

Living with Uncertainty in northern Kenya: Empathy~dyspathy dynamics in peace-making

At the heart of empathy is the act of imagination that tries to understand how it feels to be the Other in their world.

Background

As part of the [Living with Uncertainty](#) (LwU) research project at the Open University, Global Uncertainties Research Fellow, Professor Lynne Cameron, is working with the Birmingham-based NGO [Responding to Conflict](#) (RtC) and the peace-making team in the Catholic Diocese of Maralal to explore empathy in processes of conflict transformation.

The place and the people

Maralal is in northern Kenya, eight hours drive from Nairobi (approximately 380 kms) . Samburu, Pokot and Turkana tribes have lived for years with their cows and goats in this dry and difficult area where the plateau drops thousands of feet into the Rift Valley. Cattle raiding has long been part of their lives, sometimes involving injury to people. From 2003-4, drought, and guns coming in from Sudan, Uganda and Somalia, brought new levels of tension and violence between tribes, with people being killed on a daily basis.



The Catholic Diocese of Maralal peace-making team, led by Evans Onyiego, were trained by RtC in conflict-sensitive approaches to change. The team intervene to try to prevent violence before it happens, and have developed a range of imaginative activities that bring people together across tribal boundaries and help them to connect.

*Empathy is about connecting with the Other.
Dyspathy is blocking or distancing the Other so that empathy cannot happen.*

Visiting Maralal

Professor Cameron visited Maralal in March 2012 with Simon Weatherbed, Director of RtC, to compare the model of empathy~dyspathy developed in the LwU project with the realities of conflict transformation and sensitivity. As well as validating the model, we wanted to identify empathy-related aspects of the Maralal programme that might be transferable to other socially-fragile environments. As we visited people and talked to them about their experiences, we were listening out for

- stories of participating in peace-making activities and the changes these produced in people's lives;
- ways of describing people from other tribes: e.g. as *enemy* or as *neighbour, friend, brother*;
- how safe spaces had been created for building empathy.

The LwU model of empathy~dyspathy dynamics starts from individuals connecting through dialogue. Dialogue is linked into longer term changes in empathy and into social change.

What was found

The dynamic model of empathy~dyspathy that links dialogue in the moment with longer term and large scale change worked for the Maralal context. What we observed fits well with the LwU focus on empathy and dyspathy as changing through small connections between individuals. We were reminded that doing things together was as important as talking -- it's not just 'dialogue' but 'dialogue and interaction'.

For RtC, the focus on empathy was found to be a valuable complement to the systemic approaches of conflict transformation that tend to shift attention away from the emotions and understandings of individuals.

The Maralal peace-making team attend to empathy on a daily basis but our work highlighted the interconnectedness of social change and relations between individuals, and offered new ways of describing this that we hope to follow up in future work.

Empathy in practice in Maralal: Observations

Conflict and peace-making take place on rapidly changing social landscapes:

- The culture and economy of the guns replaced that of spears made by specialist blacksmiths, but there are signs that this may be reversing.
- The pastoralists do not recognize boundaries -- their movement is dictated by the availability of water and pasture for the cattle. The new dynamic of creating boundaries and naming them after ethnic communities prevents other people from accessing their traditional grazing fall-back areas, leading to conflicts.
- Some pastoralists now live in villages, sometimes moving into camps for protection when violence flares. Villages offer new possibilities for developing schools and healthcare.
- New technologies bring new possibilities - young men who have got to know each other through the diocesan team activities have exchanged mobile phone numbers and pass on warnings of impending cattle raids; phones also provide an early warning network for the diocesan team that enables them to intervene, with considerable bravery.
- With peace agreements have come important changes in social identity and labels: it has been agreed that people who steal cattle will be treated as 'criminals' and taken to the police, rather than their whole community being seen as responsible and then being subject to revenge attacks.

Empathy is being built through small steps in many different kinds of activities that work with different groups in the communities:

- Talking with the elders, who are decision-makers for the whole community, and convincing them that violence needs to end, and that it can end;
- Working with married women who can influence their husbands and families through "secret language in dark corners";
- Arranging meetings of young men from each tribe who are the 'warriors' and must demonstrate bravery and strength in protecting their community;
- Changing the songs that the young girls sing to tease and challenge the young men when they go raiding;
- Sending 'peace ambassadors' to live with another tribe and work with the children.
- Organising a music festival for the children where they sing traditional songs and get to appreciate the culture of children from other communities.
- Peace camps for school children and encouraging pen friend relationships among the children who then visit each other.

The diocesan peace-makers provide

- Leadership towards empathy through their commitment
- alternative role models for young men,
- safe spaces for meeting 'the Other'
- 'scaffolding' for different ways of thinking that allow empathy rather than violence through creating negative and positive images:
 - telling stories of how the tribes used to live in peace in the past;
 - showing videos of the terrible violence that is the consequence of revenge attacks;
 - painting a picture of how it could be living in peace.

An example: The dairy goats

We brought back many images and stories of peace-making and empathy-building in action. Here is just one of them; more can be found on [The Empathy Blog](#).

I was interviewing a Turkana man in a small town north of Maralal where Turkana and Samburu tribes have worked out ways of living together peacefully after war and drought.

A movement outside the window caught my attention – I watched a woman walk over to a goat tethered under a tree. With a stick she lifted up a long thin piece of something and carried it away. We had seen the goat when we parked the car, with a tiny baby kid. Now there were two tiny kids, and I realised that what the woman was clearing away must be the afterbirth. Then



it was back to the interviewees in the room, the recorder and the translation process: my question in English, translated by Evans into Swahili and by another guy into Turkana; the replies coming back down the chain.

When we left to go, someone commented on the new goat kids – by

then there were three. He remarked on how these new ‘dairy goats’ were so fertile, giving birth to 2 or 3 rather than the single kid they were used to from their usual breed of goat. The story of the dairy goats as told by a previous interviewee nicely illustrates the creativity of peace making.

The diocese peace-building team had held a workshop in Maralal town. The man had enjoyed meeting the others and talking with them. Sometimes these meetings produced reunions of friends from former times who had not seen each other since the fighting broke the friendships. Participants slept in a hall where they could see each other and talk. They also learnt about dairy goats and how these could support development through their breeding prowess and the extra milk they provide. The workshop was about practical skills but also about connection and (re)building empathy.

After the workshop, a small grant provided a few dairy goats for different villages. And what I had seen through the window was the birth of new kids from one these. That alone was a good change, but the dairy goats also continued to support connection between people from different tribes who

have moved from fighting to peaceful co-existence. When kids were born, one was to be passed on to a member from a different community. The interviewee told of a recent encounter:

*Even recently, I left here and went to Malasso.
And I met again those friends, we met in Maralal.
And I asked them,
“How are our goats doing now that we were given?”
He said, “They are still there.”
Even them, they are taking care of their goats very well.*

As an applied linguist, I could see how the dairy goats were contributing to dialogue and interaction across communities, and thus to empathy, as well as to health and well-being. They provided a topic for conversation between the man and his ‘friends’; they recall shared memories of a positive time spent together; and they produce a new, positive shared identity – former enemies could now see each other as fellow (successful) goat-keepers.