EMPATHY IN MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

LEARNING FROM MARALAL EXPERIENCE

THE LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY PROJECT

Living with Uncertainty is a research project that sets out to understand how empathy works in a world made uncertain by violence and conflict.

CASE STUDY STORIES

LEARNING FROM THE MARALAL EXPERIENCE

My name is Lynne Cameron, and I work as Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Open University. From 2009-12, my research project 'Living with Uncertainty' has investigated how violence and insecurity affects people's empathy towards others. It is funded by the ESRC as part of its Global Uncertainties programme.

As an applied linguist, I examine how people use language to understand their worlds and each other. To find out what happens to empathy when affected by violence, I have analysed people talking about their lives, themselves and 'the other' in a variety of situations, from Northern Ireland to Brazil, from London and Leeds to Oregon, .

In March 2012, I had the opportunity to visit northern Kenya with Simon Weatherbed from the Birmingham-based NGO 'Responding to Conflict' (RtC), and to investigate empathy in a new and very different situation.

In this harsh and beautiful landscape, where the plateau drops thousands of feet into the Rift Valley, three communities -- Samburu, Pokot and Turkana -- graze their cows and goats. Over the years, occasional cattle raids would disturb the peace, but from 2003-4, drought and guns coming in from Sudan and Somalia brought new levels of tension and killings and escalating revenge attacks between tribes.

RtC support the conflict transformation work of Evans Onyiego and his peace-building team who work out of the Catholic church in Maralal town. Evans and his team have made a huge difference over the last few years, bringing people together and reducing the number of deaths.

In taking my research to this new context, I wanted to test out my new ideas about empathy. Would ideas derived from studies in more developed countries apply in this very different situation, where violence and conflict was still fresh in people's memories?

Meetings were arranged with people from Samburu, Pokot and Turkana communities to collect narratives of

conflict and change. We heard stories of courage and determination and saw peace-builders imaginatively taking advantage of every opportunity to replace revenge and attack with dialogue and interaction.

I found that my model of empathy could be applied to what is happening in Maralal Diocese and, further, that there is scope for it to have an impact on conflict transformation. What my research has to offer is a way of seeing the creative and intense work of conflict transformation in terms of person-to-person interaction. Although all conflict transformation work builds on dialogue and interaction, the rather mechanistic models of systems and processes used by conflict transformation professionals tend to hide the vital micro-level of human relations.

Visiting Maralal revealed the rich potential of bringing outcomes of the Living with Uncertainty project into conflict transformation theory and practice. A project beginning in November 2012, also funded by ESRC, will take this further.

Meanwhile, these stories from Maralal, and the words of people we spoke with, illustrate the empathy dynamics of conflict transformation.

THE GUNS
WHAT HAPPENED WHEN GUNS CAME TO

Before guns, there were spears and pangas.

Every evening, the cows and goats of a pastoralist family are gathered in behind the fences of the homestead to protect them from wild animals and from raiders. Cattle raiding was a traditional practice carried out by one community on another. Under cover of night, and armed with spears, young men would creep up to steal a few cows or goats from a homestead in another community and take them back to their place. Raiding was a communal affair. Although the young men carried out the raids, they did so on behalf of their community: the elders would have decided when and where a raid would take place; the young women would have sung

praise songs that made the young men feel brave and determined, ready for action; the older women would receive the stolen cattle and milk them.

Guns arrive in the area

It was probably inevitable that guns would reach the area. They were brought down from countries further north -- from Sudan or Somalia -- by people who thought it a good idea, for political and/or financial reasons. At first, families were persuaded to buy guns to protect themselves, their cattle and community. Once bought, it was probably inevitable that the guns would be used, and absolutely inevitable that, when used, they would cause serious wounds and deaths. Cattle raiding changed, and violence escalated through revenge attacks.

Introducing guns changed the complex social system of the communities and changed empathy dynamics.

The Other seen through the sights of a gun

is no longer just a young man like yourself sent to seize a few cows but is reduced to a target. The person who shoots is also changed: young men practised with guns, learnt how to look after them, how to move through the landscape with them, how to use them. Some of them 'love their guns'. The guns become integrated into constructs of strength and courage, into masculinities.

