PEACE AND CONFLICT: JOURNAL OF PEACE PSYCHOLOGY, *10*(4), 369–380

Attribution-Emotion Processes in White's Realistic Empathy Approach to Conflict and Negotiation

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Emotions and the cognition-emotion linkage in conflict-related behaviors are examined in relation to White's (1985, 1986, 1991) realistic empathy approach to conflict and negotiation. An attribution-empathy model of prosocial behavior (e.g., Betancourt, 1990) and an attribution-emotion model of violence in conflict environments (e.g., Betancourt & Blair, 1992) provide the conceptual frame for articulating proposed relations among the various psychological aspects thought to be associated in realistic empathy. Research testing the structure of relations among perspective taking (PT), attribution processes, empathic emotions (EE), and anger as determinants of conflict-related behaviors provided evidence concerning the role of realistic empathy in conflict resolution and negotiations. Although realistic empathy is not actually measured in these studies, the procedure by which it is induced was manipulated and behaviors theoretically associated with it were measured. Results show that PT influences EE, anger, and causal inferences concerning the conflict. In fact, EE appear to be activated by PT and mediate its effect on conflict behavior. This suggests that PT, the process proposed by White to achieve empathic understanding, involves the activation of emotions that in turn explain some of the behaviors relevant to negotiations and conflict resolution.

According to Ralph White (1985, 1986, 1991), the resolution of a conflict begins with an attempt to empathize realistically with the other party, which leads to an understanding of how the conflict looks from the other's perspective. To understand the realistic empathy approach to conflict and negotiation, it is important to differentiate between empathy, conceived as cognitive in nature, and sympathy, which can represent feelings associated with empathy. In fact, White (1991) conceived empathy as the realistic understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others, whereas he defined sympathy based on the original Greek concept of "feeling with others."

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Within this context, realistic empathy is defined as the understanding of the other party's situation as if one were looking through their eyes (see White, 1991). Consistent with this view, the cognitive nature of perspective taking (PT) is emphasized as a means to achieve realistic empathy. According to White, the focus must be on the situation (not on the party as an individual or group) to the point that causal attributions for the actions of the other are more situational than dispositional.

White (e.g., 1991) recognized that empathic feelings such as sympathy and compassion are associated with realistic empathy. However, he indicated that emotions are not necessary to achieve an understanding of the other party's situation and options. He conceived realistic empathy as the chess player's type of empathy, which implies an effort to understand the situation from the perspective of the others and see their available options. This is particularly important in acute conflicts in which, because of high levels of hostility, it can be rather difficult and naïve to expect sympathy or compassion for the other party. In these cases, a good level of realistic empathy allows one to see the options available to others, which can be conducive to successful negotiations. Nevertheless, conceptual and research developments concerning the cognition-emotion linkage in conflict and violence suggest that empathic feelings and other emotions, such as anger, are not only present but are also likely to explain, at least in part, why and how the realistic empathy approach works.

The objective of this article is to examine some of the theory and research evidence concerning the role of psychological (cognition-emotion) processes relevant to White's realistic empathy approach to conflict and negotiation. The results from some of the studies I conducted over several years (e.g., Betancourt, 1990, 1991, 1997; Betancourt & Blair, 1992; Betancourt & Zaw, 2003) are used to illustrate how empathic emotions (EE) and the cognition-emotion linkage may relate to PT and other aspects seen as relevant to the realistic empathy approach to conflict and negotiation. Empathic understanding is not directly measured. Rather, PT, the means proposed by White to accomplish realistic empathy, is manipulated, and emotions proposed to mediate the effects of PT as well as behavior related to empathic understanding (e.g., prosocial behavior [PSB], positive conflict behavior) are measured. In fact, empathic understanding is conceived as an intervening latent construct inferred through the corresponding behavioral or self-report indicators. The emphasis is on the measurement of emotions expected to be elicited when PT, the cognitive process used to elicit realistic empathy, is activated. In general terms, this represents an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for a better understanding of the realistic empathy approach and its contribution to effective negotiation, nonviolent conflict resolution, and peace building.

