

Showing the Other Side: What Kinds of Empathy Should Political Science Teach?

Chelsea Kaufman
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Wingate University
c.kaufman@wingate.edu

Colin Brown
Assistant Teaching Professor of Political Science
Northeastern University
colin.brown@northeastern.edu

Abstract

In 2006, then-Senator Barack Obama implored undergraduates at Northwestern to cultivate empathy, and called on the country he would later lead to address its “empathy deficit.” A recent book pointing to empathy as a way out of polarized politics (Sirin, Valentino & Villalobos 2021) won the Best Book Award from two different APSA organized sections in 2022, just two years after the APSR published an article pointing to empathy as a key contributor to polarization in the first place (Simas, Clifford & Kirkland 2020). Empathy is being taken seriously in politics and political science—but what exactly do we mean by empathy? In order to understand the role that we as political science educators have in fostering this trait in our students, and to what extent this is a role we should even be taking on, we must first clearly understand the concept. This paper reviews the uses of “empathy” in the political science and teaching and learning literature in order to identify which of many possible definitions we really mean when we as educators say that we wish to develop empathy as a skill. We identify several different conceptualizations of empathy in the political science and related literatures. The first is the sort of empathy needed to understand others’ political positions, perhaps especially those whose positions we deem irrational. Empathy also plays an important role in perceptions of in-group and out-group members. There is also the sort of empathy that may be necessary to a democratic society: the ability to listen to others and deliberate. The last is the sort needed to understand the experiences of people in marginalized groups in order to promote equity and inclusion. However, this form of empathy may necessitate understanding not only of others, but also ourselves—and if not carefully shaped may risk “filtered” empathy (Breithaupt 2019) or an exploitative empathic relationship. At the same time, we would not want this empathetic understanding to go so far as to eliminate the need or desire for debate. We also begin to consider the question of where we go from here—if empathy is a necessary skill for democracy, how exactly can we as educators help our students to develop it? As part of developing and clarifying this typology, we provide a preliminary review of existing research that finds best practices already identified and points to important directions for further studies, in order to help increase our discipline’s effectiveness in developing the kinds of empathy that we as political scientists truly appear to value.

Introduction

Empathy is a concept that has received significant attention in both politics and political science in recent years. In 2006, then-Senator Barack Obama implored undergraduates at Northwestern to cultivate empathy, and called on the country he would later lead to address its “empathy deficit.” In an APSA publication about teaching civic engagement about the discipline, multiple authors emphasize the importance of empathy in our classrooms (Bennion 2017; Crigler et al. 2017; Suarez 2017). More recently, a book pointing to empathy as a way out of polarized politics (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021) won the Best Book Award from two different APSA organized sections in 2022, just two years after the APSR published an article pointing to empathy as a key contributor to polarization in the first place (Simas, Clifford & Kirkland 2020). Empathy is clearly important in today’s politics, or is at least clearly perceived as important, which suggests that empathy deserves at least some place in the political science classroom. But what exactly can and should political science educators do to address empathy?

The fact that empathy can be seen as simultaneously a cause of and also a way out of polarization already suggests some potential contradictions within the concept of “empathy.” In deciding to study empathy, we immediately faced a problem: what sort of empathy did we want to examine? One of the authors (Brown) put out a call for collaborators on the topic, and the first question the other author posed in our first meeting (Kaufman) about the project was what sort of empathy he meant. One of us had approached the topic thinking about empathy as perspective taking, while it turned out the other had thought more about the role of instructor empathy and empathy between classmates/collaborators. Both are valid questions for classroom practices, and both touch on ways that “empathy” has been discussed in the academic and teaching practices literature. But in sharing our interests and what we had been reading, we realized that the way empathy is talked about in our field seems to stretch the concept across a wide range of potential implications, mechanisms, practices, and

definitions—and that the way we talk about “empathy” so loosely in both politics and the classroom may be leading us, perhaps ironically, to talk past each other.

