



Living with Uncertainty Working Paper 8

Empathy dynamics in conflict transformation in Maralal, northern Kenya

**Lynne Cameron (The Open University), Simon Weatherbed (Responding to Conflict)
and Evans Onyiego (Catholic Diocese of Maralal, Kenya)**

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Empathy dynamics in conflict transformation in Maralal, northern Kenya

L.J. Cameron^a, S. Weatherbed^b and E.G. Onyiego^c

^a Open University, Milton Keynes, UK ; ^b Responding to Conflict, Birmingham, UK/Durham Global Security Institute, Durham, UK; ^c Catholic Diocese of Maralal, Kenya*

Abstract

A dynamic model of empathy informs qualitative investigation of successful conflict transformation initiatives among pastoralist communities in Samburu County, northern Kenya, carried out by the Diocese of Maralal peacebuilding team. While post-liberal and hybrid peace approaches posit empathy as central to conflict transformation practice, it remains under-defined as a construct and under-explored in terms of its relation to peace. Interviews were held with a range of actors and analysed for empathy dynamics. Case studies illustrate key findings: how successful peacebuilding seems to depend on ‘layered empathic understanding’, in which conflict transformation practice builds from empathy between peacebuilders and individual conflicting parties towards empathy between conflicting parties themselves. In the absence of the aid industry, local peace builders are able to exercise ‘critical-creative local agency’, in which a key dynamic is the noticing and using of affordances for scaffolding empathy.

Keywords: empathy, conflict transformation, peacebuilding, critical-creative, agency

1. Introduction

Peace, like war, is human. As such, it is invested with emotion: hatred, revenge, empathy, love, loss, solidarity and many other feelings have a role to play. Technocratic peacebuilding that is shoehorned into pre-packaged peace projects and programmes is often unable to connect with this affective dimension of the transition from war to peace.¹

* Corresponding author. Email: lynne.cameron@open.ac.uk

¹ Roger MacGinty, ‘Gilding the Lily? International Support for Indigenous and Traditional Peacebuilding’, in *Palgrave Advances in Peacebuilding: Critical Development and Approaches*, ed. Oliver P. Richmond, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 361.

This article adopts ‘empathy’ as the key construct to use in interpreting findings from an investigation of conflict transformation and peace building initiatives implemented as part of the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium and the Integrated Peace and Livelihood project (funded by CAFOD) run by the Catholic Diocese of Maralal (CDM) in northern Kenya.

A growing body of applied conflict transformation work under the rubric of post-liberal and hybrid peace posits empathy as a key quality for ‘peace actors’, who include activists, mediators, and outsiders as well as insiders. Empathy is also held to be a key condition for conflict transformation and to emerge as a result of effective peacebuilding.² However, it can be argued that the concept of empathy remains assumed rather than defined, and that exploration is required of the conditions under which empathy emerges, or does not, and of its relationship to peace as a deliberate strategy or consequence of processes and actions. Through in-depth consideration of the processes of successful conflict transformation in terms of empathy dynamics, the article addresses these issues.

The three pastoralist communities in this area of northern Kenya – Samburu, Pokot and Turkana – have a long history of cattle raiding, which escalated in recent years because of the availability of guns, initially used for protection but increasingly for revenge and attack. Before the recent escalation, violent deaths would be around 4 per month; at the peak of the conflict this rose to up to 70 per month.³ Conflict transformation initiatives and conflict sensitivity training reduced this to only sporadic incidents in the two year period 2010-12.

The first two authors visited the area in March 2012 to interview project leaders, including the third author, and key players as part of the ESRC-funded research project, ‘Living with Uncertainty: Metaphor and the dynamics of empathy’ (LwU). By inviting actors in the conflict transformation projects to describe their lives before, during, and after conflict events, we were able to understand more about the human relations at the heart of conflict transformation.

Empathy is about one person connecting with another, reaching across gaps between Self and Other to build a better understanding of how the Other feels and thinks, lives their life and sees their world.⁴ It operates both automatically, as an immediate emotional response, and through more controlled processes. One of the key findings of the LwU project has been that to understand empathy, we also need to understand its counterpart or contrast: ‘dyspathy’.⁵ Dyspathy encompasses those processes, capacities and strategies that prevent understanding of the Other as a particular and complex individual, which include lumping, distancing and blocking.⁶ Conflict involves increasing dyspathy between people, and can lead to the dehumanisation of ‘the Other’⁷ that permits violence and killing. In situations that are moving out of traumatic conflict, dyspathy must be dismantled and empathy increased, shifting the Other from enemy into some new relation. Empathic understanding ‘serves as a

² For example, Roland Bleiker, ‘Everyday struggle for a hybrid peace’, in *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From Everyday Agency to Post-liberalism*, eds. Oliver P. Richmond and Audra Mitchell. (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2012), 298.

³ Figures are the best approximation provided by CDM on the basis of their observation and experience on the ground. More precise numbers are impossible to find because many communities are inaccessible, deaths may go unreported or, conversely, if they are reported, may be exaggerated for maximum effect.

⁴ There is a huge multidisciplinary literature on empathy which is reviewed in Lynne Cameron, ‘Empathy: A Review’, *Living with Uncertainty Working Paper*, 1, 2011.
<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/livingwithuncertainty/p6.shtml>

⁵ Lynne Cameron, ‘Dyspathy: The dynamic complement of empathy’. *Living with Uncertainty Working Paper* 5, 2012

⁶ Lynne Cameron, Robert Maslen and Zazie Todd, ‘Dialogic construction of Self and Other in response to terrorism’. *Journal of Peace & Conflict* 19, no. 1 (2013), 3-22.

⁷ The Other and the Self, are capitalized to signify the two individuals involved in empathy~dyspathy dynamics, together with their various social identities and group loyalties.

normative ideal for a rehumanized view of the other'⁸ and the basis of new social co-operation.

Accounts of conflict transformation processes are analysed in terms of the dynamics of empathy and dyspathy, i.e. changing relations between individuals, and changing relations between groups, here ethnic communities or intra-community age-sets. The article shows how project design, conflict sensitive approaches and ad hoc tactics combine to create and exploit affordances for such changes. Findings are illustrated by two case studies: one of rebuilding empathy at a micro-level of dialogue and interaction and the other considering change at social-institutional level, where a change in the practice of customary law both supports empathy and depends on it. The following sections present background to the conflict in Samburu County and places the model of empathy~dyspathy dynamics that underpins the analysis in relation to post-liberal peacebuilding approaches.

