Intergroup Conflicts and the Role of Emotions: The Need for and Importance of Empathy in Filling the Trust Deficit and Resolving Ethiopia's Chronic Political Problems

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Abstract

Ethiopia's political landscape is characterized by extreme polarization. The country's history, national symbols, heroes, and heroines, as well as future direction, are all contested. Accompanying this is the glaring lack of trust among the various political actors. This is often seen obstructing the roads to dialogue, negotiations, and compromise. In recent years, it has also led to increased erosion of social cohesion, political crisis, inter-communal violence, and war. The trust deficit is partly caused by the unique sense of victimhood that the various ethnic and religious groups have developed over the years along with the self-assured belief that truth is always on their side. Each group advances its own story of historical and present suffering and the kind of 'truth' that is incontrovertible only to its members. Unfortunately, the complete reliance on one's own version of pain and suffering, disregarding similar sentiments and experiences of other groups, has only engendered resentment, ossified positions and increased chasms within the different segments of the society. At this moment, the country is at a point where the "truth" is devoid of its natural quality of objectivity and no reference to the "truth" or a fact by one group is palatable to the other. Consequently, there is a dire need for understanding and empathy to overcome the entrenched stubborn culture of persistent refusal to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point or have experienced emotional suffering deserving attention and empathy. This paper argues that if Ethiopia is to overcome its current challenges and move into a peaceful and prosperous future, there must be the understanding that politics is not necessarily dictated by facts or an objective truth. Facts alone, no matter how glaring and accurate, do not settle the country's political disputes. A genuine desire and attempt to address Ethiopia's political problems instead requires adding empathy to the political discourse and elite

engagements. Accordingly, political elites should first show some empathy towards their fellows from outside their religious or ethnic groups. This entails not necessarily doing what is factually right but doing what is emotionally correct, as not everything emotionally correct is factually or rationally correct and vice versa. National and international efforts to promote dialogue, peace, and democracy in the country should therefore involve initiatives that aim to create understanding and empathy among the diverging groups. Empathy appeals to the inner soul and taps into both human malleability and individuals' ability to understand the emotions of others without necessarily having to share those feelings. In polarized societies, empathetic gestures take on a symbolic value and healing power by giving recognition to the fact that each group has its own untold and unacknowledged pain and suffering.

Introduction

Ethiopia once again finds itself at crossroads and its people caught in the crossfire of war and inter-communal violence. The internecine civil war and the ethnic and religious violence happening in the different parts of the country have significantly affected every aspect of human life. In the last four years alone, tens of thousands (or more) have died, millions have been displaced, the country's international standing is severely weakened, national security is threatened, the economy is in shambles, and social cohesion is at an all-time low. The elites of the country are also divided, and the political scene is extremely polarized along ethnic and religious lines. Some of the root causes for this pathetic reality can be attributed to recent events but most others go back to decades and perhaps centuries, having left traces in the country's early state formation; of course, this is not so different from the way other states around the world carried out their state formation. At the moment, there is hardly anything in Ethiopia that is undisputed, be it the country's history, national symbols, heroes and heroines, or even what should its future path look like. As a result, not only is Ethiopia now at this difficult juncture where it has lost peace with itself as well as its collective national vision, but also it appears to have let the past take hostage both its present and its future.

Many, including in the international community, are now calling for national dialogue, new negotiated political dispensations, and a total change of course to turn the country away from the precipice. The call also seems to have gained traction with the recent establishment of a national dialogue commission by the government.[1] All the same, there is a serious lack of trust among the elites such that the prospect of any fruitful dialogue looks very bleak. Indeed, some of the prominent political parties and figures have openly challenged the legitimacy of the Commission citing a lack of broad-based consultation, transparency, and inclusiveness in the process of its creation and the appointment of its Commissioners.[2] The government has also been ambivalent as to who will partake in the national dialogue.[3] Despite the recent lull, the civil war in the north has still not been resolved and there is fear that it might reignite sooner or later. There is also generally a huge trust deficit between the different political groups and actors, which simply means that the possibility of complete cessation of hostilities followed by negotiations and a peaceful settlement is not very promising.

The trust deficit is occasioned by the unique sense of victimhood that the various ethnic and religious groups have developed over the years, along with the self-

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[1] The Commission is established by virtue of National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation No. 1265/2021

[2] *Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council request Parliament to temporarily halt National Dialogue commissioners' selection, resume process in inclusive, trustworthy manner*, Addis Standard, February 14, 2022, https://addisstandard.com/news-ethiopian-political-parties-joint-council-request-parliament-to-temporarily-halt-national-dialogue-commissioners-selection-resume-process-in-inclusive-trustworthy-manner/; See also *OFC, ONLF say Dialogue Commission process unrepresentative, not impartial; decline Parliament invitation today,* Addis Standard, February 4, 2022, https://addisstandard.com/newsalert-ofc-olf-and-onlf-say-dialogue-commission-process-unrepresentative-impartial-decline-parliament-invitation-today/.

[3] At some point, the government had indicated that there was a possibility that armed groups in the country such as the Tigrayan People Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) may be allowed to participate in the dialogue as long as they commit to disarming and respecting the constitutional order. This was however subsequently retracted by the ruling party. See *Ethiopia vows to table all agendas including referendum in national dialogue*, Anadolu Agency*, (December 20, 2021),* https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/-ethiopia-vows-to-table-all-agendas-including-referendum-in-national-dialogue/2452338; see also *Ethiopia's ruling party says planned 'inclusive national dialogue' will not include TPLF and OLA*, Globe News Net*,* February 17, 2022, https://globenewsnet.com/news/ethiopias-ruling-party-says-the-planned-inclusive-national-dialogue-will-not-include-tplf-and-ola/.

assured belief by every party that truth is always on their side. Each group advances its own "irrefutable" story of historical and current suffering. There is almost no group in Ethiopia today without some sense of alienation, marginalization, or victimhood. Such feelings of oppression and exclusion are often normally associated with or imputed to another group despite the fact that this group itself has its own claim of suffering. With these accompanying vindictive and virulent competing narratives, the "truth" effectively loses its quality of objectivity and at the moment, a "fact" that is invoked by one group, however obvious it might look, is unlikely to be accepted as such by the other.

Unfortunately, the complete reliance on prioritizing one's own version of pain and suffering, while at the same time ignoring similar sentiments and experiences of other groups, has only exacerbated group resentment, hardened entrenched positions, and widened divisions between the different elites and other segments of society. Consequently, there is a dire need for empathy to overcome the entrenched and stubborn culture of persistently refusing to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point or have experienced emotional suffering deserving of attention and compassion.

Predicated on the foregoing, this paper argues that if Ethiopia is to effectively address its current challenges and move to a peaceful and prosperous future, any step towards dialogue, negotiation or elite bargaining should begin from the fundamental realization that politics is not necessarily dictated by facts or even an objective truth. Facts alone, no matter how conspicuous and accurate, do not necessarily settle the country's chronic political disputes. The fulfilment of a genuine desire to resolve Ethiopia's political problems instead requires understanding the symbolic role and the healing power of empathy. Accordingly, political elites should show some empathy towards their fellows and seek to understand the other side by putting themselves in its shoes. It is therefore proposed that national and international efforts to promote dialogue, peace, and democracy in the country should involve initiatives that aim to create understanding and empathy among the diverging groups.

The paper first reviews existing literature on the relation between emotions and conflict, and briefly discusses how some discrete emotions may trigger, fuel, and sustain conflicts while others may contribute to the making of peace. Then, the content and notion of empathy and its role in conflict resolution is examined at a conceptual level. The paper subsequently identifies some areas around which Ethiopia's perennial political questions and unresolved national issues revolve and demonstrates how empathy could assist in addressing them. These areas are the country's history, national symbols, and the Constitution, along with the system of government that it has instituted. Thus far, these issues have been the most contentious obstacles impeding transition to democracy. The paper then proposes some strategies of intervention to induce the empathy of the diverse groups in the country with a view toward enhancing forward-looking engagements. The paper finally concludes by urging the various political and religious elites to realize that, in the absence of empathetic considerations and reciprocal peace gestures, the usual tendency to focus on winning arguments by professing the seamlessness of one's perspectives and uniqueness of suffering will not bring about sustainable peace for everyone.

