

## Empathy as Political Action: Can Empathic Engagement Disrupt Narratives of Conflict

Franke Wilmer

Department of Political Science Montana State University Bozeman, MT 59717

franke.wilmer@montana.edu

### Abstract

Democracy and peace rest on the ability of political institutions to channel conflict nonviolently. Most of the nearly two hundred states in the world today, however are not the product of negotiated social contracts. Rather, they came into existence as a result of political violence – imperialism, conquest, border wars, revolution, civil wars, anti-colonial independence movements, and the disintegration of empires. State formation thus often leaves a legacy of grievances and identities shaped in part by narratives and experiences of historical injury and victimization. Identity narratives are implicated not only in interstate conflict, but also in “ethnic” or “communal” conflicts within states. Can political action aimed at evoking empathy across the divide of identity counter, challenge, or even disrupt these narratives of victimization and open spaces for the development or strengthening of identities committed to “what we have in common” as well as “how we are different,” and thus contribute to de-escalating, mitigating, resolving, or avoiding violent conflict altogether?

**Keywords:** Feminist theory, political psychology, political identity, ethnic conflict, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, peace studies

### Introduction

This article begins with a psychoanalytic account of identity development and argues that the experience of violence and historical injury leads to the formation of victimization narratives as a component of political identity, and the perpetuation of political violence, particularly when political leaders mobilize support by using victimization narratives. The antidote, I argue, is the cultivation of empathy as a civic virtue, a move necessary for the successful reconciliation of grievances and the creation of conditions for sustainable peace. The question posed is: can empathic engagement that disrupts the narratives and cycles of violence create a demand for political leadership on both sides that is committed to peace and resolution of the conflict? The argument made here is intended for application to a larger case study of binational peace movements in Israel and Palestine. Some preliminary examples are discussed in this article.

### Theoretical Intersections: A Political Psychology of Identity

Politics is often neither rational nor reasonable. Rather, it is emotional and irrational, full of prejudices, or “disagreeable passions,” as Adam Smith put it in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Among these passions are guilt, shame, resentment, anger, and blame and they drive cycles of emotionally-driven and emotionally-charged violence. Emotions, in so far as they are linked to identity, may even play a larger role in politics than reason or rationality.

I begin with a tentative but universal assertion about human early emotional development but also acknowledge that cultures mediate emotional development. An infant is not born as a “self,” but as the location of feelings, often distressed feelings, as well as needs, and these needs and feelings are connected. The fulfillment of needs - experienced as survival needs - alleviates distress, but only temporarily. Early life is experienced as primarily or entirely emotional cycles of needs expression, fulfillment, and frustration. In time, an infant learns to distinguish her own location as the site of those needs, and the location of others as the source of needs fulfillment or, alternatively, needs frustration. Asserting culturally neutral generalizations beyond this is complicated because language, social processes and cultural practices begin to shape the expression, fulfillment, and frustration of needs quite early, perhaps, as Lacan argues, even pre-linguistically. Social processes and cultural practices



“thicken” as cognitive development proceeds, and as a consequence, an infant or child begins to understand herself as an agent, a “causer” of things that happen, and the location of feelings becomes not only a locus of agency, but also a self, already significantly shaped by linguistic, social, and cultural practices.

None of this is new, but it is where my argument begins. I became persuaded by feminist theorists whose theoretical work explores the political implications of psychoanalytic theories of a self, formed in a world of otherness (Dinnerstein 1976, Butler 1990, Irigaray 1977, Moi 1992), that understanding the political significance of identity begins with these early emotional experiences around which the boundaries of the self and the ability to locate agency and its consequences develops. It is becoming increasingly apparent that political conflict is less about control over material resources than about emotions and group identities, and in turn, how identities are asserted as the basis for control of (and legitimacy to control) political institutions that allocate rights and resources. And there’s the rub. As political theorist Yasha Mounk, said in a recent interview “I think what we have to be absolutely clear on is that we cannot have an ethnic or religious conception of who really belongs to our nation...” Identity is at the core of every form of political conflict today. We need a better understanding of it.

Identity forms in relation to others; the self or “I” is the “same as” one group and “different from” another. But must identity be antagonistic toward others who are different? If so, not only modern secular democracies, but virtually all states are in trouble, with thousands of ethnic (identity) groups living in just under two hundred states. Feminists employing a psychoanalytic account of the development of a bounded self, point to the importance of gender as an early, or even first encounter with difference. From this perspective, infants who learn they “are” (seen by others as) masculine are emotionally unsettled by the discovery that their primary caregivers are “not masculine,” setting in motion anxieties about difference that become normative in a society where men, men’s experiences, perspectives, and a particular kind of masculinity become dominant. In this account, we may not be hard-wired for antagonism toward difference, but at least “masculinized men,” and to the extent that masculinity is normative for agents and citizens, are psychologically prone or vulnerable to anxieties about others who they do not regard as sharing their identity.