2. Background

2.1 The context of the conflict

Samburu County is located in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya, bordering Turkana County to the west, Marsabit County to the north and north east, and Baringo, Isiolo, and Laikipia to the south. The County is 20,826 sq km, characterised by a range of topography and is in general considered semi-arid and prone to short falls of bi-modal rain. The population is estimated at 200,000.⁹ The development status of the County is one of the lowest in Kenya. For example the literacy rate for the County is estimated at 30%, the doctor-patient ration at 1:76,000.¹⁰ Electricity and tarmac roads do not exist outside of the few urban centres. Government institutions, with the exception of the occasional small police posts, are not present outside of the urban centres.

The three major ethnic communities residing in Samburu County, all semi-nomadic or sedentary agro-pastoralists, are the Samburu (numerically dominant), the Pokot, and the Turkana. Other ethnic communities tend to be found in the few urban settlements. It is estimated that 60% of all households in the County are dependent upon livestock, either as pastoralists or agro-pastoralists. Many of these three main ethnic communities reside in permanent villages, utilising rangeland within the County. Others are more nomadic. Bordering counties are populated by pastoralists of the same ethnic communities, who may migrate into Samburu County in search of pasture and water during the dry season, sometimes contributing to conflict. There is a long history of cattle/livestock raiding practices between ethnic groups, carried out to acquire cattle for bride-wealth, status, and sometimes for survival. Such practices have always been carried out by the 'morán', the warrior age set, roughly 18-28 years of age, responsible for protecting the community, and have been violent. Customary practices have existed between the 'elders' of all three communities, traditionally the leaders and decision makers, to prevent resource conflicts from escalating into open warfare. Since the availability of modern firearms, such processes for mitigating escalation have become eroded, casualties have become higher, and cycles of revenge, often indiscriminate, have become more common.

In Samburu County, the first ethnic community to obtain modern firearms, approximately 15-20 years ago¹¹, were the Turkana¹², which gave them an immediate

⁸ Jodi Halpern and Harvey Weinstein, 'Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconciliation'. *Human Rights Quarterly* 26 (2004), 583.

⁹ *Government of Kenya, Samburu County Vision and Strategy: 2005-2015*, (July 2005), 3-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Evans Onyiego, personal correspondence.

advantage in cattle raiding over the Samburu and the Pokot. The Pokot and Samburu reportedly formed an alliance against the Turkana and subsequently acquired firearms. Demand for weapons has led to a war economy in which politicians and businessmen from outside, and within, the County have developed a vested economic interest in provoking violence. This in turn contributes to erosion of traditional authority of elders over the moran, as politicians and businessmen forge alliances with those younger men who fight.

From 2007 the long rains failed over three years, leading to a severe drought both in the region, and rapid death of livestock from 2008 on. The response to stock depletion by the three ethnic communities was an escalation of raiding, leading to increasing cycles of revenge and retaliation. During 2009 the alliance between Pokot and Samburu communities broke down¹³ with resulting violence between all communities. It is estimated that, at the peak in 2009, there were on average around 70 deaths per month.¹⁴ The escalation of violence “touched everybody”; as one moran told us, “when we started this war, we started something that we had never seen”. A ‘shoot on sight’ policy operated, not discriminating by age, sex, combatant or non-combatant status.

As indicators of the uncertainty and enmity at the time, people from other communities were labelled simply as “enemies”¹⁵. People recounted how they had “slept with their shoes on” in order to escape any impending raid. In the worst of the violence, children were sent away from homesteads to sleep in the bush, in peaceful times a place avoided at night as extremely dangerous.

The Catholic Diocese of Maralal, sharing its name with the County capital, broadly correlates to the County boundary. The Diocese has been one of the few non-state development actors present in the County and maintaining relationships (including service provision) with all three ethnic communities. As such the Diocese was, and is, uniquely placed to play a mediating role between the three ethnic communities when possibilities have arisen. In 2009, the Diocesan team, in partnership with CAFOD (Catholic Fund for Overseas Development) joined the Conflict Sensitive Approaches Consortium. As part of their participation, they offered as a case study for applying conflict sensitive approaches an on-going and problematic road building project that aimed to link Samburu and Pokot communities. In addition the Diocese had also begun dialogue with elders to explore the possibilities for peace talks at this time. The result of this co-operation was training for staff by Responding to Conflict (RTC)¹⁶ and a fundamental revision to the road project, described later in this article.

When the first two authors visited in March 2012, the conflict and death rate had been dramatically reduced. By investigating this successful conflict transformation work in Maralal, we aimed to understand the relation between empathy dynamics and conflict transformation, and to identify factors and processes that may apply in other contexts.

¹² Assumed to be from Southern Sudan during the Sudanese war, given Turkana County being adjacent.

¹³ Allegedly over a Samburu group borrowing firearms from a Pokot group on the promise of sharing spoils from a raid that was unsuccessful, and when the debt could not be paid the Pokot group raided the Samburu.

¹⁴ Precise numbers are impossible to ascertain since, on one hand, reporting of numbers killed may be exaggerated by those reporting them, and, on the other, the inaccessibility of many communities leads to under-reporting of deaths. The estimated numbers are based on observation and on the experiences of the CDM team.

¹⁵ Quotes from interviews, translated where necessary.

¹⁶ Founded in 1991, Responding to Conflict (RTC) focuses on Conflict Transformation and capacity development of a range of actors seeking to transform conflict and reduce violence. See <http://www.respond.org>

2.2 Empathy and post-liberal peacebuilding

Post-liberal peacebuilding discourse starts from a critique of the ‘liberal peacebuilding’ paradigm, which in turn starts from the assumption that liberal democratic societies will be less likely to be violent or oppressive in their relations with their population(s) and with other states. The linked assumption, that a liberal economy is the best way to meet the needs of populations, entails organising state institutions to facilitate a liberal political and economic model of society. Liberal peacebuilding therefore becomes both means and an end. A further general assumption is that a liberal peace should see the re-establishment of state capability to maintain internal security.

