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A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine

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Abstract

This article starts from the premise that empathy is an inherent part of social and political life but that this is not sufficiently theorised in International Relations. Building on the burgeoning debates on emotions in world politics, it argues that the study of empathy should be developed more rigorously by establishing an interdisciplinary and critical framework for understanding the experiences and processes of empathy in IR. The central contribution of the paper is two-fold: firstly, it highlights limitations of the dominant perspective on empathy in IR, and secondly, it argues that a range of meanings may be attributed to empathy when examined within the socio-political conditions of particular contexts. Drawing on research on the conflict in Israel and Palestine, the article identifies and articulates two such alternative interpretations: empathy as non-violent resistance and as a strategy of normalisation.

*Do not judge your neighbour until you walk two moons in his moccasins.*¹

Empathy is accepted as a core capacity of human beings and as a fundamental component of social and political life in disciplines as varied as political theory, neuroscience, applied linguistics, social psychology, and philosophy. Although it has emerged as a relevant concept in the fields of peace studies and conflict resolution, it has received relatively little attention in International Relations (IR) despite the latter's burgeoning literature on emotions. Notwithstanding the significance of the role that it plays, there have been remarkably few attempts to rigorously theorise how empathy operates within the (international) political sphere.² For the most part, attention has been focused on the interpersonal or intergroup dimension of empathy in mediation, problem-solving workshops, or peace-building programs without considering its wider political role within and between states and societies. At the same time, however, increasing recognition has been voiced in the public sphere, by President Barack Obama among others, of an 'empathy

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deficit'³ while other scholars regard the contemporary period to represent the coming of the 'age of empathy'.⁴

With such claims contributing to a discourse of empathy identified as a positive influence in the public sphere, it is timely to explore the role attributed to the concept in greater depth. With this in mind, the article offers a preliminary mapping of the definitions and uses of the term empathy across different disciplines. While not an exhaustive account, it serves to establish a platform for the development of a more critical engagement with the theory and practice of empathy. The article articulates a number of conceptual limitations to the mainstream discourse of empathy which tends to assume a normative, progressive dimension.⁵ Such shortcomings include the absence of recognition of a 'politics of empathy'; many of the current debates neither adequately examine the socio-political conditions in which empathy may or may not operate nor recognise the political character of empathy when it is adopted by actors. A further significant lacuna in the literature is attention to processes whereby empathy may be enabled or constrained from flowing across different levels of analysis in societies, thus embracing the individual and collectives. Integrating empathy into recent debates on narratives and emotions in IR which have begun to theorise how emotions as motivators for political behaviour operate across the political spectrum from individuals to groups to states remains a challenge for IR scholars.⁶ It has long been recognised that sustainable engagement with conflict requires addressing its emotional dimension⁷, yet despite the primacy of empathy within this transformative toolbox, it has been given little explicit critical attention.

The article acknowledges the important contribution of a normative dimension of empathy and its powerful role in reconciliation processes (among others), yet also argues for the need to locate empathy within its socio-political context and recognise the asymmetries of power embedded in relationships.⁸ As Lauren Berlant writes, 'the project of critique seeks not to destroy its object but to explain the dynamics of its optimism and exclusions'.⁹ In this light the article seeks to reveal the presumptions underpinning dominant perspectives on empathy and to problematise these by identifying alternative readings of empathy.

One of the most challenging cases in international politics, the protracted conflict in Israel and Palestine is nonetheless an important site for the study of empathy. This is largely because of the considerable focus on people-to-people peace-building activities initiated by

local and international organisations after the Oslo Accords - for which empathy was a core ingredient - and the failure of those activities to transform the conflict at a macro-level or prevent the repeated escalations of violence. Yet despite the mistrust and disillusionment this has created for many, there remains a commitment amongst a wide range of individuals and organisations to contact activities which embrace various understandings of empathy and dialogue which, as discussed below, may themselves be a source of contestation and conflict. Given its prevalence, understanding the role of empathy is an important component in analysing the conflict and its potential for transformation.

I conducted approximately twenty interviews during two periods of fieldwork in 2013-14 which sought to explore the dynamics of empathy through encounters with Israelis and Palestinians. I focused on civil society and grassroots organisations working with non-violent approaches to the conflict¹⁰ in Israel and the West Bank and spoke with their leaders or volunteers. The majority of interviewees have been involved with peace-building organisations for a long time and have experienced different periods of the conflict (reflected in shifts in their perspectives regarding empathy, contact and dialogue activities with the outgroup). Motivations for their involvement varied; some had been former combatants who had rejected violence, some were peace educators or students, others were pacifists, peace activists, those who had lost loved ones, and so on. I sought to understand what definitions of empathy individuals held, how and why they engaged in empathy (if they did), with whom they were empathic, and what role they perceived empathy to play in the conflict and its transformation. The focus on grassroots actors reflects both the characterisation of empathy in the literatures as a predominantly interpersonal or individual process and the predominant site of people-to-people peace-building activities.¹¹

Drawing on this research the article empirically highlights the aforementioned limitations of the existing discourse by focusing on two interpretations from Israel-Palestine which reveal the range of meanings which may be attributed to empathy; namely, empathy understood as both a practice of non-violent resistance and as a strategy for normalisation. Characterising empathy in such terms broadly reflects the Coxian distinction between critical theory and problem-solving theory. In Robert Cox's well-known framing, critical theory 'does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in

the process of changing'.¹² This contains an emancipatory capacity which is reflected in the meaning attributed by actors to empathy as non-violent resistance. Conversely, 'the general aim of problem-solving is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble'.¹³ This reflects a 'normalising' approach to the conflict in Israel-Palestine which seeks to make the existing conditions work better rather than challenge the historical conditions and asymmetries of the occupation. Exploring these differences is not intended to subsume all Palestinian and Israeli experiences within these interpretations. Instead, it seeks to draw attention to patterns evident in a relatively small sample of interviews in order to raise a key question: how is meaning attributed to empathy in IR? Examining empathy in this light demonstrates that the meaning attributed to empathy offers a spectrum of possible practices and interpretations.