First, research on the role of empathy and EE in PSB is discussed. A causal model that integrates findings from the empathy and attribution theory approach to PSB (see Figure 1) is examined. Results from the test of this model (Betancourt, 1990) illustrate the relations among empathic PT, attributions concerning the con-

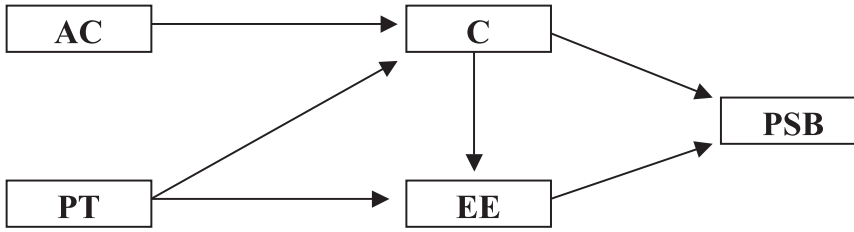

FIGURE 1 Attribution-empathy model of helping behavior. PT = perspective of potential Helper; EE = empathetic emotions; PSB = prosocial behavior; AC = causal attributions of need; C = perceived controllability.

ditions or needs of the other party, and empathic feelings as determinants of PSB. In this case, PSBs are conceived as important determinants of positive interactions and relevant to nonviolent conflict resolution and peace building. In addition, these results illustrate how experimentally induced realistic empathy elicits empathic feelings and influences causal inferences. Second, an attribution-empathy model of conflict and violence is examined. In this case attribution processes, EE, and anger are the key elements explaining violent responses to frustrating conflict situations (Betancourt, 1991, 1997; Betancourt & Blair, 1992). The purpose of presenting these studies is to illustrate how anger can increase violent responding in conflict situations, whereas empathic feelings can inhibit such responses. Finally, these results are discussed in terms of implications for the role of empathic feelings and the cognition-emotion relation in White's realistic empathy approach to conflict and negotiation.

EMPATHIC EMOTIONS AS A FUNCTION OF PERSPECTIVE TAKING AND CAUSAL INFERENCES

The association between empathy and PSB in general and helping behavior in particular has long been documented (for reviews see Davis & Kraus, 1997, and Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). From the perspective of promoting peace, there is a significant body of literature demonstrating the role of empathy not only in PSB but also in moral judgment, social justice, and the structural factors relevant to cooperation and peace (e.g., Hoffman, 1987, 1989, 2000; Murphy & Eisenberg, 2002). In addition, concerning the relations among some of the key aspects associated with realistic empathy, such as PT and empathic feelings, there is a large volume of literature demonstrating the role of empathic feelings as mediators of the effects of PT on PSB (e.g., Batson, O'Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983; Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995). Of course, as indicated by White (1991), it is important to keep in mind that a clear distinction is made between PT, which is cognitive in nature, and sympathy, which is conceived here as one of a set of emotions conceptually associated with empathic understanding.

According to Batson and collaborators (1983), empathic concern is characterized by the presence of true empathic feelings such as sympathy and compassion. These are often seen as different from feelings of distress, which are typically defined as one's own discomfort associated with the suffering or needs of others. In fact, in a number of studies (e.g., Batson et al., 1983, 1995), PT, the cognitive process proposed by White as the key to elicit empathic understanding, has been used to induce empathic feelings and observe their effects on PSB. The level of empathic feelings experienced has been found to account for increases in PSB associated with empathic PT.

From an attribution theory perspective (for a review see Weiner, 1995), the interpersonal feelings associated with PSB are a function of the causal inferences (e.g., attributions of controllability) concerning the causes of the need or situation of the other person or group. If one attributes the needs or the situation of others to causes perceived as uncontrollable by them, one is expected to experience higher levels of EE (which increase the likelihood of a prosocial response) and is less likely to experience anger (which decreases the probability of a prosocial response).

Overall, according to these two approaches (the attributional and the empathy approaches to helping behavior), EE are seen as the most direct influence on PSB in general and helping behavior in particular. In the case of the empathy approach, PT is seen as the cognitive antecedent but not the most immediate determinant of PSB. Although the traditional attribution approach is consistent with the view that EE are the most direct determinants of such behaviors, the emphasis is on causal inferences as the main determinant of those emotions. The research examined in the following paragraphs integrates these two approaches. The model tested articulates conceptually based relations among PT, attribution processes, and EE as determinants of PSB and is expected to provide a more comprehensive conceptual frame for understanding interpersonal and intergroup behavior associated with realistic empathy in conflict environments.