Group boundaries are also the basis for moral communities - communities where moral equality obligates members to treat one another with moral reciprocity and justice. Moral communities create boundaries that morally exclude others to whom we do not have such an obligation. A feminist interpretation of Klein’s object relations claims that gendered identities, our first encounter with difference, form a kind of foundation for our emotional relationship with difference, and masculine anxiety toward feminine difference then becomes the norm for intergroup relations. But there seemed to be something missing theoretically. Must masculinity be hostile to or apprehensive of difference?

### **Psychological Account of Patriarchal Culture**

Identities are formed in the context of particular cultures. Feminist theorists have long directly and indirectly implicated patriarchy, but in 2009 Carol Gilligan and David Richards offered what seemed to be the missing psychological piece in their book *The Deepening Darkness: Patriarchy, Resistance, and Democracy’s Future*. First, they define patriarchy as a culture, not the social system that follows from it, and it is characterized by the centrality and normalization of fear, domination, and control in organizing social relations. All identities, they argue, are socialized to normalize these assumptions and enact roles of interlocking logic, much the way Jean Bethke Elshtain theorized the “good citizen” Spartan mother who raised her sons to be good citizen loyal warriors in her book *Women and War* (1988). But how do we come to see fear, domination, and control as an inescapable and endemic feature of human social condition?

Their second move is to make a psychological argument about connection, or rather, disconnection, as the defining emotional feature of patriarchal masculinity. They trace its roots to Roman imperialism:

In our view, democracy remains so much in tension with patriarchy because we lack a critical public understanding of this tension, in part because of the degree to which Roman patriarchy has been absorbed into our religion and political culture. Historical study enables us to unmask the dimensions of the problem, revealing

both how our patriarchal assumptions blind us to its existence and how much these assumptions undermine and subvert the liberal democracy we claim to honor and uphold against all enemies, foreign and domestic (Gilligan and Richards 2009:12).

According to Gilligan and Richards, the psychological foundation of patriarchy requires a rupturing of the capacity for connection among male identified citizens and socializing all identities to normalize that rupture by regarding it as an inherent and defining characteristic not only of masculinity", but of the entire social world where male-is-norm. Furthermore, they argue, this rupture is traumatic, and affects both personal and political relationships (2009:4). Drawing on new research in neurobiology and psychology that calls "into question the splitting of reason from emotion, mind from body, and self from relationship" (2009:4), they argue that *connection* is the normal condition of the human psyche, and traumatically rupturing that condition is a necessity for the production of patriarchal masculinity *and* feminine identity that normalizes and reinforces patriarchal masculinity. Hierarchical social relations are then a product of patriarchal ideology because it normalizes domination and inequality. Gilligan and Richards offer, they say:

...a developmental psychology that explains how such patriarchal authority arises and is sustained, namely, by traumatic breaks in personal relationships (including of sons to mothers), leaving a devastating sense of loss and a disjuncture between relationship and identification. The patriarchal voice becomes internalized, along with its gender stereotypes, accepted as in the nature of things or as the price of civilization. Thus the link between trauma and tragedy. (2009:19)

Gilligan and Richards then explore sites of resistance to patriarchy, beginning with women's resistance to Roman patriarchy, and tracing its embeddedness as well as resistance to it, as the central struggle for democracy, throughout western social history. Fear, domination, and control are in fundamental tension with one another, and incompatible with trust, equality, and liberation. Resistance occurs in sites that resistant religious fundamentalism, sites of ethical and political struggles like the civil rights movement and anti-war resistance, post-Freudian psychological resistance, particularly the work of Ian D. Suttie, various gendered resistances including feminism and non-patriarchal or anti-patriarchal sexuality and gender identities, and in artistic resistance.

## **Narratives and Identity**

Identity is both inherently social and linked to narratives about "what it means to be" identified with various labels and categories. For example, what does it mean to be an American? A Canadian? How do they differ? A mother, or father, a man, a woman, or LGBTQ, and how do these identities differ? What does it mean to be an "ethnic majority" or an "ethnic minority," or identified as one economic class or another, and so on? Identities are emotionally experienced as "selves", that is, threats to our identity are experienced as threats to the very existence of the self. And with good reason. The definition of genocide links the mass murder of hundreds of thousands, and millions of people to their identities. With thousands of ethnic or identity groups in the world and just under two-hundred states, hundreds of groups are marginalized as "minorities," in relation to those groups whose identities are predominant within particular states. It is remarkable that until fairly recently in the academic and policy worlds, states were commonly referred to as nation-states, a term that normalizes and even naturalizes the relationship between national identity and statehood. The nation, this term suggests, achieves its highest form of self-determination by controlling the institutions of a state. And that's probably true in a way, except that this formula leaves thousands of national identities *not* in control of the institutions of a state.