Recognition of empathy – like emotion – relies largely, in the social sciences at least, on discourse analysis. It is through language and representation that actors – individuals and collectives – attribute meaning to action and cognition. Linguistic expressions of connection offer a means to identify what Lynne Cameron has called 'gestures of empathy'.¹⁴ The identification of empathy cannot be adequately interpreted, I suggest, without reference to the specific socio-political conditions of its expression. This is, therefore, an interpretivist rather than a causal argument about empathy. Interpreting the meanings attributed to empathy by individuals and collectives seeks to contribute to an understanding of how these practices shape – and are shaped by – social identities and narratives of conflict.¹⁵ Whilst the focus remains on empathy as a discrete concept for the purposes of the argument, this is not intended to detract from the recognition that empathy is inextricably entwined with a variety of other emotional and cognitive processes. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to do justice to the many divisions between and within groups in Israeli and Palestinian societies, I do not assume that these interpretations of empathy are fully representative of any group as a whole and they are not intended to downplay the social dynamics – including the potential disruption of collective narratives by dissenting voices – within groups. There is sufficient coherence within the empirical evidence, however, to suggest that these are interpretations which resonate with a range of individuals and organisations which have adopted particular narratives of the conflict in Israel-Palestine and that they justify the call to more rigorously engage with empathy in IR.

The argument develops through the following steps. I first provide an orientation for the theoretical perspective towards empathy before navigating the definitional debates surrounding the concept for the purposes of the current argument. I then turn to examine the meanings attributed to empathy in the empirical context as identified above.

(Re)framing empathy

As earlier debates between positivism and critical theory clearly revealed, to represent voices and reality in certain ways is to adopt particular perspectives on the production of knowledge. The epistemological conditions of empathy as relational and intersubjective reveal this in practice because we explore stories of connection (or lack thereof), and so recognise that empathy cannot simply be an abstract intellectual concept. It is embodied, messy, personal and political. Moreover, if, as I argue that it does, empathy contains within it the possibility of social and political transformation, then researching the dynamics of empathy brings with it a responsibility to reflect upon the construction of our subjectivities. In this vein, Oded Löwenheim has written that 'the individual [is] not just an interpreter of social reality, [but] someone who can understand her/himself through thinking about social institutions, practices, and phenomena'.¹⁶ This transcends the merely personal and places the story within a social and political context that ties the life and identities of the individual to the life of the society he or she lives in. In other words, it is akin to C. Wright Mills' vision of the sociological imagination. The task is, as Mills writes, to 'grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society'.¹⁷ Grasping this relationship in the context of a critical study of the dynamics of empathy is crucial because it situates individuals embedded in particular social, political and cultural conditions and facilitates an understanding of what hinders or enables both individual empathy and broader empathy flows within and between societies.

Questions of empathy in lived experience do not fall neatly into the neuroscientific, psychological, or philosophical accounts of empathy but are messy and complex. As already suggested, they bring to the foreground the question of knowledge creation: how is it that meaning is given by actors to acts of empathy and how is it interpreted by those who listen? Empathetic engagement is not straightforward for either party: 'it is uneven, mediated and shot through with incommensurabilities'.¹⁸ This reflects Christine Sylvester's argument that 'empathetic cooperation [offers] a navigational method of politics at borderlands' through

which 'our subjectivities travel to accommodate the new empathies'.¹⁹ Empathy always requires attention to the way in which subjects position themselves in relation to the multiple identities and sources of conflict they are embedded within. The face-to-face encounters narrated through fieldwork revealed both interpersonal *and* structural relations at play in shaping practices of empathy and call for the contours of empathy to be delineated with greater reflection. Doing so not only draws attention to the production of meaning and subjectivities concerning empathy but it also engages with the social, linguistic, psychological and political conditions which shape these processes.

Empathy is a term which has been widely adopted in different literatures and for which there is no single, coherent and consistent meaning, although broad similarities can be traced across definitions and uses.²⁰ In what follows, I will sketch some of the broad lines of debate in order to briefly indicate the variety of disciplines in which empathy has become a significant part. This is by no means an exhaustive account, but it serves as a platform on which to articulate my definition of empathy for the purposes of this article.

Empathy can be defined as that 'faculty which enables us to feel with another human being, to cognitively and affectively put ourselves into his or her place, and therefore to become aware of the other's feelings, needs, and wants'.²¹ Various named, forms of empathy, sympathy and compassion²² are commonly perceived by philosophers and others as morally relevant concepts in that acquiring a 'sense of others' is a moral virtue and an important factor of social life.²³ In this sense it is argued to be a normative good which contains within it the seeds of progress for humanity. This discourse of empathy, reflecting its philosophical origins in Enlightenment humanism, dominant paradigms of cosmopolitanism and human rights, offers a positive recognition of the value of empathy in terms of its capacity to expand the boundaries of our moral universe, to contribute to social cohesion, cooperation, reconciliation and 'humanising' processes. Within this tradition, a 'sense of the other' *qua* (equal) human being is both self-evident and universal. As Steven Pinker has noted, 'the Rights Revolutions show that a moral way of life often requires a decisive rejection of instinct, culture, religion, and standard practice. In their place is an ethics that is inspired by empathy and reason and stated in the language of rights'.²⁴ These theoretical debates, which shifted the frame of reference from the state to the individual in IR, also address the moral responsibilities we have towards other individuals as a result of 'enlarging the boundaries of compassion'.²⁵ While such positive connotations of empathy

may be central to conflict transformation and reconciliation processes, they also imply, somewhat problematically as Carolyn Pedwell has noted, a certain teleological aspect to empathy in terms of its inherently progressive, benign, and civilising character.²⁶