Figure 1 represents the causal model integrating PT, attributional inferences concerning the needs of the other, and EE as determinants of prosocial responses relevant to nonviolent conflict resolution. Concerning the realistic empathy approach to conflict and negotiation, the results of the research testing that model (Betancourt, 1990) represent an empirical test of whether EE are involved in the process of achieving realistic empathy. As indicated earlier, according to White, realistic empathy is the understanding of the other's perspective that may result from taking the other's perspective. Therefore, it is important to recognize that realistic empathy was not directly measured or manipulated in this research. However, the research can be conceived as a test of whether EE are influenced by (or result from) PT and whether they mediate the effect of PT on behaviors attributed to achieving realistic empathy.

Although White (e.g., 1991) suggested that emotions might be involved, the studies reviewed went further in recognizing and actually testing the importance of EE in

mediating the effect of PT on behavior. However, the research did not deal with the cause-effect relations among PT and realistic empathy or EE and realistic empathy. Still, the model may provide a starting point and guide research that can test such relations. Specifically, this research on the attribution-empathy approaches to positive conflict behavior included a test of the extent to which PT, the key element in achieving realistic empathy, elicits EE. It also offered a test of whether those emotions influence prosocial responses. A confirmation of these two paths within the model would confirm that EE are elicited and play a role in conflict environments when realistic empathy is induced through PT. In other words, this means that achieving realistic empathy implies cognitive processes (e.g., PT) that elicit EE. These propositions, consistent with the research of Batson and associates (1983, 1995), suggest that the increase in PSB associated with PT is mediated by the empathic feelings elicited by that PT. However, future research including explicit measures of realistic empathy or empathic understanding could more specifically test the structure of relations among cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects relevant to empathic understanding. Such research would shed significant light on the psychological processes involved in the realistic empathy approach to conflict and negotiation, which may in turn lead to more effective interventions.

According to the model observed in Figure 1, the paths from PT to EE and from EE to PSB represent the views that PT elicits empathic feelings, which are in turn direct determinants of PSB. The paths from the need condition to perceived controllability (C) and from C to PSB represent the views from attribution theory. According to these paths, aspects of the situation influence one's perception of controllability of the causes to which one attributes the needs of the other(s). Then, the level of C influences one's feelings, such as pity or sympathy, which in turn influence one's behavior toward the other(s).

The path from PT to C represents the proposition, not included in any of the two (attribution and empathy) approaches, that PT may influence the attribution process, in this case the perception of controllability. This model implies that PT, the key methodological element proposed by White to achieve realistic empathy, influences EE *as well as* the attributions one makes for the condition of the other party, both of which have a positive impact on prosocial action.

Finally, the path from C to helping behavior represents the proposition that cognitive processes, in this case the attribution of controllability, may in some cases directly influence PSB, independent of the emotion-mediated effects. This is consistent with White's (1991) view that sometimes, as in the case of the chess player's kind of empathy, the cognitive processes may lead one to make inferences concerning the situation of the other, which may directly influence one's responses independent of emotions.

A test of this model was conducted using data from a study that manipulated PT and the controllability of the causes to which actors attributed a problem or need. The participants in the study were college students who had responded to a situa-

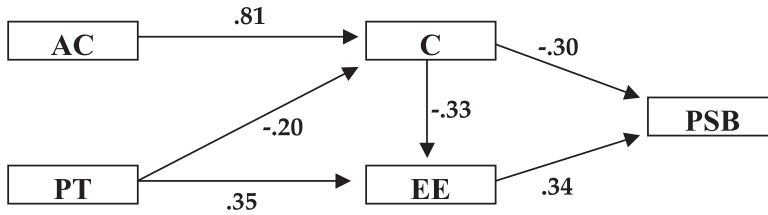

FIGURE 2 Attribution-empathy model of helping behavior with parameter estimates from LISREL Test for the analysis of structural equations. $\chi^2(3, N = 150) = 2.37$, $p = .499$. PT = perspective of potential helper; EE = empathetic emotions; PSB = prosocial behavior; AC = causal attributions of need; C = perceived controllability.

tion that demanded prosocial action, in this case helping the actor. Along with the prosocial response, C of the causes given for the need of the actor and levels of EE experienced by the participants were obtained (for more detail see Betancourt, 1990). Figure 2 represents the results from a test of the proposed model based on the data from this study.

