violence.

Empathic accuracy is difficult in conflict and requires considerable effort, information and resilience. Institutional biases and bureaucratic constraints must be overcome. Empathizing also entails risks that must be carefully managed. Mediators can misjudge others or become partial to one side. A party that empathizes may face personal costs, or may become more aware of an adversary's hatred and less amenable to dialogue. Looking ahead, drawing on research, analysis and experience, empathy should be incorporated into mediation theory, training and practice.

Introduction

The Center for Empathy in International Affairs (CEIA), in collaboration with the European Institute of Peace (EIP), held a full day consultation with 18 mediators and experts in Brussels on Friday, 4 March 2016. The participants included individuals from a range of institutions including: the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue – HD, Crisis Management Initiative, European External Action Service, European Institute of Peace, European Parliament Mediation Support Service, King's College London, Oxford Research Group, Peaceful Change Initiative, Swisspeace and the United Nations. Individual participants are listed below.

This briefing paper, written by CEIA director Matt Waldman, summarizes key insights from the consultation. It highlights observations with relevance for mediation and conflict resolution as a whole, regarding:

- Why empathy matters
- Cases
- Empathy as a tool of understanding
- Attributes of empathy
- Challenges to empathizing
- Risks and drawbacks of empathy
- Key considerations for mediation
- The way ahead

Why empathy matters

Empathy is a crucial resource for mediators and peacebuilders: it can help to spark the imagination of a party involved in conflict to visualize a political arrangement with a rival or adversary. Importantly, empathy has the power to humanize others. It counteracts demonization, which so often occurs during hostilities, and brings attention to the human beings involved in and affected by conflict. Observers tend to refer to the parties to a conflict, while largely overlooking the nature, views and perspectives of the people within those parties, or the population on the ground. Empathy brings attention to psychology and emotions that are marginalized by conventional 'realist' approaches to foreign affairs and the general assumption of rational decision-making. In conflict especially, people's behavior is shaped by emotions and sacred values.

Cases

Participants raised several cases where empathy or lack of empathy was observed, illustrating empathy's diverse potential application. They are briefly referenced below, as described by different participants.

Vietnam. Robert McNamara, the former US Secretary of Defense, had said of the Vietnam War that the Americans and Vietnamese were fighting two different wars. He attributed this, above all, to a lack of empathy.

Israel-Palestine. There may be a role for empathy in breaking the cycle of violence in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Yet, given the deep drivers of the conflict, it seems unrealistic at this stage to expect the parties to step outside their own powerful narratives.

East Timor. According to one participant, in 1999-2000 elements of the Australian-led peace-keeping mission did not appreciate how threatened and victimized the East Timorese felt, which meant that at certain points they acted in a way which jeopardized their relations with the East Timorese and their overall mission. The participant believed a greater level of empathy might have led to corresponding adaptations in behavior.

Bougainville. This island, near Papua New Guinea, experienced a civil war in 1998-99 between Papua New Guinea and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, which was fighting for independence. The conflict claimed 10,000-15,000 lives. The New Zealanders, who were mediating between the two sides, took a delegation from Bougainville to meet with one of the most autonomous tribes of Maoris in New Zealand. The latter were able to empathize with the Bougainvilleans – and shared with them the advantages of their autonomous political arrangements. Ultimately, the conflict was resolved with an agreement leading to autonomy for Bougainville within the state of Papua New Guinea.

Liberia. In one area of rural Liberia, in 2004-05, there was conflict between Muslim and Christian groups, partly due to resentment among Christians that Muslims didn't send their children to local schools. Empathy helped break the deadlock. In a critical meeting, Christian leaders came to understand that Muslim elders couldn't send their children to local schools because they had been founded as missionary schools. According to one participant who was present at the discussions, the former had been able to take and understand the latter's point of view.

Empathy as a tool of understanding

Everyone sees life through their own lens. How others see the same things, or the same conflict, may be very different. Empathy can help throw light on 'multiple truths' – in other words, the varied apprehensions of reality of the parties to conflict. Often we deal in static or conventional notions of knowledge, when conflict is in fact dynamic, complex and nuanced – which empathy can help illuminate. In that sense, empathy can add more layers to our understanding.

More specifically, empathy can help us understand the chaos in people's hearts and minds during conflict; a party's perceptions of others and the relationships between different actors; another's cultural or political system, which might be quite different to ours; and how a party may view the consequences of compromise. This information can be extremely useful for the empathizer – and empathy helps to meet the need or aspiration of individuals and groups to be recognized and understood.

Empathizing can enhance our self-awareness by throwing light on how we ourselves are seen by others. It can help us to identify our own misperceptions or false assumptions, and, crucially, the *gaps* in our understanding of others. Empathizing forces us to listen closely to others – an ability that is often impaired in times of tension or crisis.

Attributes of empathy

A distinction should be made between cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy broadly means imagining another's thoughts, feelings and perceptions; affective empathy involves sharing another's feelings. There is a distinction, within affective empathy, between empathic distress and empathic concern, which may provoke different responses in others. Importantly, empathy is not unidirectional – it is interactive. It can affect the thinking and behavior of the person who empathizes; this can in turn affect the thinking or behavior of the subject.

Empathy has a powerful universality, echoing that of human rights. All human beings have thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Yet, in practice, the more different and distant the subject, the harder it becomes to relate to them, and the less likely we are to empathize.