The young men died in numbers they had not imagined:

This is what one of the 'morans' -- the young men who are the warriors of the tribe -- told me about the conflict:

> when we started this war,
> we started something that we never knew,
> and that we have never seen.
> In that war
> so many friends,
> so many young people,
> died.
> So many people died in this war.

The guns changed how people live in their landscape:

A man we interviewed in the town of Marti, spoke of changes brought about by guns:

before the war,
people were staying scattered everywhere...
everyone stays on his own,
free,
with his own livestock,
taking care of his own livestock
...now.. we are all forced to stay in one village,
congested,
but we have no alternative
because of this gun

The arrival of guns changed the local economy.

Blacksmiths in each community lost their traditional role. Because the guns need 'feeding', cattle have to be driven north to be exchanged for expensive bullets; a local system became connected into an unstable international system, with attendant risks.

The guns changed lives. As they became part of the physical landscape, so they changed the social, economic, cultural and empathic landscapes of communities. To initiate change and reduce violence requires intervening in this web of connections...

STOP SHOOTING ON SIGHT
HOW THE PEACE-BUILDERS REMOVED IMMEDIATE THREAT

Once guns have entered a community and changed ways of living, they are unlikely to be relinquished; as long as 'the other' feels like a threat, the gun will feel like a necessary protection. It seems that there is no way back to life as it was before the guns, only ways forward to new lives where it feels right not to use them.

Peace-builders mediate conflicting parties as they take their first steps on these ways forward. How are they doing that? A starting strategy in Maralal was to help people to feel that they no longer needed guns for protection, that the guns are best left unused -- shifting behaviour around using guns and shifting emotions and attitudes about them.

Shifts in behaviour

...began with a simple resolution with the power to change everything: "Let's stop shooting on sight".

Neuroscience research, in studies of empathy and decision-making, shows clearly that our immediate reactions are driven by emotions, and that we may act differently given time to think. The agreement to stop shooting on sight gave that precious time to think: to think about the consequences of shooting; to think about the situation and see it more clearly.

Imagine two men, each with a gun, coming face to face on a path through the landscape. If the other was recognized as from another community, the immediate response was to shoot. To resist the urge to shoot on sight, the men need to trust that the other will not shoot first. That tiny amount of trust was provided by agreeing a signal of peace, a raising of the arms. Seeing this signal allowed people the time to think before shooting, to find out the other's business, to connect.

From this first simple agreement and signal, they gradually built up new roles for the guns. To begin with, as one of the team described, people brought guns came even to peace meetings:

> Then they talked.
> "These guns are not good in the peace meeting."
> So they decided they will come with the young men.

These young men were armed, but they stayed out in the bush and did not come into the meeting. Each side brought the same number of young men:

> They will stay there and then for us,
> We will meet here without any gun.
> They'll take care of us,
> so our warriors will be there.

So we'll talk.

After some time doing this, they felt safe together:

Then they said,
"We really don't need those guns",
So they told them,
"Next time don't come with your guns in this meeting."

Moves like this, away from guns, are happening in different parts of the diocese. However, guns are still there. In some areas, people have agreed "to walk without their guns". But close by, guns are still visible. The next challenge is to spread the change.

Shifts in emotions and attitudes

can come from 'conflict fatigue', as people simply grow tired of fighting and losing friends to the guns. This played a large part in the peace agreement in Northern Ireland; the generation that had led the fighting were growing weary. When peace-makers spot people getting tired of fighting, death and injury, they can take advantage of the moment to suggest alternatives.

The peace-makers in Kenya painted pictures of a good life that was possible without violence, and they painted terrible pictures of what life would be like if the violence continued with more and more revenge attacks. The power of cinema was invoked, with screenings of 'Shooting Dogs' and 'Hotel Rwanda' used to help people imagine themselves being drawn into the worst of situations.

A pastor told us how he and his peace committee tried to cut through romanticised ideas about guns and what they do:

The guns are here to kill us.
They are not for protection, they are for killing.