To be clear, there is no intrinsic problem with the normative qualities implied in this discourse of empathy; what is at stake is the degree to which this – somewhat abstract, top-down and, in some cases, institutionalised²⁷ – approach to empathy tends to exclude sufficient acknowledgement of the relations of power which structure context-specific and situated conflicts. As Andrew Linklater argued ‘thin conceptions of cosmopolitan citizenship revolve around compassion for the vulnerable but leave asymmetries of power and wealth intact’.²⁸ In other words, we must interrogate the ideological work which such humanist values enable. Representing empathy as one thing rather than others – as a benign, beneficial process of reconciliation, for example – is to construct identities of people and states in particular ways. Such an approach contains within it the potential seeds of a hierarchical, asymmetrical relationship between the empathiser and the recipient.²⁹ In such circumstances the language of empathy may be ‘presumptuous’; it may serve to ‘disempower people’ by making interpretive claims regarding the experiences of others.³⁰ Consequently, it serves to constitute particular subject-positions whereby the weaker, more vulnerable, needy party receives a benevolent empathy from the stronger party, or, as Kathy Ferguson argues in the context of reconciliation, ‘empathy can readily be recruited into a gesture of appropriate [*sic*] (as in “I know just what you mean” when I really don’t know at all)’³¹ thus silencing alternative forms of knowledge, expression, and experience. Such a discourse may be more likely to pre-assign subjectivities to actors thereby imposing in advance a reification of narratives and determining the appropriate recipient (and vulnerable) subjects of empathy (or sympathy).³² Adopting such an approach not only raises expectations for a positive (and affective) remedy for the situation, but forecloses an interrogation of how and why actors themselves experience, adopt, utilise, and understand empathy in particular social and political conditions. This serves to obscure recognition of the contested meaning of empathy, the reasons or motives for which it is adopted and the ways it may be used, as well as its role in producing relations of power which may benefit some more than others: together these dimensions create a ‘politics of empathy’. Raising questions which underpin the present discussion, Pedwell has argued that

efforts to generate empathy might be less important or productive in some contexts than examining the potential causes and implications of empathetic ‘failures’ – those circumstances in which empathy reaches its limit point, is ignored or rejected by its intended recipient(s), has antithetical consequences to those anticipated, or simply makes no sense (or difference) in the midst of given social conditions and political hierarchies. Rather than assuming that empathy is a ‘good’ thing [...] [we should] consider a range of more [...] critical questions: What is empathy? What does it do? Who does it serve? What are its risks?³³

By addressing these questions, the study of empathy can move beyond the dichotomy which exists within current representations of empathy in realist and liberal thought in IR. Whilst much of the realist cannon implicitly rejects the relevance of empathy,³⁴ strands of cosmopolitan liberal thought tend to extract it from its socio-political context and offer a rather monochromatic representation of empathy as a benign, beneficial and moral process which forms a crucial element of a (cosmopolitan) ethics of political community. This macro-level approach to empathy often assumes that the expressions, interpretations and benefits of empathy are the same irrespective of place, context, and relations of power. In contrast, I argue, the meaning attributed to empathy varies from one cultural and political context to the next.³⁵ A micro approach investigates how empathy may be ‘constituted by and function in particular cultural and political environments’.³⁶

(Re)defining empathy

Empathy is generally accepted as a mode of being which connects us to others and which promotes intersubjective relations, enabling the individual subject to move beyond the limits of her own knowledge.³⁷ The intersubjectivity of the relationship between self and other is an ontological and epistemological premise of empathy. Indeed, Richard Ned Lebow has written that ‘[e]mpathy in turn encourages us to see others as our ontological equals and to recognize the self-actualizing benefits of close relationships with others.’³⁸ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that one of the most common definitions of empathy focuses on accessing the thoughts and feelings of others; in other words, to walk in the shoes of the other. On a fundamental level, empathy involves recognising others as human beings. This

resonates with Axel Honneth's argument for a 'founding moment of intersubjective recognition in the process of human interaction'.³⁹ As fundamental as recognising others as ontological equals is to exercising empathy successfully, so an inability or refusal to recognise others as such contributes to blocking empathy.

The immanent potential of such an intersubjective relationship denotes a capacity for transformation. Such change must begin at home, with the self. As Clare Hemmings has argued, 'Empathy can be the mechanism through which...subjects transform their own comfort as subjects in order to appreciate and understand the other'.⁴⁰ The intersubjective ramifications of empathy reside in the possibility of shifts in the subject positions of individuals. Such shifts emerge from the process of empathy as it is described by Nava Sonnenschein, director of the School for Peace (Neve Shalom–Wahat al-Salam) in Israel: 'To understand deeply the existence of the other...not to save face...not to project the blame, not to try to make symmetry...really to care about the other side and also to take responsibility [for] what you should do in order to change the situation'.⁴¹ This shift may be explored in the example of the Israeli or American Jew, a self-declared liberal/moderate who considers Israeli checkpoints comparable to airport security control, yet participates in a MachsomWatch tour of the West Bank or the enclave created by the separation barrier north of Jerusalem.⁴² What tensions and possibilities may reside and emerge through this experience that challenge existing subjectivities?