The model presented in Figure 2 includes the parameter estimates from the experimental test based on the analysis of structural equations. The model fits the data very well. Specifically, these results confirm that adopting an empathic perspective elicits EE. Moreover, according to the results, empathic PT not only induces EE but also influences C of the causes to which the problem is attributed, which in turn also influences EE. As observed in Figure 2, levels of PSB are a function of both the higher levels of empathic feelings and the lower levels of C of the causes to which one attributes the conditions of the other, both of which are influenced by PT.

Overall, the results from the test of the model presented in Figure 2 suggest that when realistic empathy is induced by PT, empathic feelings are also elicited. In addition, because taking the perspective of the other also changes the attributions one makes for the other's condition, these results support White's views that achieving realistic empathy involves a particular pattern of attributions, which he characterized as more situational than dispositional (see White, 1991). If this is so, other factors that influence empathic feelings and attribution processes (e.g., from dispositional to situational) may have similar effects on PSB in general and conflict in particular.

FROM PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR TO VIOLENT REPONSES IN CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS

Empathy has usually been seen as having a positive effect on PSB and as a consequence positively influencing conflict resolution and negotiation. Furthermore, there is also a significant volume of literature that focuses on empathy as a deterrent to violent behavior (for reviews see Davis, 1994, and Miller & Eisenberg, 1988).

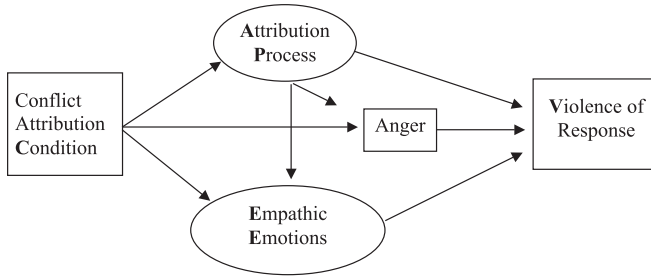

FIGURE 3 Cognition (attribution)-emotion model of conflict and violence.

These studies suggest that higher levels of empathy have a negative effect on the use of violence. In other words, research in this area indicates that empathizing with others in a conflict situation not only increases the level of prosocial or positive responses but also lowers the likelihood of violence or antisocial behavior. Similarly, from an attribution theory perspective, the attributions of controllability one makes for the negative actions of others not only lowers the likelihood of PSB or positive conflict resolution but also increases the probability of aggression and violence (for a review see Weiner, 1995).

The cognition (attribution)-emotion model of violence in conflict situations presented in Figure 3 includes causal inferences concerning negative actions, EE, and anger as determinants of responses to a frustrating or instigating action in conflict situations. This model is based on the proposition that some of the same cognitive and emotional factors associated with PSB also influence nonviolent versus violent responses to conflict. If the presence of EE increases PSB whereas the absence of these emotions results in neglect, it is possible that in conflict scenarios, high levels of EE may also increase nonviolent responses and prevent violence.

In addition, anger has been found to be influenced by the same attribution processes affecting EE (see Weiner, 1995). In this case, attributing higher levels of intentionality to the actions of the other party and perceiving the causes of their behavior as more controllable results in higher levels of anger. Anger, the key determinant of aggression in the reformulated version of the frustration-aggression hypothesis (e.g., Berkowitz, 1983), has also been found to increase violence of responses to an instigation or a negative action in conflict environments. Hence, the structure of relations among anger and the antecedent cognitive (e.g., attribution) processes as determinants of violent responding appears to be similar to what has been observed for EE. That is, whereas EE enhance PSB and inhibit violence, anger inhibits prosocial responses and increases violence.

