ABSTRACT

In the study of International Relations, there is growing research and consideration of the significance of empathy in political communications and nation-to-nation relationships. This article examines cognitive empathy, the ability to understand the perspectives and feelings of another, in the case of the Cuban Thaw, the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and The United States. It traces President Obama’s use of empathy in publicly communicating intentions towards Cubans and Americans, a rhetoric that marks a contrast from the previous U.S. administrations’ attitudes toward Cuba. This article then analyzes the efficacy of that rhetoric, finding that though there are indications of positive effects, it is difficult to understand the long-term impact of his actions at this time. This case provides context as to the positive transformative power of empathy in IR, and the efficacy of empathetic rhetoric in shifting public attitudes and encouraging cooperation between previously antagonistic nations. Empathy as a tool faces a number of practical limitations, all of which deserve greater research and attention.

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2016, Barack Obama traveled to Cuba with a delegation of family, staff, and Democrat and Republican congressional representatives, marking the first time in eighty-eight years that a sitting United States president visited the country. This was part of a much larger effort to normalize diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, which had been officially severed in 1961. Since then, U.S. policy towards Cuba had been marked by isolation and hostility, including repeated attempts to overthrow Cuba’s Communist government. Obama’s approach came as a drastic change in U.S. rhetoric and policy, and it included a nuanced understanding of the position of Cuba, its people, and its leaders. This paper examines the role of this nuanced understanding, better understood as empathy, in facilitating the administration’s new approach by focusing on one central question—where and how did Obama employ empathy in the Cuban Thaw and what was the impact of this shift in rhetoric?

Empathy and other emotions have traditionally been dismissed in IR as irrational and something to be mitigated, but they have long been part of practicing politics and diplomacy (Head, 2012, p. 37). More recent research reveals the significance of empathy in these domains and evidence that reason and emotion are significantly intertwined (Yorke, 2017, p. 14). Obama, in particular, made empathy a large part of his politics, from the time he was a senator (Shogan, 2009, p. 872). It also was a fundamental part of his personal ethics and character.1

This paper will analyze Obama’s speeches and policy documents between 2014-2016, during which U.S.-Cuba relations were normalized, a period of time known as the Cuban Thaw, arguing that his empathetic approach was successful in facilitating diplomatic change and in shifting public opinion in both the U.S. and Cuba. However, it was unable to generate significant democratic reforms in Cuba. This analysis adds to accruing research on empathy in International Relations and helps increase understanding of the importance of empathy as a negotiating tool and as something to be employed more often, due to its efficacy in encouraging cooperation between previously antagonistic nations.

EMPATHY IN IR

In line with IR scholarship on emotions, empathy will be theorized here as the “cognitive projection of oneself into the shoes of another, whilst maintaining a clear differentiation between self and other,” (Head, 2012, p. 39) or, “to put oneself into the other’s place” (Wheeler, 2008, p. 495). This definition of empathy has often been referred to as “cognitive empathy,” as opposed to “affective empathy,” which involves feeling the same emotions as the person with whom you are empathizing (Head, 2012, p. 39).2

Cognitive empathy has been shown to be an important part of presidential leadership, particularly in allowing individuals to make more informed decisions and “formulate effective rhetorical arguments” (Shogan, 2009, p. 874). This speaks to the importance of empathy in strategic communications, which is further illuminated by Yorke, who explains that communication employing empathy involves perceptive listening and understanding of the point of view of one’s counterpart (Head, 2012, p. 43). In the case of foreign policy, empathy can be used strategically to “develop cooperation with other countries and cultures through both public statements and private meetings” (Yorke, 2017, p. 150).

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1 See (Obama, 2006) for background.

2 See also (Yorke, 2017, p. 142) & (Head, 2016, p. 103).
Another strategic use of empathy is in security dilemma sensibility, defined as:

[T]he ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one’s own actions may play in provoking that fear (Booth & Wheeler, 2007, as cited in Wheeler, 2008, p. 496)

By understanding how an adversary views their state, a leader can better judge their motives and therefore diminish the fear inherent in the security dilemma, though not remove it entirely (Wheeler, 2008, pp. 495-496).

Although empathy can successfully be used strategically, it will only be effective if it is perceived as genuine (Shogan, 2009, pp. 862-874). Even within this definition, scholars and practitioners have identified limits and even dangers to empathy.3 In the following analysis, the stated definition of empathy will be used to analyze where President Obama exhibited empathy, how different individuals and groups responded, and if it was successful in achieving the goals of the Obama administration.