1. Conflict and Emotions

Emotions play a central role in conflicts both at the individual or group level. Emotions may also be instrumental in facilitating and making or building peace. Recent studies in the field of social psychology have confirmed that emotions and conflicts have a direct relationship, with one causing, aggravating, or sustaining the other.[4]

Indeed, most individual and communal conflicts are often charged with emotions whether such conflicts are caused by ideological disagreements or competitions to

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[4] See Eran Halperin, Keren Sharvit, and James J. Gross, *Emotion and Emotion Regulation in Intergroup Conflict: An Appraisal-Based Framework* (2010); D. Bar-Tal, E. Halperin, & J. de-Rivera, *Collective emotions in conflict situations: Societal implications*, 63 Journal of Social Issues 441 (2007); V. Cheung-Blunden, & B. Blunden, *The emotional construal of war: Anger, fear and other negative emotions* (2008), 14 Peace and Conflict – Journal of Peace Psychology 123 (2008).

gain control over resources or socioeconomic conditions. Conflicts by their very nature are emotion-eliciting stimuli but also are a function of negative emotions manifested in the form of hatred, anger, and resentment. Nonetheless, those emotions generating conflicts are not themselves "the guns that fire or the bombs that explode" but rather are the propelling forces that lead to the path of war and other forms of violence.[5]

Once conflicts break out, negative emotions may further prevent compromise and peacemaking in an ongoing or intense intractable conflicts. For example, several empirical studies conducted in the context of Israel-Palestine conflict have shown that different discrete emotions such as fear, hatred, and hope impacted the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.[6] One study carried out recently specifically revealed that fear was found to be the only emotional precursor of the opposition to taking risk in negotiations while hatred was the only emotion that reduced support for symbolic compromise and reconciliation.[7] Anger, on the other hand, was found to have engendered the tendency to blame Palestinians while concurrently and somehow counterintuitively, helping induce constructive stances such as support for taking risks in negotiations and openness to positive information about them.[8]

In multi-ethnic/racial and multi-religious societies, emotions play an integral role both at the start and over the course of conflicts particularly in shaping attitudes and behaviors during intergroup conflicts. At the start, emotions could easily transform individual disagreements into collective or group affairs and eventually make them take on clear ethnic, religious, or cultural lines, resulting in even further extreme polarization and violence. In such cases, individuals experience

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[5]   Eran Halperin et al., *ibid.*

[6]   *Ibid*; Eran Halperin, *Emotional Barriers to Peace: Negative Emotions and Public Opinion about the Peace Process in the Middle East*, 17 J. of Peace Psychology 22 (2011).

[7]   *Ibid.*

[8]   I. Maoz & C. McCauley, *Psychological Correlates of Support for Compromise: A Polling Study of Jewish-Israeli Attitudes Toward Solutions to The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict,* 26 Political Psychology, 791 (2005); E. Halperin, D. Bar-Tal, R. Nets-Zehngut, & E. Drori, *Fear and Hope in Conflict: Some Determinants in the Israeli-Jewish Society*, 14 J. of Peace Psychology 1 (2008).

every emotion, anger or victimhood, victory or defeat, in response to events that affect other members of a group with which they identify themselves.

Emotions may be grounded both in perception or fact. The perception could relate to interactions with the out-group or how that group is portrayed in the collective imagination of the competing group. Emotions may also be based on recollections of historical facts or relying on current events or on their interpretation by a group. When conflicts are associated with historical or ongoing intergroup oppressive/unequal relationships, emotions have the potential to alter a substantive incident into a motivation to respond to it in a particular manner.

Emotions could also be short-lived or may endure for a certain period of time in which it may evolve into sentiments, opinions, and prejudices toward or stereotypes about (the perceived) adversary group.

It should however be underscored that, although emotions and being emotional are often mistakenly understood as carrying exclusively negative connotations, they may also play a positive role in resolving conflicts and building peace. Emotions that have evolved or developed into hope, love, and compassion set the stage for dialogue, negotiations, and compromise by reducing the identifiable victim bias.[9] They also promote helping behavior toward suffering people, including those belonging to the rival group.[10] Similar to negative emotions, positive emotions are intertwined with each other and one may reinforce the other; for example, hope and compassion may generate love and love tends to make people more compassionate to the suffering of others.

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[9]   See sub-section 2.4 below on limits to empathy.

[10]   B. Fredrickson, et al., Open Hearts Build Lives: Positive Emotions, Induced Through Loving-Kindness Meditation, Build Consequential Personal Resources, 95 J. of Personality and Social Psychology 1045 (2008). Cohen & Insko, *War and Peace: Possible Approaches to Reducing Intergroup Conflict*, 3 Perspectives on Psychological Science 87 (2008).

2. Empathy as a Way of Building Peace

Empathy and empathy-related emotions such as compassion, love, hope and personal distress, are recognized to play a key role in social relations.[11] Empathy in particular is often considered to be a crucial factor in enhancing cooperation between interdependent individuals and creating good intergroup relations.[12] Empathetic gestures, even small ones, when they are displayed towards the perceived or actual adversary/competing out-group, also go far in changing social prejudice and generating reciprocal positive responses from the competing group.[13] Several meta-analytical statistical research analyses of multiple existing studies have demonstrated that empathy has a positive and negative correlation with prosocial and antisocial aggressive behavior, respectively.[14] For example, by exposing individuals to the suffering of others, it was possible to induce their empathy, and make them develop (the motivation for) altruistic behavior;

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[11] E. Halperin, *Emotions in conflict: Inhibitors and facilitators of peace making* (2015); see also Olga M. Klimecki, *The Role of Empathy and Compassion in Conflict Resolution*, 11 Emotion Review (2019).

[12] C. D. Batson & N. Y. Ahmad, (2009). *Using empathy to improve intergroup attitudes and relations* 3 Social Issues and Policy Review 141 (2009); J. F. Dovidio, et al., "Empathy and Intergroup relations" in M. Mikulincer & P. R. Shaver (eds.) *Prosocial motives, Emotions, and Behavior: The Better Angels of our Nature* 393 (2020); F. B. M. De Waal, *Putting the altruism back into altruism: The evolution of empathy*, 59 Annual Review of Psychology 279 (2008).

[13] For instance, on July 31, 2016, thousands of protestors in the Northern Amhara city of Gondar demonstrated against the government. Some carried placards showing support and empathy to the Oromo youth who had been protesting for serval months and against whom a brutal crackdown was carried out by the government. This showed improved intergroup relations between the Amharas and Oromos and subsequently played a significant role in forcing the ruling party to introduce reforms, paving the way for the appointment of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who is from the Oromo ethnic group, to the premiership.

[14] Eisenberg, N., & Miller, P. A., The relation of empathy to prosocial and related (1987), *Psychological Bulletin*, 101(1), 91–119, Miller, P. A., & Eisenberg, N, "The relation of empathy to aggressive and externalizing/antisocial behavior" (1988) *Psychological Bulletin, 103*(3), 324–344. See also other more recent studies, including K. Jörkqvist, K. Österman, & A. Kaukiainen, *Social intelligence - empathy = aggression?* 5.2 *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 191 (2000). Dovidio et al, *supra* note 12.

furthermore, it was observed that the more they empathized, the more they tended to assist others who sought their help.[15]

If indeed empathy has such a significant role in influencing social behavior and individual and intergroup relations, the obvious question is: what does empathy mean and how is it different from other interrelated notions such as sympathy, compassion, or even personal distress?

2.1. Definition

The term has its vernacular provenance in the Greek language and is said to be derived from the word "*empatheia*" meaning "physical affection or passion", which itself originates from another Greek word, *pathos*, meaning "passion" or "suffering".[16] However, despite the fact that it has been a subject of extensive research—in philosophy, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, social work, sociology, etc.—and that there have been attempts to define empathy, there is hitherto no single, unanimously agreed-upon, comprehensive definition of the notion. Different individuals define it differently. For example, McLaren considers empathy to be a skill and defines it as follows:

> **Empathy** is a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support … [it] includes a capacity to help others.[17]

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[15] C. D. Batson, B. D. Duncan, P. Ackerman, T. Buckley, & K. Birch, *Is empathic emotion a source of altruistic motivation?*, 40.2 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 290 (1981), O. M. Klimecki, S. V. Mayer, A. Jusyte, J. Scheef, & M. Schönenberg, *Empathy promotes altruistic behavior in economic interactions*, 6 Sci Rep 1 (2016); see also S. V. Mayer, A, Jusyte, O. M. Klimecki-Lenz, & M. Schönenberg, *Empathy and altruistic behavior in antisocial violent offenders with psychopathic traits*, 269 Psychiatry Research, 625 (2018).

[16] The Free Online Palliative Care Dictionary. *Empathy*, https://pallipedia.org/empathy/.

[17] Karla McLaren, *The Art of Empathy: A Complete Guide to Life's Most Essential Skill* 30 (2013).

On the other hand, Britannica Dictionary defines empathy as "the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions." Similarly, Roman Krznaric defines empathy as "the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives and using that understanding to guide your actions."[18] As such, empathy may be simply understood as an emotional exercise of projecting oneself in the shoes of others and understand their perspectives, feelings, or conditions.