Taken literally, the thesis of liberal peacebuilding tends to focus on creating building certain types of structures, facilitated by the agency of international elites, a ‘one-type fits all’ technocratic approach to peacebuilding, which ignores local agency, culture, relational dynamics and alternative forms of institutional process.¹⁷

Post-liberal approaches, and so-called ‘hybrid peace’ approaches, address these perceived shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding. A growing body of work in the applied fields of conflict transformation, and the emergent research and theorisation, posits ‘empathy’ as a key quality for peace actors and sees empathy as a key condition for, and result of, conflict transformation practice and effective peacebuilding.¹⁸ We next present Cameron’s new model of empathy~dyspathy dynamics as offering enriched potential for the development of post-liberal approaches.

2.2 The model of empathy~dyspathy dynamics

The work of empathy is precisely trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share, and in fact may find it quite difficult to share.¹⁹

Empathy is about one person connecting with another, reaching across gaps between Self and Other to build a better understanding of how the Other feels and thinks, lives their life and sees their world. Crucially, empathy is a process and relation between individuals, in which an individual Other is imagined by an individual Self. To speak of empathy between groups must be done with care since it extends the notion beyond its neuro-biological basis. In the dynamic model presented here, social or group empathy emerges over time from multiple individual interactions.

Empathy is relevant to situations of conflict transformation because (a) violence seems to require that empathy be destroyed or blocked in processes of dehumanisation and (b) in transforming conflict, empathy needs to re-established in processes of re-humanisation.²⁰ The liberal peacebuilding project, however, as described in the previous section, works with the Other as a social group, lumping together individuals in assumption about what is ‘right’ and ‘needed’ for them. It therefore, both in grand design and in implementation, distances policy makers and implementers from the values, norms and day-to-day practices of individual citizens in conflict, and may put in place barriers to empathy, such as a lack of consultation in the visioning of peace and design of support, or narrow and time-bound project design. The alternative perspective offered here is that the dynamics of empathy in interpersonal relations can serve post-liberal approaches as an indicator of conflict transformation progress.

¹⁷ Oliver Richmond, ‘The Problem of Peace: Understanding the “Liberal Peace”’, *Conflict, Security and Development*, 6 (2006) no 3, 291-314.

¹⁸ Bleiker, *Everyday struggle for hybrid peace*, 298.

¹⁹ Halpern and Weinstein, *Rehumanizing the Other*, 581.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The model of empathy in dialogue and interaction developed in the LwU project is briefly summarised and then applied to data from the Maralal context. In viewing human interaction in terms of complex dynamic systems, the model goes beyond process models of empathy²¹ while sharing with them the idea that empathy involves a range of cognitive and affective processes. Starting from the working definition above, the model centres around individuals doing, or failing to do, the ‘work of empathy’ in dialogue and interaction. ‘Dyspathy’ is introduced into the model as everything that stops or inhibits empathy between individuals. Whereas empathy is understood as ‘connection’ between Self and Other, dyspathy appears in dialogue as ‘blocking’ or ‘distancing’ the Other from the Self.²² The dynamics of empathy and dyspathy change and shift over time.

Empathy in dialogue and interaction operates at several different layers of time and social-individual connections, called ‘levels’ in the model:

- The ‘initial conditions’ before interaction between individuals begins constitute level 0.
- Any particular dialogue or interaction between individuals involves activity at
 - level 1 – automatic and immediate responses to the Other,
 - level 2 – more considered responses
- From the particular dialogue, level 3 changes in empathy dynamics emerge between the individuals.
- From successive dialogues over a longer timescale, level 4 stabilisations in ‘empathic understanding’ emerge at social and group level.

The different levels influence each other through feed-back and feed-forward loops as shown in Figure 1.

(Figure 1)

At level 0, as part of initial conditions of a dialogue or interaction, empathy is a capacity of an individual, albeit influenced by social factors. As measured by brain imaging, empathy as capacity has a normal distribution across a population, with very small numbers of people at the extremes of zero or high empathy.²³ Zero empathy is characteristic of people classed as psychopathic, narcissistic, or on the autistic spectrum. In conflict situations, capacity for empathy can be damaged or temporarily reduced through brutalisation, dehumanisation, and the ‘collapse of compassion’²⁴ or psychic numbing²⁵.

Starting from these personal parameters for empathy, influenced by social identity, the balance of empathy~dyspathy in a dialogue or interaction will be continuously varying. Participants will experience or enact automatic emotion-led empathy (at level 1) which is instant feeling by the Self of how it feels to be the Other, for example the ‘ouch’ when seeing someone else bang their head. Automatic empathy can be regulated or over-ridden by more conscious processes (at level 2) that range from directing attention to focussed reflection.²⁶

²¹ For a recent example see Michael Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

²² Cameron, *Dyspathy*.

²³ Simon Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*. (London: Allen Lane, 2011)

²⁴ C. Daryl Cameron and B. Keith Payne, ‘Escaping affect: How motivated emotion regulation creates insensitivity to mass suffering’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 1 (2011): 1–15.

²⁵ Paul Slovic, “If I look at the mass, I will never act”: Psychic numbing and genocide’, *Judgment and Decision Making*, 2, no.2 (2007): 79-95.

²⁶ Jennifer N. Gutsell and Michael Inzlicht, ‘Empathy constrained: Prejudice predicts reduced mental simulation of actions during observation of outgroups’, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46 (2010): 841–845.

More conscious, controlled empathy involves processes that try to understand how it is to be the Other in their world. Cameron shows three types of gestures of empathy occurring in post-conflict conciliation conversations: ‘allowing connection’, which includes asking questions, explaining oneself, being ready to listen to explanations; actively ‘entering into’ the Other’s experience, which includes anticipating how the Other will feel and summarising from their perspective; and a third type of gesture, ‘acknowledging shifts in perceived relations of Self and Other’, for example from enemy to brother or friend.²⁷ These acts of empathy may eventually make themselves felt (at levels 3 and 4) as longer-term shifts in ‘empathic understanding’ of the Other and of the Other’s group, or, negatively, as entrenched positions of enmity.