This is no trivial matter, as Yasha Mounk's earlier quote indicates. How many "immigrant others" can "we," whose identity is privileged as a majority, allow residency in "our" state without compromising or threatening our identity as (Germans, Americans, British, Dutch, and so on). Iraqis have become "Iraqis" primarily through discourses among outsiders about the inhabitants of post-colonial Iraq, who are otherwise Sunni, Shi'a and (primarily Sunni) Kurds. Afghanistan, and most other states, actually, are even more pluralistic. Of states in existence today, only about one-fourth of them existed at the time of the founding of the United Nations in 1945, which means that most states are relatively new. It is not surprising, then, that postcolonial leaders,

candidates, and parties either play an "ethnic identity" card or an "anti-western/anti-imperialist" card in mobilizing support.

Identity is relative to someone else - normally a group - who shares it, as well as to others who do not. The definition of genocide presumes this to be the case, identifying genocide as an act intended to *destroy a group as a group*. Until fairly recently, many social scientists regarded at least some, if not most, ethnic and sexual identities as biological and self-evident. More recently, race as a category of identity is more widely regarded as socially constructed. Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, and others explore the way language and narration produce and sustain national identities (Bhabha 1990, Anderson 1983). The political significance of group identities is narrated through political leaders, media, leaders of civil society and religious institutions, artists and cultural agents, and families. In societies where patriarchal culture and ideology predominate, identities are articulated within a system of hierarchical power relations that endow some identities with privileges, "more rights," or "more accessible exercise and protection" of rights, and others with less. White, male, western, European, heterosexual, wealthy, and educated, for example are in the first category, and people of color, female, LGBTQ, non-western, Oriental, impoverished, and less educated people are in the latter category. Given these power relations and the violent histories through which state were established and recognized by other states, state-making created minorities and majorities in unequal relations and in doing so, marginalized them or worse, as a result. Identity narratives today, particularly but not only in zones of conflict, are often profoundly shaped by narratives of injustice and victimization arising out of lived experiences of injury and injustice in this context of state "formation."

### **Conflict, Justice, and Narratives of Victimization**

In 1933, Germany's Nuremberg Laws forced German Jews out of jobs in the civil service, the academy, the courts, and public service. In the years that followed, Jewish businesses and property were seized or sold well below their value. Why did non-Jewish Germans let this happen, or even support these policies? In a radically depressed and uncertain economy, the Jews, according to Nazi propaganda, remained wealthy by exploiting the government for jobs and by dominating the commercial sector at the expense of non-Jewish Germans. Jews, according to the propaganda, were educated elites who not only dominated the commercial sector, but also held a disproportionate number of white collar and public-sector jobs. In other words, less educated and economically vulnerable non-Jewish Germans were victims and German Jews were perpetrators of injustice. Like all victimization narratives, it was not unrelated to observable "evidence." Like most victimization narratives appropriated for propaganda purposes, political leaders asserted a spurious correlation between unstable and uncertain socio-economic conditions and deprivations, and the causes of those conditions and deprivations by scapegoating a vulnerable minority. Non-Jewish Germans who were all too willing to believe anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda and support the increasingly intolerant discriminatory scapegoating, and ultimately, the genocidal ideology that culminated in the Holocaust.

The point is not that all victimization narratives are distorted and misappropriated to mobilize support for genocides, but that even distorted ones are often based on lived experiences and "evidence," offered by leaders exploiting a victimization narrative for political purposes. People believe they are injured or aggrieved, and regardless of the merits of particular cases of victimization on which such narratives are based, political leaders use them, and people find them appealing across a broad spectrum of circumstances, cultures, and historical episodes. *Victimization narratives are also emotionally appealing.* There are several reasons for this.

First, by claiming the role of the victim, one is *disclaiming* the role of the perpetrator. As victims, individuals are endowed with inherent innocence and entitled to sympathy and compassion. Victims implicitly occupy the moral high ground. There are three roles in the victimization narrative - the victim, the perpetrator, and the rescuer. Political leaders place themselves in the "rescuer" position in order to mobilize support from the victims they promise to rescue and restore to wholeness. In this scenario followers and leaders/rescuers are justified in using force to achieve justice. Second, being a victim relieves one of responsibility for action. A victim is the one *acted upon*, and *unable* to "act back" to adequately defend themselves against continuing harm. Victims must appeal

to third parties to intervene and undertake action on their behalf to restore them to wholeness, to restore justice for their injuries. Third, victimization narratives eliminate ambiguities. Ambiguities are complicated and necessitate living in some cases with "not knowing," or having to make tentative judgments, if necessary, while being willing to revise them. Ambiguities suggest that victims may also be perpetrators, and that moral responsibility may be shared, but not equivalent across two parties to a conflict. Ambiguities complicate the world. *Knowing* who is responsible for our injury makes us feel less powerless. All we need to do then is persuade a powerful rescuer to take up our cause, or to act violently in defense of our right to restore justice.

