

Do we need empathy or compassion in our political leaders? A case of Colombian political leaders

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Abstract Nowadays, societies demand political leaders with the capacity to identify, recognize, and address other's suffering who can govern satisfactorily their nations. In that sense, empathy became not just a preferable quality, but also a prerequisite. However, academic discussions showed that empathy is not the most accurate term to appeal, neither the most appropriate. Empathy as the core of social engagement allows us to share others' psychological experiences, but it does not entail necessary the need to take action toward specific community wellbeing. Compassion, on the other hand, drives action to relieve the discomfort of others. Due to the importance of the target in the definition of compassion, political leaders must choose which sector of his nation deserves their compassionate actions, even though empathy let him or her understand others national actors' situation. Therefore, to identify the difference between empathy and compassion, this document will briefly exemplify the case of two former Colombian presidents who ended the armed conflict in Colombia. In the Colombian case, we can identify how empathetic leaders connect easily with the inhabitants of the nation, although their actions are not necessarily moral. While other leaders, without outstanding empathic characteristics, could intelligently choose empathic people for solving issues that demand being capable of understanding others' emotions or perspective. In sum, we cannot deny empathy is a key feature of leadership. However, we must be aware that being empathetic does not entail moral action. As well as warn of compassionated which could lead leaders to focus on just one group necessities, ignoring other groups demands.

1 Introduction

Facing the problems of the 21st century like climate change, terrorism, civil wars, segregation, migration, among others, empathy seems to be not only a desirable quality for leaders but also a necessary one. Being able to be in other's position, as well as understand how it feels being there, looks like a key feature for good governance. Moreover, it seems to be useful for taking away political corruption, increase institutional' trust, and decrease political polarization (Schumann et al. 2014; or Fido and Harper 2018). Nowadays, a crescent number of political leaders around the world focus their speeches on the importance of cultivating empathy inside and outside their nations. That is the case of U.S former president, Barack Obama, who constantly urges their governed to cultivate empathy in several of his presidential allocutions (Obama 2004).

Due to its implications and it is nowadays popularity, academic research focuses on the importance of empathy in leadership, especially in political leadership. For any leader, empathy constitutes in a prerequisite for effective communication with their subordinates (Badea and Pana 2010), that leads to a better understanding of the emotional states of a group and improve performance. Also, empathy is related to ethical decision-making (Brown et al. 2010), and moral solidarity, concern, and commitment with others (Ciulla 2010; or Holt and Marques 2012). In the specific case of political leaders, Schilling (2010) points out that remarkable twentieth-century leaders as John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Nelson Mandela display good levels of empathy -among other emotional competencies- which enables to lead their countries in difficult times.

However, being aware of empathy importance in political leaders have not brought the expected results. As Shogan (2009) shows empathy must be balanced: too much reliance on it could lead to timidity or paralysis in taking decisions, too little could lead to the people feel so uninterested in their needs. As empathy importance in judgment and political action is highlighted, we must clarify what the term means. For doing that, it is imperative to distinguish from other terms such as sympathy, compassion or benevolence.

So, our objective is to distinguish empathy from compassion to illustrate how in Colombian political leaders -as in other leaders around the world- not always both characteristics presents at the same time. Even more, show how empathy does not mean a compassionated leader, neither a leader more concern with everybody's necessities.

2 Empathy or compassion?

Nowadays the definition of empathy seems to be misleading. Common sense definition, as well as academics' ones, tends to differ in empathy's conceptualization. Batson (2009) argues that the word empathy has been applied to a varied of phenomena due to different interest: either to explain how we can understand others thoughts or feelings, either to understand why some people tend to respond caring and try to reduce pain from others. Those interests have provided researches the necessity of clarifying a wide variety of concepts related between them, but not always synonyms.

For instance, empathy and compassion refers to different phenomenon: the first could be understood as the capacity of making sense of another subject's psychological life, or to share an affective state with them, while the second goes further beyond demanding that the one who experienced empathy be concerned and willing to do something for the other person (Breyer 2019). A way for differentiating between empathy and compassion could be the target of the psychological process. While empathy mainly refers to the psychological experience of resonating with the empathizer, compassion needs to entail a deep motivation of caring geared towards other's well-being, the target (Singer and Klimecki 2014; Breyer 2019). Moreover, Nussbaum (2003) affirms that compassion is more intense due to involve a greater degree of shared suffering. However, it must be clarified that the desire of helping others in compassion, not always end in a helping action Gladkova 2010; Jeffrey 2016). As the intense desire of helping not always arrives at real action, it is easy to get confused compassion with empathy. Empathy does not entail a real action, neither the desire to do it.

When we use as equivalents empathy and compassion there are some important issues to address. For example, Bloom (2017a; 2017b) argues that people are more likely to empathize with someone in their social group rather than an outsider. Recently, academics found that there are cognitive biases in empathy that tend to underestimate the importance of certain prefer behaviour or attitudes when we choose whom to empathize with (Van Boven and Loewenstein 2005; Nordgren et al. 2011). In other words, we are less likely to empathize with members that look different to me or belongs to another group, than the ones who are like me and belong to my inner group (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2012; Pratto and Glasford 2008). However, looking deeply, we could identify that the mentioned empathy gap refers more to whom the desire to do actions for helping or alleviate suffering are directed, instead of the capacity of connecting with others. If it is the case, it would be preferable to call it compassion gap. People with this gap can easily identify or connect with the others' states -be empathic-, but they prefer to actively guide their action and intentions toward the ones that are alike to them.