Empathy and dyspathy as individual actions and processes are strongly influenced by social and group factors. Empathy is more likely with people perceived as ‘one of us’ than with people perceived as belonging to an out-group.²⁸ In the Samburu County context, conflict has made tribal membership particularly relevant; people spoke of others in terms of tribe, highlighting difference and minimising commonalities: “the Pokots live down there in the valley”; “the Samburus would come and raid”; “the Turkana do not practice circumcision”. Conflict benefits from an enemy constructed as an identifiable and labelled group. To achieve this, differences between groups are exaggerated. Since physical safety come to rely on the group, group membership becomes more significant to individuals, for practical reasons as well as rhetorical ones.

Empathic understanding of other people is under threat in such situations, as dyspathy reduces a person to tribal membership, disallowing more complex relationships with and understandings of others. This ‘lumping’ of the Other²⁹ can lead people to act from automatic responses, e.g. with high levels of suspicion or shooting on sight.

Conflict transformation actors intervene to change these dynamics so that people stop acting out of automatic dyspathic responses (revenge attacks, shooting on sight) and engage in more deliberative, empathic consideration of the effects of their actions on others and themselves. In the following sections, we trace this process and how it was supported by project design, implementation, and leadership. First, we give the research question and details of method.

3. Research question

Our broad aim was to investigate the relation between empathy and conflict transformation in the evolving Maralal situation. By interviewing a range of actors in the conflict transformation process, we aimed to address the question:

How was the growth of empathy, and reduction of dyspathy, supported by actions and decisions of the peacebuilding team, including project design, implementation, and leadership?

4. Method

More than 20 interviews were audio recorded during a five day visit to the Diocese of Maralal Integrated Peace and Livelihood project in March, 2012. The third author (Evans Onyiego - EO), as Programme Director, arranged meetings with key actors in the peace-

²⁷ Lynne Cameron, *Metaphor and Reconciliation*, (New York: Routledge, 2011).

²⁸ Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²⁹ Cameron, Maslen and Todd, *Dialogical Construction of Self and Other*

making process from the three communities, and acted as interpreter. We travelled out from Maralal town to meet people in their villages; some interviewees came especially to meet us from quite some distance, others lived nearby.

4.1 Ethics

The study followed ethical guidelines approved by the Open University Research Ethics Committee, developed to take account of the inter-community conflict situation. The purpose of the interviews was explained to participants in their first or second language and they signed an informed consent form. Informed consent was witnessed by a friend for several participants who were not literate. Anonymity was offered to participants but for the most part was explicitly declined. All but one of the interviewees wanted their own names used and were happy to be recorded on video in addition to the planned audio recording. However, when transcribing interviews, it became clear that some interviewees had told us potentially sensitive information that might cause some risk if attributed to them under their own name. We have thus changed people's names and other details where necessary.

4.2 Interviews

At each interview, EO explained the purpose of the interview to participants, using a written explanation that he translated into a language familiar to them (see below). Interviewees were asked to tell us how the Integrated Peace and Livelihood project had changed their life and the life of people in the area over the last five years. They were asked in particular about shifts in 'how people think about other people' to try to capture empathy-related information. Most interviewees began by telling us about their own role in peace-making projects, including details about the conflict that had prompted peace-making interventions. Prompt questions were asked to fill gaps in their narratives or to elicit further details. Interviews were audio recorded and field notes made. (Some interviews were also video recorded although videos are not used here.) The two UK authors informally interviewed Evans Onyiego at several points in order to clarify contextual issues raised by the interviews and to build an accurate chronology of events.

4.3 Languages and translation

Each of the three communities has its own language (Samburu, Turkana, Pokot); the national language of Kenya is Kiswahili, and some interviewees had a working knowledge of spoken English. EO acted as interpreter where interviewees did not speak English, translating from English into Swahili, Samburu or Pokot, and back, as the interview progressed. An additional interpreter translated between Swahili and Turkana. The first author's basic knowledge of Kiswahili was helpful in checking the accuracy of translations from and into English.

4.4 Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed by the first author. Analysis of transcripts was carried out by first and second authors, and checked by the third.

To analyse the dynamics of empathy~dyspathy, we worked with narratives about project interventions which included mention of Self and Other, as individual and as group or community. In these narratives, we focused on descriptions of changes in relations between Self and Other, through empathy (connection), and dyspathy (distancing, blocking or lumping). We looked for reports of gestures of empathy that allowed connection, entered into the world of the Other or described a shift in the perceived relations of Self and Other. We also looked for reported or actual dyspathy, particularly in negative labelling or positioning of the Other.

5. Findings

We found empathy to be a complex phenomenon in the Maralal conflict transformation, with two distinct types of empathy dynamics affecting the success of the process in what we call ‘layered empathic understanding’. The first layering occurred when individual members of the peace-building team developed empathy with the people involved in the conflict, understanding them as complex individuals while not sanctioning their violent actions. Armed with this empathic understanding of the people in conflict, the team were able to support a further layering, the delicate process of developing empathy between individuals who had become enemies. Successful initiatives show the inter-dependent nature of layered empathic understanding: empathic understanding of the peace-building team towards conflicting parties underpinned conflict-sensitive activities that then support the growth of empathy between conflicting parties. Without the team’s first layer of empathic understanding, projects were less successful.

We found the peacebuilding team in Maralal to be working with what we call ‘critical-creative local agency’. In the absence of large-scale aid projects, they conceived and undertook a “palette” of local interventions of different types. On-going holistic conflict analysis served to identify what could be done and how it might make a difference to the changing situation. After some general points, we use two case studies to illustrate the range of interventions and the critical-creative local agency that made them possible.

5.1 Describing conflict transformation interventions

Two constructs from post-Vygotskian socio-cultural theory emerged as particularly useful to describe leadership in the Maralal context where people were supported towards more positive empathy dynamics: ‘scaffolding’ and ‘affordances’.

The scaffolding metaphor, which originates in learning theory, describes types and methods of support that allows people do something with help on the way to becoming ready to do it independently.³⁰ Here it is used to describe support provided by the team in moves towards peace-making. In an ideal use of scaffolding, skilled teachers or, in this case, skilled conflict transformation leaders, provide just enough support for each interaction so that people gradually take on more responsibility for what happens and outcomes. In judging appropriate scaffolding, the skilled leader does not do more than is needed but just enough to ensure successful outcomes. Support is gradually reduced until people are acting autonomously. The interviews show scaffolding by conflict transformation practitioners towards increased empathy

This scaffolding of empathy made use of many activities of different types: for example, bringing children together through a peace school; sending young people to other communities as ‘peace ambassadors’; setting up peace committees to oversee projects; persuading the elders to support changes in customary practice over cattle raiding; engaging young men from the warrior age sets in joint projects. The last two of these are described in more detail below.

