



Center for **Empathy** in  
International Affairs

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# Empathy in Conflict Resolution: If, How and When

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# **CEIA Briefing: Empathy in Conflict Resolution: If, How and When**

## **Summary**

Empathy has several definitions but can be considered as the practice of imagining or grasping the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of others. As such, it is an essential tool to resolve conflict and to ensure the sustainability of peace. Mediators or facilitators can empathize through finding something within their own character or experience that resonates with the parties. This enables them to forge stronger connections, build trust and increase understanding. Empathizing helps mediators to identify a party's key concerns and sacred values. In the Colombian peace process, efforts to understand FARC leaders and their perspectives enabled facilitators to identify the nature and source of the group's core concerns, which could then be addressed, allowing the talks to progress.

Talented diplomats and decision-makers recognize the importance of empathy, but this is constrained by the assumption that states and their leaders behave rationally, dismissive attitudes towards psychological or emotional factors, and a business as usual mindset in foreign policy institutions. Decision-makers may have pre-existing biases, are sometimes reluctant to question assumptions, and their decisions are shaped by exogenous factors.

That said, empathy should be practiced judiciously. Empathizing does not necessarily lead to an improvement in behavior of a party to conflict and there is the risk that in seeking to understand another, we may fail to judge and deal with those who intend to cause harm to others. We should also bear in mind the limits of empathy to transform conflict. In intractable cases such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is unrealistic to expect empathy-based initiatives to break the deadlock in the absence of other important elements of conflict resolution. Empathizing may even generate an understanding of an adversary that leads to disillusionment about the prospects for peace.

There is a need for an understanding of empathy that goes beyond the standard conceptual frameworks of international politics. Such efforts may draw on behavioral models, such as emotional intelligence, or fields such as social, behavioral and cognitive psychology. Empathizing can be considered as a discrete activity, practiced by a given party, or as a dialectical, interactive activity involving two or more parties, in which the role of dialogue and narrative play an important role.

Looking ahead, more should be done to incorporate empathy into the pedagogy of diplomacy, negotiation and mediation. Measures should be taken to reduce bias against empathy in foreign policy institutions and to encourage scrutiny of beliefs and assumptions. Research is required on when empathizing could change behavior and yield positive outcomes, as well as on the conditions in which it will achieve little or even undermine confidence in peacebuilding. A repository of historical cases and best practices should be compiled. Papers could be researched and published presenting the lens through which a given leader or society sees a particular issue, thus enhancing understanding and expanding the public discourse.

## **Introduction**

In collaboration with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Center for Empathy in International Affairs (CEIA) held a consultation with 15 academics, experts and mediators in Washington DC on 14 March 2016. The participants are listed at the end of this briefing. The consultation addressed empathy in conflict resolution, building on insights from CEIA's March 2016 consultation on empathy in mediation, and expanded on those discussions with new insights, issues and case examples.

The participants included individuals from a range of institutions including: Alliance for Peacebuilding; Center for International Governance Innovation, Canada; Council on Foreign Relations; Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University; Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame; School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University; School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University; School of International Service, American University; and the United States Institute of Peace.

This briefing paper, written by CEIA director Matt Waldman, summarizes key insights from the consultation and case examples, as described by participants. It highlights observations regarding:

- Empathy in mediation and facilitation, including case examples of Colombia, the Caucuses and initiatives to counter violent extremism
- Constraints and challenges to empathy
- Risks and limits of empathy, including a case example of the Israel-Palestine conflict
- Empathy and theory
- Recommendations

### **Empathy in mediation and facilitation**

While there are various interpretations of empathy, cognitive empathy broadly means imagining or grasping another's thoughts, feelings and perceptions; affective empathy involves sharing another's feelings. A degree of cognitive empathy is a necessary – though not sufficient – element of conflict transformation. It has a role both in achieving peace and in sustaining peace once it has been achieved. It is hard to imagine sustainable peace as simply a formalistic, intellectual plane without empathy. As a tool for resolving conflict, the nature, form and feasibility of empathy is likely to vary from case to case. It is especially useful in a trilateral context, for a third party or mediator.

A mediator requires empathy to get inside the heads of the parties. This enables the mediator to acquire knowledge that is then used to pressure, persuade and influence each side. In empathizing, a mediator may try to suspend or suppress their sense of self, so that their own views or sentiments do not interfere with efforts to imagine mindset, feelings and perspectives of the party. However, the main instrument of mediation is the mediator him or herself, with their particular background, attributes and techniques.

