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Empathy and Political Psychology: Problematic Contributions to Security Issues

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Title: Empathy and Political Psychology: Problematic Contributions to Security Issues

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Abstract. This article describes potential contributions of the empathy construct to political psychology as well as problems hindering this potential from being realized.

In the English language empathy typically denotes identifying with, understanding, or attributing something about oneself to another person. Research on how empathy develops, how it is distributed among populations, what psychological constituents it comprises, and how it can be modified would seemingly have myriad applications to political psychology --especially security issues. Examples might include (1) policy analysis for preventing nuclear weapons proliferation through a comparative analysis of the effects of carrots and sticks--and what constitute carrots and sticks--in modifying the policies, perceptions, and behaviors of nonproliferators; (2) intelligence analysis concerning psychological profiles depicting the motives and conflicting dynamics of terrorists and/or antiterrorist/counterterrorist allies leaders; (3) political and military deception operations based on the causal attributions, person perceptions, and weltanschauungs of strategic and tactical targets; (4) operations countering of illicit trafficking organizations through the delineation, publicization, and dismantling of highly valued money laundering and logistics supports; and (5) public health and environmental programs that target security threats from pandemics and global warming through delineating psychological phenomena, e.g., attitudes, beliefs, motives, and behaviors creating these threats and, then, modifying these phenomena.

However, a close reading of the psychological research on empathy is a disheartening experience. Not only are different definitions of empathy employed in different studies, but often it is not clear which definition is being used. Moreover, measures of empathy comprise a significant range of psychological instruments, observations, and situations with often questionable or unknown reliabilities and validities. Also, the majority of studies are from the areas of counseling and psychotherapy, less frequently from developmental and social psychology, and rarely concerning issues of tangible and pressing global significance, viz., international political conflict.

Increasing and mining the heuristic value of empathy needs to begin with clear definitions. The most common psychological definitions of empathy have included (1) feeling the feelings, i.e., emotions, of another person as these latter feelings occur; (2) experiencing aspects of the private world of another person--cognitive, emotional, motivational--as aspects of this world occur; (3) understanding the private world of another person--usually in toto or in some macromolecular fashion--independent of what that person may be experiencing at the time of understanding; and (4) showing that one somehow feels or understands another person concurrent with that person's phenomenology or independent of it--apparently even if one does not.

These psychological definitions appear to be an adequate starting point for the development of appropriate measures and the application to problems of international political conflict. Although a recent review (Duan & Hill, 1996) suggests that the amount of empathy research is significantly decreasing, the potential for political psychology suggests a reversal of this trend would be worth the effort. (See Duan, C., Hill, C.E. (1996). The current state of empathy research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 43, 261-274; Gladstein, G.A. (1983). Understanding empathy: Integrating counseling,

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developmental, and social psychology perspectives. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 30, 467-482; Greenson, R.R. (1960). Empathy and its vicissitudes. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41, 418-424; Wispe, L. (1986). The distinction between sympathy and empathy: To call forth a concept a word is needed. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 314-321.)(Keywords: Analysis, Empathy, Intelligence, Operations, Policy.)