Although a thorough discussion of how to assess the strength of victimhood claims is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that, while these dynamics are always or almost always characteristic of violent conflicts, there can be cases where victims and perpetrators are "nearly perfect," where moral responsibility falls entirely, unambiguously, on one side. Most of all, power matters. Victimhood claims aimed at mobilizing the powerful and privileged are particularly suspect. Hitler said Aryan/non-Jewish Germans were victimized by German Jews; German Jews got on a ship and sought asylum in the US and were turned back. We have to be able to make intelligent distinctions between competing claims of victimization. Claims made by, on behalf of, or to mobilize the more powerful, stronger, privileged groups to act *against* less powerful, weaker, marginalized groups on the grounds that the latter are victimizing the former should be regarded with skepticism. Every genocide (politically motivated violence carried out for the purpose of destroying a group as a group) in history has been rationalized on the grounds that the target group was a threat to the group carrying out the genocide. The Holocaust, the Armenians, Indigenous peoples, Cambodia, Bosnia, Tutsis in Rwanda, Darfur... every. single. one. The traumatic nature of victims' experiences and injury overwhelms almost everything else about them. It is always important to ask how power is distributed between the parties to a violent relationship.

### **Empathy: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time**

Can empathic political action disrupt cycles of victimization and antagonistic intergroup conflicts? We are all selves living in a world of others, *and* a world of underlying unity. Our humanity unites us; our identities divide us. Perhaps at this shared historical moment we are not only linked by our increasing proximity and the growing interdependence of our well-being, but also by our capacity for self-destruction. These are inescapable paradoxes of the present human social condition. Marilyn Brewer wrote a very important article published in 1991 entitled, "On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time." This is the challenge of moral and emotional maturity. We are bounded selves, indeed, but we need not be disconnected selves. In fact, if Gilligan and Richards are right, we must be connected, bounded selves if we are, in a sense, to save ourselves or at least resolve and prevent preventable human suffering and conflict. We must claim our own agency, our ability to cause things to happen, our responsibility for causing things to happen, *and* the agency of others. It seems easy to acknowledge our difference, and harder to accept our sameness. Sameness in terms of moral equality is not the same as seeing others as parts or extensions of ourselves. The former is a benchmark of moral maturity, the latter an infantile position.

First let me clarify my use of the term empathy and distinguish it from sympathy and compassion since they are sometimes used interchangeably. Sympathy means feeling *for* someone. You don't send a "compassion" or "empathy" card to someone who is recently bereaved, you let them know you have feelings for them in their loss, you are there *for* them. When someone tells you a sad story about events in their life you say, "I am so sorry, I feel for you." Compassion, in contrast, is feeling *with* someone, literally meaning to "suffer together," and to be motivated to act to relieve the suffering of others. I do not regard these as have more or less qualitative value. They are different, serve different purposes in our human relations, and are all important elements of our emotional capacity.

Empathy, as Andrew Cohes argues, is "that capacity of the imagination that resides in everyone," (2013). It is our capacity to *imagine* ourselves in someone else's shoes, even if they are "different." It is the effort to understand how someone else feels by imagining yourself having their experience. It can also be two people who realize that they have had similar experiences, similar losses or challenges or that they are in some way similarly situated

in the world of social and emotional experiences. It is crucial to distinguish between empathy that is felt or imagined from a position of bounded selfhood and empathy expressed or perceived as *including* or regarding the other as an extension of oneself, or as an object onto which one projects one's own emotions. The second I call narcissistic empathy, empathy from a position of a boundless self that is unable to acknowledge and respect the equal agency of the other, and empathy arising from having projected parts of the self onto another. Empathy from a position of a bounded self, honors the moral equality of the other with whom one has empathic feelings. I am not giving it a special name, I will just call it empathy and the other "narcissistic" empathy.

Interestingly, Brené Brown finds that the most compassionate people are those with the clearest boundaries (Brown 2018). She also argues that research on empathy shows that "empathy fuels connection; sympathy drives disconnection" (Brown 2013). Explaining the findings of nursing scholar and researcher Theresa Wiseman (2007), she explains that there are four qualities of empathic engagement. First, empathy entails taking on the perspective of the other, and secondly without judging the other. Third is recognizing the emotion of the other and finally, communicating that recognition.