Empathy is related to sympathy, and sometimes people use one to mean the other. However, empathy is considered to be different from sympathy, that is, "the expressions of … pity or feeling sorry for somebody—because these do not involve trying to understand the other person's emotions or point of view."[19] Yet, it should be pointed out that, although sympathy is an "other-oriented concern or compassion," it is "an emotional reaction that also is a consequence of apprehending another's state or condition."[20] Empathy and sympathy are nonetheless clearly distinct from self-oriented feelings of personal distress, including anxiety or feeling uncomfortable. Personal distress induces the desire to alleviate one's own adverse state or distress, while empathy and sympathy are believed to be associated with an altruistic motivation to alleviate others' distress or respond to the need of others.[21]

2.2. Why empathy? The benefits of empathy in conflict resolution

Why does empathy matter? As pointed out earlier, empathy can help reduce violence, promote mutual understanding and resolve conflicts. Given that empathy is the ability to recognize and understand the thoughts of another person,

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[18]   Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters and How to Get It* (2014).

[19]   *Ibid.*

[20]   Nancy Eisenberg, *Empathy and Sympathy: A Brief Review of the Concepts and Empirical Literature*, 2:1 Anthrozoös: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People and Animals 15 (1988).

[21]   *Ibid*; see also Daniel C. Batson, *Prosocial Motivation: Is It Ever Truly Altruistic? in Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (1987).

it is one of the best ways to build peaceful communities, especially in diverse multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. The need for empathy is also dictated by the realization that emotions play a significant role in conflicts.

In diverse societies, as was indicated earlier, conflicts often arise either from a history of uneven intergroup relationships, ongoing (perceived) dominance by one group or a too-readily accepted sense of victimhood. The sense of victimhood may be grounded in a fact or perception, but once it has developed, it makes each group view their circumstances as the fault of others, not the product of broad historical, social, economic, and political forces. A sense of victimhood also has the power to make members of a group consider the other to be the "enemy," a permanently evil character created with only the desire to harm or even eliminate them.

With this often comes the belief that the out-group cannot change and thus needs to be "educated" to stop its aggression against the in-group. Identity-based politics,[22] characterized by resentment and the desire to avenge the "oppressor" out-group, then takes the centre stage, thrives easily and the conflicts gradually run deep in the veins of each member of the in-group. Feelings eventually matter more than the truth; perceptions become facts and consequently, emotions become the default compass to guide individual and group actions.

It is at this point where empathy, more than any reference to facts or the truth, is needed. As it is rightly pointed out, "Knowledge may influence decision-making, but it is emotion that truly changes behavior."[23] Empathy is a powerful tool for engaging people's emotions, healing their collective pain, opening their hearts to try to see the other side, and ultimately for preparing them to choose the path of peace over violence.

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[22] Recent studies in the field revealed that social identity shapes neural responses to intergroup competition and harm. See M. Cikara, M. Botvinick, S. T. Fiske, *Us versus them: Social identity shapes neural responses to intergroup competition and harm* 22 Psychological Science 306 (2011).

[23] Mary Gordon, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* 47 (2009).

Empathy has some particular benefits and advantages that are crucial to resolving conflicts. First of all, despite differences in degree, empathy is an emotional treasure or resource found in every human being and can be easily tapped into to make people compassionate and amenable to compromise. It is inherent in human nature that the capacity to empathize exists in all human beings from young to old age. As Gordon succinctly put it:

> Nature is on our side in creating strong, empathic societies. We are born with the capacity for empathy. An ability to recognize emotions transcends race, culture, nationality, social class, and age.[24]

Accordingly, empathy is generally closer than knowledge to human nature among all members and sections of a society; educated/uneducated, men/women, young/elderly, religious/atheist, etc.—all have the ability to empathize with others.

Empathy also creates conditions for transitional justice by making individuals feel guilt for the wrongs which they have committed on others. It encourages them to acknowledge in-group responsibility and develop the willingness to conceive of new approaches such as negotiating with the enemy and making compromises. In this connection, studies conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina with respect to the Srebrenica Genocide and the Israeli-Palestinians conflicts revealed that admission of in-group guilt can motivate group members to take actions aimed at rectifying past wrongdoings on the part of their in-group and show inclination to support or endorse reparation policies designed to assist out-group victims affected by injustice.[25]

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[24] *Ibid.,* 22.

[25] E. Halperin & D. Schwartz, *Emotions in Conflict Resolution and Post-Conflict Reconciliation* 87 *Les Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale* 423 (2010), R. Brown & S. Cehajic, *Dealing with The Past and Facing The Future: Mediators of the Effects of Collective Guilt and Shame in Bosnia and Herzegovina* 38 European Journal of Social Psychology (2008); See also N. R. Branscombe, "A Social Psychological Process Perspective on Collective Guilt" in N. R. Branscombe & B. Doosje (eds.) *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives* 320 (2004).

Furthermore, empathy is a forward-looking exercise in the sense that it allows people to deal with the past and face the future.[26] As opposed to hatred, the emotion that leaves parties fixed on past assumptions about the adversary out-group as evil and incapable of real change, empathy creates hope and makes people imagine a harmonious future different from and likely better than the past. It also creates societal expectation and aspirations around a positive attainable goal.

Empathy also helps promote cognitive appraisal and regulate emotions,[27] including by inhibiting aggressive responses to provocations.[28] Cognitive appraisal gives rise to understanding, compassion and forgiveness—important assets for fostering intergroup relations and building sustainable peace.

Furthermore, empathy tames negative emotions, limits their role in shaping or influencing opinions and positions, and guides a group to see the truth in the eyes of the adversary.

2.3. Tapping empathy to resolve Ethiopia's perennial national issues

Ethiopians often consider themselves to be very empathetic, and indeed the daily life of ordinary people has long exhibited this collective virtue. However, since the middle of the 20th century, and more so in the last three decades, Ethiopia's politics has suffered from a serious deficit of empathy. A sense of victimhood and resentment dominates the political discourse, and elites compete with each other to win arguments and claim entitlement to power on the basis of who suffered most. Devoid of humility and any sense of empathy towards others, some of the influential political elites are often heard speaking of the "irrefutable correctness" of their own stories and the seamlessness of their historical narratives, painting

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[26] Halperin & Schwartz, *ibid.*
[27] See sub-section 3.3 below on emotion regulation.
[28] P. Cernadas Curotto, D. Sander, E. Halperin, & O. Klimecki, *The Impact of Compassion and Emotion Regulation Training on Conflict Resolution* (2018).

themselves or their group as uniquely victimized and oppressed by others. It is not unusual to see many of them claiming, with a blend of self-assured omniscience, to have exclusive ownership over knowledge and the fountain of truth. They assert authority for their claim of victimhood or their past contributions to the country's nation-building, or seek to substantiate the correctness of their preferred ideological leanings from their selectively picked sources, sources which possess "the truth"—a truth which appears "incontrovertible'" only to them.

As a result, division, violence, and polarization have become almost the defining features of Ethiopian politics. This claim to having the absolute truth on one's side, coupled with an embedded societal culture that sees compromise as weakness, is seen to have made peace elusive. The prospect of dialogue, negotiations, and broad-based elite bargain is all the more impeded by a complex history of interethnic and interreligious relationships and accompanying oppressed-oppressor narratives.

Unfortunately, some of the country's political or historical contestations cannot be settled by a mere reference to "facts" or by advancing a self-serving narrative that gives parties ownership over the truth of the past or present. In the absence of empathetic gestures—without the willingness to put oneself in the shoes of others and an attempt to understand the truth of the other side, any effort to ensure inclusiveness, including building a nation on the foundation of rule of law and bringing about sustainable peace will remain a distant dream.

Against this background, three areas of contestation or perennial national questions are identified in the next section. In the country's political discourses, these issues have consistently proved to be contentious and not amenable to resolution by adducing "evidence" or "facts." Each ethnic/religious group maintains its own version of the truth on these issues and as such, their resolution very much depends on Ethiopians' empathetic engagements with each other. This begins with the realizations that diversity is the inbuilt character of Ethiopia and that different groups in the country have differing perspectives and interpretations of national identity, or the questions of being an Ethiopian and what Ethiopia is.

It is also important to point out that every group in the country has painful experiences deserving the empathy of the others. It does not matter whether the current generation or the forefathers are the causes of each other's hurt—what matters most in this is that all groups have developed pain and a sense of having been hurt—for some a deeply-engrained one that merits empathy. It should be reiterated that empathy is not necessarily about reason or fact; rather it is about having the personal quality of understanding, valuing, and, if possible, sharing others' emotional pain, whatever its foundation or source is—understanding the foundation or the source is particularly critical for a proper engagement.

In a situation where every aspect of a nation's project and symbol, ranging from the color of the flag to its heroes and heroines, historical facts and narratives, and its governance structure, is disputed, empathy, when combined with honesty, heals wounds, narrows rifts, and overcomes societal divisions. As such, a genuine desire and attempt to address the country's political quagmire requires each group in the country to understand the symbolic value and the healing power of a simple empathetic gesture. As various studies have demonstrated in other countries, empathy has the capacity to enable different groups to have the courage to acknowledge the pains of others, regardless of whether they are grounded in a fact or perception, and look beyond the strictures of their own ethnic and religious horizons. Such exercises may not necessarily entail doing what is rationally right but what would be emotionally correct for and expected by others. Needless to say, not everything emotionally right is factually or rationally correct and vice versa.