Also, Bloom (2017a, 2017b) argues that when our decisions are guided by empathy, we could have compassion feelings for a small minority, that can harm the vast majority. As we have already argued, decision making oriented toward the wellbeing of a target is more related to compassion than to empathy. In that case, this argument would apply for compassion, not for empathy. Let's think of an example. A president can be concerned about immigrants' problems: their political situation, their needs or, even, the feeling of getting away from their hometown or families. However, deciding on taking care of immigrants' worries demand resources (physical, economic, social, etc.) that, in another case, would be destined to the nation and its inhabitants' necessities. So, the problem seems not to be understanding immigrant's situation, but to decide who deserves the resources of the nation. In other words, the issue is not the empathy of the president, but his compassion. Moreover, as Bloom (2017a, 2017b) warns, being compassionate with a minority -the immigrants- could not be the best for the majority - the nation inhabitants-. Even though the president or the inhabitants of a nation could want to help immigrants' problems -showing compassion-, they will not, at least they are willing to sacrifice their own goals or well-being. In sum, Bloom's argument seems to apply perfectly to compassion, not necessary to empathy (Jordan et. al 2016).

Trying to illustrate how empathy and compassion could be separated in real life, we would address the case of two former presidents of Colombia, South America. Moreover, we will aim to show that a good leader could have empathy, even though lacking compassion. Compassion, on the other hand, will be a very dangerous characteristic in a leader due to its need for a specific target.

3 The case of former presidents of Colombia

At the beginning of the 21st century, Colombia was still dealing with a great amount of violence perpetrated by guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug trafficking groups. The trust in political leaders was almost inexistent due to a long list of corruption, failed peace agreements, and the absence of government throughout the national territory. With the failed peace's dialogues with Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), there was a need to look for a new president able to be a strong leader and able to protect effectively their citizens without consideration of their wealth or political beliefs (Kline 2009).

The former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez won 2002-2006 elections by proposing *democratic security* able to bring to an end the civil war fueled by drug trafficking (Hagen 2003; Posnanski 2005). As an excellent reader of the political and social environment, Alvaro Uribe Vélez shows a great deal of empathy not only by identifying the needs of Colombians but connecting with their fears, their hopes, and their demands. In his candidates' speeches and slogan – firm hand, big heart-, Uribe not only assured we would face guerrillas, drug trafficking and terrorism (Delgado 2013; Orozco 2016), but he also will be an affordable and friendly president. Indeed, the policies of the former president Alvaro Uribe includes the citizens in three different ways: a) helping militaries by reporting suspicious people, b) making accessible government for people by a series of town meetings, and c) making government more efficient by reducing the Congress and other positions (Kline 2009). Including the Colombians in the solution of the conflict, Uribe connected with their people and their needs. People felt they were heard and understood. Uribe turns into a symbol of what must be done.

Up to this day, former president Alvaro Uribe Vélez continues to be considered one of the most important political leaders in the recent history of Latin America. Despite the political scandals that former President Álvaro Uribe has faced since his re-election (2006-2010), his ability to connect with people has allowed him to remain in Colombian politics with a force exemplified by his election as a senator with the highest vote in the history of the country - nearly 900,000 votes- (El Tiempo 2018).

However, if we analyse Alvaro Uribe's compassion, another story must be told. His policies largely violated the guarantees of human rights (Hernandez 2007; Kline 2009). Moreover, the preference of doing peace agreement with the United Auto-Defense of Colombia (AUC) and intensifying war with the guerrillas exemplify the empathy gap. The big quantities of casualties during his government that included civilians and military forces, make us ask about his compassion toward a part of the population that lived the worsening of the war. Finally, the focus on his objectives and of his in-group has made part of a corruption investigation (El Espectador 2019).

After Uribe's government, Juan Manuel Santos was elected as president of Colombia. He is widely recognized as a Nobel peace laureate for getting a successful ending for a 50 year's conflict in Colombia with the guerrilla group known as Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. In a speech given in Harvard, former president Juan Manuel Santos affirms that the most important value leaders may have is empathy (The Washington Times 2019). However, Santos is not a model of an empathic president. His allocutions, public speeches, and presentations at his first period (2010-2014) lack emotion, and connection with the people of the nation he rules. He appears distantly, and cold. He had not the charisma, neither the empathy of Alvaro Uribe Vélez. Yet he led a successful peace dialogue. As Gomez-Suarez and Newman (2013) argues the success of the dialogue was due more to the learning of experience, less to compassion toward FARC, victims or Colombians.

However, it is important not to deny the role that empathy had in the negotiation process. Being empathic, not necessarily compassionate, is a key feature to overcoming biases, increasing the likelihood of cooperation and, getting behind long-held enmities (Holmes et. al 2016). The former president Juan Manuel Santos role was to be compassionate with Colombians need for peace. But he had to be intelligent enough to select empathic people to represent Colombian voices in the dialogues with FARC: people with the capacity to connect with victims, guerrilla, government, etc. and seek for the resolution of a long conflict.

4 Conclusions

Overall, empathy as the main feature of political leader could be overestimated. Although empathy is the core ability to share other psychological experiences, it does not entail by itself the willingness to take care of another human being. Empathy not necessary leads to compassionate actions, neither to prosocial behaviour. Although empathy may be the first step for getting political leaders with the capacity to recognize their followers' needs and feelings, further competencies must be required for solving the conflicts their role demand.

In the end, we need compassionate leaders who can not only be empathetic with other situations, but they will make real actions for solving others pain. However, the next question that should be addressing is whose situation leaders have to care about. As compassion needs a target, leaders must choose whose situation demands their action although their election could be less compassionate, even been less empathic with others. That may be the case with the migration situation all over the world. Political leaders should take care of one group demands for well-being, even though it entails denying others' groups demands? How could leaders be empathetic with the

immigrants' situation, even compassioned, when the country cannot fulfil their own inhabitants' demands? This is just an example of how to address empathy and compassion in today's globalized world is not just a vacuous claim, but a real necessity.

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