Some of the older women are teaching the girls new songs about peace to sing to the young men, instead of the old songs that praise bravery with a gun.

School children are being encouraged to 'fight with the pen and not the gun'. Many people told us how they trust in education to change their lives. I really hope that they get an education able to meet this challenge.

THE ROAD:
HOW A ROAD BUILDING PROJECT HELPED EMPATHY

and how a boy with a list made a difference.

Young men from two communities, Samburus from the top of the escarpment and Pokots from down in the valley, had been killing each other in cattle raiding attacks over several years. When intervention became possible, the peace-making team negotiated agreement to work on a small project building a road between their villages.

This road could become a lived metaphor, connecting the two communities; the physical connection could support the connection of empathy. How did that become possible? Answer: *through small interactions that created the beginnings of trust.*

The 'road' is not for traffic but for people to trade and for goats and cattle. A path is made by clearing large stones. 40 young men from each tribe, encouraged by the elders and supported by the peace-making team, assemble for the work. They start down in the valley, working upwards. There is no trust between the two groups and they work separately, in different places. The lack of trust and empathy is embodied -- one of the young men describes how dangerous it felt to have 'the Other', your enemy, close to you but not in sight, because you remember what can happen.

> When we were working,
> we just didn't want anyone to walk behind me,
> because I thought he would chop my head with a panga.

Language helps as a first step across the divide:

> then slowly people started talking.

But it is a boy with a list who really makes a difference

This is how Evans told the story:

> We also invited the women who sell tea, because those people would stay there. So we told them, "Come with mandazi and porridge and tea, and serve to people."
>
> After two days, the old women -- because they know these people will be paid at the end of the week -- they would extend credit for selling things to the Samburus. So they will take on credit and, at the end of the week, I saw someone with a list, walking. A young man.
>
> Somebody pays him, so many shillings, (he ticks him off the list). And then he took the list and the money to the Pokot woman. "Here's your money that we've owed you."

> The women were still giving credit, trusting that this boy will bring (the money). They were paying, all of them. The boy will tell them, "Please come with loose money. Don't bring notes." So they go with it and they pay that lady.

That boy with the list plays a pivotal role -- by acting as intermediary between the old Pokot women and the Samburu young men who bought their tea, each side trusted him; because he carried out his task reliably, he enabled them to begin to trust each other. The Pokot people's perception of the Samburu young men made a small but important shift: from 'enemy' to people who pay their tea debts.

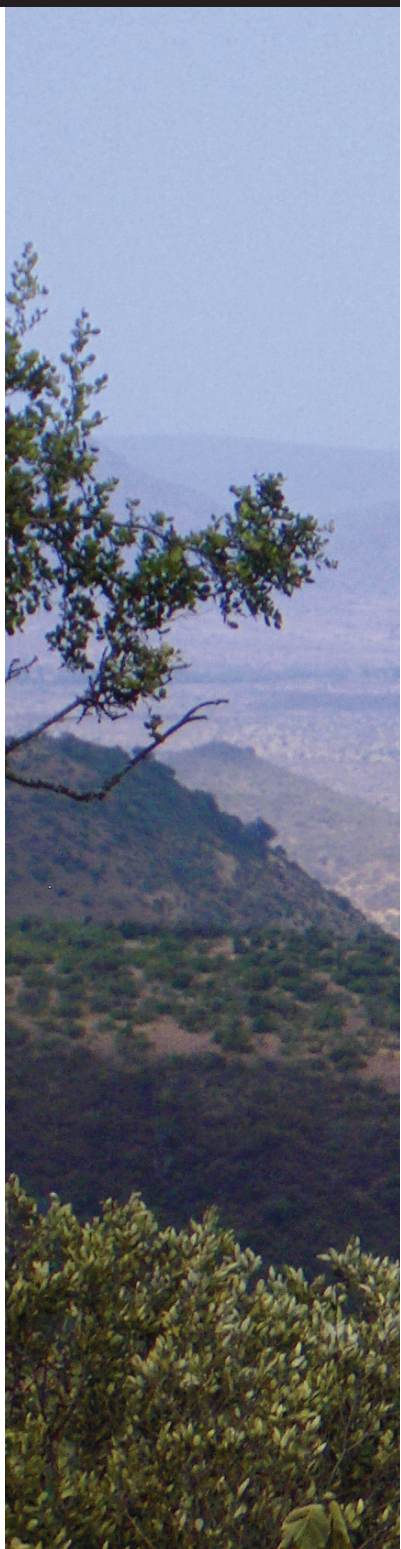
Here's what was built from that small beginning:

- The Samburu men started sleeping in the Pokot village down in the valley, instead of going back up each night.
- The young men from the two communities exchanged mobile phone numbers.
- When the road building got near to the top of the hill, the Pokot men stayed in the Samburu village.
- When they stayed overnight, they would talk to the families, recall times before the fighting, speak of people they used to know.
- The idea of a peace market was introduced and set up.
- The young men who worked together continue to meet, arranging meetings by phone.

The moral of the story:

Don't underestimate what a boy with a list can do for empathy and conflict transformation.

He was a first, small, non-threatening connection between the Pokot tea women and the Samburu tea drinkers. With his list, he made sure that the first interactions between them were carried out honourably. The success of those first interactions enabled the rest. Through his work came the beginnings of connecting with 'the Other' and empathy.



GOATS ASSIST EMPATHY: HOW DAIRY GOATS PROVIDED MORE THAN A TOPIC OF CONVERSATION

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

A movement outside the window caught my attention – I watched a woman walk over to a goat tethered under a tree. With a stick she lifted up a long thin piece of something and carried it away. We had seen the goat when we parked the car, with a tiny baby kid. Now there were two tiny kids, and I realised that what the woman was clearing away must be the afterbirth. Then it was back to the interviewees in the room, the recorder and the translation process: my question in English, translated by Evans into Swahili and by another man into Turkana; the replies coming back down the chain.

When we left to go, someone commented on the new goat kids – by then there were three. He remarked on how these new 'dairy goats' were so fertile, giving birth to 2 or 3 rather than the single kid they were used to from their usual breed of goat. The story of the dairy goats as told by one of our interviewees illustrates the creativity of peace-makers who spot and use all opportunities to increase empathy.

It began with a workshop:

The diocese peace-building team had held a workshop in Maralal, an hour's drive away. The man had enjoyed meeting the others and talking with them. Sometimes these meetings produced reunions of friends from former times who had not seen each other since the fighting broke the friendships. In this workshop, they learnt about dairy goats and how these could support development through their breeding prowess and the extra milk they provide.

The workshop was about practical skills but also about connection and (re)building empathy:

> we were given an opportunity to talk to each other,
> and see where the problem is.

A goat to take home:

After the workshop, a small grant provided a few dairy goats for different villages. And what I had seen through the window was the birth of new kids from one these. A condition of the goat project was that, each time a goat gave birth, one of the kids was to be given to the other community. Not only did this spread the good fortune, but the kids became a tangible connection between communities.

Goats connecting people:

The multiple births and the extra milk they provide was significantly helpful but

the dairy goats also continued to support connection between people from different communities who have moved from fighting to peaceful co-existence. The man I interviewed told me of a recent encounter:

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

More than a conversation topic:

In this encounter, the dairy goats provide a topic for conversation between the man and his 'friends'. But they also recall shared memories of a positive time spent together. And they produce a new, positive shared identity – former enemies can see each other now as fellow (successful) goat-keepers. And that's on top of providing multiple kids.
Who would think a goat could offer so much towards empathy and peace-building?

THE HYENAS ARE EATING THE GUNS: HOW A STORY TOLD IN THE DARK GAVE A SPACE FOR EMPATHY

One night, Evans and the peace-making team received a call to tell them that men with guns were gathering for a revenge attack. Evans came to sit with them and try to persuade them against the attack. As they sat there, a hyena howled in the dark beyond the group. Evans used that noise to weave a story of hungry hyenas waiting in the dark, hoping the men would attack because causalites would provide fresh meat to eat.