Broadly speaking, psychology and neuroscience debates have recognised that empathy is able to inhibit aggressive behaviour.⁴³ Within these disciplines has also emerged a distinction between automatic and cognitive empathy.⁴⁴ The former is considered akin to an automatic emotional response to the experience of others – emotional contagion and emotional recognition/responsiveness are common alternative terms - whereas the latter requires actors to consciously choose to engage in empathy and refers to a capacity for agency and cognitive perspective taking. This distinction also touches on the debate in emotions research whether emotions are primarily cognitive or bodily perceptions.⁴⁵

Cognitive empathy invites the actor to understand the perspective of the other while not having to share it on an emotional level. While sympathy denotes an element of concern or care for the other, cognitive empathy may be used to undermine another actor and this is embodied in the first rule of military strategy: know thy enemy. Along these lines, Matthew Waldman has noted that 'empathy as practiced by a government can be

considered as an analytical tool that does not require any kind of isomorphism or the sharing of feelings'.⁴⁶ This form of empathy also requires an ability to tolerate the emotional and moral ambivalence that exercising empathy may give rise to.⁴⁷ Crucially, the analytical distinction between cognition and emotion serves to highlight two important factors for the present definition of empathy. The first is the indeterminate character of empathy: a benevolent or positive intention should not be assumed prior to investigation. Second, the increasing rejection of the distinction between cognition and emotion across disciplines recognises the role that emotions play in shaping actors' motives, intentions, judgements, reasoning and beliefs.⁴⁸

Empathy is thus conceived here as an intersubjective, dynamic, cognitive and emotional process which operates across multiple timescales.⁴⁹ It involves a cognitive understanding of the other's point of view as well as, potentially, the sharing of emotions. This means being willing to accept another person or group's interpretation of events. Even if an individual is only exercising cognitive empathy towards the other, s/he cannot divorce their cognitive processes from their own emotions which shapes how they may process the information received. While empathy always requires individual cognitive-emotional processes, collective empathy refers to collective narratives regarding the recognition and legitimization of the other and captures the complex relationship between individuals and groups in terms of beliefs, identities, emotional orientations, and narratives.

Cameron's discourse dynamics model of empathy has identified a series of stages which lend a temporal dimension to our conceptual and empirical exploration.⁵⁰ Cameron's model offers the following four stages: 1) the background conditions for empathy (all that participants are and bring to the dialogue, including, procedural preparations for talks, individual/group attitudes and beliefs or biological disposition); 2) the local discourse dynamics of empathy which take place during dialogue (timeframe of minutes); 3) the emerging discourse patterns of empathy through dialogue (timeframe of minutes/hours); and 4) emergent empathic stabilities which emerge across days/weeks/months/years in the public sphere and in political or social discourse. Whilst stages 2 and 3 may be identified within various people-to-people activities, the absence of the latter stage of emergent empathic stabilities from elite discourse or public opinion in contemporary Israeli and Palestinian societies contributes to some of the tension identified around the effectiveness and purpose of interpersonal or intergroup dialogue encounters (discussed below).

Illustrating the significance of time for empathic processes, one of the teachers involved in the Peace Research in the Middle East (PRIME) dual narrative project in Israel-Palestine reflected that

When I saw the narrative of the other side, first I was angry and frustrated at how different it is from ours. I felt it was not based on facts but on stories and emotions. Later, I learned to cognitively accept the difference, but still felt that our narrative was superior to theirs. Only recently did I learn to see the logic behind their narrative and even to emotionally feel empathy to what they went through. If this took me four years, imagine what it will take the pupils or their parents.⁵¹

What this makes clear is that empathic interactions take time, the absence of which sets up a clear obstacle to the sustainable transformation of relationships. These are likely to be iterative processes which happen over long periods of time with various actors and through which change always remains a possibility.⁵² In this vein – and in the tradition of critical theory - I argue that a dynamic process of empathy always contains an immanent potential for transformation of the self and of self-other relationships. As Yiftach Ron and Ifat Maoz have argued, '[c]onfronting contested narratives in ethnopolitical conflict [...] is a transformative form of intergroup engagement because it can create spaces for different affective and ethical relations with *[self]* and others'.⁵³ Crucially, however, such change is not inevitable or determined; actors who take a decision to empathise during dialogue in a particular moment are not bound to act in particular ways thereafter. Their ongoing actions will be part of a complex process involving material interests and ideational factors which may enable or constrain particular outcomes. It is the actions that follow the decision to engage in empathy which may reveal the agent's intention to contribute in some way to the well-being of another. Such commitment needs to be built over time through repetition and repeated engagement. As expressed by both Palestinian and Israeli participants, 'you have to cultivate the change...Because reality is very strong, can erase the impact. It's not natural, you have to build it. You can feel empathy and do nothing.'⁵⁴

Parties in intractable conflicts tend to establish monolithic identities for themselves and the other which are bolstered by historical narratives recruited for such a purpose.

