

GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH ENLIGHTENMENT AND CULTURE OF EMPATHY: HOW TO NAVIGATE A WORLD IN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AND WARS?

Miro Jakovljević

School of Medicine, University of Zagreb

received: 6. 11. 2024;

revised: 26. 11. 2024;

accepted: 2. 12. 2024

Summary:

A global culture of empathy appears crucial for the survival of humankind and life on our planet. There is no health without mental health and no mental health without a culture of empathy at all levels: individual, family, national, and global. Similarly, there is no global security without peace, and no peace without a culture of empathy. While peace is associated with mental health promotion, wars are associated with poor or ill mental health. Humanity needs a fresh goal for global peace and sustainability that promotes the culture of empathy to prevent millions of innocent victims from dying, becoming ill, or being maimed. Education focusing on empathy, peace, and mental health literacy forms the foundation for a better future for all and Earth's sustainability. If we, as Homo sapiens - beings capable of foresight, choice, and action - are to survive, there must be New Enlightenment: a positive vision of an empathetic form of globalization for all humankind.

Key words: *culture of empathy, mental health, collective psychopathology, global sustainability, wars, global mental health enlightenment*

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INTRODUCTION

Global mental health enlightenment is crucial for the sustainability of our volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Mental health concerns of our time extend beyond the list of individual mental disorders and their treatment. Global mental health enlightenment promotes mental health as a global public good and a fundamental human right, viewed from a transdisciplinary, integrative perspective. It should be included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and New Enlightenment. Our fluid world stands at a crossroads, experiencing an accelerating transformation that connects nations and Earth—our Mother Nature—into one global system with a shared destiny. Universal ethics, culture of empathy, and New Enlightenment lie at the core of our world's better future: "Think globally, act locally! Think long-term, act now" (International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis 2018, Gabriel et al. 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, Israeli-Hamas and Israeli-Hezbollah wars, along with climate change and natural disasters, represent severe challenges in our VUCA world and pose significant global risks. Wars and natural catastrophes directly kill, injure, maim, and destroy life. The detrimental and catastrophic impact of war on overall mental health and well-being can devastate entire nations,

communities, families, and individuals, disrupting their socioeconomic status, development, and prosperity (Hoppen et al. 2021, Moitra et al. 2023, Cosic et al. 2024, Javed 2024). War affects large populations globally; for example, between 1989 and 2019, approximately one-sixth of the global population experienced war within their country of residence (see Hoppen et al. 2021).

What can psychiatrists and other mental health professionals offer toward better understanding war's madness and the threatening nuclear doomsday, as well as promoting peace and global mental health and security? The psychiatric view on war centers on three general questions: 1. What is the relationship between authentic human nature and war? 2. What is the relationship between culture, mentality, war, and mental health? 3. Is war our fate, and why do humans find it so difficult to live in peace? War is a complex, multidimensional anthropological phenomenon with numerous sources and causes. Although commonly described as "crazy," "insane," "doom and gloom," and "abhorrent," war still serves economic, political, and psychological functions. Wars can be a "toxic cocktail" ignited by political leaders' personality types, harmful cultures, psychopathological political ideologies, and religious beliefs that demonize and dehumanize others, as well as governmental systems fighting for control of or access to resources (see MacLennan 2023, Jakovljevic 1991).

The relative lack of interest among health professionals—particularly psychiatrists and mental health workers—in opposing all forms of violence, human rights violations, and wars is disappointing (see also Jayasinghe 2024). According to Javed (2024), “there are around 40 ongoing wars and conflicts in the world,” suggesting that “mental health professionals should understand the role of social contexts and needs for psychological resilience, recovery, and empowerment in mental well-being during periods of trauma and conflicts,” while also promoting a culture of empathy and peace at public, national, and global levels. In psychiatric and mental health journals, we can use our voices, values, expertise, and power of influence to make essential contributions to stopping and preventing wars from the perspective of public and global mental health promotion and protection. We have a historic opportunity to reframe Global Mental Health in light of the concept of global empathic civilization and global humanistic mindset. Here, we should remember humanistic psychotherapist Carl Rogers, who, during troubled times in Northern Ireland, brought Protestants and Catholics together in “encounter group” sessions to facilitate dialogue across the divide. A culture of empathy, as a humanistic way of being with others in our fluid world, engenders mutual understanding, respect, trust, collaboration, wisdom, and peace. According to Jeremy Rifkin (2010), one of the leading big-picture thinkers, the concept of empathic civilization can be a potent force in alleviating global conflicts and promoting global mental health. The choice between a clash of civilizations or dialogue among them leading to an empathic global civilization of love represents the most fundamental issue from the public and global mental health perspective (see Jakovljevic 2016, 2021)