The idea of affordance is taken from ecology³¹, and used metaphorically in describing conflict transformation practice. In ecological systems, an affordance is a quality of something in the environment which allows action, a kind of latent possibility. In a woodland ecosystem, for example, a tree offers different kinds of affordances to birds and to people. Birds may use the tree branches as a perch to sing from, or as a place for building a nest;

³⁰ David Wood Jerome Burner and Gail Ross, ‘The role of tutoring in problem solving’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17, no.2 (1976): 89-100.

³¹ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

people may exploit the affordance of the tree to provide shade, use branches for a fire to cook on or to make a roof to live under. Each particular affordance emerges from the interaction of actor and object. In the re-building of empathy, we found that the peacebuilding team noticed affordances of various types in the conflict environment and used them to scaffold the re-building of human relations and shift empathy~dyspathy dynamics. For example, one night the morans (young men/warriors) of one community had gathered, armed with guns, to revenge an attack made by another community. EO came to sit with them and try to persuade them against the attack. As they sat there, a hyena howled in the dark. From that noise, he created and told a story of hungry hyenas waiting out in the dark and hoping for an attack so they could get some fresh meat to eat. The horror of the idea of becoming food for a culturally-despised animal played a part in dissuading the young men from carrying out the planned attack, and the phrase ‘the hyenas are eating guns’ was later spread more widely as part of a poster. The howl of the hyena had been picked up and exploited as an affordance for peacebuilding, linking into negative cultural attitudes and beliefs about the animal and its habits. Such noticing and exploiting of affordances was found to be a central aspect of the shifting of relational dynamics in the successful conflict transformation in Maralal, as illustrated in the first case study.

5.2 The interaction of individual empathic change and social-institutional change

As in studies of South Africa and former Yugoslavia³², social-institutional change was found to be interconnected with changes in empathic understanding, attitudes and values at individual and small group levels – each supports the other, and neither can happen without the other. As part of its critical-creative local agency, the peacebuilding team recognised how social-institutional change could support the growth of empathy, and when it was timely to broach such change. Empathic understanding of community decision-makers then provides the underpinning for implementing change, as the second case study shows.

In the following sections, detailed case studies of two projects illustrate how the conflict transformation interventions shifted empathy~dyspathy dynamics. The first, about the building of a road between communities, illustrates the importance of layered empathic understanding. The second describes changes in customary practice and discourses around cattle raiding brought about through appropriate social – institutional change.

5.3 Case study 1: The road projects

From 2008, the Diocese initiated a road building development project in an attempt to provide immediate employment opportunities for the ‘moran’ (young men/warrior age set) of the Samburu and Pokot. This first road building project was halted after it led to problems between the communities. After conflict-sensitivity training of the team, it was re-designed in dialogue with the communities, and successfully implemented. The trust established through the second road project helped increase empathy between the elders of two communities and ultimately led to an agreed settlement and further joint activities which aimed at consolidating the peace through transforming the culture and practices of conflict.

The first project started during the conflict, after small groups had started talking about peace, and was intended to build a road down from the escarpment where Samburu groups lived into the Rift Valley to a Pokot village that had no health care, education or regular food supplies. The Diocesan team verdict was that the project failed because “the length of time given to community consultation was not sufficient”. The team began with the best of intentions towards the communities, thinking through the benefits for each, but their empathic understanding of the Pokot and Samburu communities was incomplete due to the

³² Reported in Halpern and Weinstein, *Rehumanizing the Other*.

time constraints in consultations. While they had thought themselves into the world of the Other at some point in the future so that they could promote the new road and all its benefits, they did not fully engage with people's current perspectives, with conflict still active and the communities affectively separated by violence and dehumanisation. Each group objected to the road from its own position: the Samburus felt that the Pokots were being unfairly favoured, a view that connected into historical feuds over land rights that had been reactivated by the conflict. The proposed recipients of the road, the Pokot villagers, felt that it opened them up to attack by the Samburus, and they, who it was thought had most to benefit, in the end destroyed both road and project. The missing stage of empathic understanding by the peace building team led to dyspathy between communities and the team; because each group had negative feelings about the road, they both felt that the Diocesan team must have motives that they were hiding from them. Reflecting afterwards, the Diocese team asked, "Whose need was it? was it our needs? or the needs of the community?"

Having assessed what went wrong, the team felt that "the road was not a mistake, only it was done in the wrong way", and so decided to start again. In re-planning, the team made use of conflict sensitivity training received as part of the Consortium project. They added an extra stage of empathy work with each conflicting party separately, finding out, and then working from, the perspectives of those involved, rather than assuming them. This layer of empathic understanding was built through initial dialogue in separate meetings with Pokot and Samburu elders (who make decisions that the rest of the community then follow) asking for their feelings about a possible road. An extract from EO's report of the dialogue³³ with Samburu elders indicates how he employed this empathic understanding to manage change:

so it was a miserable life for them
and they started seeing,
by making peace with this Pokot
they will also be
make their own development
<Q because you will stay in your house,
you'll take care of your livestock,
you will sleep comfortably Q>

EO draws on his empathic understanding of how things were for the Samburu community (*miserable*) who had left their area because of the conflict to stay in town. Because he knows that they want to come back to the good grazing land and feel secure there, he offers a picture of the road offering a more comfortable life.

For the Pokot elders, the highlighted benefits of the road included: a 'peace market' where Samburus would come to *do business* such as buying goats and selling maize; and improved access to education and health services in Samburu areas. In dialogue, the team scaffold the acceptance of the road project by 'painting a picture' of how things might be better:

this is a picture we were painting
that came to be the true one
slowly when we started
(working with) the Pokot,
(and they began) embracing these developments.
The Pokots now want the same developments.
they say,

³³ Interviews with EO were in English, transcribed into intonation units. Brackets are used to show talk unclear in recordings. The symbol <Q...Q> marks quoted speech.