The result of our initial conversations led us to three key questions that appear to be largely unanswered in the SoTL literature, and particularly with regard to politics: 1) what are the specific uses of empathy in Political Science 2) can we actually teach our students empathy, and are there any risks to doing so 3) if so, how can we best teach empathy? We begin by identifying four ways in which empathy is typically described and/or advocated for in political science, discussing for each use the potential ways that fostering empathy could further or hinder these goals. We finish by discussing how currently identified best practices for teaching empathy may not be enough—a few studies seem to indicate some effective methods to increase students' empathy in some respects, but not enough research has yet been conducted to align these with different concepts of empathy, or to determine how to also address other considerations, such as whether students increasing their empathy are learning to identify with in-groups, out-groups, or something else.

Uses of “empathy” in Political Science

There are numerous uses of the word “empathy” employed across various academic disciplines. Batson (2009) alone identifies eight different uses of the term across various fields interested in theory of the mind, ranging from philosophy to developmental psychology. To say that there is a lack of clarity surrounding this concept's definition is not a novel idea: one article that is nearly 50 years old begins by saying “...numerous definitions of empathy have been advanced during the past century (Deutsch and Madle, 1975).” Despite the fuzziness of the concept,, we were able to identify four common themes in terms of how it is usually employed in political science, though these are not fully exhaustive. These four broad approaches include the role or even necessity of empathy

1. to understand political positions from other perspectives;
2. to be able to identify with other members of one's own group, and also to understand or even appreciate commonalities with identified out-group members;
3. to engage in democratic deliberation;
4. to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion.

However, in each case, there are also those who argue that empathy is not necessary—and is perhaps counterproductive or detrimental—to achieving these goals.

1. Hearing “The Other Side”

Some argue that empathy can be used to understand others' political positions, perhaps especially those whose positions we deem irrational. For example, the organization Braver Angels specifically tries to develop what they call “patriotic empathy” in their mission to depolarize American politics, engaging in activities that have the goal of moving one's view of the other side from “they are enemies” to “they have a lot to contribute.” In fact, some argue that the sort of empathy that allows one to understand the perspective of the other side is necessary for a functioning democracy, (Caughell 2018; McCartney 2020). Without this skill, students may be unable to predict others' political behavior, or to reject beliefs based in misinformation or extremism. If our perspective on political issues is shaped by our own political identities, then without empathy, we may have difficulty understanding or even listening to the perspectives of those shaped by their different identities—especially if those perspectives challenge our core beliefs (Crocco et al. 2018). In fact, there is evidence that if we try to correct misinformation that informs a belief consistent with one's worldview, that correction may backfire, leading people to more strongly hold their opinions rooted in misinformation (Nyhan & Reifler 2010; Cook, Ecker, and Lewandowsky, 2015)¹. Students are often at a critical juncture where they are working to form their own political perspectives and self identities, while also deliberating in the classroom environment (Crocco et al. 2018).

¹ Though more recent studies have indicated this effect may itself be weaker and less durable than initial studies—and widespread understanding of them—suggested (Nyhan 2021)

Not everyone feels that empathy helps us to better understand the other side, and, some argue it may even fuel division (Breithaupt, 2019; Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland, 2019). Specifically, Breithaupt states that “empathy can be used to solidify and deepen quick side-taking judgments (2019 pg. 114).” If people are taught to consider the perspective of “the other side,” he points out, they may learn that the issue has “sides,” rather than a universal issue, and that there is a side that they are supposed to identify with. Furthermore, they may also be motivated to commit extreme actions or support extreme beliefs on behalf of those on their side who are being harmed. He specifically discusses the example of terrorism. After all, many terrorists are not drawn to the cause or motivated to commit violent acts because they personally have been harmed, but rather because they identify with—that is, they have empathy for— people or groups they perceive as oppressed. In a perhaps less extreme example, he discusses how Donald Trump is able to maintain support for his arguably unempathetic actions through appeals to his supporters’ empathy. They may identify with him precisely because he portrays himself as a victim of the same circumstances (e.g. immigration) that they perceive themselves as being victimized by. His opponents, on the other hand, identify with those who may be harmed by his policies (e.g. immigrants). Thus, political polarization, and even political violence, may be fueled by empathy.

Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland (2019) make a similar argument, but are somewhat less pessimistic. They acknowledge that empathy could potentially help us to understand the perspective of the other side, but that “that potential may not always be realized (Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland, 2019).” One reason for their concern is that many of the findings that empathy can reduce partisan acrimony have been found in laboratory environments, rather than in the real world. Using evidence from both an experiment as well as survey data, they show how empathy could fuel polarization. For example, people may still have more empathy for their in-group rather than for the out-group. Therefore, if a member of the out-group (the opposite party) is

perceived as harmful to a member of the in-group (one's own party), then empathy would make one angrier at the other side, not more tolerant. One area of possibility is that they find those with more empathy tend to have more interactions with the other side—but are those positive interactions that would build tolerance, or negative interactions, such as attempts to censor or punish them? These findings lead us to believe that the result of increased empathy may depend on what sorts of interactions with and perceptions of the other side one has.

One must also consider the potential implications of the fact that empathy is itself often considered to be a “liberal” trait. Bloom (2016, pgs. 112-128) spends an entire chapter of *Against Empathy* directly addressing the question of whether by being against empathy he is “pursuing some sort of conservative agenda.” This corresponds with the empirical results of a number of surveys conducted by Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos that found greater levels of out-group empathy correlated with significantly greater support for egalitarian and redistributive policies in both the US and UK (2021). Is it possible for empathy to lead to greater political and racial tolerance in general if it is one-sided? If this is the case, could more empathy lead to more polarization due to those who are becoming more empathetic also becoming more liberal and *vice versa* (Morris 2020)? Bloom (2016) does acknowledge that there is some evidence of at least a weak association between greater empathy and liberal political views, but ultimately comes to the conclusion that it is not so much a question of whether one has empathy but rather who we empathize with that seems to motivate our policy beliefs. Therefore, while his arguments may imply that empathy could fuel polarization (for example, due to bias for one's in-group), it would not be for the reason that it promotes one ideology over the other. Yet, it is also possible that causality flows the other way: for example, Hasson et al. (2018) say that “...what people want to feel toward others varies as a function of their political ideology.” If that is the case, then increasing empathy would have no impact on one's ideology, but rather could promote more understanding and acceptance of those who are not like us. Even Morris (2018,

2020), who argues that it may be a cause of polarization, also states that “...empathy is a vital tool for improving human relations due to the numerous social and political benefits it provides.” However, this statement is, in part, informed by his viewpoint that more liberal (which he refers to as progressive) politics benefit the greater good. In short, the relationship between empathy and ideology is complicated, and it is not necessarily safe to assume that more empathy leads to greater tolerance, though it may be a possibility.

2. Group empathy

As noted above, empathy is often discussed in politics as an understanding of “the other side.” However, it should be possible to empathize in different ways with different groups of people, which may complicate the kinds of empathy that we expect to see—and the potential effects of teaching it. Social psychologists studying empathy have often focused on it as an in-group phenomenon, rather than an outward-facing virtue. At the extreme, it is seen as an adaptive evolutionary trait (Decety et al 2012); more commonly it is related to greater involvement and prosocial behavior in one’s own community or group (Unger & Thumhuri 1997; Cialdini et al 1997) while also being related to in-group/out-group distinctions (Decety and Cowell 2014). In some ways, this affective response may complement common political conceptions of social capital, whose in-group and out-group variations may both have positive effects but may both come into conflict with each other—and neither of which may be independently sufficient for democratic practice (Putnam 2000). Without in-group empathy, members of a community may not be able to form meaningful bonds or cooperate; without out-group empathy they may be unable to incorporate either new members or perspectives. In the absence of the other, increasing amounts of either kind of empathy may not independently increase the democratic nature of a society.