TOXIC CULTURES OF NARCISSISM AND PARANOIDISM: EMPATHY EROSIONS AND WARS

“The fact that millions of people share the same vices does not make these vices virtues, the fact that they share so many errors does not make the errors to be truths, and the fact that millions of people share the same forms of mental pathology does not make these people sane”

Erich Fromm

There are times when we need to know, tell, and hear the straight truth rather than engage in pep talk when considering the big questions of life: Who are we? Who or what may we become? What is our role in the universe and on our planet? What is true human nature and

real mental wellness? What is a healthy life, and how should we live it properly? (see Harari 2024). When we consider the tremendous technological and artificial intelligence progress humans have made, it is incredible how little we have developed in other respects. For millennia, humans have been trying to improve themselves philosophically, psychologically, and spiritually, but sadly with insufficient success. According to Harari (2024), “we Homo sapiens – the wise humans – have developed new super-technologies such as artificial intelligence and certainly accumulated enormous power, but power is not wisdom.” Unfortunately, we have produced so much destructiveness that we may activate a doomsday scenario caused by misuse of our own power and lack of wisdom. Are we really Sapiens or a failed species? If we are so wise that we can produce super-intelligent algorithms, prevent famines, contain epidemics, and mitigate natural disasters, why are we so self-destructive? This remains an essential question (Harari 2024). Lack of empathy is commonly related to lack of wisdom, but also to poor mental health..

Our behavior and values, including human rights, love, peace, freedom, dignity, equality, happiness, and well-being, are fundamentally determined by our culture and social institutions. We create culture and culture creates us because our brain produces ideas and ideas shape our brain. Culture is an expression and product of human philosophy, knowledge, communication, and collaboration. Culture may create and provide a healthy environment conducive to human flourishing, virtues, and integration; conversely, culture may present a toxic environment and ill politics suitable for human disintegration, vice, devastation, and destruction (Houde 2024). Individual mental health is result of one’s cultural and environmental influences in interaction with genetic and biological predisposition regulated by epigenetic mechanisms.

The culture of narcissism, with its severe deficit of empathy or dyspathy, creates global risks and existential crisis in our VUCA world, in which international tensions are increasing and ecological collapse threatens us. Humankind has been divided for thousands of years into diverse groups, nations, cultures, and civilizations characterized by different, commonly irreconcilable views of the world and confronting ethical values and political and economic interests, leading to wars from time to time. When we cross cultural, national, or political boundaries, we enter “strange” territory where new languages are spoken, different epistemics are practiced, empathy gaps exist, dissonances and disjunctions are present, and different values are followed, making the possibility of misunderstanding, miscommunication, alienation, and conflict high. The history of humankind comprises annals

of wars, cruelty, and injustice, and it seems that human beings are as bloodthirsty as they have ever been. In our understanding of wars and severe deficit of moral empathy, the psychology of good and evil can be helpful within the culture of narcissism and culture of paranoidism. The culture of narcissism is characterized by a deficit of empathy with: 1) stratospheric self-esteem, self-centeredness, grandiosity, and lack of caring about others; 2) fearlessness, ruthlessness, impulsivity, and thrill-seeking; and 3) Machiavellian deceitfulness and exploitativeness. Several beliefs may be recognized in the culture of narcissism: this world is competitive and the stronger survives, outsiders are competitors and potential enemies, our rights and claims supersede others' rights, and our group (nation, etc.) is superior, the chosen, the elite. In the culture of paranoidism, life is perceived as a battle and the world as a battlefield: no one is to be trusted, we (our group, nation) are good, others are bad and dangerous, better get them first or they'll get us, someone always has to lose (see Jakovljevic & Tomic 2016).

"Human life is like a stage play in which human consciousness and conscience participate in a particular drama of human interiority, which is the drama of good and evil" (Houde 2024). According to Svendsen (2011), four types of moral evil should be distinguished: demonic evil or autotelic evil for evil's sake, where the torturers are often perverse sadists; instrumental evil that is done to achieve some goal with full awareness that what is being done is evil; idealistic evil ("us and them," "they are evil") that is done with the belief it is done for good, for some ideal; and stupid evil that is done without the perpetrators even thinking about what they are doing (for more details see Jakovljevic 2023). Doing evil is not reserved only for fanatics, psychopaths, maniacs, and sadists; it seems that "normal people" often take part in doing evil as well. The fact is that in every human there are potentials for both good and evil, of course in different proportions, and circumstances also play an important role in what will prevail in us. Aiming to explain how some people may treat others as if they were just objects, ignoring their subjectivity, thoughts, and feelings, as well as how people can be cruel to each other, Simon Baron-Cohen (2012) substituted the term "evil" with "empathy erosion." Empathy erosions as states of individual or collective mind can be associated with: 1) corrosive emotions, such as bitter resentment, desire for revenge, blind hatred, or a desire to protect; 2) beliefs that a class of person or some nations are unworthy of human rights; 3) goals such as defending the country; and 4) intentions to make somebody redundant (Baron-Cohen 2012).