Accordingly, rather than suppressing their sense of self, some mediators try to reach into themselves to find some part of their character or experience that resonates with the other, a pursuit that is possible because mediators, like everyone all humans, are multi-layered, multi-faceted and have had varied personal experiences. This can help the mediator improve their understanding of the party, forge a stronger connection, and exercise influence to reach a productive outcome. Thus, empathy, for some mediators, can involve finding something within themselves that enlarges their capacity for understanding and connection.

An empathic approach helps mediators to identify the parties' core concerns and their sacred values, in other words, beliefs or principles that a party considers as essential for their sense of identity and dignity and which they will not trade. Empathy can also help a mediator identify where, in a party's narrative, which is often charged with blame, vilification and repudiation, there is space for a new attitude and approach that could lead to agreement. If government officials are seeking to mediate, they are more likely to be able to empathize and build trust where talks are held on a confidential basis, especially where one of the parties has been stereotyped or stigmatized in the official's home country.

### *Case example: Colombia peace process*

The Colombia peace process illustrates the power and utility of empathy, which was key to building trust and overcoming a major obstacle to progress. In recent talks, the FARC guerilla movement had insisted on a long period between the signing of an eventual peace agreement and their disarmament. This was wholly unrealistic so far as the Colombian government was concerned, and left the FARC and the Colombian government a long way from agreement. Through a sustained dialogue, the United States was able to ‘tune in’ to the thinking of FARC leaders. This brought to light the fact 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 the U.S. was really able to grasp the depth of these concerns that it could address them by way of agreed steps and reassurances. The U.S. delegation was able to explain 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 was also able to commit to measures to contain the threat posed by paramilitary forces. By this means, America and its partners 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 U.S. had taken the time to get inside the heads of its interlocutors, and gauge their priorities. The key here is that whatever we may think of another party, we must recognize that they have a unique sense of who they are and what is important to them. Without grasping that and putting it into practice, the U.S. and its partners could never have really discerned and addressed the FARC’s core issues.

### *Case example: Caucasus peace talks*

In certain cases, a party to a conflict may seek empathy or recognition for an historical injustice, even where it is peripheral to the dispute at hand. In peace talks convened in the Caucasus in the 1990s, led by the mediator Harold H. Sanders, the Armenian delegation wanted the Azerbaijani participants to apologize for their role in the Armenian genocide. The latter at first could not understand why they should apologize, given that they were not Turkish. In further discussions it transpired that the Armenians had been cast only as villains in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, having appropriated two fifths of Azerbaijan. They wanted recognition – and a degree of empathy – for their status as victims. Once space was created in the talks for this to be acknowledged, the talks could then move forward.

### *Case example: Countering violent extremism*

USIP is conducting various initiatives on countering violent extremism at the local level. In Nigeria the institute is bringing together community and religious leaders, government officials, and police to counter radicalization, which is carried out largely through training, role-play and dialogue. USIP considers empathy as critical in such interventions because extremism so often involves dehumanization. Empathy is considered as a goal that the organization seeks to measure through assessing the participants’ willingness to engage, depth of understanding and mutual collaboration.

## **Constraints and challenges to empathy**

The perceived utility of empathy is undercut by the assumption of the ‘rational actor’ that is still

prevalent in many spheres of international affairs. Moreover, there is a general bias against empathizing in politics and in the foreign and security establishment. It is not just a question of whether individuals have the ability to empathize but whether they have the intention to do so. There is a sense that ‘real men don’t empathize’. Even highly reputed mediators and diplomats – such as Richard Holbrooke and George Mitchell – have avoided any acknowledgement of the role of empathy in their biographical works. Building empathy into the pedagogy of diplomacy, negotiation and mediation could help to address this problem. There is also a need for efforts to change attitudes towards empathy, which may require a different strategy for cognitive as opposed to affective empathy.

Introducing empathy into complex foreign policy institutions will be challenging given the numerous pressures faced by individuals and a highly constraining professional and political environment. To empathize accurately requires a lot of work and if practiced well, it almost invariably leads to an adjustment of our own assumptions. Yet, the willingness to question assumptions and beliefs is a quality that tends to be disparaged rather than valued in powerful institutions.

There are talented decision-makers in foreign and security policy who are highly empathic and able to acquire a deep understanding of other actors and societies. Yet, it is often challenging to bring that knowledge to bear. Biases or preconceptions about others are resistant to change, and policy-makers often take a large number of exogenous factors into account when taking decisions. There are limits as to how far an individual can empathize without being seen as a ‘sympathizer’ by their own side. Ultimately, decision-makers and senior diplomats have political constituencies that they have to satisfy in order to retain their jobs. Empathy needs to be presented as a tool that can empower individuals, and by extension institutions, rather than potentially undermine them.