**METHODODOLOGY**

In order to determine where President Obama used empathy, this paper will focus on five central speeches by Obama in the period between December 2014, when the policy changes were announced, and March 2016, when Obama visited Cuba. This will include discourse analysis of the transcripts, along with analysis of the videos, which will allow for the rhetoric to be placed in the context of the event and audience, his body language, and tone. Yorke delineates the criteria used by scholars of empathy in discourse analysis, including “evidence of perspective taking, and seeking to understand different sections of society and their political, historical, structural, and social-economic context;” “awareness of one’s own words and actions and how this might be perceived;” and “evidence of discussions of the importance of understanding another point of view and acknowledgement of recognition” (Yorke, 2017, p. 146). Also noted and included in these criteria will be words, phrases, comparisons, and analogies with connotations of empathy, particularly respect and trust towards a Cuban audience, and calls to stand in the shoes of the Cuban people that are directed toward a U.S. audience. This paper will rely on articles from The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal to show how Obama’s speeches were received. It will also include an analysis of some of Cuban President Raúl Castro’s remarks, which will serve to illuminate if and when Castro implemented empathy in his rhetoric.

However, even with these objectives, there are limitations to discourse analysis and the analysis of empathy more generally. As Mercer (1996) stated, “emotion is hard to define, hard to operationalize, hard to measure, and hard to isolate from others” (as cited in Clément & Sangar, 2017, p. 7). In focusing on externally displayed emotion, some of these challenges will be mitigated, but it will remain difficult to measure the role of the empathy displayed in subsequent tangible political changes. Discourse analysis “cannot determine the intensity or relative weight of an emotion in relation to other emotions, nor does it indicate the involvement of countervailing emotions” (Clément & Sangar, 2017, p. 24). Even emotion discourse analysis—in which emotions are more thoroughly integrated into the method used—runs the risk of “homogenizing the emotions of groups” (Clément & Sangar, 2017, p. 24). In acknowledging these biases and challenges, this research can be analyzed for what it adds to the scholarship on empathy in IR while understanding the limits on its conclusions.

**TRANSFORMING RELATIONS THROUGH EMPATHY**

Obama’s belief in the importance of understanding others’ perspectives made possible the negotiations that led to the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations. An analysis of empathy in shifting the relationship has to acknowledge the secret negotiations that happened prior to the December 17, 2014, announcement of policy changes. One factor was Obama’s belief—contrary to nearly the entire foreign policy establishment—that, as he said, “It. Is. Not. A. Reward. To. Talk. To. Folks.” (Rhodes, 2018, p. 15). This ran contrary to the rhetoric used by the previous administration, in which President Bush consistently laid out preconditions for negotiating a change in the relationship and maintained a policy of isolation and forced regime change (Bush, 2002). The contrast shows that empathy as employed by Obama was a distinct shift in the way the U.S. thought about Cuba.

Even before public announcement of the changes, Obama and his administration recognized the importance of acknowledging the historical and political context of the relationship and Cuba’s point of view, which involved signaling from both countries demonstrating that they were serious about shifting the relationship (Yorke, 2017, p. 146). Ben Rhodes—one of the lead negotiators during the Cuban Thaw and Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications—described a series of small acts by Obama that indicated his understanding of the history and his desire to move beyond it, for example, when in 2013 he became the first U.S. president to shake the hand of a Cuban president “since the revolution” (Rhodes, 2017, p. 261). The eventual success of these actions in bringing Cuba and the U.S. to an agreement suggests that empathetic rhetoric should be used more frequently in initial negotiations.

The first public announcement of the policy changes came on December 17, 2014. Obama framed the shift in relations as explicitly with the “people of Cuba,” rather than Cuba as a state or with the Cuban government. This framing, along with his acknowledgement

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3 See (Bloom, 2016) & (Johnson, 2010, p. 505) for more on the limits of empathy.
of the political, social, and historical perspectives of Cubans and Cuban Americans, highlights the centrality of empathy to his rhetoric surrounding the policy. Like U.S. negotiators did in private with their Cuban counterparts, Obama acknowledges the “complicated history” between the two countries and the ways in which U.S. actions have impacted Cubans, including the Bay of Pigs invasion and the “legacy of … colonization” (Obama, 2014a). In doing so, he exhibits an understanding that the U.S. government’s interventions have provoked anti-American sentiment and led to fear contributing to the hostility between the two countries. This recognition is important in mitigating the security dilemma and diplomatic stalemate the two nations faced (Wheeler, 2008, p. 496).