<Q oh we will be able to do business also.
We can do this. Q>

Dialogue with the elders of each community led to community readiness to engage in the road building project and willingness to work together. In contrast with the first attempt, dialogue started further back in the project design, adding in a stage of finding out about people's attitudes to the road idea. In this exploratory dialogue, the team exploited empathic understanding that they already had (level 0), added empathic understanding that they built through talking (levels 1/2), to achieve the goal of getting agreement for the road project (a level 3 outcome). Empathic understanding included knowing about

- the customary discourse structures of the community: elders making decisions
- differences in the lives and development of each community: e.g. lack of health care and school in the valley
- how conflict had affected lives of each community: e.g. leaving land for the town
- people's desires to live differently: e.g. to sleep securely on their land; to earn money by selling.

Each of these became a possible affordance for getting agreement on the road proposal.

EO describes the dialogue outcome as "making them see things from the angle we are seeing". In contrast, our analysis shows that this depended on the team first seeing things from the angle from which the two communities were seeing them. Empathic understanding of each community enabled EO to scaffold the elders' imaginations towards a view of the road project as useful and as contributing to conflict transformation. Scaffolding strategies included describing an imagined future in which people's lives would be closer to what they wanted, and contrasting this with sources of unhappiness in their present situations. The dialogue also supported the growth of empathy between Pokot and Samburu communities by helping the elders understand more about how it was to be the Other in their worlds. However, it was when young men of the two communities came together to actually construct the road that empathy with the potential for conflict transformation came about.

When work started, the 40 Pokot young men and 40 Samburu young men were brought together on a joint project but rejected physical proximity:

<Q when we were working,
we just didn't want anyone
to work behind me
because I thought he would chop my head
with a panga Q>

on the first day
you will see
the Samburus,
if they want to lift a stone
he has to call a fellow Samburu
.. Samburus are working on that part
Pokots are working on this part.

Their literal distancing from each other reflects the dyspathy and lack of trust between the groups. This changed gradually through activities implemented by the team on the basis of their empathic understanding of the groups; affordances were noticed and exploited. The elders who had given their approval for the project now had a stake in it; they could not do

the physical work but were brought along to encourage the younger men to work together and not split into separate groups; their encouragement scaffolded joint working. Pokot women were invited to sell tea and snacks to the workers, who were to be paid by the Diocese at the end of each week. Trust in the Diocese scaffolded the buying and selling interaction, and further trust -- the women trusted that the money would be paid and so extended credit to the road builders. A young Samburu boy was charged with writing down who bought what from the women and collecting payment at the end of the week:

and then (he) took the list
and the money
to the Pokot woman.
<Q here's your money
that we've owed you. Q>

Trust between members of the communities was built through these micro-level interactions between individuals, and even a small amount of trust became an affordance for empathy to grow through dialogue. Trust and empathy increased in a 'virtuous circle' of feedback loops as the people worked in the same space on the joint project and interacted more closely as time went by. Each step afforded new steps:

- people started talking to each other;
- instead of going back up the hill at the end of the day's work, the Samburu young men started sleeping in the Pokot village;
- the young men exchanged mobile phone numbers;
- when they started work at the top of the hill, the Samburu women brought tea to sell and gave credit to the Pokot workers, and the Pokot slept in the Samburu village;
- through spending time in each other's villages, contact widened to families, who recalled *the old times* before the conflict and people they used to be friends with in the other community;
- the team started discussing how to set up the 'peace market' with the group, as a next, shared, project;

and, showing that scaffolded interaction was moving to autonomous interaction:

- the young men started arranging their own meetings by mobile phone.

Change in empathic understanding between the communities resulted from multiple, micro-level interactions between individuals (at levels 1 and 2) where dyspathy was dissolved and empathy grew (level 3). Micro-level interactions between individuals are the locus of shifting relational dynamics. Out of this, comes shifts in perceptions of Self and Other marking new stabilisations in empathic understanding (at level 4):

<Q I've changed my mind about you.
You're not the enemy you used to be.
I start trusting you,
as a friend,
not an enemy Q>

Analysis of the road projects demonstrate the role of layered empathic understanding in changing the relational dynamics of communities in conflict, and the critical-creative local agency that made this possible: (i) the peace-making team built their own empathic understanding of the two communities, (ii) this understanding was used in negotiating buy-in to a joint goal (building the road), (iii) affordances generated in the road building activity were exploited to support widening cycles of empathic understanding between the

communities, based in 1-1 micro-level interactions which led to changes in group attitudes: interaction → trust building → empathy through dialogue.

5.4 Case study 2: Re-framing cattle raiding, from communal attack to individual theft

By 2010, participating Pokot, Turkana and Samburu village leaders had agreed and enshrined a peace settlement that codified a number of practices aimed at stopping the cycle of violence, and minimising the potential of cattle raiding to lead to further communal violence. Included in the settlement were agreements covering small arms control, range and water management, and a conflict early warning system using mobile phones with the Diocese acting as communications ‘hub’. The second case study concerns the further important stage of the de-communalisation of violence and the re-framing of cattle raiding, from a tribal attack deserving of revenge to a criminal act by individuals. The importance of changing societal conditions to support empathy and reconciliation has been noted in other contexts.³⁴ In Maralal, the shift at social-institutional level of the County and communities (level 4 in the dynamic model of empathy) interacts with change for individuals (levels 1/2/3) – increasing dialogue and interaction between members of the communities coming out of conflict helps support the social-institutional change and, in turn, the social-institutional change helps support the stabilisation of new patterns of empathy that are growing between individuals.

The escalation of violence mirrored the growing impact of the drought from 2007 to 2009. The communities were, at the time of the initial peace talks, still operating an instant response ‘shoot on sight policy’ that did not discriminate by age, sex, combatant or non-combatant identity. This state was discussed at length during talks facilitated by the team, and the elders agreed on a fundamental need to focus not only on an immediate ceasefire and greater gun control, including tracing guns from bullets, registering guns and checking licences, but also to examine how participating villages in the three communities responded to cattle raiding which was responsible for escalating spirals of inter-community violence.³⁵

From the perspective of empathy, the approach that was agreed by the participants³⁶ centred on a defined general need to transform perspectives of the Other from ‘enemy’ to ‘brother’ in a process of re-humanisation:

If you eat with someone, or stay in their home, then you are their brother.