In-group and out-group empathy may also manifest differently across different groups, even when those groups share the same political space—and possibly based on reactions to the same political dynamics. Sirin, Valentino and Lobos argue that marginalized groups are more likely to show empathy with members of other disadvantaged groups, if only because the cognitive load for both perspective-taking and affective forms of empathy should be much lower, as both groups will have similar experiences navigating both their own and the dominant worldviews in society (2021). This may also lead to a differential relationship between group identity and empathy, and these authors find evidence that stronger in-group identity leads to greater out-group empathy for Blacks and Latinos in the US, while white Americans who identified more strongly with their in-group demonstrated less empathy for out-groups (2021, 82-84).

3. Democratic deliberation

Empathy has taken an increasingly important role in conversations about deliberative democracy, in a way often portrayed as contrasting with a purely rational approach to deliberation. Michael Morrell (2010) takes perhaps the strongest position on this, arguing that:

A persuasive deliberative theory of democratic justification must account for affect and cognition because human beings reason using a combination of the two, and...without both the affective and cognitive components of empathy, deliberation will likely not be open, unbiased, or reciprocal. (2010, 193)

In Morrell's view, the fact that rational deliberation makes reference to interests that themselves derive from affect or passion makes the idea of mutual respect² difficult to achieve from a purely cognitive perspective. It also provides a partial solution to the problem of deliberation when groups are excluded, either in practice (e.g., non-citizens in many cases) or by necessity (e.g, the environment or those not yet born) (181). Robert Goodin has similarly argued that empathic

² Morell draws largely on Gutmann and Thompson 1996 for this concept

insiders may simply be more effective in empowering the perspectives of the excluded when barriers to inclusion cannot be or are not being addressed (2003, 58). For these reasons, Morrell asserts that training in “empathetic predispositions” may be both more effective and less controversial than traditional civic education in areas like patriotism or tolerance (2007, 399).

Empathy also serves a key for the ability to understand and interpret the laws as lawmakers or jurors. Where American legal standards are often based on the “reasonable man,” they implicitly ask how a civil or criminal defendant felt or thought in explicit comparison to what the broader community would be expected to feel (Krause 2011, 94). As Martha Nussbaum puts it more bluntly, “the average man, being also a human being, exhibits a lot of tension, ambivalence, and, in normative terms, unreasonableness.” In this way, empathy as a skill is implicitly expected even during what might be seen as “impartial” deliberation. Without having cultivated a broad degree of empathy, and/or without legal practices that force the consideration of empathetic perspectives, a citizen called to serve on a jury may be in danger of failing to understand the emotional context of their broader society or its impact on the defendant.

While accounting for empathy may be both more equitable and realistic than a purely cognitive approach to deliberative democracy, this focus on empathy as a reflective and internal process that allows us to *speak* for others may stand in the way of *listening* to them. Mary Scudder points out that empathy is not a direct substitute for communication, and that communication is the primary stated goal of deliberative democracy: “[E]mpathy trades in similarities and so is out of our reach precisely when we need it most, when differences make it most difficult both to imagine and consider another’s perspective” (2020, 78). While Scudder is reacting to theorists like Krause and Morrell who are making much stronger claims than many of the other approaches to empathy—effectively, that empathy is a necessary condition for democracy—this critique highlights the need to think about how empathy might be developed in a way that facilitates listening rather than replacing it.

4. Diversity, equity, and inclusion

A final sort of empathy is the kind that can help us to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion in the discipline and beyond. This is somewhat different from the previously discussed concept of group empathy, as the focus in this case is more so on how individuals may empathize with other individuals who are unlike them, and consequently produce a more inclusive and equitable society. Givens (2022) sees the development of this sort of empathy—in particular, what she refers to as “radical empathy”—as being crucial to bridging racial divides in the United States. Radical empathy is specifically defined as (Givens 2022, pg. 21):

1. A willingness to be vulnerable.
2. Becoming grounded in who you are.
3. Opening yourself to the experiences of others.
4. Practicing empathy.
5. Taking action.
6. Creating change and building trust.