Obama also demonstrates an understanding of how his words and his decision to pursue normalization of diplomatic relations would be perceived by the Cuban American community, most of whom were staunchly opposed to the Castro government. Coverage of this announcement, however, reveals that Obama’s attempts to see this from the side of Cuban Americans and Cuban advocates for regime change were unsuccessful in changing the minds of these individuals. Older Cuban dissidents felt that this was a betrayal by Obama and would not lead to concessions by the Castros, and all seven Cuban American legislators in Congress opposed it (Burnett & Neuman, 2014; Hook, 2014). It did seem to resonate, however, with a younger generation of Cuban-Americans, who were “open to change” (Baker, 2014).

President Raúl Castro, speaking on the change in policy the same day, acknowledged the “profound differences” between the two countries and his “willingness to dialogue on all these issues” (“Speech”, 2014). His speech reiterated his belief in Communist rule, though the fact that he was willing to engage in dialogue about U.S. concerns was a significant change from being unwilling to discuss these matters until the embargo was lifted (“Speech”, 2014; Bush, 2007).

In later statements regarding the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations, Obama uses similar rhetoric with empathetic connotations. When announcing on July 1, 2015, that the United States formally re-established diplomatic relations with Cuba and would reopen an embassy in the country, Obama frequently refers to Cubans as the United States’ “neighbors” and repeatedly talks about the physical proximity of the two countries, being “separated by only 90 miles” (Obama, 2015a; Obama & Castro, 2015; Obama & Castro, 2016a). This language attempts to evoke affective empathy for Cuba and Cubans by highlighting how close the two are to Americans, a message of similarity that would make it easier for the general public to understand his decisions. At the same time, he demonstrates a respect for Cuban ingenuity and sovereignty by talking about certain shared values and where citizens of both countries have worked together “in Haiti against Cholera, and in West Africa against Ebola” (Obama & Castro, 2016a). This show of respect is a crucial shift from the Bush administration, in which Cubans were framed as helpless members of a “shattered society,” often spoken to in a patronizing manner (Bush, 2007). In remarks before a meeting with President Castro on April 11, 2015, Obama again repeats language acknowledging the differences and “mistrust” that had developed between the two countries, as well as the historical context of a policy that for 50 years “had not changed on the part of the United States” (Obama & Castro, 2015). Seeking to understand the perspectives that Castro and many Cubans would have concerning the U.S. and U.S. action is one mechanism through which President Obama exercises empathy.

Even President Castro begins to use this rhetoric, speaking about the U.S. and Cuba as neighbors developing “a friendship between our two peoples” and having “respect for the ideas of the other,” while a joint press conference with Obama (Obama & Castro, 2016a). This press conference alone was a success for the Obama administration; Rhodes describes how the “Cuban journalists, all employees of state-run media, seemed astonished to see their own leader taking questions” (Rhodes, 2018, p. 355).

Obama’s language around physical proximity and connection between Cubans and Americans resonated with the press, and coverage of the events of 2015 reflected more positive, though still cautious, views of the opening with Cuba, with most vocal opposition coming from Republican members of Congress (Davis, 2015; Schwartz, et al., 2015). Insights from Cuban citizens tended toward skepticism, specifically about concessions Castro would make, but many were also hopeful. All of this indicates that empathetic rhetoric has an important role to play in international relations, specifically on the level of public opinion.

Videos of President Obama’s remarks also reveal more about his attempts to express and cultivate empathy. Throughout his presidency, Obama spoke in a calm, slower manner that conveyed an air of thoughtfulness and genuine care about the matter at hand. This was no different for his speeches about Cuba. In the video of Obama’s initial statement on the policy changes in 2014, his focus on the Cuban people and the unity required for this effort is further illuminated by his emphasis on “and” when he talks about creating “more opportunities for the American and Cuban people,” and how “increased commerce is good for Americans and for Cubans” (Obama, 2014b). Not only do his words convey empathy, but his engagement and emphasis while speaking makes this display quite genuine.