One cannot steal from one’s brother, as you are of the same community³⁷

The ‘traditional rules’ relating to cattle raising and theft, as reported through interviews, is that one cannot steal from one’s own community, and that community is not only a geographic / spatial community, i.e. village, but also an ethnic community (i.e. tribe). The discourse of raiding is ‘communal’ and downplays individual agency. Raiding is carried out by a group, usually the moran age set (young men of the tribe), who collectively act on behalf of the tribe/community and collectively are praised or punished (although individuals may be picked out for particular instances of bravery or cowardice in the songs of the young women). Revenge would be taken, in a similar communal way, by the community who have been

³⁴ Halpern and Weinstein, *Rehumanizing the Other*.

³⁵ None of the communities at the time were in a position to consider alternative livelihood strategies, and environmental factors leading to the drought were considered largely out of their control. Responding to raiding was identified as one of the few avenues open for change and under people’s control.

³⁶ Also apparent from interviews concerning the other activities constituting the ‘settlement’, and reflected in informal agreements between elders to initiate a deliberate process of inter-community marriages.

³⁷ This perspective warrants further research as, although these sentiments clearly relate to the act of ‘theft’ and therefore the practices of cattle raiding, it would not appear to be a binding moral obligation when revenge attacks have escalated to ‘war’ and ‘shoot on sight policies’. However, we encountered a number of examples of participants talking about confronting their friends from different communities during battle and shooting them only to ‘wound’.

raided.³⁸ This communalised discourse and practice mirrors the loss of individual connection involved in de-humanisation; violence may be more acceptable when targets are spoken of and constructed in terms of the out-group category.³⁹ For example:

The Pokot down there stole from us, therefore we must attack and take cattle from the Pokot down there.

The transformative process agreed by the community elders and moran (warrior) leaders is innovative in design and implementation, and involves strategies that can be described in terms of strengthening empathy and removing barriers to dyspathy. An important factor in enabling this re-framing was the commonality across the three communities of primary livelihood strategies, and the associated value placed on both cattle and the 'community'. Shared experiences and values around cattle offered a crucial starting point: the elders of each community understood the cattle-raiding problem as affecting all communities in the same way, and could thus approach the issue with some empathic understanding for other communities, increasing the possibility of a shared solution.

The centre-piece of the transformative process is a discursive shift that re-frames cattle raiding by Pokot, Samburu and Turkana groups as theft by individuals. The shift mutually re-affirms the primacy of the community – as a collective interest shared by all three ethnic groups – and the primacy of individual spatial communities (mono-ethnic villages) – as a unit of responsibility for the individuals who live there, while at the same time individualising the act of cattle raiding in respect of both perpetrator and victim⁴⁰. An individual from a defined community is said to have 'stolen' cattle (or committed another crime, for example murder), and therefore to be a 'thief' rather than being defined by tribe, as "a Samburu/ Turkana, Pokot". Dealing with the theft of cattle becomes the responsibility of the community, spatially defined if known to be from a settlement within the County, and if not, a community in the area takes responsibility to try to find where the thief came from and arrange to deal with the issue. The communities have thus locally appropriated the modernist discourse of the 'rule of law', which has been largely absent in the practice of pastoralism and cattle raiding, and, where it has existed, perceived as partial and problematic in practice:

Before if there is a raid, the police would run the other way.

In relation to the road building project, a Pokot perspective:

If the road is built then that will allow the Samburu to send the police down here to steal our cattle and make it easier for them to arrest us

³⁸ Again, this warrants further research. It would appear that if the perpetrators are known, then they are likely to be from a known settlement within Samburu County and therefore open to a discriminatory retaliation. If the perpetrators are not known then this may imply they have come from a neighbouring County and the retaliation may then be indiscriminate within the parameters of a particular ethnic community/tribe

³⁹ Tajfel, *Human Groups*; Michael A. Hogg, 'Subjective Uncertainty Reduction through Self-categorization: A Motivational Theory of Social Identity Processes', *European Review of Social Psychology* 11, no.1 (2000): 223-55.

⁴⁰ This is not to be confused with dyadic classifications and continua such as Hofstede's individualism vs collectivism. We acknowledge the polymorphic nature of self-categorisation; however, the point is that there has been a collective decision by participants to interpret and act upon – thus giving meaning - the discourse of individual and collective to protect both the individual (victim and perpetrator) and the collective(s). For a summary of recent debates on culture and peacebuilding, see Morgan Brigg, 'Culture: Challenges and possibilities', in *Advances in Peacebuilding: Critical Developments and Approaches*, ed. O. Richmond, (London: Palgrave, 2010) 336-342

Re-framing cattle raiding to theft involves a shift from collective to individual, for actors and in agency; instead of a raid by one community on another, there is theft of one person's cattle by another person. Both perpetrator and victim become individual rather than collective. Where, before, response to a raid would come from the raided/victim community as a retaliatory raid on the perpetrators, the new dispute management mechanism requires that, in the event of a raid, the community of the perpetrator(s) assume responsibility for both retrieving and handing back stolen cattle and apprehending the thieves. In theory, restoring cattle is possible whether the perpetrators are from the communities within the County or from others 'further afield', when tribal network affiliations are invoked. Apprehending the raiders is possible if they are local but more problematic if the 'thieves' come from outside of the County.

The strategy goes further in making use of the (dysfunctional) police and court systems as part of community management of the crime. The very weakness of these institutions on the ground provides an affordance that was exploited to support transformation of the customary dispute management process. Whereas previously, national and local government institutions charged with the upholding the 'rule of law' – the Kenyan police and the County courts – have been largely ignored and perceived as corrupt ('one can buy one's way out of jail, even if convicted for murder'), community elders have agreed that such institutions can play a, perhaps unexpected, role in the process of transforming how cattle theft was managed by communities. The customary practice now, when 'thieves' are apprehended, is to hand them over to the police. This practice arguably serves two purposes: firstly, it buys time, allowing immediate emotions – the conditioned response for revenge by the victims of the larger community on the 'other' community – to be dissipated as an immediate action is seen to be taken by the perpetrators' community. Secondly it serves, through practice, to reinforce the idea that a 'crime' was committed by individuals and a communal response is not necessary or warranted. This shift to using the police to hold the criminal thus works as a deliberate mechanism to prevent the community acting upon a 'collective automatic dyspathic tendency' and, by focusing responsibility on individuals, avoids the dehumanisation of perpetrators and victims, with its immediate loss of empathic understanding, that would make further violence more likely.