1) History: the legacy of past leaders

One of the most controversial national issues in Ethiopia is the country's history. While some sections of society tend to portray or capitalize on a glorious past, some others describe the country's past as nothing but a history of oppression and violence.[29] The difference is so stark that one may be tempted to think that what

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[29] The existing Constitution of the country itself starts with a controversial preamble which describes one of its main purported goals as the creation of common destiny "by *rectifying*

each group considers Ethiopian history looks like that of two distinct countries, not one.

At the centre of the controversy is found the legacies of past leaders and administrations, particularly the kings and regimes of the last two centuries. For example, ethnonationalist groups and individuals from the South (Oromos, Kembatas, Sidamas) see Ethiopia's history as an oppressive past where the northern Semitic groups of Amhara and Tigray dominated culturally, politically, and economically, and subjugated the South. On the other hand, some others in the predominantly lowland regions of the country (ethnic Somalis, Gumuzus, Shinashas, Agnuak, etc.) perceive Ethiopian history as an exclusionary world of the highlanders with which they cannot identify themselves. For the peripheries, Ethiopian history is exclusively that of the center, having nothing in it that they consider their own.

The different religious groups have also their own understanding of the country's history. The (Orthodox) Christians see the past as essentially a time when the country was a land of justice, which peacefully welcomed and hosted Islam but whose civilization was later destroyed by the Muslims. On the contrary, the Muslims, citing the strong influence of the Church in imperial regimes, claim that it was instead a time when they were made second-class citizens in their own country.

As a result of these contestations over its history, Ethiopia has still not found what its people could call the "Father(s) of the Nation". The legacy of all its leaders is disputed and it is almost impossible to find a single leader who is now accepted by all or a majority of the various ethnic and religious groups as "their own." All of the country's past leaders have been controversial but the most controversial of all are the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and King Menelik II, not surprisingly because of their great influence and role in giving the country its current shape. Both have their own ardent social bases, who with messianic zeal view them as the

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historically unjust relationships and by further promoting our shared interests" (emphasis added). Preamble, Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995.

best leaders of all time,[30] while other groups see Menelik as a colonialist/ imperialist[31] and Meles as a brutal dictator.

In view of this ostensibly irreconcilable disparity in understanding the past, including the legacies of Ethiopia's past leaders, it has currently become extremely difficult to imagine the possibility of reaching consensus on even some part of the shared history of the country. No matter how much one group is able to produce piles of evidence or fact, or to firmly assert that truth is on its side, it is unlikely that it will succeed in convincing others on the accuracy of its own understanding of the past or disproving that of others'. Questions over whether Menelik was anti-imperialist or oppressive King or whether Meles was a visionary or despotic leader will definitely be non-starters in the kind of forward-looking political discourse that Ethiopia badly needs. They not only have the potential to harden the already polarized positions but even more, they reduce the appetite for intergroup engagement.

However, what would the situation be like if the different groups could empathize towards each other? The first outcome would be that each group realizes that Ethiopia's history, like the history of many other countries, is contentious and that multiple narratives are naturally expected.[32] Empathy will prompt each group to understand the reasons behind such divergent views on the same subject matter and learn to know and tolerate the perspectives of the perceived rival out-group. Empathy will also enable members of the different groups to develop sensitivity

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[30] Paulos Milkias & Getachew Metaferia, *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory Against European Colonialism* (2005); Hailay Gebretsadik Shifare, *Transformational Leadership (Lesson from Meles Zenawi): The Lesson of Exemplary Model for Developmental State Governance* 7.2 International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences 261 (2018).

[31] See Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo* (2014).

[32] For example, considering the moral cause underlying the American Civil War, one may be tempted to think that it is not controversial, but it is estimated that more than 70,000 books containing different and, at times, contradictory narratives have been written exclusively on the War. In 2001, Jonathan Sarna estimated that over 50,000 books had already appeared, with 1,500 more appearing annually (89.3 *American Jewish History* 335 [2001]).

towards the feeling of the other groups that they consider as their historical adversaries.

For instance, with some addition of empathy, Oromo nationalists will allow themselves to realize that they would potentially have the same views of their Amhara counterparts if they were members of the Amhara people and experienced the same path of life their counterparts have. Similarly, Amhara nationalists will understand that their veneration of King Menelik triggers a painful memory of oppression in their Oromo counterparts and thus desist from censuring the latter for criticizing or showing an inveterate hatred towards Menelik. Similarly, Amharas and Oromos will refrain from demonizing Meles Zenawi in view of how much that will negatively affect their Tigrayan fellows. The adoption of empathy in this exercise creates the understanding that no leader is uncontroversial in any country and, as such, contending groups need to focus more on the positive collective achievements of the people and leaders, such as, for example, the Victory of Adwa instead of, Menelik and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) instead of Meles Zenawi. In other words, empathy will permit groups to not let the future be a prisoner of the past.

Yet again, it should be emphasized that politics or any other intergroup interaction is not only dictated by one's own truth or even by citing an "objective" truth. In the absence of empathy, the ownership of truth, even one that is objectively verifiable, will not necessarily resolve differences on historical facts or incidents. Facts—no matter how glaring and accurate—alone cannot help settle disagreements on the history of the country or even on what it means to be an Ethiopian.

2) National symbols: national flag

National symbols, and in particular national flags, are a subject of great controversy in Ethiopia's political landscape.[33] In recent years, the issue of the flag

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[33] Abdi Latif Dahir, "Ethiopia's flag protests show a nation fighting to become united," Quartz Africa, (September 17, 2018), https://qz.com/africa/1392779/ethiopias-abiy-ahmed-calls-for-calm-after-flag-protests/

has also become a cause of recurring intercommunal skirmishes and violence.[34] The conspicuous absence of consensus on the national flag is apparent in the frequency with which the national flag has changed over time. In the last century alone, Ethiopia has had over 10 flags of different colours and sizes. With the adoption of the federal structure, the country now has dozens of regional flags while the opposition also maintains its own flags. Changing flags seems to be the ordained norm that all previous governments have, upon assuming power, taken as a priority that must strictly be implemented. Instead of working to create consensus, some of them even used the law to ban the use of other competing flags.[35]

In fact, though they change the size and designs of prior flags, most of the contested flags in the country share similar colours. What thus appears to be the real cause of the dispute is the perceived thinking/idea or belief behind those flags. Oromo and Tigrayan ethnonationalists often see the old flag as a symbol of oppression and a reminder of subjugation while the Amharas and some others in the South see it as a symbol of freedom, under which Ethiopia defended itself from foreign invaders, sacrificing the lives of hundreds of thousands of its men and women. Both beliefs are deeply engrained in the collective soul of each group such that it is inconceivable that any would adopt the other's flag to serve as a common symbol for all.

However, empathy could come in here to play its role by bridging the gap and inducing compromise from the different sides. By creating reciprocal

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[34] In the last Epiphany Celebration held in January 2022, it was reported that at least three individuals were killed by police after clashes erupted between Police and Orthodox Christians who carried the old flag of Ethiopia during the processions. See "Oromia police killed at least three Orthodox church followers during epiphany celebration in Addis Ababa" Borkena, (January 21, 2022), https://borkena.com/2022/01/21/ethiopia-oromia-police-killed-at-least-three-orthodox-church-followers/

[35] For example, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front government enacted the Flag Proclamation No. 654/2009, which is still in force, by which it banned the use of the old flag without the national emblem, a pentagram on a blue disc, superimposed in the middle. This was enforced with a threat of criminal sanction against those who breach the ban. See Article 23 of the Flag Proclamation No. 654/2009, Federal Negarit Gazeta No. 58, August 28, 2009.

understanding as to why each group has a particular love or detestation for the different flags, it promotes tolerance among the groups and encourages them to be open to the adoption of a common symbol which allows each to see its past as well envision its own and the country's future.

3) The Constitution and state structure: federal *vs.* unitary

In 1994, Ethiopia officially introduced the ethnic-based federal system under which each ethnic group is given a "national homeland" with its accompanying right to self-determination that, where necessary, may include the right to secession.[36] Ever since such system was adopted, the country's governance structure as well as the Constitution itself have been a bone of contention between the different groups.

In this regard, the political landscape is perceived to be a battleground for the fight between those seeking a centralized system of government and those who prefer a decentralized administration that provides greater autonomy to the member federal units. The recent war between the Federal Government and Tigray Regional Administration is also framed by many as a "clash of visions" between "unitarist" and "federalist" forces.[37] Whether the war is indeed a clash of visions between those who are for autonomy and those for a more centralized system, or rather a clash between different forces to control the center is debatable and could be a subject of further research.[38]

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[36] See Articles 39, 46 and 47 of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1994).