Beyond that, there is also the question of empathizing with people with whom we otherwise already identify, or what Cohesy refers to as the proximity issue, and others have explored it in terms of caring (and compassion) for strangers versus caring for others who members of our identity group are. But this can cut both ways. In some cases, proximity can make us feel *responsible* for the suffering of others, as having *caused* the suffering of others, when we do not wish to recognize that responsibility or causation. Poverty provides an example. We seem more willing to provide aid for the reduction of poverty in "other countries" than in our own where our own privilege may be part of the structural cause of the poverty and deprivation of others. So, proximity in terms of identifying with those for whom we care, have compassion and with whom we empathize may facilitate those dispositions, but proximity in terms of distancing ourselves from the agency or causation of others' suffering can also work to inhibit caring, compassion, and empathy. We may find it easier to empathize with "people like us," but not if we are asked to consider whether our agency contributes to the causes of their suffering. One implication is that *a higher form of empathy occurs when we empathize with those who are both different, and in whose suffering or deprivation we are implicated.*

Finally, there are nature and nurture questions - what role does biology (or neuroscience) play and what role does learning play in our capacity for empathy? Psychologists, biologists, and neuroscientists have all inquired into the physiological roots for empathic feelings, from the "empathic distress" of bonobos and humans to the cooperative (and presumably caring in contrast with hostile) behavioral effects of the female mammalian hormone, oxytocin (Batson and Powell 2003, de Waal 2008, McKie 2010, Shenkein 2016). But just because something like empathic behavior seems to be hard-wired into our emotional and hormonal responses does not in itself tell us much about *why* it is so. Evolutionary biologists might say it serves our species' survival; mothers must care for offspring or else the species will become extinct. Social psychologists may regard cooperative and hostile behavior as a function of in and out-group affect. Moral psychologist Martin Hoffman (1990) and philosopher Andrew Cohesy pose a different question: what is the link between our apparent emotional capacity for empathy, particularly those who are "like us," and our ethical subjectivity? Furthermore, can we overcome the bias of empathizing with those like us and denying empathy, or worse, dehumanizing or morally excluding those who are different? Carol Johnson, for example, traces the denial of empathy in conservative discourses on race, class, and sexuality (2005). Recent research suggests that, providing the "mirror neurons" that scientists have discovered correlate with the ability or inability to feel empathy are present, empathy can be facilitated and cultivated, and, some note, there are teachings within virtually every major world religion that direct adherents to engage in empathic conduct (Chan 2017).

My claim here, however, is that our understanding of the antagonism in self-other relations is missing something, and Gilligan and Richards' work points us in the right direction. The normalization of patriarchal culture and ideology obscures the traumatic rupturing of our capacity for connection upon which the ability to imagine and feel empathy for others, rests. The good news is, as Gilligan and Richards also argue, there are sites

of resistance. The next section will describe some of those sites among peace activists and organizations in Israel and occupied Palestine.

### **Our Tears Are the Same Color: Empathy as Political Action**

The theoretical argument developed here will be applied to the case of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a larger project, but some examples are illustrative. Suliman al-Khatib was born in 1972 in Hizme, a small Palestinian town about four miles from Jerusalem and nine miles from Ramallah. I met and interviewed him in Jerusalem in 2016. His family's land was confiscated by Israel in order to build the wall. He became active in the Fatah movement as an adolescent, making Molotov cocktails, throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, and writing anti-Zionist and anti-occupation graffiti on public buildings. When Souli was 14, he and a friend wanted to "up" their resistance game, so they plotted to stab Israeli soldiers and steal their weapons. He later said, "I didn't see the soldiers as human beings. The soldiers were wounded, but thankfully, no one was killed" (al-Khatib 2017). He and his friend were captured, arrested, and Souli served ten and a half years in Israeli prisons. There he learned to read and speak Hebrew, he watched Schindler's List, and learned about the non-violent anti-apartheid leadership of Nelson Mandel in South Africa. In Souli's words:

I realized for the first time that I had mistaken the enemy. I had thought it was the Israeli people, but I was wrong. Instead, we had a common enemy: hatred and fear. I knew that if we could somehow unite against these common foes, then *together* we could end this conflict (al-Khatib 2017).

When he left prison in 1997, he founded the Alquds Centre for Democracy and Dialogue, and then the Combatants for Peace. Combatants for Peace is a peace movement with binational leadership and binational supporters, former fighters from both sides who have come together with one message: *there is no violent path to peace*. Again, says Souli, "there is no hero who will save us; it is ordinary people, you and me - together - who will end this war" (al-Khatib 2017).