There is little scope for revealing vulnerability to the other within such identities and narratives which shape (and obscure) the capacity for recognition of the other's narrative and identity. While this step towards vulnerability remains important for the transformation of both individuals and groups to take place, there is a larger shift at stake because, as Judith Butler argues, 'we do not simply have recourse to single and discrete norms of recognition, but to more general conditions, historically articulated and enforced, of "recognizability".⁵⁵ These political and historically contingent conditions shape the possibility of recognising particularly constituted subjects and impact on the (a)symmetries of such recognition. As such, a focus on empathy and its enabling/restraining conditions leads us to ask: how do existing norms [narratives and structures] allocate recognition differentially⁵⁶ and what are the implications of this for sustaining or transforming conflict? Responsibility, rather than simple reciprocity, may therefore be required to shape the intersubjective dynamics in situations of asymmetry. Nava Sonnenschein reflected this argument when she indicated that Israeli Jews have to shift: 'from thinking about yourself as not connected, to really take the responsibility that you are, when they talk about the Occupiers, even if you are from Tel Aviv and you are not serving there as a soldier, that you are part of the system that is doing it to the other people. That you acknowledge the asymmetry in power relations'.⁵⁷ This question of responsibility and reciprocity is highly pertinent to a politics of empathy given that the struggle for recognition lies at the heart of conflict and is, in particular, reflected in asymmetrical structures and relationships within Israeli and Palestinian societies.⁵⁸

Empathy as nonviolent resistance

Whilst the meaning and scope of non-violence is broad and contested, the narrative of non-violence is one that is strongly articulated in this conflict. Moreover, empathy as a form of nonviolent resistance was a strategy articulated by both Palestinians and Israelis.⁵⁹ It is one that maps onto the earlier definition of empathy which highlights the interwoven nature of cognition and emotion, the agency involved in the decision to engage in empathy and act accordingly, and the temporal dimension which is central to a situation of protracted conflict. It also provides a counterpoint to the progressive and benign discourse of empathy. Viewing empathy as a form of resistance unsettles the traditional categories of 'empathiser' (stronger) and 'sufferer' (weaker party). In the case of Israel and Palestine,

many of those who are deeply embedded in processes of empathy have themselves experienced suffering and trauma. As has been recognised by Pedwell, 'the act of 'choosing' to extend empathy or compassion can itself be a way to assert power.'⁶⁰ The act of choosing empathy is a political choice for those in both societies (as opposed to responding to the conflict in other ways). The notion that it is the marginalised in Israel and Palestine who are actively engaging in empathy (and not only the strong) attributes agency to those who may, in conventional political terms, be considered to be the weaker parties.

The complex map of relations amongst Palestinians, amongst Israelis, between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Israelis, and between Israelis and Palestinians defies any simplistic assumptions about 'who' is doing the empathising and 'with whom' despite the evident asymmetry of political power. It is important to note that the asymmetry of the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians who encounter each other in many intergroup dialogues is clearly not the same as that experienced by minority voices within Israel for whom empathic engagement may also represent a form of resistance to the occupation and a process of transformation of the self.⁶¹ When actors choose to engage empathically with those in more (geopolitically) privileged positions, it is plausible to conceptualise this as a form of resistance to systems and structures of oppression. Contact between groups and individuals may generate new political possibilities and discourses. In a similar vein, Phillip L. Hammack has argued that contact may be a 'potentially transformative – even potentially subversive – activity' for groups in intractable conflict as it offers a 'site to cultivate resistance and to repudiate a social order that benefits from the maintenance of antagonism'.⁶² I suggest this resistance can be articulated in a number of ways.

Many of the narratives which are dominant within Israel and Palestine identify the 'other' in highly polarised terms.⁶³ Countering this by showing the other that you are an individual with experiences, emotions and beliefs is a form of resistance as it refuses to accept the dehumanising function of the Israeli occupation; instead it reiterates and gives resilience to the qualities of being human.⁶⁴ It also serves to make transformation of the self and other possible across boundaries through processes of recognition, understanding, and the sharing of experiences. This is not to be confused with normalisation; it does not mean that either party gives up their rights or their claims.⁶⁵ While the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories remains in place, exercising empathy does not change this fact. In this sense, the value of and motivation for empathy is less about building bridges and

shared understandings between national groups under conditions of asymmetrical power and more about the construction and positioning of the self. In this light it could be argued that adopting particular identities and narratives (and resisting others) contributes to securing a sense of self.

Exercising empathy refuses to accept the inequalities of the occupation while at the same time contributing to individual identities, opportunities, emotions and beliefs, making it less likely that individuals will continue the cycle of violence through retaliation against others. Adopting nonviolence, Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian member and co-founder of Combatants for Peace indicated, is good for Palestinians and it counters the stereotypical image of the violent Palestinian in the minds of others.⁶⁶ According to Abdelfattah Abusrour, director of Alrowwad in Aida refugee camp, exercising empathy within and between groups contributes to the construction of a 'beautiful self' which focuses on what it is to be human amidst conditions of injustice; it feeds creativity and moral imagination; it creates resilience against the dehumanising elements of the conflict; it demands that we ask how we should treat others, and through its focus on being human it transcends political justifications for the continuation of the occupation.⁶⁷ Recalling our concern with power relations, it was made clear by Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of the Wi'am Center in Bethlehem, that there are no elements of patronage or sympathy in this perspective; empathy is cast as a relationship between equals, as citizens, where actors take responsibility for the transformative process of the self and the relationship which exists and evolves between the self and other in a specific political context.⁶⁸ These approaches are evident in a number of grassroots organisations which embrace non-violence and often focus on forms of education and self-development through art, music, drama, leadership, intra-group dialogue and education, mediation, nonviolent training, workshops, and media engagement.⁶⁹

Building on this sense of individual responsibility for transformation, empathy also provides a vital source of education about the conflict and it has the capacity to contribute to a third narrative which embraces a recognition of the history of both Israelis and Palestinians, of the Holocaust and the Nakba. Karin Fierke has argued that it is necessary to create a space in which each side 'can acknowledge how the acts of the Other have been conditioned by their own experience of suffering'.⁷⁰ This serves to acknowledge how each side has contributed to the suffering of the other and breaks down the 'absolute conviction

in one's own victimhood'.⁷¹ This type of education is, for example, present in the educational (cultural, historical, political) tours offered by organisations such as MachsomWatch, Tiyul Rihla, the Wi'am Center, and Breaking the Silence (amongst others) for international visitors, Israelis and Palestinians. In other words, empathy has the capacity to contribute to creating a cognitive dissonance⁷² which, I argue, may be a constructive vehicle for social and political transformation. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that when two elements are psychologically inconsistent they create a motivating force for individuals to resolve this dissonance. In this context empathy offers a motivating force to reduce the psychological (and material) conflict through acknowledging the suffering of self and other.