Given the expectation that perpetrators (thieves) will invariably be released from custody (whether sentenced or not), the responsibility for punishment and deterrence falls on the perpetrators' own immediate community – their village. The punishment is described as two-fold: Firstly, the perpetrator and their immediate family are stripped of their primary assets (livestock); secondly, the perpetrator is excluded from or publicly beaten by members of their age set. Aside from acting as an obvious deterrent and public shaming, this could be interpreted as a practice that publicly displays empathy with the raided/victim community and that places a value on not thieving comparable to individual allegiances within a community.

When asked 'what happens if someone re-offends' there was a consistent response: this cannot happen, as the person will be made to leave the community

It remains to be seen how resilient this emergent customary dispute resolution process is, given that at present participation is restricted to communities in Samburu County. Nomadic pastoralist groups migrate into Samburu County in the dry season from neighbouring County, and other groups have settled. The opportunity for major cattle raids by migrating groups on resident communities is a distinct possibility and leaders within the participating communities have expressed a desire to 'reach out' to their respective communities and convince them to 'buy into' the process initiated in Samburu County. Similarly, how even those communities participating in the process described will respond to another major drought peacefully

remains to be seen. This will be the ultimate test of the resilience of the emergent peace and foundations of empathy.

6. Conclusions

Conventional theories and policies of peace building do not adequately account for the micro-human relations and intangibles that have made peace work in Maralal / Samburu County. This is not a story of liberal peace building as propagated by the ‘international community’ and negotiated on the interface of international-national-local politics. Nor is it a story of the Kenyan state seeking to deepen the functional notion of the state through institutional strengthening and the consolidation of justice and the ‘rule of law’ in a hitherto marginal pastoralist County. Partly mirroring Richmond’s description of the possibilities of a ‘post-liberal peace’⁴¹, partly informed by a conflict transformation approach and processes⁴², the example of the work of the CDM team with Samburu, Pokot and Turkana leaders illustrates the possibility of hybrid peace⁴³ through the co-option of partial state apparatus and democratic processes by a critical-creative local agency grounded to serve the needs of an emergent customary peace. This agency works through palette of interventions derived from noticing and using individual and socio-cultural-institutional affordances that offer opportunities to scaffold and rebuild empathy between conflicting parties. For the peacebuilders, layered empathic understanding is necessary, in which interventions to shift empathy~dyspathy dynamics across conflicting communities are based in empathic understanding of those communities. For the individuals involved in intervention activities, trust generated through scaffolded micro-level interactions can provide the basis for increased empathy towards former enemies in a feed-forward loop that eventually produces emergent empathic understanding at group level.

Ideas of timing from the conflict resolution literature (particularly ripeness⁴⁴) also resonate in the Maralal case, as does the need for flexibility from the main actors. The case of failed (or conflict in-sensitive) development projects – the first road – overcoming barriers and providing the impetus for peace talks suggests that the understanding and seizing of affordances by local actors is far less rigid and linear than Western peacebuilding notions of activity sequencing and the separation of dialogue-based from needs-based peacebuilding strategies.⁴⁵ We believe the Maralal case suggests possibilities for effective action that transcend the (often) arbitrary (but powerful) distinctions between relief, development, peace-building.

We argue that the critical-creative local agency, including the collective noticing and using of affordances in apparently irrelevant social-political institutions of modernity, is

⁴¹ Oliver Richmond, *A Post-liberal Peace*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 186-216.

⁴² See: Simon Fisher et al., *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action*, (London, Zed, 2000)

⁴³ For further discussion on customary approaches see Saverio Kratli and Jeremy Swift, *Understanding and Managing Pastoralist Conflict in Kenya: A Literature Review* (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 1999), 30-35.

⁴⁴ Interviews with Diocese staff, community elders and moran (warriors) from Pokot and Samburu communities included a coherent narrative of reaching a level of escalated violence and death, triggered by ‘the worst drought in living memory causing mass livestock death and increasing raiding’ that was ‘unimaginable’ by 2007. These accounts broadly accord to the perceived condition of ‘imminent mutual catastrophe’, defined by Zartman as one of several pre-conditions that define a situation as ‘ripe’ for conflict resolution (Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge, Polity, 2005), 162-163.) See also: Lucie Podszun, *Does Development Aid Affect Conflict Ripeness? The Theory of Ripeness and its Applicability in the Context of Development Aid* (Frankfurt, VS Research, 2011), 81-108.

⁴⁵ For a summary of this debate see: Betts Fetherston, *From Conflict Resolution to Transformative PeaceBuilding: Reflections from Croatia*, Centre for Conflict Resolution, Working Paper 4, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, 2000), <http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/confres/assets/CCR4.pdf>.

possible because of the ‘moral imagination’ of key individuals.⁴⁶ That imagination has been shown to tap shared history, cultural similarities, discourse practices, common interests and needs as a basis for creating a ‘grounded’ vision and to implement flexible strategies for transforming relations through negotiation and re-invention of historical customary agreements and present day institutions.

The study of both the processes and the temporal outcomes of emergent peace through the dynamic model of empathy highlight the importance of ‘scaffolding’ processes of agreement and interaction between the individual and group ‘self’ and ‘other’.

Key dynamics in these processes of ‘scaffolding’ include confidence building talks, agreements and the implementation of agreements that have been, we argue, an implicit notion of deliberately creating the conditions for empathy building, a pre-condition for this being an understanding of ‘the interconnectedness of enemies’ and (re)creation of networks of individual interactions and relationship building⁴⁷.

The work of the CDM team to create conditions for talks, and the agreements made by the aforementioned leaders, and the processes established to implement these agreements that enable a resilience to shocks are underpinned by activities – be they conflict early warning, social and economic interactions, development projects – are all built around enabling conditions for strengthening empathy and reducing dyspathy.

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⁴⁶ John P. Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ For Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, a more moral community can be developed through connecting the past, present, and future. Peace needs to be imagined whilst (importantly) still remaining grounded in the realities of the conflict. The transformation process has to start - parties need to envision a better future and begin to see their enemies as partners in getting there, ideally according to Lederach whilst a deadly conflict is still in progress.