[37] See for example *A Clash of Narratives: National Identity and Violent Conflict in Ethiopia*, Globalvoice, (May 2021), <https://globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Ethiopia-National-Identity-Observatory-2021.pdf; Teferi Mergo, *The War in Tigray Is a Fight Over Ethiopia's Past—and Future*, Foreign Policy, December 18, 2020, Awol Allo, *How Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia-first nationalism led to civil war*, Al Jazeera, November 25, 2020.

[38] In the opinion of this author, the "unitarist vs. federalist" discourse in Ethiopia has nothing much to do with the actual desire of the groups to see a more centralized or decentralized form of government. In fact, the fight among the various groups in both camps is more for the center than periphery or their own self-administration. For example, TPLF identifies itself as a federalist force but its 27 years in power were marked by strong central government. Similarly, Oromo

Nonetheless, it is self-evident that there is no common consensus over the existing system of government among the different sections of the Ethiopian society. For those who support the *status quo*, Oromos, Sidamas, etc., the federal system is a manifestation of the end of their past cultural and political marginalization and an affirmation of their natural right to determine their own future destiny. On the contrary, some other groups, particularly, the Amharas, Gurages, and urban elites, believe that the existing federal system made them aliens and second-class citizens in their own country by usurping their full rights of citizenship in places outside their purported ethnic homeland.

Clearly, both *pro* and *against* camps have legitimate reasons for supporting or fulminating against the Constitution and the existing federal system that it has instituted. Obviously, the disagreement cannot be settled by the sword of truth that each claim to have, nor one by outrightly rejecting the other's preference for this or another alternative system. Again, the complex history of the country has put its weight on each group's choice of governance structure. It is very doubtful that bringing into the discourse the objective advantages and disadvantages of the different systems of government alone will convince either side to accept the other's preference.

What would instead help them move from the "self-regard" default preference to consideration of others' concerns is the empathy each could display toward the out-group's grievances with respect to the in-group's preferred system of government. If the different groups are empathetic towards each other, it will be easier to design a system where both self and shared rule, multinationalism and civic nationalism, majority rule and minority rights, and the full respect for religious rights and secular values, could be simultaneously materialized without

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nationalists have, for the most part, expressed their favor for a decentralized system not necessarily because they have a particular love for it but rather because they believe that Oromia is the center. In this case decentralization means having a dominant role relationship to the center without much contestation from other groups. In sum, Ethiopian politics is not a fight for self-autonomy or centralization as such but rather essentially it is a contestation to control the center. Federalist vs. unitarist narrative is just used as ladders or means to control the power that resides at the center, namely in Addis, the capital city, where the country's economic, social, and political power is concentrated.

the need for one to eliminate the other. The ability of each group to evoke the humanity of its members, take the perspective of the other group, and identify commonalities in the shared feelings of pain and suffering will enable them to imagine the possibility of a third option in between the federal and unitary or territorial (geographical) federalism systems.

2.4. The limits of empathy

As much as it could have a significant role in improving individual and intergroup relations, resolving intercommunal conflicts, and building a lasting peace, it is necessary to note that empathy is neither a panacea to resolve each and every conflict nor is in itself capable of responding to all the intricacies of a particular conflict. While initiating pro-empathy interventions, one should thus bear in mind the natural limits of empathy.

The first limit is that empathy does not fully respond to demands for accountability for serious crimes or past or present injustice. Whereas empathy could facilitate some aspects of transitional justice such as truth and reconciliation, it does not offer the full benefits of the criminal justice system. Empathy-promoting programs should therefore be considered alongside other means of ensuring accountability for serious crimes and/or reparatory justice.

Second, empathy is time and context dependent, and thus it is important to identify the opportune moment when it is likely to be effective in resolving conflicts. In conflict resolution studies, this opportune moment is encapsulated by the notion of ripeness. This line of thinking suggests that adversaries must experience a mutually painful stalemate, albeit not necessarily in equal degree or for the same reasons, before they are nudged to pursue the path of negotiations and peace.[39] Similarly, empathy cannot be successful in a situation where there is no emotional ripeness, that is, where the prevailing collective emotions of rival groups must support the practical possibility of progress towards sustainable

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[39] William Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond" in Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (eds.), *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War* 225 (2000).

peace.[40] According to Halperin and Schwartz, "the presence of emotional ripeness exists when, with respect to collective emotions, the overriding long-term sentiments and non-affective factors are aligned with a predisposition to evoke cognitive appraisals in response to new or recollected events that give rise to emotions conducive to supporting constructive political attitudes and actions."[41]

The role of empathy may further be constrained by intergroup empathy bias and identifiable victim empathy. Studies have shown that individuals and groups are biased, being more empathetic towards members of their own groups in comparison with other groups, or towards single, specific, and identifiable persons while harboring reduced empathetic feelings towards a larger, vaguer group of people.[42] Exposure to the suffering, first-hand perspectives, and stories of members of the out-group is also a more effective way to evoke empathy compared to a general description of the suffering or story of the rival group.

3. What Can be Done to Exploit the Full Benefits of Empathy?

In the preceding sections, I have examined the relationship between emotions and conflict, the definition of empathy and its role in creating intergroup harmony and resolving conflicts. I have also shown how empathy could help address Ethiopia's contentious national issues and the potential inherent limits of empathy. In this section, an attempt is made to briefly highlight possible interventions that could maximize the benefits of empathy.

It should be stated from the outset that individuals empathize with others consciously—with full cognitive appraisal of the circumstances of others—or unconsciously—for example, in the form of interjection. In both cases, it is

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[40] See Eran Halperin and Drew E. Schwartz, *supra* note 25.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] S. Lee & T. H. Feeley, *The Identifiable Victim Effect: A Meta-Analytic Review*, 11 *Social Influence*, 199 (2016); K. Jenni & G. Loewenstein, *Explaining the Identifiable Victim* Effect, 14 Journal of Risk and Uncertainty 235 (1997); A. Genevsky, D. Västfjäll, P. Slovic, & B. Knutson, *Neural Underpinnings of the Identifiable Victim Effect: Affect Shifts Preferences for Giving*, 33.43 The Journal of Neuroscience 17188 (2013).

possible to induce empathy through various mechanisms, which should be included in peacemaking/peacebuilding initiatives to promote empathetic engagements. Below, I will briefly discuss four of such mechanisms that existing psychosocial literature found to be effective in evoking empathy and fostering empathetic discourse in polarized, diverse societies.

3.1. Perspective taking exercises

Perspective taking is defined as "The ability to understand how a situation appears to another person and how that person is reacting cognitively and emotionally to the situation."[43] Various studies have shown that perspective taking exercises help combat intergroup racial bias and stereotypes and improve conflict resolution by triggering empathetic feelings.[44] Perspective taking involves the process of seeking to *understand the lived experiences and perceptions* of others by: *ideating*, that is, imagining what a situation/story means to the others; *hypothesizing*, or making solid hypotheses to validate and use to interact with the others; and finally *engaging* with them to understand and reassess our assumptions and adjust our outlooks.[45] This requires implementing initiatives that create common platforms for intergroup communication and dialogue. It should be recalled that "Empathy cannot [necessarily] be achieved through objective observation or detached inference, because that would indicate a lack of interpersonal connection and communication."[46] Communication is, hence, at the

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[43] H. Gehlbach, *A New Perspective on Perspective Taking: A Multidimensional Approach to Conceptualizing an Aptitude*, 16.3 Educational Psychology Review 207 (2004).

[44] See Margaret Shih, et. al., *Perspective Taking: Reducing Prejudice Towards General Out-Groups and Specific Individuals*, 12.5 Group Processes & Intergroup Relations 565 (2009); Andrew R. Todd, et al., *Perspective Taking Combats Automatic Expressions of Racial Bias* (2011), 100.6 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1027 (2011); Valerie I. Sessa, *Using Perspective Taking to Manage Conflict and Affect in Teams*, 32 *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 1 (1996); Inga J. Hoever, et al., *Fostering Team Creativity: Perspective Taking as Key to Unlocking Diversity's Potential*, 97 *Journal of Applied Psychology* 982 (2012).

[45] *Guide to Perspective Taking*, AMP Creative (last accessed September 7, 2022) https://ampcreative.com/guide-to-perspective-taking/

[46] Linda Roan, et. al, *Technical Report: Social Perspective Taking*, U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (2009), 9, https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/4556387/Gehlbach+2009+Social+Perspective+Ta king.pdf;jsessionid=67C417E3C0F0FF62EE77CEF4F99DAF2D?sequence=1.

center of perspective taking, although firsthand experience or observation of the situation of the out-group is crucial.

In the Ethiopian context, perspective-taking and the resulting empathetic dialogue could be promoted by organizing inter-communal and inter-religious discussions. National volunteering services, joint retreats of representatives of different groups, cultural exchange and language learning programs, and story-telling initiatives are also instrumental in this regard.

