Empathy Dynamics in Conflict Transformation:

A Short Summary of the Manual

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e-book and pdf versions of the full Manual are available from www.open.ac.uk/edict

The manual provides peace practitioners, and anyone involved in mediating change or dealing with conflict, with a method for identifying empathy dynamics at play at different stages of conflict transformation and ideas on how to work with conflict transformation in practice. Rather than providing a step-by-step guide or formula, the manual offers methods to understand and observe empathy, which will in turn help understanding the processes of change in conflict transformation. This can add value to practice, allowing reflection on the conflict transformation processes and prompting intervention for positive change. In this document, we summarise the key points.

The manual was developed as part of the Empathy Dynamics in Conflict Transformation (EDiCT) knowledge exchange project\(^1\), bringing academic research into dialogue with conflict transformation practitioners. The EDiCT project was undertaken in partnership with Responding to Conflict.

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Empathy and Conflict Transformation in practice

This manual draws on case study research undertaken with peace practitioners and communities in Kenya and Nepal:

In Samburu county of northern Kenya, three pastoralist communities – Samburu, Pokot and Turkana – faced new levels of tension and conflict brought on by droughts and the proliferation of small arms, which led to escalating killings and revenge attacks. A team from the Catholic Diocese of Maralal/Caritas (CDM) sought to stop the violence and build peace. The team have made a huge difference over the last few years, bringing people together and reducing the number of deaths.

In Nepal, a project of the non-governmental organisation Child Workers in Nepal (CWIN) helps children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG). After a decade of civil war in Nepal, Peace Accords were signed in 2006. However, CAAFAG young people who fled or were dismissed from armed groups prior to the signing of the peace accords have been left out of the provision for their re-integration. Without support to reintegrate, many CAAFAG young people have fled both their communities and families, fearing accusations and exclusion. CWIN aimed to remedy this by supporting reintegration through training, meetings and dialogue sessions.

From engaging with the work of practitioners, the EDiCT manual was created to provide those working in conflict with a framework to map and identify empathy dynamics that might be at play during different stages of conflict transformation and techniques for more effective interventions.
Key ideas about empathy:

**Empathy** is about how we understand another person and how they feel. Empathy can be both an automatic reaction and more controlled perspective-taking. If empathy with the other person doesn’t happen, something is stopping it.

**Dyspathy** is anything that stops empathy.

We stop empathy in three main ways:
- distancing the other person; blocking them; lumping them as a group.

Removing the dyspathy in a conflict situation is key to increasing empathy.

**Empathic understanding** is what happens as a result of feeling empathy. In empathic understanding, the other person is seen as a complex individual, different from the self. And those differences between self and other are accepted, even if that is difficult to do.

The goal of our work is to transform conflict and enmity into empathic understanding.

**Webs of connection** are the relationships which connect people to each other. To intervene in a conflict situation, peace-builders need to understand the webs involved in conflict, and the webs broken by conflict. To transform conflict, peace-builders start from their own web of connections with people supporting change, and then continue by bringing in new connections who are committed to peace.
Setting out on Conflict Transformation:

- As a peace-builder, what do you bring to the situation?
- Who is in your inner web supporting your peace-building?
- Who do you reach out to first?

Identifying the personal qualities needed to be a peace-builder is important for successful conflict transformation. Imagination, creativity and empathic understanding are essential to help the peace-builder understand what can bring about change. The ability to notice new opportunities in a situation and use them for peacebuilding is important. Recognising your own feelings about the conflicting parties safeguards against prejudices, and reminds peace-builders to consider how others see them. Peace-builders need to step into the shoes of each group involved and see things from these other perspectives in order to increase their own empathic understanding. You also need to take care of yourself emotionally.

Building a small group of people willing to join in the conflict transformation work helps peace-builders create a web of ‘empathic allies’. In Kenya, CDM found the first empathic allies in a small group of local pastors. They built up strength by meeting and talking together, and then were able to produce ideas for action through their meetings.

Reaching out to people in conflict. When ready to take action, the empathic allies can begin to look for the most appropriate people to connect to within the communities. Choosing people with power and influence in the communities can give an entry point, as they will vouch for the peace-builders’ credibility. In Kenya, CDM and the pastors decided to approach the highly respected elders in each community to talk about peace.

Changing conflict to empathic understanding requires each connection for peace to be built through dialogue and interaction – talking and acting together. To become an empathic ally, a person must understand the goal in transforming conflict. Even if they don’t agree with everything the peace-builders say, they accept and trust them.
The EDiCT Map:

The manual offers tools to help understand and map empathy dynamics in conflict and the differing perspectives of those involved, and helps decide what to try to change. These tools do not replace established methods of conflict analysis but deepen this analysis by considering the relations between people involved.

- **What makes up the complex social identities of the individuals involved in the conflict?**
- **How does each of the people involved in the conflict think about the others?**
- **Where are the opportunities to develop empathic understanding in this conflict?**

Three key tools comprise the EDiCT map:

**The Social Identity Map** sketches the many different social groups an individual is connected to and the nature of these connections that together make up a complex human life. Each person has multiple ‘social identities’ through the many social groups that they are part of: family, clan, organisations, religious groups, school, village group or political party.

**The Empathy-Dyspathy Matrix** is a tool which allows us to see how individuals think and feel about the others involved in the conflict. The Matrix helps to spot where feelings of dyspathy are held and what needs to be changed, as well as where individuals and groups share something in common, which can provide opportunities for empathy and connection. To construct the matrix, we step into the shoes of each person or group and collect what we know about how they feel about one another. We then gain a better understanding and compassion of what motivates them.

**The Adapted Force-Field Analysis** allows us to see the positive and negative forces influencing a particular relationship between two people or groups. By identifying a key conflict issue and listing both the dyspathic factors stopping empathy on one side, and opportunities for empathy on the other, we can identify possible ways to intervene to bring about the desired solution.
Bringing People Together

• How do peace-builders increase the number and strength of connections between people to transform conflict?

Planning interactions requires connecting people through shared understandings of problems, and visions of the future. Interaction allows dyspathy to be replaced with empathy. In Kenya, the peace-building team introduced dairy goats to the different communities by holding a workshop. Learning about the new goats allowed people from the different communities to meet and talk. After the workshop, a few dairy goats were provided to different villages. Dairy goats provided a topic of conversation for the men from different communities and produced a new shared identity between the men as fellow goat-keepers.

Supporting Dialogue and Interaction

• How do peace-builders support change at community level?
• How does a shared vision of the future turn into reality?

Peace-builders support communities and individuals to do what they cannot yet do for themselves, for example, by painting a picture of a peaceful future or reminding people of their development goals. Support has to be accompanied by a plan of action that commits people to work towards the future. In Kenya this was done through group discussions which identified the problems and then allowed people to discuss possible solutions.

Resilience in empathic understanding

• How do peace-builders help connections between people to become strong enough to last?
• How do peace-builders measure the effectiveness of their work to increase empathy?

For peace to be meaningful, connections must be resilient. Resilience comes from multiple, strong connections between individual people. To determine whether connections are strong, we need to assess whether there is empathic understanding between people. By listening to how people talk about each other, we can find indications of increased empathic understanding. To ensure on-going commitment to the conflict transformation, it is helpful to set in place structures for continuity, such as people who can take on a peace-building role in the future.

For more information and access to the full manual, please visit: www.open.ac.uk/edict