Whereas the model in Figure 1 is relevant to understanding PSB and its implications for positive conflict resolution and peace building, the model in Figure 3 is relevant to understanding violent responses and the implications for preventing violence and promoting nonviolent conflict resolution. The set of causal relations

specified by the model represents theory-based propositions, such as those highlighted earlier, concerning the relations among attribution processes, EE, and anger as antecedents of violent responding in conflict environments. Although the model goes beyond the psychological elements included in White's realistic empathy approach to conflict, the test of the model in general, and some of the causal linkages in particular, are directly relevant to the processes likely to be involved in achieving realistic empathy and the ways in which these processes may impact conflict resolution and negotiations.

Specifically, as observed in Figure 3, the paths from the (frustrating) conflict attribution condition to anger and from anger to violence of responses represent the traditional view from the frustration–aggression hypothesis, as reformulated by Berkowitz (e.g., 1983). In addition, the paths from the frustrating conflict condition to the attribution process and from attributions to anger represent the view that anger is a function not only of frustration but also of the inferences concerning causal controllability and intentionality of the frustrating action.

Consistent with results from the helping-behavior model (Figure 2), the path from attribution processes to EE represents the proposition that attribution processes influence EE. In addition, the path from the conflict condition to EE represents the proposition that in addition to eliciting anger, aspects of the frustrating conflict situation directly influence empathic feelings, independent of the attribution-mediated effect.

Concerning the role of EE, as observed in Figure 3, the path from EE to violence of responses represents the proposition that empathic feelings have an inhibiting effect on violence. This is consistent with the view that in conflict situations empathy may have not only a positive effect on PSBs but also a negative effect on violent responding. Also consistent with the data from research on PSB, the path from attribution processes to violence of responses represents the view that cognition, in this case inferences concerning the intentionality of the other's action and controllability of its causes, may directly influence violent responding, independent of the emotion-mediated effects.

The conceptual model in Figure 3 has been used to examine conflict in a variety of settings (e.g., Betancourt 1991, 1997) and has been tested experimentally (see Betancourt, 1997; Betancourt & Blair, 1992). Figure 4 includes the results from an experimental test of this model using Bentler's (1995) program for the analysis of structural equations. The test was conducted using data from laboratory studies in which individuals were presented with a simulated frustrating conflict situation. Participants were college students and the various conditions manipulated the intentionality of a negative action and the controllability of the causes to which the action was attributed. Participants reacted to the instigating action and reported their level of anger, empathic feelings, perception of intentionality of the instigating action, and controllability of its causes.

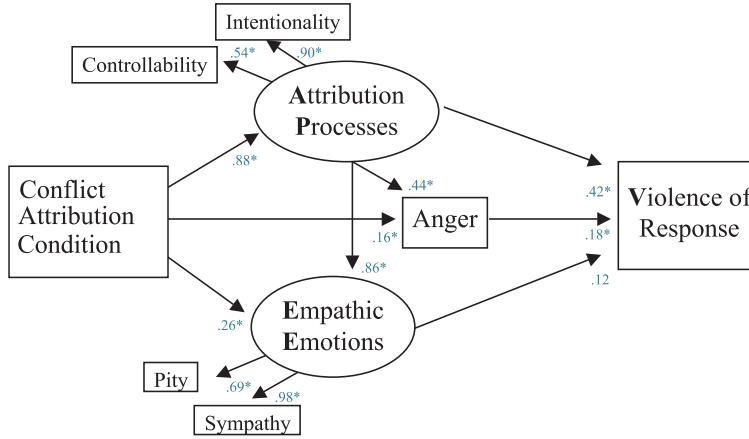

FIGURE 4 Test of the cognition (attribution)-emotion model of conflict and violence. NFI = .977; χ^2 (9, N = 154) = 11.48, p = .24. *Adapted from Betancourt & Blair, 1992.

As observed in Figure 4, the model fit the data very well, NFI = .997, χ^2 (154, 9) = 11.48, p = .24. Overall, these results demonstrate that the structure of relations among the cognitive processes involved in a frustrating conflict situation and EE is similar to the one observed in the attribution–emotion model of PSB presented in Figure 2. Specifically, when the instigating (frustrating) action is perceived as less intentional and attributed to less controllable causes, individuals experience less anger and more EE. Whereas higher levels of anger result in a greater probability of a violent response, higher levels of EE result in lower levels of violence and a greater probability of a nonviolent response.