3.2. Compassion training and increasing the motivation for intergroup empathy

Some studies have suggested that compassion training, loving kindness, and cultivating positive emotions regarding others all increase empathy and exert beneficial impacts on intergroup relations.[47] Despite the fact that empathy is generally activated by and associated with the imagination of unpleasant experiences of others, positive feelings are also considered to have the power of generating empathy.[48] In this vein, increasing positive emotions, even in the face of suffering, through compassion training is believed to serve a particularly useful role for strengthening compassion, empathy, and a readiness for resolution of intergroup conflicts. One proposal is to make compassion-positive norms among the in-group more salient or socially desirable.[49] In this regard, it is worth noting that Ethiopian society has several wonderful social values such as ይሉኝታ (*yeluñetā*) (selflessness and public self-consciousness),[50] generosity, tolerance, and

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[47] B. Fredrickson, et. al, *Open Hearts Build Lives: Positive Emotions, Induced Through Loving-Kindness Meditation, Build Consequential Personal Resources*, 95 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1045 (2008). T. R. Cohen & C. A. Insko, *War and Peace: Possible Approaches to Reducing Intergroup Conflict*, 3 Perspectives on Psychological Science 87 (2008).

[48] *Ibid.*

[49] Klimecki, *supra* note 11, 11.

[50] ይሉኝታ (*yeluñetā*) does not have an English equivalent word but it is generally described as entailing self-restraint, consideration of others' feelings, or having an awareness of how one's actions are seen through other's eyes (*Rukya Hassen, Culture-Specific Semiotic Politeness Norms in the Multicultural Society of Ethiopia*, 7 Arts and Social Sciences Journal 3 [2016]; see

love of neighbors, which are found in the cultures and traditions of almost all groups in the country. The social capital attached to intergroup empathy and harmony is therefore readily available. What is apparently missing is the work of cultivating and amplifying these positive values in an organized way to shape public discourse in the political arena and combat intergroup stereotypes. This should accordingly be one of the priorities that must be considered in interventions that aim at helping the country heal and move to a harmonious future.

3.3. Emotion regulation and reappraisal

Another important strategy for inducing empathy and promoting intergroup relations, especially in the context of intractable conflicts, is to implement emotion regulation programs like cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive appraisal denotes "the attempt to reinterpret an emotion-eliciting situation in a way that alters its meaning and changes its emotional impact," whereas expressive suppression is "the attempt to hide, inhibit or reduce ongoing emotion-expressive behavior."[51] Empathy evolves with cognitive skills and moral values, and the more individuals manage to regulate emotions through cognitive appraisals and expressive suppression, the better chance there is for meaningful intergroup dialogue, understanding, and empathy-based cooperation.

3.4. Reducing group entitativity

Intergroup conflicts are often fueled by entitativity, or "the extent to which a group or collective is considered by others to be a real entity having unity, coherence, and internal organization rather than a set of independent individuals."[52] It is a perception developed by a group that the rival out-group has structured

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also Nina Evason, "Ethiopian Culture Core Concepts," Cultural Atlas [2018] https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/ethiopian-culture/ethiopian-culture-core-concepts)

[51] Debora Cutuli, *Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression Strategies Role in the Emotion Regulation: An Overview on their Modulatory Effects and Neural Correlates*, 8 Frontiers in Systems Neuroscience 1 (2014).

[52] APA Dictionary of Psychology. *Entitativity*. (Last accessed September 7, 2022).

cohesiveness and homogeneity and its members do things in a coordinated and organized way, including those purported to be directed against the interests of the in-group. In Ethiopia, for instance, it is not uncommon to see Oromos accusing Amharas and/or Tigrayans of conspiring to dominate them and vice versa; each group speaks about the other as a homogenous group relentlessly working to destroy or hurt them. This is despite the fact that there are competing forces within all these groups that are fighting against each other for dominance and power.

Entitativity blurs the line between peacemakers and spoilers of peace and everyone is perceived as one or part of a single enterprise. In a situation of intractable intergroup conflicts, entitativity is capable of sowing the seeds of suspicion, mistrust and animosity and could eventually be an obstacle to the creation of positive intergroup relations by peace-loving members of rival groups. As such, it limits intergroup cooperation and denies opportunities for moderate voices from each group to emerge and get a platform.

Reducing out-group entitativity is shown to have diminished intergroup empathy bias and facilitate intergroup interactions and compassions.[53] Changing the orientation of members of the in-group to view their counterparts in the out-group as individuals—fellow humans with their own distinct personality—has been found to promote forgiveness toward historical injustice perpetrators of an out-group.[54]

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[53] M. Cikara, et. al, *Their Pain Gives Us Pleasure: How Intergroup Dynamics Shape Empathic Failures and Counter-Empathic Responses* (2014), 55 Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 110 (2014); see also Klimecki, *supra* note 11, 12.

[54] In one study, for example, it was observed that among Jewish North Americans, human-level categorization of the harms done by Nazis to the Jews resulted in more positive responses toward Germans by decreasing the uniqueness of their past harmful actions toward the in-group. The more the criterion of the inclusiveness of categorization was enlarged, the greater the forgiveness was and the expectations that former out-group members should experience collective guilt were reduced compared with when categorization was at the intergroup level. See Michael J. A. Wohl & Nyla R. Branscombe, *Forgiveness and Collective Guilt Assignment to Historical Perpetrator Groups Depend on Level of Social Category Inclusiveness*" (2005), 88 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 288 (2005).

It is therefore important that compassion trainings or any other interventions designed to foster intergroup collaborations, build trust, and bridge differences in Ethiopia should include strategies to reduce entitativity among the different religious, ideological, or ethnic groups. This could be done by showing that there are also intra-group differences and divisions, and that the degree of group cohesiveness in the adversary out-group is not static. For instance, evidence-based compassion training aiming at reducing Amhara and Oromo group entitativity is expected to show that there are indeed intragroup competitions and differences within both the Amharas and the Oromos. In addition, training members of each group to see their counterparts in the other group as fellow Ethiopians or humans, by enlarging the standard of inclusiveness, is likely to encourage forgiveness for the past historical injustices that each claim to have suffered at the hands of the other.

Conclusions

Ethiopia finds itself at a difficult juncture where its people are suffering from a brutal civil war, intercommunal violence, poverty, and other social and economic challenges. Although several factors contribute to this, the failure of its elites to resolve their differences peacefully could be identified as a major reason why the country is in this unpleasant situation. Grouping themselves along ethnic, religious, and, to some extent, ideological lines, the elites are seen to be locked in a seemingly endless battle. Each group claims to have been uniquely victimized by the other and to have the truth on its side. As a result, no group shows an appetite to listen to the pain and suffering that the other group also claims to have equally experienced. Coupled with the serious trust deficit, this reliance on the absoluteness of each group's truth and narratives has impeded meaningful intergroup conversations and any resolution of the country's chronic social and political problems. In this paper, it is asserted that facts and any exclusive claim to the truth will neither make any of the groups a permanent winner nor resolve Ethiopia's complex problems. Instead, what will help create a peaceful future for all is to undertake an empathetic consideration of the perspectives and grievances of the respective perceived rival groups. This will enable stakeholders to fill the

trust gap, promote compassion and communication and, ultimately, conduct meaningful conversations among the different groups. Accordingly, members from the various ethnic, religious, and ideological groups should focus more on understanding each other's concerns than winning arguments. This might not necessarily entail doing what each considers to be logical or factually right; rather it requires doing what is emotionally correct in the eyes of the adversary group. National and international partners seeking to help Ethiopia overcome its current challenges should also consider including initiatives that foster an empathetic culture in the society.

DISCUSSIONS

Dr. Abadir M. Ibrahim — Discussant

I can say that Zelalem started with similar premises and arrived at a conclusion similar to those in the paper by Semeneh Ayalew[*], although their methods were quite different. But I feel that Zelalem dwelled more on the elephant in Semeneh's room, that is, the political side of what was mentioned in the earlier presentation. Thus, the two created a conversation that interlocks.

Zelalem asked how we can overcome the trust deficit. He also said that there needs to be recognition, not of facts, but of the suffering of others. He proposed that, rather than relationships of real or perceived dominance and a sense of victimhood and mutual blaming, empathy and the recognition of each other's pain is a sine qua non for the resolution of our ongoing conflicts.

Then he discussed three areas in which these things are manifested: history, national symbols, and the Constitution. In my view, these all converge towards power and the state. I agree with Zelalem that the State is incontestably crucial

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[*]   See another contribution in this volume by Semeneh Ayalew, "The Politics of the Social: Imagining a New Political Order in Ethiopia."

since it is the state that legitimizes a particular version of history by incorporating it in the educational curriculum and history books that are taught in the schools. Even when talking about national symbols, we are also talking about the state, the flag, the insignia, the public squares, and what the state can do with its purse. The same is true of the Constitution which, among other things, is about the division and limitation of power but also a statement of what the nation is.