The horror of the idea of becoming food for this despised animal helped dissuade the young men from carrying out the planned attack, and the phrase 'the hyenas are eating guns' spread around Maralal.

The story originated in a real event and physical experience – Evans sitting at night, in the dark of the bush, with men armed with guns, ready to raid, and trying to persuade them not to go; together hearing the noise of the hyena in the bush around them. Evans takes that physical experience and uses it to create a story for the young men he is with:

> For two months the hyena were very angry.
> They need meat.
> So they are asking you to go for a raid, so they can have something to eat.
> Because definitely,
> (if) you go,
> you will be killed.
> So it wants to eat you.
> "Bring those guns, bring those guns. I want to eat."
> And the hyena will kill you.
> You all will be killed
> while the hyena celebrates to get their meat.

Shared cultural meanings make the story powerful:

- hyenas are seen as dirty and disgusting
- calling someone a hyena is an insult: a very big abuse
- hyenas are seen as animals that work very hard, but feed on leftovers
- hyenas are said to eat anything: they say if it cuts itself, it would start eating its own leg
- people are very scared of hyenas.

Evans draws on all these ideas in constructing his story. The despised and feared animal becomes even more so when it expresses pleasure in human conflict and sees it as providing meat. To be eaten by such an animal would be a terrible thing.

The moral of the story remains unspoken

Evans does not tell the listening young men explicitly not to go. They are left to do the work of imagining themselves being meat for hyenas to eat. This work is an investment in the story which may make it more persuasive.
The story succeeded in helping to stop the revenge attack happening that night.

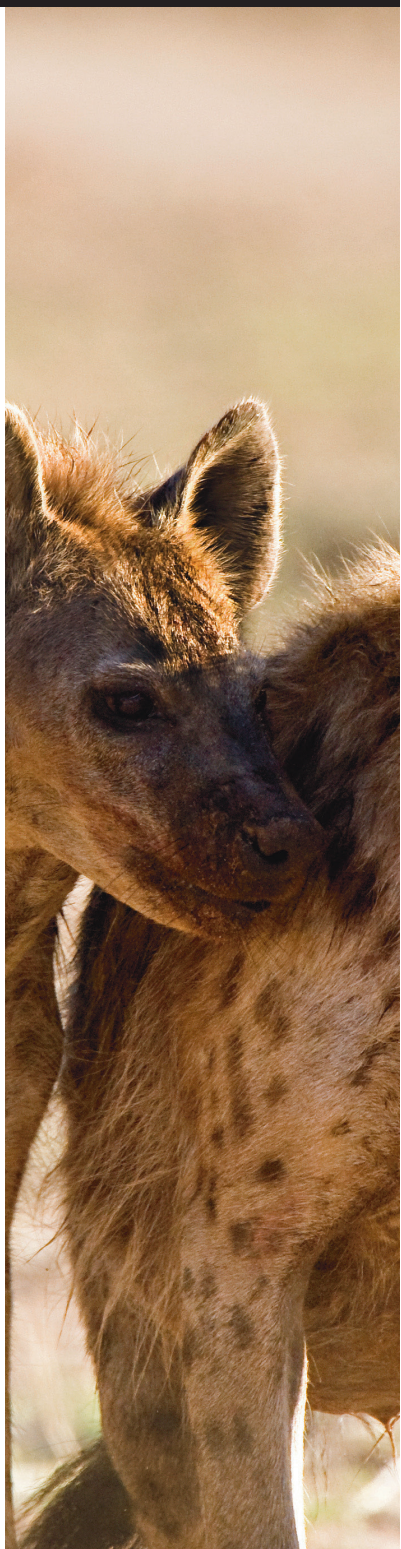
How the story works for empathy and conflict transformation

