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# Empathy Institutionalized: Sociocultural Dialogue as a Strategic Peacebuilding Initiative

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The pervasive and polarized political climate of the United States surrounding the 2016 presidential election is thought by several to be a surprising manifestation of innate division, bringing attention to issues which many did not previously believe to exist within U.S. society. Across the spectrum of political affiliation, disunion and hateful rhetoric continue to plague both civil and social spheres, creating conflict exemplified particularly in the overwhelming increase of reported hate crimes occurring in the election's aftermath. During the ten days following the 2016 election, the Southern Poverty Law Center counted 867 hate incidents committed within this time frame—a number absolutely appalling in and of itself, but likely nowhere near reflective of the full magnitude of divisive acts that ensued and continue to transpire today<sup>1</sup>. Strikingly, of these cases, the most common settings for such events to occur were K-12 institutions and college campuses, with this violence demonstrating a clear need for peacebuilding interventions across a variety of institutions, but particularly within educational settings. While the motivation behind such attacks remains rooted within complex interactions of historic, systemic, and individual prejudices, their occurrence illuminates a definitive need to improve upon society's overall lacking abilities to communicate and empathize with those who appear to be different. From this need arises the ever-prominent question which exists at the core of any conflict: how does a society begin to work to bridge such deep divides?

Research suggests that in searching for sustainable solutions to conflict, societies ought to look just there: the beginning. This work explores from an integrative psychosocial perspective the potential that exists in working to define a more equitable, empathetic means to a conflict's end by shaping a new beginning, through directly examining the institutions that comprise our

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<sup>1</sup> CNN, Holly Yan Kristina Sgueglia and Kylie Walker. 2017. "'Make America White Again': Hate Speech and Crimes Post-Election." *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/10/us/post-election-hate-crimes-and-fears-trnd/index.html>.

own beginnings— schools. Through use of a combined research lens of peace studies as well as social and developmental psychology, educational practices emerge as a viable means for strategic peacebuilding. Simply put, peacebuilding here refers to efforts to transcend social division in ways that promote productive interpersonal relationships across identities. In labeling this peacebuilding as strategic, one signifies that peacebuilding efforts deserve consistent application across all levels of society, both in policy and practice. One such initiative with the capability to integrate into existing educational frameworks and to hold a lasting impact on large-scale conflict resolution is that of sociocultural dialogue, or intentionally developed conversation surrounding pertinent social issues such as race, class, and gender. These conversations, when structured correctly, prove to facilitate a significant increase in individual levels of empathy, ultimately working to shape a more resilient society. Such efforts effectively serve not only as a form of conflict resolution, but as an intentional strategy toward a sustainable means to address future division. By assessing dispositional empathy as a cognitively-based emotional response, it becomes clear that this empathy can be increased through engaging in perspective-taking experiences, such as those inherent in dialogues surrounding social issues and personal narrative. It then follows that creating spaces for the facilitation of these experiences through sociocultural dialogue remains an imperative in striving to increase empathetic levels. Through using elementary classrooms as a means to introduce empathy-building experiences during critical developmental years, sustainable peacebuilding initiatives are embedded within our institutional framework—initiatives that promote an ultimate motivation toward altruistic behavior and civic engagement for future generations, and hold the utmost potential to begin bridging the polarized division we see today in United States society.

Psychological Significance of Empathy to Peacebuilding Processes:

In approaching conflict defined by sociopolitical polarization, empathy emerges as a viable means to bridge intergroup division due to its capacity to increase both individual and interpersonal wellbeing—ultimately producing markedly improved positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors. On a basic level, research indicates that deficient amounts of empathy within one’s personality correlate with behavioral complications, as well as with more destructive traits such as aggression.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, increases in empathy repeatedly correspond with greater amounts of prosocial behavior.<sup>3</sup> Yet while many use the terminology of empathy broadly, frequently, and colloquially, its connotation takes on a variety of different meanings within the scientific community. Psychologically-oriented frameworks produce a number of conditions and qualifications which accompany differing forms of empathy, making it imperative to define which type is referred to here. In the most general of contexts, empathy categorizes as either cognitive or emotional, with cognitive empathy involving the pursuit of experiencing another’s point of view.<sup>4</sup> As this designation best suits discussion for peacebuilding initiatives, the concept of cognitive empathy necessitates in-depth examination for evaluating its potential in conflict resolution processes. Research indicates that through engaging in cognitive empathetic experiences, a psychological overlap of what individuals perceive as self and other occurs, meaning that people quite literally project their identities onto that of another person in the moment that they empathize. Most notably, a self/other merging of both perspectives and trait characteristics are found to consistently correlate with empathetic instances, signifying that these