Chen Alon's Zionist grandfather, whose entire family was killed in the Holocaust, emigrated to Palestine before World War II. Zionism had saved him and the family he later raised there. As Chen says. "It was not theoretical concept" (Alon 2017). Chen grew up believing that his Jewish state was surrounded by enemies and that Israeli soldiers like his father, a veteran of both the 1967 and 1972 wars, were there to protect them. Chen says his father came home from the second war severely traumatized. When Chen went into military service he wanted to "fix things," he said. Instead, he became "locked into the same cycle" (Alon 2017). Here's how Chen described his empathic transformation:

One night we had to meet an agent from the security forces in order to find a wanted terrorist. My men surrounded a house and as we entered with our flashlights. People were sleeping on mattresses all over the floor. Then the agent woke someone up and dragged him to the jeep. It was a 10-year-old child. 'How can this be the "wanted terrorist"?' I asked myself.

...[later] when I was stationed at a roadblock, I was asked to allow a taxi full of sick Palestinian children (who didn't have a permit) through to the hospital in Bethlehem. At the same time, I got a phone call from my wife telling me she was having problems picking up our three-year-old daughter from kindergarten.

So there I was, standing on a sand blockade talking to my wife, while sick Palestinians children were waiting in the car. I couldn't bear it any more: on the one hand I was a kind, devoted father, and on the other hand I was being so callous with these people. Were these children nothing more than potential terrorists?

My children were human, and yet we had dehumanized the Palestinian children entirely. I began to realize that in the de-humanizing of the other, you begin to de-humanize yourself. (Alon 2017)

Chen and Souli are co-founders of Combatants for Peace, nominated for a Nobel peace Prize in 2017.

In the 1990s, Arik Frankenthal, an Israeli soldier, was kidnapped and killed by Hamas. Arik's father, Yitzhak, and several other bereaved families founded a peace group today called the Parents' Circle Families Forum, formerly the Bereaved Families Supporting Peace, Reconciliation, and Tolerance. The PCFF maintains an office in Ramat-Efal, Israel, and in Beit Jala, Palestine and is also led by Israeli-Palestinian co-directors Rami Elhanan and Mazen Faraj. Each year the Combatants for Peace and the PCFF co-sponsor a Memorial Day ceremony in Tel Aviv where PCFF members tell their stories.

In 1997, Rami's 14-year old daughter and two friends were killed by suicide bombers as they went to visit a bookstore in Jerusalem. "When someone murders your 14 year-old little daughter, the one and only thing you have in your head is unlimited anger and an urge for revenge that is stronger than death," Rami says (Elhanan 2017).

"During my first experience with the Parents Circle, I saw something that was completely new to me. I saw bereaved Palestinian families: men, women and children, coming towards me, greeting me for peace, hugging me and crying with me," he said. "From that day on I have dedicated my life to one thing only: to go from person to person and loudly tell all that this is not our destiny! Nowhere is it written that we must continue dying and sacrificing our children forever in this holy land" (Elhanan 2017).

In 2002, Co-Director Mazen Faraj received a call from the hospital in telling him that a man with "more than 60 holes in his body" had been shot returning to the West Bank from his job in Jerusalem. "They found on his ID that his name was Ali Faraj. My father. He didn't have a gun. Didn't have a suicide bomb. Just a human in the street" (Faraj 2017). I was invited to join the PCFF on Jerusalem Independence Day in 2016 as they set up a canopy and a circle of chairs in a small park near the Old City in Jerusalem. Some PCFF members approached passers-by to hand them a brochure about their work, and some passers-by stopped and asked for more information, taking a chair and joining the circle where PCFF members, including Rami Elhanan, held photos of the loved ones they had lost to the violence. One man became very angry and starting yelling at the whole group and individual participants. PCFF members just responded sympathetically and calmly. They had, after all, paid as high a price as anyone for the conflict. Finally, one of the PCFF members asked the angry man, "and who did you lose?" To which he replied, no longer yelling, but crying, "my sister" (Author 2016). The banner hanging from the PCFF canopy read, in Hebrew, Arabic, and English, "Our tears are the same color."

Thus, began my journey into the empathic activism of peace movements in Israel and Palestine. These two groups rise to the top of any list, and in fact share many members in common. But the more time I spent with them - on citizen-to-citizen diplomacy missions, attending and hearing their stories at 2017 Memorial Ceremony, visiting their Sumud Freedom camp where they put themselves between Palestinian goat herders and hostile settlers who destroyed both the Palestinians' homes and livestock without consequence, visiting with leaders of non-violent resistance in the West Bank whose office walls display huge photos and posters of Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Mandela, the more I learned of other binational peace efforts.