### **Risks and limits of empathy**

As much as we need to empathize, there is ultimately a need for normativity in foreign affairs. We need to understand others, but we may also need to judge them. There is the risk that an overemphasis on empathy could lead to inaction – so much time is spent analyzing evil that we don’t do anything about it. This echoes important feminist critiques of mediation, which may also apply to empathy, that women could lose out if priority is given to understanding their abusers.

It is not clear that empathizing necessarily improves the behavior of the empathizer. Certain political leaders, and even novelists, for example, have displayed a huge capacity to empathize but have acted despicably. Consideration should be given to what kinds of actors, in what conditions, may misuse empathy for malign purposes – such as to identify a party’s vulnerabilities and exploit them for unjust advantage.

It is important to consider the limits of empathy’s ability to contribute to conflict transformation. There are cases where encouraging two sides of a conflict to empathize does nothing to reduce or resolve the conflict. This is especially true where efforts to empathize are undertaken in the absence of other important elements of conflict resolution. Empathy can also enable a party to realize how hateful, hostile or uncompromising an adversary really is, and the degree to which it is demonized, therefore generating disillusionment about the possibilities for peace.

#### *Case example: Israeli-Palestinian conflict*

In some long-running conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, empathy arguably has diminishing efficacy. There have been three decades of workshops on that conflict, which typically involve efforts to humanize and understand the other side. USIP has organized successive people-to-

people dialogues, some of which involved officials, that were in essence designed to promote empathy. One Palestinian participant memorably said the experience had been valuable in helping him understand the other side, and that, in a sense, they had been humanized in his eyes. He said they had held meaningful discussions, which led to improved relations. But the participant also said he now so fully understood the Israeli perspective that he couldn't imagine that peace would ever be possible. He could not believe that the Israel government would ever make the necessary compromises – and became less optimistic about the prospects for peace.

In short, where one side comes to understand the structural nature of the violence, and infeasibility of change, this can undercut and enervate efforts to achieve peace. And if years of such efforts fail to lead to meaningful change, this can also undermine the perceived value of empathy as a tool of peace-making. Thus, it must be considered what the conditions are that would allow empathy to make a real difference, and therefore, what other elements are required, in conjunction with steps to promote empathy, in order to maximize the prospects for peace.

### **Empathy in theory**

It is important to situate empathy with other relevant literatures and theories, such as emotional intelligence as explored by Daniel Goleman in the 1990s. He considered empathy as a skill to be used in conjunction with self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills and motivation. It should be asked what is to be gained and what potentially lost by considering empathy discretely, rather than as part of a broader approach, such as relating to emotional intelligence. There is much, also, in the branches of social, behavioral and cognitive psychology that situates empathy among other mental processes and types of behavior.

There is a tension between the conception of empathy as a detached activity, practiced by a given party, and empathy as a dialectical, interactive activity involving two or more parties. Indeed, there is a body of literature that argues empathy should be considered as a relational process – not simply one person's feelings or even a set of practices, but something that happens between two people as they incrementally interact. This brings our attention to the importance of conversation, for which models have been developed. It is possible to systemize dialogue – in other words, generate sets of questions in a structured way that organize people's accounts of reality, ensure that they evolve in the course of the conversation, and promote improved engagement. This enhances mutual understanding, developed through a set of narratives, which generates a better quality of relationship.

Empathy has a critical role in offsetting malign narratives, given the way that certain groups construct stories about others in order to portray them as evil. These adulterated stories, generated through folklore, popular culture, movies, books and more, can produce an environment that is conducive to highly destructive or immoral policies. Empathy can help challenge these stories, expose falsehoods and identify the resources that can be brought to bear to enable certain groups or societies to tell less harmful stories.

### **Recommendations**

There is a powerful case for incorporating empathy into the pedagogy of diplomacy, negotiation and mediation. Targeted efforts are required to mitigate the bias against empathy in foreign affairs, promote its professional recognition, and encourage greater willingness to scrutinize our own beliefs and assumptions.

There is a need for research on the conditions in which empathy is unlikely to bring about positive change and may even undermine confidence in peacebuilding. Research is also required on when the

practice of empathy changes behavior and leads to better outcomes. Historical cases should be catalogued where empathy has had effect, drawing on the experience of those with proven international experience. A repository of best practices could be established.

It is often essential for policy-makers or practitioners to acquire a deep understanding of another society – and on other occasions, the particular way of thinking, mindset and attitudes of a particular leader. In each case, the process of empathizing may be quite different. There is a strong case for research and publication of papers that present the lens through which certain societies, groups or leaders view certain issues in international affairs. This would socialize different perspectives on a given issue, broaden understanding, and raise the quality of public discourse. By analogy, there is strong case for promoting empathy in society as a whole, as a cultural attribute, and as a skill used by individuals, not only in negotiations but in many other spheres of human activity.

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## Participants

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