This sort of empathy goes beyond simply being able to “see the world from another person’s perspective” (Givens’ own definition of empathy) to taking actions based on that understanding. It is a process of self-reflection that culminates in changing one’s behavior in order to effect positive change in society.

But how exactly does this practice foster diversity, equity, and inclusion? A good example comes from Givens’ (2022, pgs. 122-123) discussion of inclusive leadership. She talks about how in many careers, leaders are often going to be people who need to mentor minorities, but are not themselves minorities. Therefore, leaders that strive for an inclusive workplace require empathy so that they can provide mentorship that is suited to mentees with different backgrounds and experiences, which is a key part of being an effective leader. However, this impact is not limited to organizations such as companies or universities. She even goes so far as to say that it was empathy that led various leaders throughout US history to move the country towards a more equitable future (Givens 2022, pg. 118). She specifically cites various leaders in

the Civil Rights Movement, who realized that they could help their cause by eliciting the empathy of others. For example, people could relate to Rosa Parks, as they could understand being tired and not wanting to give up a seat on the bus, and many parents could relate to the mothers of young men who were killed, such as Emmett Till or Trayvon Martin.

Monroe and Martinez-Marti (2008) demonstrate that empathy can be used for this purpose in the classroom as well. They set out to teach students about differing political perspectives of people from different backgrounds with a philosophy that “students learn best not by listening to lectures, but by being forced to examine their own preconceptions in the light of empirical evidence, and further that emotions play an important part in permanent shifts in attitudes.” As a result, they specifically designed the course to have “empathetic involvement with the other” (in this case, conducting narrative interviews of the elderly) with a goal of increasing students’ understanding and tolerance while also decreasing their prejudice. Their results were somewhat mixed, but the evidence pointed towards their greater understanding of members of out-groups.

Not everyone is as positive as Givens about the potential for empathy in this sphere. As previously discussed, there is at least the possibility that empathy it may fuel division, rather than leading to greater understanding of the other side (Breithaupt, 2019; Simas, Clifford, and Kirkland, 2019). This could apply not only to ideological divisions, but also racial ones.

Additionally, some legal scholars have cautioned against empathy for its own sake or empathy aligned with the perspective (and power) of the state, as it may also privilege or reinforce existing inequalities if it is used to justify or identify with more powerful groups in society, and it may privilege dominant emotions over already marginalized ones (Bandes 1996; Krause 2011).

If, in the classroom, we are thinking about this sort of empathy from the perspective of needing to help marginalized people in society who are suffering, we risk identifying empathetically with the “helpers” rather than the people who are suffering, which Breithaupt

(2019, pg. 131) refers to as “filtered empathy.” A key issue with this sort of empathy is that it requires a victim so that the helper can maintain moral superiority. He gives the (perhaps relatable) example of a teacher: we may want to give our students empathy and be lenient with them, but then we risk them never developing self-sufficiency. This is not to say that the issue is inherently with helping people, but rather than if we are helping them so that we can be perceived as helpful, and maintaining certain expectations of how they “should” behave as victims, then the dynamic becomes problematic. In the context of healing racial divisions, it is easy to see how filtered empathy could lead one to value one’s role as a “white savior” rather than to actively work towards advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Even a more complete empathy with marginalized groups—even one that accurately considers their perspective—may hinder inclusion: “...trying to empathize with such excluded individuals can distract us from the need to continually search for ways that they can speak for themselves.” (Scudder 2020, 65).