Empathy erosions arise from people turning others into dehumanized objects because they are focused only

on their own interests or they are obedient to their authorities, leaders, or dictators. Empathic deficits, empathic dissonances and disjunctions, and empathic gaps are important terms for better understanding interpersonal and political conflicts, wars, and related mental disorders. In wars, each side dehumanizes the other, denies the other's human rights, and practices anger, violence, and vengeance. We must recognize that wars degrade human dignity and are unworthy of human beings. Wars are detrimental parts of the culture of death and are associated with collective psychopathology in a bidirectional way (see Jakovljevic 2023). Mental health enlightenment promotes the culture of life in peace all over the world.

THE MAD OR THE STEP INTO THE PEACE: IS THE CULTURE OF EMPATHY A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE?

"We are mad, not only individuals, but nations also. We restrain manslaughter and isolated murders; but what of war and the so-called glory of killing whole peoples?"
Seneca, Letter 95

Cultures guide our behavior; they are learned, shared, dynamic, multifaceted, and overlapping. Empathy is a basic human capacity that manifests itself differently across cultures, contexts, times, life scripts, and stories. It is human nature to be curious about the mental world of other people - how they see reality, think what they think, feel what they feel, and why they do what they do. The culture of empathy is based on empathizing as an interactive, communicative, connective, performative, and iterative process, evident in words, deeds, and actions that dominate symbiotic interactions between people in families, communities, and societies. Empathy encompasses cognitive and emotional resonance and behavioral cooperation. Empathization may be mediated and influenced by various factors such as personality types, interests, politics, identities, and public discourses. According to Yorke (2023), empathy is essential for "interpreting the meanings and significance people attach to ideas, objectives, and identities, anticipating the responses of allies and adversaries alike, and communicating and building connections with different people to take them along with you." Strategic empathy is seen as "the great corrective for all forms of war-provoking misperception," involving "both the motivations and the limitations on adversaries" and enabling "more nuanced information and insights of other states, which leads to different assumptions about their intentions and expected behavior" (Yorke 2023).

Empathy serves as an antidote to hubris by mediating the excessive dominance of enemy images and narratives of enmity that do not correspond with, or reflect, the realities or complexities of a situation (see Yorke 2023, Jakovljević 2011). The culture of empathy involves an ethos and templates for living in peace and serves as a corrective to insecurity and diplomatic crises. As Yorke (2023) writes, “through communication and actions, empathy offers a means by which to confer respect and dignity on others, showing a willingness to listen and understand, in spite of intense disagreement and animosity, thus creating opportunities and space for change and transformation” as well as common purpose, collective security, well-being, and positive mental health. While the concept of empathizing with an enemy may be wise and idealistic, the reality is more complicated, and it is not easy to process and reconcile trauma, grief, anger, and desire for retribution.

Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) is a military mental model that refers to a situation where two sides are in a stalemate, and neither can act without causing their own destruction. Donald Brennan conceived the acronym MAD cynically to argue that deterrence through nuclear weapons capable of mutual annihilation was mad and irrational. However, the contemporary world has created a level of destructiveness that enables mankind to destroy civilization itself (Kissinger 2024), leading to the possibility of mutually assured doomsday. In our world of increasingly formidable technology that can either uplift or dismantle human civilization, the choice between peaceful coexistence and the quest for dominance has become the “to be or not to be question” (see Kissinger 2024). The awakening of people’s conscience, culture of empathy, and mental health enlightenment lies at the core of our VUCA world’s sustainability.

Empathy, as a psychosocial and spiritual adhesive, is an invisible force that connects people, societies, and civilizations. To empathize means to civilize and humanize; conversely, to civilize and humanize means to empathize (see Jakovljević 2023). The culture of empathy promotes greater respect for the common good: increased care for our families, neighbors, communities, countries, and the whole world. Promoting and practicing a culture of empathy can help us create not only national and global security today but also a better future for generations to come. When we display and practice empathy in action, we send the message that “we are all in this danger together, we are all walking close to the same abyss, and we need to maintain our balance and harmony together for our better

future.” In this light, our journal *Psychiatria Danubina* promotes the Strategic Transformative Empathic Path (STEP) to PEACE concept. The STEP concept includes: Strategic empathy involving better understanding of others and leading to compassionate society, global harmony, and empathic civilization; Transformative empathy based on Trust in Strategic Vision and Empathic leadership that gives us hope and meaning and makes the world within and around us healthier and happier; Education for a more empathetic world based on Ethos universalis associated with humanistic global mental health enlightenment; Public goods provided efficiently and generously by Empathic Leadership. Strategic empathy enables leadership beyond frontiers and overcomes barriers with an understanding mind based on the well-functioning brain-heart-gut axis.