Much of the dominant contemporary narrative of the conflict in Israel and Palestine circles around (although is by no means limited to) two critical historical events: the Holocaust and the Nakba. Underpinning these events and their representation in public discourse are the ideologies of Zionism and Palestinian/Arab nationalism. The conflict which emerged as a result of this early definition and contestation of the Jewish state is continued and reinforced through the memories of the traumas experienced during the Holocaust and the Nakba and their contemporary (re-)articulation. Whilst the Holocaust was not central to the Israeli Zionist narrative until the 1960s, it has since become a critical component in the construction of Israeli collective memory and a sense of existential threat and insecurity. Both of these complex and many-stranded histories serve as legitimating and justificatory narratives for contemporary politics and shape the parameters of political debate within Israeli and Palestinian societies.⁷³ Both, for many people on all sides of the conflict, cancel out the acknowledgement of the other and reinforce the collective trauma of both sides, thus limiting the capacity to widen the perception of multiple narratives.⁷⁴ As Butler has argued, the 'public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives and whose deaths will count as deaths'.⁷⁵ This returns us to the act of recognition/denial of both individuals and collective narratives and the asymmetrical consequences of these decisions for the Palestinian and Israeli parties to the conflict. Hearing and speaking the 'unspeakable', i.e. the narrative of the 'other' which is so often marginalised by social and political norms, might therefore be conceived as an act of non-violent resistance because it opens up

questions around reciprocal recognition and acknowledgement of the other, responsibility, vulnerability and the re-cycling of collective trauma and patterns of violence.⁷⁶ As one Palestinian explained, 'we must teach Israeli Jewish children about the Nakba and Palestinian children about the Holocaust'.⁷⁷

An example of the educative potential of face-to-face encounters can be found in the dual narrative approach adopted by the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME) which brought Israeli and Palestinian teachers together between 2002 and 2009 to develop, and teach, a history text comprising of two, parallel, narratives for events across the last century for two nations. The project aimed to initiate a process whereby 'both peoples – especially the younger generation – [could] move beyond the one-dimensional identification with their own narrative'⁷⁸ which serves to perpetuate justifications for conflict. Conducted through iterative meetings in locations in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories the seven-year timeframe of the project reflected the recognition that 'accommodating the dual-narrative approach demands long sequences of class time and cannot be achieved on a one-shot basis'.⁷⁹ Illustrative of the fact that education through a complex process of narrative and empathy can represent a form of resistance were the considerable obstacles put in the way of those teachers who wished to bring the dual-narrative approach into their classrooms by both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities who each perceived it, for different reasons, to represent a political threat.⁸⁰ The formal prohibition on teaching this material in the classroom by the authorities reveals the social and political constraints placed on re-framing the approach to education and wider political debates. Some teachers responded by bringing the classroom into their homes and teaching students outside of the formal curriculum, such was the value they placed on this form of narrative education.

There is an ongoing tension between the forms of empathy indicated above and the awareness of injustice while the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories continues. Awareness of this tension serves to reject the suggestion that empathy in this context is merely about the prospect of building bridges or transcending differences through interpersonal encounters with the 'other'. Instead, empathy emerges as a shifting and localised practice which may be engaged in by those within marginalised political (cultural and economic) positions as part of a strategy of resistance to the occupation and its dehumanising consequences (for both sides). This manifestation of empathy fosters an

emancipatory possibility through its creative focus on what it is to be human under occupation.

Empathy as normalisation

The presence of asymmetric power relations does not only inform conceptualisations of empathy as a practice of resistance. Importantly, it also shapes the understanding for some Palestinians that empathy may constitute a strategy of normalisation, thus coming under the umbrella of circumstances which Pedwell termed 'empathetic failures'.⁸¹ This gives substance to the notion that empathy does not stand outside of politics and to the argument that the beneficial assumptions underpinning much of the discourse on empathy must be questioned. In the context of Israel and Palestine, normalisation is a term laden with political meaning. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) has defined normalisation as

the participation in any project, initiative or activity, in Palestine or internationally, that aims (implicitly or explicitly) to bring together Palestinians (and/or Arabs) and Israelis (people or institutions) without placing as its goal resistance to and exposure of the Israeli occupation and all forms of discrimination and oppression against the Palestinian people.⁸²

Furthermore, PACBI indicates 'It is helpful to think of normalization as a "colonization of the mind," whereby the oppressed subject comes to believe that the oppressor's reality is the only "normal" reality that must be subscribed to, and that the oppression is a fact of life that must be coped with'.⁸³ This draws parallels with the notion of reification: a term first coined by Georg Lukács and adopted by other critical theorists to interrogate the process through which man-made phenomena appear as natural, unavoidable and objective, and whereby human beings treat each other instrumentally.