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<sup>2</sup> Rieffe, Carolien, Lizet Ketelaar, and Carin H. Wiefferink. 2010. “Assessing Empathy in Young Children: Construction and Validation of an Empathy Questionnaire (EmQue).” *Personality and Individual Differences* 49 (5): 362–67.

<sup>3</sup> De Waal, Francis B. M. “Putting the Altruism Back Into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy.” 2017. Accessed March 28.

<sup>4</sup> Belman, Jonathan, and Mary Flanigan. 2017. “Designing Games to Foster Empathy.” <http://www.maryflanigan.com/wp-content/uploads/cog-tech-si-g4g-article-1-belman-and-flanigan-designing-games-to-foster-empathy.pdf>.

instances influence one to believe in the possibility that others could think or feel similarly to them (regardless of outwardly apparent social or physical differences).<sup>5</sup> In merging one's identity with another's through empathetic concern, similarities perhaps not immediately otherwise apparent begin to arise. Through pursuit of similarities between self and other, links between cognitive empathy and prejudice reduction become apparent, with such empathy holding potential to increase positive intergroup attitudes and interactions.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout efforts to identify such constructive similarities, or essentially to increase levels of cognitive empathy, perspective-taking exercises emerge as a viable solution. Perspective-taking activities often begin through use of phrases such as "Imagine if..." or "Picture yourself in this situation..." with an intentionally planned activity or narrative to follow. Framing activities in such a way that instructs participants to empathize can furthermore result in improved attitudes toward marginalized or stigmatized groups, as Batson and colleagues demonstrate in their 2002 series of studies.<sup>7</sup> Such findings illustrate just how powerful empathetic capacity can be when directed in strategic and innovative ways, particularly in the context of peacebuilding across divisions. Therefore, we need not confine initiatives to psychological studies, as strategies for empathetic increase prove useful for a variety of other practices.

### Institutionalization Through Education:

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, Mark H., Laura Conklin, Amy Smith, and Carol Luce. 1996. "Effect of Perspective Taking on the Cognitive Representation of Persons: A Merging of Self and Other." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 (4): 713–26.

<sup>6</sup> Byrnes, Deborah, and Gary Kiger. 2017. "The Effect of a Prejudice-Reduction Simulation on Attitude Change." Accessed May 8. <https://valpo.illiad.oclc.org/illiad/IVU/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=254862>.

<sup>7</sup> Batson, C. D., Chang, J., Orr, R., & Rowland, J. (2002). Empathy, attitudes, and action: Can feeling for a member of stigmatized group motivate one to help the group? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 1656-1666.

Given this discussion on the benefits of increased levels of empathy to the peacebuilding process, it follows that one must question both where and how such increases can occur to produce large-scale social change in addressing conflict. Such questions may lead to institutionalization of items traditionally considered by society to be solely interpersonal, specifically in viewing sociocultural dialogue as a strategically empathy-oriented tool. Sociocultural dialogue again refers to intentionally developed conversation surrounding pertinent social issues such as race, class, and gender. These types of discussions merge together thinking on social issues and reflections on personal experiences in an effort to allow space for individuals to share their own narratives, as well as listen to the narratives of others.

Additionally, from a pragmatic standpoint, the perspective-taking experiences and empathetic increases that remain inherent to sociocultural dialogue directly coincide with existing structures or practices at a variety of institutions. Arguably, the most viable institution suited for the promotion of such experiences remains that of the U.S. education system. Classroom curriculum and educational activities possess potential to include empathy-building discussion on a daily basis through incorporation of age-appropriate, developmentally relevant sociocultural dialogue. Many programs that are qualified or easily adaptable for these means already exist in areas such as social studies curriculums, mentoring programs, or after school activities.