Zelalem's proposals are very well presented, and I have nothing to add to the major points he said. However, I am a bit skeptical about some of the prescriptions Zelalem made as to how we can achieve these outcomes, which I find to be agreeable. For example, national service and the other examples could be problematic when they are implemented. I am not convinced that those types of exercises can be effectively implemented. But I would also like to challenge some of the interpretations of the empirical data or the theoretical lens he uses to interpret them. So, let me go back to the main points which I wanted to raise.

Zelalem's points about the Constitution and national symbols can be reframed as a conflict between different actors that promote competing narratives of history. Instead of looking at them as history, and therefore placing emphasis on fact versus emotion, should we not consider them in light of the reasons those disagreements exist or became salient? Should we look the present, specifically in terms of contemporary competitions over power? Can we not hypothesize about the root cause of why debates on the nation's history do not feel like debates about facts and why each side comes up with different interpretations and histories to start with? Why would the average politician bother about some archaic historical topics? Unless you look behind the debate, what you are observing becomes a moving target. As long as we do not have equitable distribution of power, including equitable distribution of recognition, prestige, and the inclusion of one's narrative into the national narrative, we will always have conflict that will be manifested in debates about history or other topics normally only academics would be interested in. This can move in mutually reinforcing circles where the debates can also sharpen the initial differences that caused them. I recommend structuring the work from this point of view since it will be hard to call for

empathy when the fight behind the historical debate, the fight over resources, is not addressed, and political or social actors have an active incentive to create debate; in these circumstances, a call for empathy is not going to find welcoming ears.

My other point is that, while we are having this discussion at the level of perspective taking exercises or trainings, we might as well go ahead and talk about education. The ability to frame the education system—its contents and the language in which it is conducted—are among the most important functions and powers of the state. That is where we learn most of our history, our social studies, gender, science and epistemology, and related things. Our knowledge and understanding of history fall under this, which is one central element of the overall discussion made in this paper. This recommendation is not a critique; it is an invitation to expand the horizon. The project you proposed would have an impact beyond the number of trainees that you can bring into a room if you think from a point of view of pedagogy, and educational policy, and curricula. I am just giving you a specific structure: if you adopt it, you might be able to have more impact in terms of achieving the outcomes you are hoping for.

Coming back to perspective taking and similar exercises, the way they were framed made them sound like an NGO project. Not that NGO projects are not effective, it is just that even if they are done effectively, they just scratch the surface. So, it might be better to think more in line with what Semeneh was saying, expanding the field beyond NGOs, like እድር (*edere*) and ዕቁብ (*eqube*). My point should not be mistaken for NGO training for እድር (*'edere*) and ዕቁብ (*'eqube*) which is something that is happening in the name of "constituency building." I am thinking here more in terms of how one starts a proper social movement, such as the Zone-9 type of movement or the Qeerro movement in Oromia, where you had thousands of teens and young adults sacrifice their lives for a cause. Such an approach would be more impactful than NGO trainings on perspective taking.

As a second move, let me propose some points by way of critique. While I have raised the issue of state power as something that complements Semeneh's paper, I

should also say that it should also be raised as a critique especially from two points of view.

First, I want to raise the issue that, as legal professionals, we have certain prejudices that have us favoring state power and the state structuring of power without even noticing it. Zelalem starts his discussion with empathy and the need for empathy and in the next section moves on to nation-building, national service, the creation of a multilingual society, relationships between regions and different ethnic groups. The first part is a discussion of problems and injustices that are created in the exercise of state power and the second one proposes solutions that assume that the state is going to somehow start solving those problems.

When we discuss empathy and when the solutions are state-centric, there is always a risk in involving the state because the latter is about power. If we, for instance, involve the current state in perspective taking exercise, it will take the funding and the good will, and use it for something else in ways you did not expect. The result may be the exact opposite of what you were hoping for. When we involve the state, we are dealing with a strong and powerful actor that wants even more power. So, this is a bridge from empathy to power that is not explained and is something to be thought about twice. We have experienced the government, current and past, doing similar things where they take an idea that sounds good, get foreign funding to implement it as a human rights or governance project, and turn it into a project of strengthening their own hand.

My second critique is regarding the "how" question. When you are talking about the deficit of trust, you are not necessarily alluding to how that deficit of trust is to be overcome at the political elite level and at the social level. Your presentation reminded me of the theory of social capital postulated by Robert Putnam, which explains that social capital is built not by state action, but by structures in society, where you have bridging social capital created by multiple ethnic, linguistic, class, and religious groups when they are brought together by social organizations. The social organizations create situations in which members of society interact so they can realize and experience the circumstances of the other in a way that they will

humanize the other. This makes it easy to empathize across those social lines. I do not know how Putnam, or his students, would recommend solutions in line with what you are suggesting. What I can recommend is expanding into the field of social capital to gain some perspectives as I can imagine that many would have thought about the same problems but with more discipline or theory specific insights. I do not want to assume too much in terms of making recommendations, however, as the broader point is that the "how" aspect of the piece is what I struggled with. I am not convinced that giving perspective-taking trainings is going to make a dent on our serious problems. My impression is also that this is not explained or sufficiently explained in reference to the literature. I wonder if you are relying too much on an individual training because you are focusing on individual psychology when you are dealing with topics that are best dealt with through social psychology or sociology. I am not familiar with the field or the literature you are delving into so let me hand over the conversation by pointing out that you have not made plain what theoretical backing your recommendations stand upon and registering a discomfort with how you propose getting from point A to point B.

Dr. Yonatan Fessha

I appreciate the attempt to make use of local concepts and values to reorder the state and society. It looks like some sort of indigenization is happening. But at the same time, we have to be careful about the assumptions that we have about those values. For example, we should ask: do those values have a cultural universal status? Take for example ይሉኝታ (*yeluñetä*): is it a cultural universal value or a pan-Ethiopian value? If neither is the case, you might risk the danger of imposing the value that belongs to a certain segment of society on the rest of the population. Of course, we have always been imposing Western values, for example in constitutional practice, but the reaction that we might generate from imposing Western values may not be the same as the reaction generated when we impose a local value that largely belongs to a particular segment of society. So, we might have to be careful in determining the place of those values in society.

Dr. Semir Yusuf

There are a couple of things I liked about the presentation. The first is even though you have not pointed it out explicitly, it is very much based on Habermasian notion of intersubjective communication. The assumption you are making is that, since it is very difficult for us to arrive at the truth about history and politics, let us assume that they are subjective values and perspectives on race and other contentious matters, and take them for what they are and communicate across our subjective ideals and perspectives. That is a very realistic way of dealing with conflict and transformation.

The other thing I liked about the presentation is that it is directly contrary to the security dilemma that has trapped Ethiopia's politics for the last couple of years. It is saying: instead of focusing on arming ourselves leading us into an arms race, let us cool down a bit and empathize with the other person or group so that we can arrive at some sort of deal through intersubjective communication. I believe that is an important condition for the success of the national dialogue; one thing we need for the success of the national dialogue is the inculcation of empathy in all the different participants.

But how can we relate the two concepts of "empathy" and ርሕራሄ *(reḥerāhé) (radical compassion)*—previously presented by Semeneh? They are very similar but also quite distinct. In my view, one way to relate the two concepts is, for example, to understand ርሕራሄ *(reḥerāhé)* as proactive, and "empathy" as reactive and passive emotions. I mention this because ርሕራሄ *(reḥerāhé),* as Semeneh defined it, has an element of radicalism in it: it instigates someone to act, while "empathy" is something we need to feel in some personal affairs of ours regardless of ርሕራሄ *(reḥerāhé).* So, any ideological or political conviction could drive us to act but when we act, we have to make sure that we empathize with the other or our antagonist. Another way of relating the two concepts is through the in-group/out-group relationship. We might apply ርሕራሄ *(reḥerāhé)* in in-group mobilization, or when we mobilize people we consider to be "ours" on different terms (class, ethnic, gender, etc). But when we mobilize our people, we have to have empathy towards others. Therefore, for in-group relations it is ርሕራሄ *(reḥerāhé)*, and for

out-group, empathy. We have to combine these two concepts to arrive at a more equitable and harmonious society.

The same concerns I raised in connection with ርሕራሄ *(reḥerāhé)* during Semeneh's presentation also apply to Zelalem's presentation on "empathy." But I want to add one additional point: when does the realm of empathy end and state power or justice begin? To what extent should state actors and the state itself consider human relations, in their empathetic sense, and then when should it come out and act against injustice? In other words, should not we be careful not to metaphysicalize everything and call it empathy? When should we say something is wrong and should be redressed sometimes with the intervention of state power? We need to reconcile our concern for rule of law, justice, social justice with the need for empathy across cleavages. And this is very much related to rule of law, which is often considered to be legal term; for me it is primarily a political term. Because it involves two things: one, the law and second, those who enforce the law—both concepts are highly political. Following your argument, we might apply the concept of empathy in both areas; we have to empathize with others in their definition of and perspectives about the law, and we have to also empathize with others in their perspectives about who enforces the law. I believe this should not complicate our understanding of rule of law; we need rule of law. Therefore, the question is, when should we consider the rule of law as something inviolable, as something necessary, and then when and how should we leave the room for the full exercise of empathy? We need to reconcile these two competitive concepts.