The distribution of empathy, as between in-group and out-group, is crucial, and empathy, as a trait, does not always work in favor of peace. Those who turn to political violence are sometimes highly empathic people, who feel intense empathy for their in-group.

Minority groups tend to be better at empathizing with others – they are constantly evaluating what the majority group is thinking and feeling, in order to manage relations and mitigate risks. Yet, to achieve greater fairness or resolve conflict, it is often more important for the majority group to empathize with the minority.

There is intrinsic variability in the practice of empathy: different people will empathize differently. Yet, empathy is a skill and human beings have the ability to regulate and improve their levels of cognitive and affective empathy. To a large degree we have the ability to control when we empathize and with whom. We can choose to empathize with one or more of a wide range of different actors or different levels of society: the local level or elite; at the level of a collective, group and sub-group (for example, an ethnic minority, a tribe within that minority, or a particular clan or community).

Challenges to empathizing

Empathic accuracy is especially difficult in conflict, given the complexity, ambiguity and access constraints involved. It requires hard work, and must be practiced on the basis of extensive and varied information about the subject.

Structurally, empathizing is impeded by bureaucratic requirements, which entail standardized processes and procedures, and demand fast results. There are institutional biases against empathizing, mistakenly associating empathy with soft, 'feminine' issues. This is reinforced by a general reluctance among officials to devote time to analyzing the psychology of others.

At an individual level, our capacity to empathize is shaped by our own life, needs, and experiences. Empathizing is hard work, and can be tiring or disturbing. There are personal limits in terms of our capacity to empathize with those who are suffering.

Risks and drawbacks of empathy

Empathizing can make us feel better about ourselves or our policies, without requiring any change in behavior. There is always the risk of getting empathy wrong – and misjudging others. Conversely, empathy can yield accurate information but, in the wrong hands, this can be used for malign purposes.

If third parties do not empathize in a balanced way, this can lead to partiality towards one side of a conflict, which has several deleterious effects. This can raise false expectations on the part of one group, or cause it to feel more righteous in its cause, which can reduce its willingness to change behavior, engage in dialogue or compromise. Partial empathy can undermine the third party's

credibility with other sides. It could cause a third party to seek the punishment of the perpetrator of harm to one side, or increase the risk of the third party being instrumentalized.

Parties tend to resist empathizing with their adversary, but even if they do empathize, this can prove detrimental to peace. It may cause a party to realize how much it is hated by the other side, thus reducing its inclination to engage in constructive dialogue or undermining its confidence in mediation. (By analogy, research shows that people who are naturally good at empathizing report more marital satisfaction but also, on average, are more likely to get divorced – perhaps because they are more aware of their partner’s attitude towards them.) In addition, empathizing can involve social, political and economic costs to individual group-members for stepping out of the group’s prevailing narrative by empathizing with an adversary.

Key considerations for mediation

Empathy is relevant to mediation in terms of relations between the parties, and between the mediator and the parties. If a mediator can help the parties to empathize with each other, this has the potential to remove blockages, such as assumptions and stereotypes, which prevent the parties imagining a way through violence or confrontation. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that it is difficult for any side in the midst of violent conflict to empathize with the other side, especially if the conflict is long-standing and intractable.

Separately, empathizing can help mediators to increase their understanding of the parties and the conflict, as well as to build a relationship of trust with the parties. Empathizing with ‘the worst’ people is difficult, but it can help mediators establish a working relationship with people who have done terrible things or hold troubling views, which mediation sometimes requires.

Given current practices, there is a potential tension between empathizing and perceived professionalism. It is rare for senior mediators to really empathize – and to do so deliberately, on an informed basis, including through in-depth discussions about the personality and perspectives of a given individual. Changes in pedagogy, training and established practice could help to change this.

Empathizing requires a major investment of time and energy on the part of the mediator. It is difficult to empathize with both sides to a conflict, and is especially challenging if there are many groups. Mediators are liable to empathize with the groups they deal with most closely, which are often sub-state groups; and, as noted above, if mediators empathize too much with one side, they risk undermining their credibility with others. Mediators should therefore empathize in a way that is disciplined and rigorous. They should be impartial and non-judgmental, while retaining their values and a degree of distance from the parties. Nevertheless, not everyone in a mediation team needs to empathize with all the parties: different members of the team can focus on and work with different actors. The key question is whether the mediation team as a whole is balanced.

Finally, mediators often work in demanding and high-pressure environments, and can sometimes find themselves at odds with their own colleagues, especially if they are working with different parties. Empathy can help members of a mediation or peacebuilding team to get along better with one another.

Looking ahead

Empathy is a valuable tool for mediators. It is often used intuitively, but everybody can improve their ability to empathize. Empathy’s role in mediation should be acknowledged, researched and better understood so that it can be incorporated into mediation training and practice in a more deliberate and effective way, and so that the risks and potential drawbacks are managed and minimized. Simulations and role-plays could be useful training tools, reinforced by experiential learning.

There is a case for further exposition of empathy's role within theories of change – how empathy leads to certain outcomes, which contributes to the achievement of long term goals – to bring greater clarity to the mechanism by which empathy contributes to transformation. There is a need for evidence of the difference that empathy can make, which could underpin wider efforts to incorporate empathy into professional practice. Universities could offer courses on empathy; organizations could undergo empathy audits; and recruitment and contract terms of reference should include the ability to empathize as a key skill.

Mediators and experts

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