Furthermore, Obama’s notation of differences between the U.S. and Cuba is not only an example of his understanding of contrasting views, but also demonstrates that he is keenly aware of what empathy is and what it is not. As Yorke describes, “It should be emphasised that the act of empathising does not mean condoning acts of terror or atrocities” (Yorke, 2017, p. 152). While Obama is able to build trust between the U.S. and the Cuban government by exhibiting empathy, he successfully maintains American interests because he understands and states publicly that he does not need to agree with or support Castro in order to interact diplomatically. In previous administrations and in the eyes of many established foreign policy experts, talking with a country was equivalent to giving in to their demands. This notion that “seeing to understand different sections of society and their political, historical, structural, and social-economic context” equates to feeling compassionate or supportive towards an adversary is misguided, yet it was the justification for the United States’ Cuba policy for decades (Yorke, 2017, p. 146). Maintaining that attitude fostered anti-American sentiment in

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4 Cited as a criterion of empathetic discourse in (Yorke, 2017, p. 146).
5 See (Obama & Castro, 2015) for further examples of this rhetoric.

6 See (Burnett, 2015) and (“In Cuban Capital”, 2014) for further information.
Cuba and only increased tensions between the two countries, rather than actually pushing Cuba towards democratic reforms; Obama provided a different, more hopeful path.

The climax of the Cuban Thaw was President Obama’s trip to Cuba in March 2016, where on March 22 he spoke in Havana. The Cuban government agreed to have “Obama’s speech be broadcast—uncensored—to the Cuban people,” the likes of which had never before happened in Cuba (Rhodes, 2018, p. 354). A great deal of thought went into how to balance recognition of values and positions of all the parties involved—from Castro, to the Cuban people, to American interests, and possibly most importantly, to Cuban American communities. Rhodes describes visiting such communities in Miami, Florida: “Cuban Americans wanted to hear [Obama] make the case for democracy, for openness, and to include them in whatever story he told about Cuba” (Rhodes, 2018, p. 353). This is reflected in the speech when Obama talks about shared culture and religion, the reconciliations of families after decades, and when he says, “In the United States, we have a clear monument to what the Cuban people can build: it’s called Miami” (Obama, 2016). When Rhodes describes the speech, he says, “Every Cuban would hear it a different way. I had tried to paint a picture of a future in which there was a place for everyone’s story” (Rhodes, 2018, pp. 358-359). This was especially important in the context of the event; the fact that the audience was largely Cuban was reflected in the way Obama spoke directly to Cuban citizens more than he had in previous speeches. This was his most full-throated pitch for democracy in Cuba, yet he also made clear that he understood that these proposals were “sensitive, especially coming from an American President.” He continues:

Before 1959, some Americans saw Cuba as something to exploit, ignored poverty, enabled corruption. And since 1959, we’ve been shadow-boxers in this battle of geopolitics and personalities. I know the history, but I refuse to be trapped by it… What changes come will depend upon the Cuban people. We will not impose our political or economic system on you (Obama, 2016)

This is notable not only because of Obama’s awareness of how his words might be perceived by the audience, but also because his position strays from the traditional model of American power and hegemony.

“…rather than actually pushing Cuba towards democratic reforms; Obama provided a different, more hopeful path.”

EVALUATING SUCCESS

Overall, media and rhetorical analysis demonstrated a shift towards a more positive view of normalization. A New York Times/CBS News poll conducted in March 2016 found that nearly 60 percent of Americans supported “normalizing relations with Cuba” (Sussman, 2016). The poll showed 52 percent of Americans approved of the way Obama was “handling relations with Cuba,” which was “up from 44 percent in December 2014,” when he first announced the policy changes (Sussman, 2016). Obama’s success in shifting public opinion in support of his policy was also evident in the establishment of the New Cuba PAC, a pro-normalization group started in May 2015. The Wall Street Journal reported that the group had raised more than $178,000 by July 2015, which was an indication of increasing “public support for closer ties between the two countries” (Schwartz, 2015b).