Within the context of normalisation as defined by PACBI, dialogue efforts – which normally include an empathic element - are singled out for particular attention: 'Dialogue, "healing," and "reconciliation" processes that do not actively aim to end oppression, regardless of the intentions behind them, serve to privilege oppressive co-existence at the cost of co-resistance, for they presume the possibility of coexistence before the realization

of justice'.⁸⁴ This objection is realised most strongly in those activities which are based on interpersonal engagement or the contact hypothesis as it is known to social psychologists. The contact hypothesis, developed by Gordon Allport,⁸⁵ is based on the view that 'people in a conflict just need a chance to get to know each other and that once this happens, individuals will soon discover that beneath the mantle of group identity (e.g., Israeli or Palestinian) rests a much deeper and common identity – that of a human being'.⁸⁶ This argument faces certain challenges however. Even if the interpersonal meetings between Israelis and Palestinians are positive, is this attitude likely to extend beyond the individuals in dialogue to generate less prejudiced perceptions of Palestinians and Jews in general? And, even if this is so, then are such positive changes likely to persist when individuals return to communities who may not share these shifts in perception? The problem of 're-entry' – returning to 'normal' life following such an encounter – has been highlighted by NGOs and academic-practitioners as a key reason for the failure of these efforts to bring about lasting political and social change.⁸⁷

While empathy is a core ingredient to these face-to-face encounters, there are two factors missing from them which shape the normalisation critique. These are the requirement for equal status among the parties and a recognition of the role that social identity plays.⁸⁸ When an encounter preserves the asymmetrical status of parties (e.g. Israelis and Palestinians) it is likely to reinforce existing inequalities and prejudicial perceptions rather than diminishing them.⁸⁹ As Arie Nadler writes, we cannot ask individuals to leave 'their robes of social belongingness and social identity outside the room'.⁹⁰ To do so would be to require them to engage in a form of apolitical empathy uninformed by their own sense of belonging, history and identity. Not only is this too psychologically demanding,⁹¹ but it fails to take into account the politics which shapes the asymmetrical experiences of participants. These political and material asymmetries allocate recognition differentially, to use Butler's terms, and interpretations of the role and purpose of empathy are shaped accordingly. The expectations of such contact-based dialogue interventions usually pivot around reciprocity. Yet as Dasa Duhaček and Hemmings make clear, there are historical and political reasons as to why this might not be possible or desirable: 'incommensurabilites of location and perception may well disrupt the subject's ability [or willingness] to transform herself through feeling as/for the other-subject'.⁹²

Drawing on the experience of the School for Peace which has spent many years working on Arab-Jewish dialogue and encounter, Ramzi Suleiman raises an important issue which relates to the consequences of the lack of equal status. He notes that in encounters between Israeli Arabs and Jews it is frequently the case that Palestinian participants seek to shift the interaction to the intergroup level to raise issues of a political and collective nature, focusing on the discrimination practiced by the Israeli state. In contrast, it tends to be the case that Jewish participants prefer to shift interaction to the interpersonal level, thus avoiding political issues and normalising relations. This is a direct consequence of the difference in power relations and feeds into the modes of conflict-oriented behaviours for each group.⁹³

This resonates with and explains the views articulated in interviews with some Palestinians that it is not possible for intergroup dialogue and peace-building work to be successful while the occupation continues.⁹⁴ Such efforts, it is argued, serve to distract attention from the realities of the occupation and to hide the fact that the continuation of the status quo serves to protect particular political and economic interests. Consequently, it is felt that these activities effectively maintain the existing asymmetries of power and status whilst ensuring that Israel preserves a constructive face to the outside world as it participates in these activities.⁹⁵ Empathy – a core element in dialogue and peace-building work – has not, therefore, been perceived by critics of normalisation to contribute to sustainable political change. Instead, such attempts which ‘normalise’ the conflict and occupation reflect what Cox identified as ‘problem-solving theory’ and raise the question who benefits from empathy of this kind.

‘Empathy’, ‘dialogue’ and ‘peace-building’ are terms – and strategies incorporated into the international peace-building architecture - which represent disillusionment for many and are perceived to be destructive as they teach a language to individuals that not only is not shared by the communities they return to, but which does not change or reflect the daily political reality faced by those individuals outside the safe space of the workshop. Empathy through dialogue and other reconciliation processes offers an illusion of equality when conducted within facilitated workshops.⁹⁶ When Palestinians go home through checkpoints and experience the injustices of the occupation this equality is revealed to be non-existent in daily life. The consequences of this are that when taken outside of the framework of sustainable political transformation these dynamics can feed a process of

alienation, confusion, and conflicting identities for those who participate. Supporting this perception of empathy as contributing to normalisation, Katz and Kahanov have stated that 'according to advocates of the political model [of interaction], the psychological model is manipulative'.⁹⁷ It also runs the risk of de-politicising both individuals and the wider approach to the conflict by paying insufficient attention to the asymmetries of power. In such contexts, interventions oriented towards increasing empathy and reducing intergroup hostility may backfire, serving to increase the negative emotions towards the outgroup and the level of mistrust between groups.⁹⁸ Unlike empathy when constructed as a form of non-violent resistance, this critique of empathy suggests that empathising contributes to a form of cognitive dissonance which is harmful to the individual and to the communities to which they belong. In this context the dissonance is likely to be resolved through strengthening in-group identities and adopting alternative strategies of resistance against the occupation. Once again the meaning attributed to empathy is tightly tied to narratives of the conflict and associated notions of identity.

Conclusion

Identifying empathy in lived experience as a variable and ethical-political strategy sustains the call articulated here for a more rigorous and critical engagement with empathy. Interpreting empathy as both a strategy of non-violent resistance and of normalisation enables an exploration of the production of meaning attributed to empathy. Framing empathy in this manner acknowledges that it cannot be assumed to be benign or beneficial and draws our attention to the unavoidably political and situated character of empathy and to the need for interdisciplinary research to adequately explain the dynamics of empathy. This includes, but is not limited to, recent developments in the fields of social and cognitive psychology, neuroscience, peace studies, and narrative research.