In addition to confirming the role of anger in mediating the effect of the frustrating condition, these results support the proposed role of EE. Particularly important, for the purpose of this article, the results highlight the limitations of traditional approaches to violence that are based only on anger as the key emotional determinant of aggression. Moreover, these results confirm the importance of cognitive processes and the cognition–emotion linkage in prosocial and violent behaviors in conflict environments. Such cognitive processes, in this case attributional inferences, influence EE and anger, which in turn affect the probability of a violent versus nonviolent conflict resolution. Hence, one may expect that when White's realistic empathy approach is applied and an empathic perspective is induced, in addition to activating EE, C may be reduced, thereby decreasing anger. From this viewpoint, it is possible that as a consequence of PT intended to achieve empathic understanding, concurrently EE are enhanced and anger is reduced, both of which influence conflict behavior. The former may increase prosocial responding and positive resolution whereas the latter may inhibit antisocial responding and violent resolution.

CONCLUSION

Understanding complex human behaviors, such as those involved in conflict and its resolution, can benefit from scientifically based models that may effectively guide research and intervention. The realistic empathy approach to conflict resolution and negotiation proposed by White (1985, 1986, 1991) has been an effective means for explaining and dealing with international conflict. There is a large body of literature that provides conceptual and empirical support for the role of some of the key components of the approach. However, systematic conceptual work developing and testing specific models that integrate the various psychological processes relevant to the approach is not only possible but also necessary. Such work may enhance the understanding of the approach, its ability to stimulate research, and the effectiveness of its application in a variety of conflict environments, from interpersonal to international.

The conceptual models and research evidence examined in this article provide a conceptual frame to test the role of some of the key psychological elements of White's realistic empathy approach to conflict. Overall, the research supports the role of empathy in conflict resolution, violence prevention, and peace. Over a decade of work in this area supports the importance of cognitive processes associated with realistic empathy, such as PT and causal attributions (Figure l). In addition, the causal models presented in Figures 2 and 4 suggest that although the cognitive processes involved in achieving realistic empathy are important, emotions also play a significant role, particularly as mediators of cognition on conflict related behavior.

Based on the conceptual aspects and the research examined, one may conclude that Ralph White was correct in emphasizing the role of cognition in achieving realistic empathy. However, he may have underestimated the role of EE, which, based on the research reported here, appear to support the idea that EE are a natural occurrence in the process of achieving realistic empathy, often mediating the impact of cognition. Moreover, this research and the models guiding it demonstrate that in addition to EE, one must consider the role of anger, which is often present in conflict environments such as highly frustrating conflicts. Collectively, these findings indicate that empathic PT not only elicits higher levels of EE, which enhances prosocial action, but also inhibits anger, which in turn decreases the probability of violent responding.

All things considered, it appears that the attribution–emotion models of PSB and violence in conflict environments provide an appropriate conceptual frame for understanding why and how the psychological processes involved in achieving empathic understanding can effectively contribute to nonviolent conflict resolution and negotiation. In addition, the research stimulated by such models may contribute to the development of more comprehensive approaches by incorporating other factors that may play a role in conflict resolution. Such models may more effectively guide research and intervention. Of course, when it comes to understand-

ing conflict and negotiation from a psychological perspective, one must be aware that aspects, such as those considered here, may account for only a small portion of the variance. For instance, at the international level one must understand that the resolution of conflicts requires a political process (see Kelman, 1987). Hence, one must recognize not only the role of psychological processes in conflict behaviors but also to what degree and in what ways these factors relate to the resolution process and outcome (see Deutsch & Coleman, 2000; Kelman, 1987).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr. Hector Betancourt is a Professor of Psychology at Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California and was a Department Chair from 1993 to 1998. He completed his undergraduate education at the Universidad Catolica de Chile and his PhD in Social Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. His main academic interests are attribution theory and the study of culture in psychology. His current research deals with the role of culture in psychological (attribution and emotion) processes associated with conflict resolution, violence, and health disparaties. His main professional interest is the application of psychological knowledge to the solution and prevention of problems critical to society today.

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