They all seemed to have one thing in common. They were able to reach across the boundaries of their identity differences and find sameness without feeling the loss of or threats to their different identities. They were engaged empathically. For the Abrahamic Reunion, faith is the basis for sameness, their religious identities are diverse. Hand-in-Hand is a bilingual and multicultural educational program with multi-religious schools in Jaffa, Haifa, Tira-Kfar Saba, Kfar Kara in the Wadi Ara valley. There are binational women's peace organizations, including a branch of the Combatants for Peace, the diverse Women Wage Peace, and binational environmental and ecology groups like Ecopeace, and The Home that organizes Jews and Palestinians to pick up trash in Jerusalem under the banner "Cleaning Up the Hate. This article outlines the theoretical framework for understanding the role of empathic activism in challenging the dominant conflict narratives of victimization that otherwise lock the two parties in intractable and primarily psychologically-driven cycles of conflict.

## **Conclusion: The Necessity of Empathy in Pluralistic Polities**

All states are essentially pluralistic. Identity matters. Identity emerges from both difference in the form of otherness, and sameness in the form of connection and belonging. But identity is meaningless without a collective referent. I am the "same" as one group, and "different" from another. Returning to Marilyn Brewer's question: how can we be the same and different at the same time? I argue that the reason otherness and difference become problematic can be traced to patriarchal culture and its rupturing and invalidation of the capacity, indeed, the need for connection. It socializes men and women to regard masculinity as incapable of or at least averse to connection and it disciplines and punishes those who challenge that norm. There are sites of resistance. Peace movements are a site of resistance. Patriarchy relies on maintaining norms of fear, domination, and control. Social movements and leaders who challenge those norms are a threat to the continuation of patriarchal culture.

There is a growing movement among educators that aims to teach young children empathy (Wilson and Conyers 2017; Dewar 2009; Anderson 2016). Here's a story from the binational Hand-in-Hand school in Jaffa, Israel, as described by founder and current principal Anat Itzahki:

OK I am empathizing with someone who is suffering, is that enough? What do you do about it? This is in part what we teach. It sounds big but how do you change the world? We teach children that they are responsible, that they have a responsibility to change the things around them. I can give you a small example. We talk about the five senses in kindergarten. And one of the kids said, "Are there people who do not have all of them?" and the teacher said, "Yeah," and they talked about deafness and blindness and the kids were very interested and so they brought in a blind person to speak to them and they learned about disability, and another came in and talked about sign language and they learned all kinds of things about it, and the kids are saying "We feel sorry for them" and the teacher said "This is very nice that you feel sorry, but we need to see how can we include them, how can they be part of society. Then they went outside, and they wondered how a blind person can get across the street, and they did an exercise and one kid closes his eyes and sees what the problem is. The teacher said, "let's try to fix the problem." So they wrote a letter to the municipality saying "The street outside our kindergarten is not safe for blind people."

From Gilligan and Richards' perspective what they are really doing is reversing disconnection and affirming connection. In his commencement speech at Northwestern University in 2006, President Barack Obama told the graduates that America has an "empathy deficit" that is worse than the federal deficit. His theme resonated with an ongoing scientific debate about the motives for pro-social behavior among rats, whether it could be extended usefully to human behavior, and whether researchers should make a distinction between the normative claims of philosophy and the psychological claims of behavioral scientists (Honigsbaum 2013). Critics argue that humans are "infinitely more complex and reflective than rodents," and they are right (Honigsbaum 2013). I think a Kleinian account of how awareness of our selves as bounded agents, different from others, placed within the context of Gilligan and Richards' account of how patriarchal culture traumatically ruptures our capacity for connection and, by normalizing disconnected masculinity, attributes fear, domination, and control as inescapable features of social life points us in the right direction to solve this puzzle.

Although the argument here uses the empathic experiences and narratives of binational peace activists and leaders in Israel and Palestine as examples, its implications extend more broadly to central issues of democracy, conflict, and the challenge of living peacefully in pluralistic polities characterized by power relations among groups structured by fear, domination, and control and historical injuries resulting from them. No state is immune, and it does not take a collective trauma for these problems to emerge and for leaders to exploit our vulnerability to the language of otherness, fear, domination, and control, especially since victimization is emotionally appealing for reasons discussed earlier.

What it "means" to be "an American" is increasingly unsettled and problematic, a theme recently explored in different ways by Amy Chua (2018) and Yasha Mounk (2018). How and why do we seem to be more polarized? For Mounk, we are encountering our own pluralism with greater frequency and in unprecedented ways.

"Democracy promises to let the people rule,' he says. "But this immediately raises a deceptively simple question: Who, exactly, are the people?" (Mounk 2018: 161).