The culture of empathy can be viewed as a grand strategy and tool for global sustainability, mental health enlightenment, and a world of PEACE. PEACE involves: Power of clear vision of compassionate society and empathic civilization as a transformative idea for a better future; Empathization: a creative collective force at the core of humanity; Assertivity in dealing with changes rapidly, flexibly, and ethically; Collaboration in creating well-being at all levels guided by empathic transformative leadership; Education for empathic civilization based on Ethos Universalis (win-win position). The triad of Empathy with Reason and Cooperation makes a powerful combination that can motivate, inspire, and mobilize people to create compassionate societies and empathic civilizations instead of civilizational clashes. The final goal of this empathic Grand strategy is promoting the culture of empathy, both domestically and internationally, shaping a vision of great powers’ collaboration and empathic civilization instead of great powers’ tension and the clash of civilizations.

Empathic civilization is a civilization of love and peace, a common good for the whole world. According to Saint John Paul II, “human freedom does not exist for its own sake: ‘Freedom exists for the sake of love’” (Houde 2024). The absence of empathy and love causes falsehoods, lies, selfishness, alienation, narcissism, paranoia, conflicts, wars, destruction, and failure. The crucial message of this paper is that we should reexamine and improve our basic understanding of challenges, historical paradigms, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the Balkans and the Danube region, keeping in mind Europe and the whole world.

FUNDAMENTAL PILLARS OF GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

“Peace can only come as natural consequence of universal enlightenment”

Nikola Tesla (1856-1943)

The field of global mental health is growing and becoming increasingly important for the sustainability of our world, aiming to promote mental health and well-being for all through transdisciplinary approaches and the recognition of mental health as a fundamental human right involving violence prevention (see Weine & Kansal 2019, Moitra et al 2023). Global mental health enlightenment involves research and practice intended to integrate a new mental health agenda into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see Collins 2020). What kind of culture and civilization could successfully avoid disasters in the future and prevent humanity from realizing its worst potential? A global culture of empathy seems to be a key to the very survival of humankind and life on our planet. Homo empathicus, who lies within Homo sapiens, may quell the savage beast that dwells within all of us. As the association between health and peace is bidirectional, the World Health Organization has claimed that “the health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security” and likewise “peace is the most significant factor for the attainment of health for all” (see Javed 2024). The culture of empathy drives our common values, wisdom, trust, cooperation, resilience, coherence, human rights, and humanistic self, thus resolving crises and promoting individual, public, and global mental health. Education for the culture of empathy and public and global mental health enlightenment aims to create bridges between people, races, cultures, religions, and political ideologies, seeking common ground when many political forces seem more focused on division than unity.

There are three fundamental pillars of global mental health promotion related to the concept of brotherhood in humanity and empathic civilization. The first pillar is to recognize mental health as a global public good that requires action from all scientific, political, social, and cultural sectors. Equal attention should be given to both the prevention and treatment of mental disorders, as well as to the promotion of resilience, anti-fragility, and maintenance of individual and collective mental health.

The second pillar is a new transdisciplinary integrative definition of mental health that bridges the gap between individual and collective/community mental health, from public to global mental health levels. Mental health is conceptualized as a continuum from wellness and well-being in and of the world to illness and collective madness. The culture of empathy drives our common values, trust, cooperation, resilience, coherence, human rights, and humanistic self, bridging individual, public, and global mental health. The third pillar refers to human dignity and culture of empathy as essential parts of the New Enlightenment - a mental, social, spiritual, and political movement that inspires aspiration towards global human spirit, collective mind and humanistic self, public and global mental health, cosmopolitanism, and empathic civilization. Global mental health promotion and enlightenment recognize our vastly interconnected world and value nurturing that interconnectedness to solve difficult problems through diverse perspectives (Collins 2020). They are based on the understanding that suffering and well-being, illness and wellness are shared aspects of humanity. Despite distinct social, ideological, political, religious, historical, and economic drivers, there is promise in collective action and the culture of empathy (see also Collins 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

“Empathy should be an ethos rather than a formula”

Claire Yorke (2023)

The global mental health field refers to the study, research, and practice of improving and promoting mental health for all people worldwide based on a culture of empathy. This culture of empathy is an essential force in transforming conflict into cooperation and war into peace. It has the potential to improve mental health and well-being at all levels, from individual and family to community, public, and global scales. When utilized as a mindset, an ethos, and a method of practice by politicians, stakeholders, and rulers, it should model the design, evolution, and implementation of harmony at all levels, across departments, agencies, and the military. This approach can help overcome pathological political ego and national hubris while fostering greater security, resilience, and global mental health for all in the future.

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Correspondence:

Miro Jakovljević, Professor Emeritus
School of Medicine, University of Zagreb
Šalata 3, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
jakovljevic.miro@yahoo.com

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