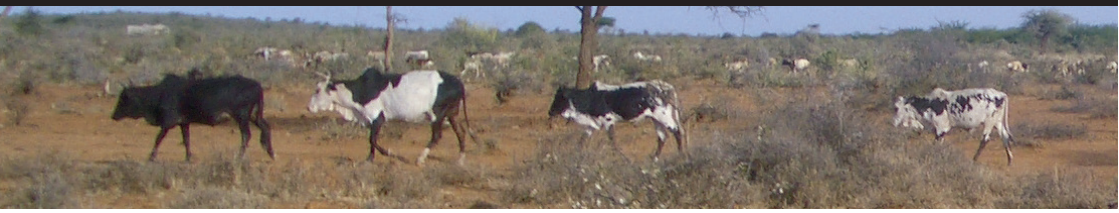
As a researcher, I notice how embodied and emotional experiences in an actual physical space and place produced the hyena story; how the story uses personification and metonymy to make it memorable and powerful; how the story appeals to shared cultural meanings that make it strange, but familiar enough to understand its message.

I notice the skills in this conflict transformation work as Evans creates the nightmare scenario out of the noises of the night and presents it to the men in a way that leads them to imagine themselves becoming fresh meat for hyenas and to feel how horrible that would be.

I notice how he spots and exploits opportunities that offer themselves -- of the physical experience in the bush that night; of language, metaphor and metonymy to create powerful images; of shared cultural meanings; and later, of making posters and pictures of 'hyenas eating guns' to spread the idea around the district.

I notice the direction of empathy: the morans are not encouraged to do empathy with their potential victims but with their imagined future selves, dying a bad death and being eaten by a disgusting animal.





More about the Living with Uncertainty project

The Living with Uncertainty research project sets out to understand how empathy works in an uncertain world, how people engage with and understand 'the other' and how they resist such engagement. In a range of situations, the project has explored how people talk about themselves in relation to others when their worlds are disrupted by violence or conflict.

Overall findings from the research

- From reconciliation conversations in Northern Ireland, the project identified 'gestures of empathy' that can be made in dialogue, and tracked their effect over the years as perpetrator and victim came to deeper understanding of consequences and causes of violence.

- In focus groups in London and Leeds, the project showed how key discourse strategies of 'lumping' and 'splitting' allow people to distance themselves from other social groups or to find a way of connecting despite the separation prompted by fear of terrorism.

- A group of London women revealed a 'Goldilocks' principle underlying their decisions about which charities to support. They preferred to help those who remained at a comfortable distance, resisting other people's suffering if it came too close and refusing to imagine suffering that was too distant. Empathy to others thrives just outside a comfort zone around the self.

- Studying focus groups in urban Brazil showed how constant threat of violence evokes a retreat to the comfort zone. Here, the 'safe space' was physical - in security-gated apartments, behind grilles and shutters. People felt like prisoners in their own lives; empathy for others was overtaken by fear for oneself and family.

- In Portland, Oregon, we examined how police representatives spoke with community members after the shooting of a young black woman. This work produced the important idea of "dyspathy" -- as all that stops empathy. Although officials declared an intention to empathy with the community, it was dyspathy that was produced. A range of emotional, moral, personal and social factors (e-m-p-s) prevented empathy, many of them beyond the control of those involved.

Outcomes

From these studies, the research has produced:

- a model of empathy ~ dyspathy dynamics

- a method of analyzing empathy in dialogue and interaction

- a typology of discourse strategies used to 'do'empathy and dyspathy

Further information

For more information or to explore implications of the Living with Uncertainty project for your own context, contact:

lynne.cameron@open.ac.uk

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

"Living with Uncertainty" is a research project, funded under the ESRC Global Uncertainties programme and led by Professor Lynne Cameron at the Open University.

PROJECT RESEARCHERS

Professor Lynne Cameron
Principal Investigator

Dr Robert Maslen
Research assistant

Carol Johns-MacKenzie
Project Administrator

Collaborators
Dr Ana Pelosi (Universidade do Ceara, Fortaleza, Brazil); Dr David Ritchie (Portland State University, Oregon, USA); Dr Bruna Seu (Birkbeck College, London, UK): Simon Weatherbed (Responding to Conflict, Birmingham, UK)

In Kenya
Evans Onyiego (Maralal Diocese)

Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology
The Open University
MK7 6AA

www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/livingwithuncertainty/