Melhik Abebe

I think there is a need to clearly distinguish between empathy (or radical compassion) and the other acts that you described to be expressions of empathy, but I do not agree with those descriptions. I consider them to be some form of transactional elite pacts done every now and then between elite groups, representing different powerful groups uniting forces against, usually, a powerful common enemy or ideological opponent. These are not done to address well-established questions of justice which, if there could be an honest consideration of them, need to be addressed as legitimate concerns instead of being dismissed. For example, I do not

see the Oromara deal as an act of empathy or solidarity, but as a transactional, opportunist and unprincipled act. One limitation of such acts is that they are hard to replicate at different levels of social structure; they happen very singularly and need the right conditions for them to emerge as an ideal option for elites.

Thus, the test for us to determine if certain acts are truly acts of empathy is if they help us concretely in terms of repairing social fabrics at that moment of crisis. That is what makes it radical. And its application should not be limited to just those that have entered into that pact or transactional activity affecting everybody, but should include everybody. I also like to add the importance of intellectuals if we are going to be part of such deals; we need to have an unflinching ethical fidelity to intellectual honesty about the different discourses that we come across. I do not think we should say, for instance, different groups in Ethiopia do not see each other's pains or value each other's pains or see pains of historical injustices of each other and just leave at that. I do not think that is the case. I believe there should be some things that should be etched in our collective memory as either bad or good. For example, may be not all but some fruits of the Revolution were good: the end of feudalism, the end of a monarchy based on the Solomonic dynasty, and religious equality are all good outcomes of the Revolution. We have to agree that these things are positive, even if there is a side that does not view these positively. Intellectual honesty is a good place for us to start.

Dr. Getachew Assefa

My observations on Zelalem's presentation also relate to what Semeneh proposed in his paper. Regarding the notions and concepts that are discussed (ርሕራሄ (reḥerāhé) and empathy), what is your assessment of the current state of affairs of these notions in society? Are we saying that empathy is on the decline, or that it does not even exist? What is our starting point to make recommendations for them to be incorporated or taken into public spheres or the political arena? It is important to see their current state, whether they have been propped up by political public policy in the past, and whether the society actually lacks them and, if so, to what extent. These are questions that need to be addressed as a starting point to build upon.

Second question: are you recommending empathy to be a state affair? Is empathy a state affair or a civil society affair? It is important to define who is best suited to nurture this concept and the danger of it being appropriated or even being degraded by the state. It is also important to consider the influence of public policy on the public role of these notions. For instance, over the last 30 years, what was the impact of education policy regarding those social capitals? Should not we evaluate the role of public policy in education and other areas to craft intervention to improve what has gone wrong?

There are some generalizations you made in your presentation which might be problematic. For example, you say Oromo and Tigrayans hate the old Ethiopian flag: do we have concrete evidence for these assertions? Because, for instance in Ambo, the epicenter of major Oromo movements, when elderly people die, the horsemen go to the graveyards wrapped with the Ethiopian flag. There is not solid evidence to prove that one group feels a certain way and the other does not, etc. You also promoted a pessimistic view that we cannot agree on Ethiopian history. But has there been enough deliberation or discourse to give up on it? My view is that not enough deliberations have been made on these issues; real and genuine deliberations should happen and then we can go from there.

How can we reconcile empathy and rule of law? How empathetic should we be? Do we need to empathize with criminals and set them free and thereby encourage people to break the law? Where is the line for these kinds of morality-based notions, and how does the state discharge its role accommodating these concerns?

Dr. Solomon Negussie

In attempting to advance social values like ርሕራሄ (reḥerāhé) and empathy, we should consider the incontestably crucial role of the state in upholding them. On the International Day of Fraternity last February, there was a conference in Addis where religious leaders, community elders, customary institution leaders like Abba Gadaas, and other community representatives participated. The participants in the conference emphasized that it is the social norms, religious institutions, and cultural values that kept the nation from collapsing. But they also emphasized the

loss of these values and the moral decay we are facing, and which is leading us into unchartered territory. To tackle this, the community leaders emphasized that the state must ensure, at a minimum, protection of individuals from violence and ensuring peace and order. There needs to be minimum level playing field into which these cultural values can come as an influencing factor for maintaining social cohesion, peace, and order. Otherwise, we will end up losing our rational capacity and moral values and start killing people whom we consider "other." There should be a link between the state and civil societies and other cultural and religious institutions. We cannot simply ignore the roles of the state, rule of law, and institutions in institutionalizing social values so that they can be promoted and protected through social movements or other means. Simply preaching our social values will greatly diminish their impact in society.

Dr. Juweria Ali

I think there is a need to define certain key concepts. The unproblematic deployment of these huge terms like "truth," "reality," and "knowledge" can be improved. Regarding your assertion that truth lost its quality or objectivity as a result of competing national narratives, should there be a nationally accepted truth? What is truth and what is objectivity? One way to dealing with this problem is to identify the philosophical underpinnings to determine what your positions are on "knowledge," "truth," and "reality." In relation to the strategies you identified, you mention the importance of understanding lived experience. That is an interpretivist framework which is based on ontological positions: that there are multiple realities, that they are locally constructed and continuously constituted and reconstituted. That will help us to deploy these big terms unproblematically. Because, even if there was a truth, there is no agreement as to what the content of truth is; nor is there agreement as to what we mean by objectivity or if it actually exists. For me, reality is subjective—something that is negotiated and varies based on the individual. We should look beyond facts and reality, towards understanding the reconstruction of group or individual experiences and the construction and reconstruction of knowledge.

Dr. Yitayew Alemayehu

I have the sense that we are under the oppressive unchangeable force of huge structures beyond our control, be it the state or identity-based structures like ethnicity, etc. It appears to me that for all the good wishes and visions for democracy, rule of law and the like that we have, forces beyond our control—the larger structural forces of society—seem to be frustrating most of what we attempt to achieve. These structural forces: political, economic, identity, etc., are in such a state that they are terrifying and do not seem to budge even a little bit. I believe that, if the structures do not change, then we have to have that agency to change them. This conception of the politics as personal and moral in the presentations by Zelalem and Semeneh gave me that sense of empowerment or agency. I may not agree with the ideas of empathy or radical compassion as presented, respectively, by Zelalem and Simeneh, but I generally agree about the need to bring the question of morality into our politics, law, and structures to question them and to chart a vision of where we should be going. This action depends on our individual initiative and action. Questioning the morality of our structures, their fairness, their goodness, their essential desirability, etc., must be assessed—this is what I see in these presentations. We have to be mindful of how we as individuals and powerful agents question and help in the transformation of these structures. The value of the Semeneh's and Zelalem's presentations is that they bring the individual or the agent into the discussion, which is very important.

Fowsia Abdulkadir

I found the phrase "the trust deficit" in the title of your paper very telling; it is the historical narration by the Ethiopian state structures and counter-narratives that created the deficit. It is important to address the deficit—the question is, how do we fill it?

It is interesting and also important to discuss the state and trying to bring concepts such as empathy to the language of politics. But sometimes we are making assumptions that the deficit of trust comes from the lived experiences of Ethiopians

in the broader sense; not everybody was or is equal. For you to be able to empathize you have to be able to see the whole of it. And based on the vantage point we are speaking from we provide different narratives. It is good to bring humanity, empathy, radical compassion to societal discourse, but we should also be cognizant of the lived experiences of the 110 million people of this country, which tell narratives that contradict each other every moment. Ethiopia has great potential to be a multicultural democracy, but the way it has been initially envisioned and created, or even articulated, fails to present the narrative that comes from lived experiences. For example, abroad Ethiopia is presented as Christian nation; but I am surprised at the number of Muslims in each ethnic group. And I think there seems to be oversimplification when we talk about empathy. State structures need to be reformed and justice needs to be at the center of it. You can empathize to a degree but at the end of the day when you institutionalize empathy there is the danger of it becoming coerced into something else; we need to be mindful of this.

Dr. Adem Kassie Abebe

There is a voyage that we have to make from values to specific decisions. We start from values that inform our policies, then our strategies, then our institutions and laws, and then we have the decision. So, if we understand empathy or compassion as values or as guides to judge or tame the decisions that we make, they can be helpful at every stage, particularly in times of transition. Because, in moments of transition, the contested issues are the law and institutions themselves; so, enforcing the law becomes unfair since it is contested. So, the importance of values is heightened in times of transition.