Even when we try to take the perspectives of the “other,” there is evidence that this may lead to faulty reasoning that may feel like empathy, but is in fact still centered in one’s own experiences. Leaf van Boven and George Lowenstein (2005) have shown evidence for what they call an “empathy gap” where individuals, even when prompted toward perspective taking, tend to do quite poorly in actually estimating others’ perspectives. Perhaps even worse, they observe this occurring via two mechanisms that may exacerbate each other: people assign excessive weight to the perspectives that *they* would take in another’s circumstance rather than considering affective differences between them and the other, and then they also do quite badly at predicting how they themselves would respond to the circumstance (288-289). If, as Morrell and Goodin argue, the benefits of empathy are the ability to speak for and include the perspectives of the excluded, these benefits are greatly diminished if included groups are likely to speak for them *inaccurately*.

Teaching empathy?

Given these varying perspectives on empathy, one might wonder whether it is a skill that we should try to cultivate in our students. Is it possible to teach it as a skill? Furthermore, if it is possible, would teaching it be beneficial, or would it be harmful? Bloom (2016) would obviously be opposed to teaching empathy, as he is opposed to the concept in general. Prinz (2011), on the other hand, argues that teaching empathy would not necessarily be harmful, but rather “superfluous.” In short, he argues that we should have developed other traits that would motivate us to work towards the various positive goals outlined here, such as a general desire to act when we see that someone else is being harmed.

There are others who are in favor of cultivating empathy, or at least imply through their arguments that fostering this trait is desirable. The argument that empathy is crucial for sustaining democracy would necessitate developing this characteristic broadly in the population (Caughell 2018; McCartney 2020). How else would we work to address the “empathy deficit” if not by trying to teach others to be more empathetic? Givens’ (2022, pg. 21) definition of empathy includes a direct call to action. In part, radical empathy is self-taught, through one’s own willingness to be vulnerable and open up to others, but teaching empathy to others, at least by modeling it in one’s own life, is implied. Similar to those who see empathy as crucial to sustaining democracy, she sees it as crucial to promoting inclusion and bridging the racial divide; change cannot be affected in these areas if empathy does not also grow. Finally, despite its “dark sides,” Breithaupt (2019, pgs. 226-227) is also in favor of teaching empathy, although not for the same reasons:

In teaching, learning, or promoting greater empathy, we should not be distracted by the prospect of some short-term moral benefit. Rather the reward for embracing empathy is the enrichment and intensification of our aesthetic perception of the world around us and the emotional experiences within ourselves and others... If we are vigilant about the darker aspects of our thoughts and behavior that empathy can access, using this powerful element of our humanity to heighten our aesthetic and emotional awareness of the world around us will lead to a richer life.

In short, despite the misgivings surrounding the concept of empathy, there may still be a reason to teach it. As long as we are careful of our biases, the benefits could outweigh the harms, and in fact, taking the risk may be necessary to achieve certain goals. These critiques do indicate that any SoTL or “best practices” literature on empathy will need to be extremely clear on its’ conceptualization of empathy and its specifications of the mechanisms by which empathy will lead to better outcomes.

If we accept the premises that empathy is a necessary skill for sustaining democracy and that it can be taught, then how exactly can we as educators help our students to develop it? As previously noted, there are several different definitions of empathy, meaning that there will be various ways to measure the concept. For example, Bennion (2017) recommends the use of a rubric, but that rubric still requires one to think carefully about the specific evidence they will collect to determine whether the civic outcome (in this case, empathy) was achieved.

In the existing literature, we came across several examples of pedagogical methods that were found to increase students’ empathy. In most cases, the increase was measured through students’ own self-reflection, but in some cases by an outside observer. Pedagogical approaches that are found to increase empathy, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend to include activities that allow students to put themselves in others’ shoes, or at least witness and reflect the experiences of others who may differ from their own. Caughell (2018) created an exercise where students were required to create a campaign website for a candidate that did not share their political views, and found limited evidence that the assignment helped students to build empathy. Aguilar et al. (2022) found evidence that reflective exercises based on reviewing materials that would allow students to understand perspectives from the past (such as documentaries or political cartoons) were effective at teaching historical empathy. Suarez (2017) used a service-learning approach to help students learn critical thinking, empathy, and civil discourse, and was able to provide several examples of how students had reflected on the