According to Chua, part of the reason antagonism toward difference is increasing domestically is because we are, literally, becoming more geographically diverse. This, in turn, brings out in relief something previously invisible to the majority, but not to minorities, and that is the privilege of the dominant majority. Not having seen it before, many refuse to see it, having always understood it as a right, an earned reward for hard work, or an entitlement, and emotionally experiencing the loss of formerly invisible privilege as the loss of rights, earnings, and entitlements. Rights, opportunities, material resources and socio-economic status were allocated on the basis of privileged and marginalized identities. Discrimination is an effect, but not the underlying cause. That is the role identity has played in our perception of the moral community, not only who is in and who is out, but who is justifiably marginalized and who is justifiably privileged.

Identity is perhaps inescapably formed in relation to otherness, but here I have asked whether sustaining identity boundaries necessitates antagonistic feelings toward others who are different? I think not - but I do think that this is where we start. Until we liberate ourselves from (or overthrow or transform) patriarchal culture, we will remain fearful because at the same moment we realize we are connected to others, we realize that we cannot control them. Connected, dependent, fearful, helpless... this is the emotional world of a two-year old. But we never really leave it behind. We must struggle with it throughout life, and political leaders can exploit it. At times of stress and trauma, and certainly in zones of intractable intergroup conflict, we are more likely to "retreat" or "regress" into it. But the world of "us" and "them" - one manifestation of which is victim and perpetrator - is emotionally appealing even without a precipitating trauma. As Chua says, we "cheer" for harm done to or the losses of the other. She calls it tribalism; I call it the basic emotional structure of selfhood/identity. This article argues that empathic engagement offers a way out, or a way forward, a way to resolve conflict and learn to live peacefully in pluralistic, democratic societies.

## References

1. Alford, C. Fred, (1989) *Melanie Klein and Critical Social Theory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
2. Alon, Chen. (2016) *Combatants for Peace Personal Stories*. Accessed August 16, 2016 at <http://cfpeace.org/personal-stories/chen-alon/>
3. Anderson, Benedict, (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York, NY: Verso Press.
4. Anderson, Jennie, (2016) Denmark has figured out how to teach kids empathy and make them happier adults, *Quartz*. August 22, 2016. Accessed online March 19, 2018 at: <https://qz.com/763289/denmark-has-figured-out-how-to-teach-kids-empathy-and-make-them-happier-adults/>
5. Bhabha, Homi, (1990) *Nation and Narration*. New York, NY: Routledge.
6. Brown, Brené, (2013) "Brené Brown on Empathy." Accessed online August 16, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewgu369Jw>
7. Brown, Brené, (2018) "Brené Brown on Boundaries." Accessed online August 16, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Nx86c6d39A> .
8. Burack, Cynthia, (1994) *The Problem of the Passions: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Social Theory*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

9. Butler, Judith, (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
10. Chen, Rosalie, (2017) "Can empathy be learned? Science offers some clues," *Religion News Service*. October 24, 2017. Accessed March 15, 2018 at <https://www.religionnews.com/2017/10/24/can-empathy-be-learned-science-offers-some-clues/>
11. Chodorow, Nancy, (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
12. de Waal, Frans, (2008) "Putting the altruism back into altruism: the evolution of empathy," *Annual Review of Psychology*, Volume 59, 279-300.
13. Dewar, Gwen, (2009) Teaching empathy: Evidence-based tips for fostering empathy in children," *Parenting Science*. Accessed online March 19, 2018 at: <https://www.parentingscience.com/teaching-empathy-tips.html>
14. Dinnerstein, Dorothy, (1976) *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. New York, NY: Harper Rowe.
15. Elshtain, Jean Bethke, (1988) *Women and War*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
16. Gilligan, Carol; Richards, David A. J. (2009) *The Deepening Darkness: Patriarchy, Resistance, and Democracy's Future* (p. 12). Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.
17. Honigsbaum, Mark, (2013) "Barack Obama and the 'empathy deficit,'" *The Guardian*. January 4, 2013. Accessed March 19, 2018 at:
18. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/jan/04/barack-obama-empathy-deficit>
19. Irigaray, Luce, (1977) *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
20. Moi, Toril, (1992) *Feminist theory & Simone de Beauvoir*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
21. Mounk, Yasha, (2018) *The People vs Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
22. Wilson, Donna and Marcus Conyers, (2017) "4 Proven Strategies for Teaching Empathy
23. Help your students understand the perspectives of other people with these tried-and-tested methods." *Edutopia*. January 4, 2017 Accessed March 19, 2018 at: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/4-proven-strategies-teaching-empathy-donna-wilson-marcus-conyers>
24. Wiseman, Theresa, (2007) "Toward a Holistic Conceptualization of Empathy for Nursing Practice," *Advances in Nursing Science*. Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. E61–E72