Obama’s major goal to “normalize relations between [the] two countries” was achieved: diplomatic relations between the two countries were reestablished, and the respective embassies opened in the U.S. and Cuba (Obama, 2014a; Obama, 2015b). The administration also removed Cuba from the list of designated state sponsors of terrorism in May 2015 (Schwartz, 2015a). In his speech to the Cuban people, Obama outlined other steps he took to loosen restrictions, which included restoring “direct flights and mail service,” expanding “commercial ties,” and increasing “the capacity of Americans to travel and do business in Cuba” (Obama, 2016). Additionally, on January 12, 2017, Obama announced an end to the “wet foot, dry foot” immigration policy that allowed Cubans who arrived on U.S. soil without visas to stay and gain legal residency. This policy was unique to Cuban migrants and described by national security archivist Peter Kornbluh as “a relic of the Cold War” (Davis & Robles, 2017). These were all significant steps in improving relations between the two countries.

Despite these changes, Obama’s call to Congress to lift the “embargo that is a legacy of a failed policy” was unsuccessful (Obama, 2015b). Shifting public opinion and outside support was not significant enough to get the Republican-controlled House and Senate to enact such legislation. As a result, President Trump was able to walk back many of the Obama administration’s changes. The Trump administration’s policy more closely resembles the policies that preceded Obama, though diplomatic relations remain relatively intact (“U.S.-Cuba Relations”, n.d.).

Furthermore, Obama’s goals of spurring democratic reforms and creating more open dialogue through reestablishing this relationship were not realized. He repeatedly stated his belief that person-to-person interactions and economic reforms would generate change in Cuba, explaining that Cuban Americans “are the best possible ambassadors for [U.S.] values,” and that the U.S. “can do more to support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement” (Obama, 2014a). However, foreign policy scholars found that years later, this policy showed weak returns. Despite increases in tourism and remittances, there was no expansion of internet access or decrease in internet censorship, and, in 2016, Cuban authorities detained a record high number of individuals (Abrams, 2018). Experts at the Council on Foreign Relations believe that the policies failed to generate improvements in human rights because “the Obama administration failed to demand any improvements from Cuba in exchange for the various diplomatic, trade, and travel concessions it granted Havana” (Abrams, 2018). While Obama

7 See (Baker, 2014) and (Davis, 2015) for further background on the role of Congress.
did call upon the Castro regime to make changes, there may have been other opportunities to force more concessions in exchange for loosening restrictions. Based on his rhetoric, though, he believed that progress would come from the Cuban people as the U.S. lifted restrictions, and he wanted to respect Cuba’s sovereignty (Obama, 2016). These failings speak to the limitations of rhetoric alone to create change.

MOVING FORWARD

This analysis hits upon aforementioned challenges of analyzing emotions in foreign policy. It is difficult to extract empathy from the other emotions that Obama evokes in his speeches, such as hope and unity. In some cases, these can be seen as mechanisms that empathy is exercised through, but often they stand on their own as a different kind of emotional rhetoric. It is also challenging to directly correlate the public attitude changes to the rhetoric Obama used, yet because this approach was so different from what the public had seen before, it is fair to attribute the shift in public relations and opening up of Cubans to the U.S. in part to Obama’s rhetoric and willingness to engage, much of which relied upon empathy.

Additionally, the recency of these events makes it impossible to judge the long-term impact of Obama’s policy of empathy, and it also means that Obama’s personal notes are not widely available, making it infeasible to study empathy on the interpersonal level in great detail. Ben Rhodes’ accounts of private negotiations and speechwriting were crucial in contextualizing Obama’s thought process behind various speeches and remarks. However, it leaves unanswered questions about the significance of interpersonal empathy during the negotiating process itself.

Empathy cannot be hailed unequivocally as a mechanism for change; as Head describes, “whilst empathy in no way determines change, it opens up the possibilities for it” (Head, 2012, p. 47). The success that President Obama had in opening up dialogue between the U.S. and Cuba and reestablishing diplomatic relations speaks to the importance of considering empathy in foreign policy and, in Obama’s words, that perhaps it is not a reward to talk to folks, but the logical way to mitigate conflict. Constant signaling between Castro and Obama allowed for the recognition of the different parties that held a stake in the matter, and it demonstrated the importance of recognizing the historical wrongs one’s country committed. However, the current state of human rights in Cuba suggests that this policy was ineffectual in pushing for democratic reforms. The broad overview of the role of empathy in Obama’s philosophy and rhetoric during the Cuban Thaw, provided in this paper, is an important component in understanding how similar empathetic ideologies function in foreign policy and the limits of their efficacy. These implications for practitioners of foreign policy and diplomacy will be better understood with more research and case study analysis of empathy in conflict transformation.

REFERENCES