growth of their empathy during the semester. He argues that the use of various high impact strategies such as service learning are crucial to the development of such skills, along with the willingness of the instructor to build “agility” into their plans for the classroom. For example, the topic for discussion for the day may need to change based on what is happening in the students’ service experiences. He also incorporated the teaching of reflective listening skills and role play activities to help the students develop empathy specifically. Crigler et al. (2017) also found evidence that a service-learning approach increased students’ empathy (in this case, both elementary school and university students). Simulations and games may also be effective. For example, Bachen, Hernandez-Ramos, and Raphael (2012) found evidence of increased empathy after having students play a game where they “inhabit the lives of individuals around the world.” Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos found that they were able to increase both in-group, exclusive empathy and out-group, mutual empathy by requiring students in a simulation to either take a single perspective or inhabit multiple roles (2021).

Although there are surely numerous other examples, these provide evidence that there are conceivably many pedagogical approaches that one may use to effectively foster empathy—once one has settled on the kinds of empathy desired and aligned the measurements to that specific understanding of empathy.

Discussion

Despite the numerous ways that the concept of empathy is employed in political science, one sort of empathy that we have not yet addressed in depth is the sort of empathy that we have as instructors for our students in the classroom. Because our focus is on how the concept of empathy is understood by political scientists in terms of its relation to various political and social phenomena, rather than on empathy in general, we had not fully explored this perspective. However, it would be remiss not to mention it when one of our questions is whether we should teach empathy, and, if so, how exactly to accomplish that. Would it be possible to

teach our students to be empathetic without modeling it ourselves? Can one have a welcoming and inclusive classroom culture without at least some empathy? McCartney (2020) says that we need to bring the “practice of skills and habits of democracy” into the classroom and sees the role of creating a classroom culture that centers civility and respect for all perspectives as critical to achieving this goal. Furthermore, keep in mind Givens’ (2022) point that when a person is in a position as a mentor, and their mentees have a different background, it is important to be empathetic in order to create an inclusive environment. Assuming that one is not employing the “dark sides” of empathy (for example, being so “empathetic” that students are not expected to meet any expectations), being empathetic in the classroom is important in order to achieve these goals. In this way, we can more clearly say that empathy should be a goal of our professional development, and indeed teaching and learning centers and other resources have developed a number of resources to develop this in ourselves.

Thinking of empathy as a teaching goal, however, appears to be more complicated than the typical discussions around it let on, largely because the varied definitions and complex implications of empathy have not been fully agreed upon even in the psychological literature, let alone the civic education and pedagogy literatures. Looking at the literature as a whole, however, a few questions stand out as developed enough—and pressing enough—to deserve testing in the classroom:

1. Does teaching perspective-taking by itself lead to greater empathy? If so, does it lead to greater consideration of others’ real perspectives, or does it invite more superficial thinking about what students would do if they themselves with their own perspectives were in others’ places? If the latter, is this a first step to later development of empathy, or does it hinder that development?
2. Does an increase in empathy actually lead to more representative outcomes in democratic deliberation, or is it just a first, insufficient step as Scudder (2020) would

argue? Can teaching students empathy or perspective-taking lead to more representative outcomes in classroom debates or discussions? Will it cause them to be more willing to speak out on behalf of others—or to attempt to speak for them?

3. Does teaching empathic skills in the classroom lead students to identify more with their in-group, with out-groups, or both? And on what other factors might this depend?

In our prior discussion of how to teach empathy, we focused primarily on examples of pedagogical approaches that had been found to successfully increase empathy by at least some measure in the past. Finding that empathy increased, however, is not the same as finding that attention was paid to the questions outlined above. Simply implementing a service-learning activity without fully considering these questions, for example, could theoretically increase empathy in such a way that we identify with the helpers rather than those needing help, as Breithaupt (2019) cautioned. Going forward, we hope to further explore these questions in making recommendations for best practices for teaching empathy in our classrooms.

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