Introducing such programs at carefully selected times and in developmentally appropriate ways remains key to ensuring their success. Discerning optimal processes for both of these factors involves assessing both the progression of empathy throughout an individual's life span, as well as examining typical stages of cognitive development throughout childhood. In the overall development of empathy, four stages generally occur, all taking place within a child's

first decade of life. These stages build upon one another, with the final phase entailing feeling “empathy for another’s life condition,” appearing around age eight or nine.<sup>8</sup> This empathic level may elicit both empathy and support from children for those in “less favorable situations.”<sup>9</sup> In the ability to here connect empathy with action, introducing such dialogue around this age, or at a third-grade learning level, carries a fair amount of evidential weight backing the benefits of improving upon levels of empathy at a stage in life where it substantially develops. Fostering these experiences from the relative beginning of empathetic maturity allows for the creation of a strong empathetic foundation for children that can be built upon as they move through life. Such a foundation can prove to be not only instrumental, but transformative to peacebuilding efforts in regard to individuals’ capacity to resolve conflict both interpersonally and collectively.

#### Necessity of Context-Specific Approaches:

Yet, in commencing such practices even in developmentally appropriate manners, context-specificity remains an equally important factor to likelihood of program success. Particularly given the topics which sociocultural dialogue aims to tackle, keeping one’s audience or intended participants in mind must dictate the details of program advancement. Curriculum or text topics must be chosen with care by those most deeply immersed in the community, mandating that sociocultural dialogue as a peacebuilding process must be community-oriented and based in a collective pursuit for conflict resolution. As such, a task force or strategic team of invested individuals may prove to be of greatest use in advocating for the needs of the children within the context at hand, as well as in eliciting a broader level of support from community

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<sup>8</sup> Hoffman, Martin. 1987. “The contribution of empathy to justice and moral judgment.” N. Eisenberg and J. Strayer (Eds.), *Empathy and its development* (pp. 47-80). New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Reid, Corinne, Helen Davis, Chiara Horlin, Mike Anderson, Natalie Baughman, and Catherine Campbell. 2013. “The Kids’ Empathic Development Scale (KEDS): A Multi-dimensional Measure of Empathy in Primary School-aged Children.” *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 31 (2): 231–56. doi:10.1111/bjdp.12002.

members. Educators, social workers, parents, and even students can act as representative figures in this process, in an effort to gain input from as many voices as is situationally possible. In encompassing numerous perspectives, communities exhibit agency and investment that allow program successes to increase because they can be directly attributed to the community itself rather than an outside entity.

When speaking of program development in terms of resource selection, inclusion, and application, a variety of databases and sources exist as a means to supply the necessary materials for productive conversation. As previously mentioned, this can take many forms or combine a number of already constructed sources, varying by context and continual input from the educators in a specific environment. “Perspectives for a Diverse America’s” program, or The Southern Poverty Law Center’s “Teaching Tolerance” database, for example, provide a wealth of resources on approaching conversation regarding topics such as race, gender, class, and ability in developmentally appropriate ways within classroom settings. Kathryn Otoshi’s children’s books cover similar subjects using concepts such as numbers or colors in the abstract as being symbolic of larger social issues, allowing students to draw connections on their own accord between her work and the world around them. Even clips from Disney movies such as “Zootopia” prove useful in structuring developmentally appropriate discussions for students to engage in critical dialogue with one another—giving rise to opportunities to practice active listening and perspective-taking frameworks through respectfully hearing others’ thoughts and experiences. It remains imperative that these dialogues provide students with the space to think, speak, and listen for themselves, engaging directly with one another in the presence of a conversation facilitator, but never crossing over into a lecture-style setting. This permits students to learn how



to communicate, interpret, and process difference in a positive way and at a critical age when they begin to reach the cognitive capacity to do so.