While it is difficult to escape the normative discourse of empathy when empathy is viewed as part of a struggle for recognition, the absence of which contributes to forms of social and psychological harm, it is nonetheless also necessary to recognise empathy as a set of lived practices which both connect and diverge with this normative perspective. The call for a more critical approach to empathy in IR is thus shaped by a recognition that empathy, when understood as an effective way in which to end conflict, bridge differences between groups and reconcile past traumas was insufficient to account for the narratives and

experiences which were offered by interviewees. A critical approach to empathy would encompass (at least) the following core issues and questions. First, a normative acknowledgement and exploration of the transformative aspects of empathy whether it be, for example, a strategy of non-violent resistance or of reconciliation. Second, it would engage with the structures, discourses, and institutions in societies that enable some forms of empathy and block others, thus sustaining a particular set of political and social conditions. In so doing, it would explore, and seek to conceptualise, the lived experiences of empathy and the range of meanings attributed to empathy by actors in particular contexts over time. The articulation of empathy as involving both cognitive and affective dimensions which leave open the purpose and intention motivating particular forms of interaction goes some way to address the concerns regarding benign assumption of care or progress often imputed to empathy. As such, it does not shy away from the question who empathy may serve and for what ends.

Third, it would address empathy across multiple levels of analysis within and between societies. A key corollary to this is to enquire as to how, where, when and why empathy may emerge, how and by whom it is circulated, reciprocated, or blocked, how resilient these processes and actions are, how they are related to emotions more broadly within IR, and what their wider connection to social and political change might be. These issues pose a number of implications for designing and reflecting on current international mediation, peace-building and conflict transformation approaches. The link articulated between practices of empathy and the politics of normalisation explains, in part, why empathy, peace-building and dialogue projects are frequently perceived to be part of the problem rather than the solution in Israel and Palestine. Even though these processes may contribute to transform individual perceptions, they 'do not seem to make a major impact on society-wide norms, institutions and position of the broad public sphere'.⁹⁹ There remains at present an insufficient theoretical or empirical account of processes which may engender or hinder the transfer of empathic processes from the individual and interpersonal level to societal-political structures.

While the role of the individual is critical for empathy to be developed or blocked, the individual is embedded within a net of identities and beliefs which shape their capacity to transform their perceptions and behaviour and to translate that transformation into social and political change. Identities are closely linked to collective narratives of the

conflict which are likewise a constitutive factor in shaping approaches to empathy. Asaf Siniver has argued for recognition of the ‘importance of collective identities and enemy images in perpetuating intractable conflict’ and that ‘identifying these psychological barriers and then overcoming them are crucial steps towards successful conflict resolution’.¹⁰⁰ Such collective and historical narratives as pervade the Israel-Palestine conflict reflect particular societal and emotional beliefs around security, the ‘enemy’ other, peaceful self-images, victimization, and the justness of one’s own goals which serve particular political justifications and contribute to perpetuating the cycle of violence and conflict.¹⁰¹ Such narratives serve to block the likelihood of empathy becoming institutionalized between ethno-national communities within the public discourse and at the level of elite leaderships, thus limiting the impact of empathic encounters at the grassroots and civil society level.

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¹¹ This is not to exclude the role of elite rhetoric and leadership or public opinion from the study of empathy. However, given the focus here is on civil society and popular narratives of the conflict, this is beyond the scope of the article.

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- ⁶⁵ Author interview with Abdelfattah Abusrour, director of Alrowwad, Aida refugee camp, 5 September 2013. While some groups may continue with intergroup dialogue others currently focus on intra-group dialogue. This depends in part on how individual/organisational positions intersect with the narrative of normalisation.
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- ⁹² Hemmings, *Why Stories matter*, p.204.
- ⁹³ Ramzi Suleiman, 'Jewish-Palestinian Relations in Israel', in Halabi (ed.), *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in Dialogue*.

⁹⁴ Author interview with Abdelfattah Abusrour; author interview with member of East Jerusalem NGO, 6 September 2013. The interviewee's views were based on prior experience of and participation in dialogue and peace-building projects.

⁹⁵ Daniel Bar-Tal, 'The Rocky Road Toward Peace: Beliefs on Conflict in Israeli Textbooks', *Journal of Peace research*, 35 (1998), p.725; author interview with East Jerusalem NGO, 6 September 2013; author interview with Palestinian educator, 2 September 2013.

⁹⁶ author interview with East Jerusalem NGO, 6 September 2013; author interview with Palestinian educator, 2 September 2013.

⁹⁷ Cited in Suleiman, 'Jewish-Palestinian Relations in Israel', p.38.

⁹⁸ Mina Cikara, Emile G. Bruneau, Rebecca R. Saxe, 'Us and Them: Intergroup Failures of Empathy', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 20:3 (2011), pp.149-153; Bruneau and Saxe, 'The power of being heard'..

⁹⁹ Pfeil, 'Understanding the Dynamics of Israeli-Palestinian Grassroots Dialogue Workshops', p.10.

¹⁰⁰ Siniver, 'Israeli Identities', p.38; Bar-Tal, 'The Rocky Road'; Nava Sonnenschein, Zvi Bekerman and Gabriel Horenczyk, 'Threat and the Majority Identity', *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 14:1, (2010), pp.47-65.

¹⁰¹ Bar-Tal, 'The Rocky Road'; Hammack, *Narratives and the Politics of Identity*.