Long-Term Projected Outcomes:

Through introducing sociocultural dialogue within classrooms by way of perspective-taking experiences, it remains evident that the potential for producing empathetic increase holds a solid foundational support in psychological literature. Yet, the larger significance of this increase lies not in viewing empathy in and of itself as an inherent good, but through examining the influence that empathy can exert over future behavior. The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis, examined in-depth by prominent social psychologist Charles Daniel Batson, develops a direct, causal relationship between experiences of empathy and actions of altruism. Simply put, this hypothesis states that “empathetic concern produces altruistic motivation.”<sup>10</sup> However, experiencing a feeling of empathetic concern is contingent on the perception of a present need—the identification of which may occur throughout the process of engaging in sociocultural dialogue. In experiencing an empathetic response to such needs, altruistic motivation manifests. Research suggests this is due to shared neural pathways between portions of the brain which process empathy as well as provoke motivation, meaning that empathy neurologically amplifies one’s motivation to do good in the world. The implications that this motivation holds in determining increased levels of civic engagement, which can ultimately work to combat polarization, remain immense.<sup>11</sup>

These findings designate empathy as a vital component in peacebuilding processes well worth monitoring on a deeper level. Researchers and scholars have vehemently debated the

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<sup>10</sup> Batson, Charles Daniel. 2011. *Altruism in Humans*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Bierhoff, Hans-Werner, and Elke Rohmann. 2004. “Altruistic Personality in the Context of the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis.” *European Journal of Personality* 18 (4): 351–65. doi:10.1002/per.523.

measures by which to do this, resulting in a variety of existing empathy scales today. In measuring such intangible qualities in statistically quantifiable ways, a valid argument can be made that in the process, a fundamental piece of empathy's essence is lost. While this counterpoint is an important one to remain cognizant of, the benefits of making an earnest attempt to engage in outcomes-based analysis of empathy may ultimately be what allows for its reach to expand. In quantifying the value of concepts such as empathetic response and its relation to sociocultural dialogue, peacebuilding efforts are able to build a reputation for such practices within our current social framework—a framework that not only emphasizes statistical outcomes as a necessary component in defining success, but attaches financial funding to such successes. Thus, the more we measure the importance of dialogue in quantifiable terms, the more institutional validity we might secure to support it as a sustainable peacebuilding initiative, making this dialogue more accessible to mainstream institutions and ultimately to society as a whole.

In viewing, implementing, and measuring the effects of sociocultural dialogue as a strategic peacebuilding initiative, communities may take great strides in beginning the process of bridging extreme division. Particularly in the United States' polarized and partisan culture of today, a means for citizens to engage with one another through discussions that not only respect differences, but promote unity despite these differences remains imperative. Due to its capacity to increase both individual and collective levels of empathy, sociocultural dialogue serves as a viable option to promote such unity. In initiating dialogues surrounding social issues such as race, class, and gender in ways which allow participants to experience the perspective of another, and in effect, empathize with them, marked improvements in intergroup attitudes, individual helpfulness, and altruistic motivation may take form. Through creating spaces for these

conversations on an institutional level, particularly in the context of the U.S. education system, such dialogues are able to adapt to programs well-suited for their integration. Beyond these benefits, in pursuing the educational incorporation of sociocultural dialogue at critical developmental stages, students receive valuable opportunities to increase empathetic concern at ages where they possess the cognitive capacity to do so. This increase in empathy ultimately holds great promise for future advances in levels of civic engagement and altruistic behavior on a large-scale social level, allowing sociocultural dialogue to act as an embedded and institutionalized form of strategic peacebuilding that serves to shape a more resilient society for generations to come.

Therefore, in working to develop peacebuilding processes that aim to overcome divisions like we see today, we must expand vital practices traditionally viewed as being solely interpersonal to an institutional magnitude. We must delve further into why and how intangible necessities such as empathy can be measured and increased, ultimately looking directly at systems such as education which hold such strong potential for the incorporation of strategic peacebuilding initiatives. In providing spaces for individuals to engage with one another through perspective-taking experiences and relating these experiences to the numerous benefits of empathetic response, we move from a present day narrative surrounded by instances of hatred to a future one shaped by an overwhelming sense of hope.

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