



From Science to Parliament: How Empathy Became a Political Concept in Finland

RESEARCH

MARTIN PETTERSSON 

HUP HELSINKI
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ABSTRACT

Empatia, the Finnish word for empathy, became used by politicians in Finland in the second half of the 20th century, just as other translations of the English term took root in their respective contexts. This article scrutinizes the Finnish case to find out how and why empathy became a political term there. The rise of empathy is examined in context of the growing interest in the role of political action within an immaterial realm, tracing the paths that led the concept into Finnish public discussions and contrasting it against earlier uses of sympathy. Based on this contextualization, I argue that empathy is both a symptom of the scientization of 20th-century political concepts and a continuation of a parliamentary rhetoric of positing interpersonal understanding as either important or unimportant to political decision-making. Politicians talking about empathy, while drawing on the scientific roots of the concept in psychology, still apply it rhetorically as if empathy were another word for sympathy, albeit in an improved, rational form. Parliamentary debates display how politicians use empathy to oscillate between numerous perceived dichotomies, such as nature and nurture, or individual and collective, depending on the rhetorical situation and without scientific precision. This usage highlights how scientific concepts mutate when they are made to do rhetorical work.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Martin Pettersson

Doctoral researcher in
the Doctoral Programme
in History and Cultural
Heritage, University of
Helsinki, Finland

martin.pettersson@helsinki.fi

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‘Empathy is a superpower.’ These were the words printed in English on a white tote bag, held up by the then leader of Finnish political party The Green League (Finnish *Vihreä Liitto, vihr*), Maria Ohisalo, in a photograph published on Facebook in November 2020. In the accompanying post, Ohisalo brought attention to the number of refugees and stated that ‘We who have the chance to help, must do so’. A few months later, in January 2021, Riikka Purra, then MP and later leader of the far-right Finns Party (Finnish *Perussuomalaiset, PS*), stated in a Finnish interview that she did not believe in ‘*empathian ohjaam[a] politiikk[a]*’ (English ‘empathy-driven politics’; unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author’s). In June 2021, Juho Jokinen, a member of the conservative National Coalition Party (Finnish *Kokoomus, kok.*) used the tagline *asiallinen empatia* in his ad campaign for the municipal elections. The phrase could roughly be translated into English as ‘appropriate’ or ‘no-nonsense empathy’. Together with the slogan and a picture of him, the phrase ‘give your vote to reason and heart’ was written above the ad.

These examples show that empathy has taken on typical qualities of what have been called ‘basic’ or ‘key’ political concepts (Koselleck 2004, 84–85; Ifversen 2011). The meaning of empathy is vague, leading to contested notions of what it entails. Even when empathy is disregarded as unnecessary to politics, as Purra did, the word itself carries a sociopolitical charge. Despite, or, as will be shown, partly because of, the term empathy’s specific origins and usage within an academic context, it has become a buzz word used by political actors to communicate with voters and each other. This study focuses on the Finnish case of a wider phenomenon. Word searches in easily accessible databases—such as Google nGram and the Swedish, British, and Finnish parliamentary records—all paint the same, general picture: the word empathy has become more popular toward the end of the 20th century, with first uses in the British, Finnish, and Swedish parliaments in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, respectively.¹ As two of the introductory examples show, empathy has been translated into its Finnish form *empatia*. However, Ohisalo’s comment hints that the English language was important in how empathy made its way to Finland. Thus, the Finnish translation, while dependent on regional developments, follows a more general trend of empathy becoming a political buzzword.

The aim of this article is to answer the question of how empathy has become a political term in Finland and at least partially explain why this has happened. In what follows, I argue three interrelated points. First, a wide understanding of wellbeing during the latter half of the 20th century made viable a rhetoric that stresses political action in what I call the immaterial realm (social relations, psychological health, quality of life, etc.). Following World War II, a range of notions of wellbeing were present in the Finnish parliament, from viewing it as contingent only on economic or material factors, to viewing it as mostly a product of immaterial improvement. Especially in arguments for the importance of these immaterial aspects, empathy found a home. Second, while empathy as a political concept was informed by a long tradition of academic debate and research, it cannot be regarded as a purely scientific addition to politics, at least not in the Finnish case. In political rhetoric, the meaning of the term has been influenced both by a popular understanding of the concept and by semantically

¹ Google nGram is problematic for a number of reasons (see Pechenick, Danforth, and Dodds 2015), but is still useful for simple observations of relative frequencies of words; the British parliamentary records have been accessed through english-corpora.org, the first mention of empathy in British parliamentary debates appears in 1967; the Swedish parliamentary material has been accessed through riksdagen.se/sv/document-och-lagar, ‘Betänkande 1982/83:7 om dödsbegreppet m.m.’, first mention in a report from 182/83.

similar terms, used earlier in parliament. Third, and based on the previous two points, empathy is a visible sign of a post-World War II trend of scientific terms becoming political concepts. This does not mean that political language followed a scientific ideal of becoming more precise.

These arguments should interest scholars wishing to make empathy an important part of political decision-making. To borrow Christian Geulen's (2010) vocabulary, the concept of empathy in many ways exemplifies the early 21st century tendency to 'socialize science', meaning the drive to make science useful for society.² Several works on empathy within the humanities and social sciences attempt to do this. Research on empathy generally addresses one of three, often overlapping, questions about how empathy can be: (1) measured or observed, (2) defined as an analytical category, and (3) applied or used (Lanzoni 2018; Preston and De Waal 2002).

The measuring and observation of empathy is interlinked with its naming. As Susan Lanzoni has shown, in the early 20th century, psychologists attempted to find an English translation for the German term *Einfühlung*; as a result of this complex process, empathy became the accepted translation around the 1910s. In German aesthetic discourse by the late 19th century, *Einfühlung* had become the word of choice to describe the 'ability to feel into objects' (Lanzoni 2018, 23, 46–51). Thus, in its first iterations, empathy was conceived of as an ability to feel into objects and art rather than people. From around 1920 up until World War II, it slowly acquired the interpersonal connotations it has today, especially through the diagnosis of schizophrenia; people with this diagnosis were deemed to lack the capacity to empathize with other people (Lanzoni 2018, 101–125, esp. 122). Measuring and observing empathy has continued and spread to a variety of fields, and the earlier aesthetic understandings have in many cases become obsolete, as I will show in the Finnish case study below.

The overlap between topics one and two is immediately visible. When attempting to measure empathy, researchers needed to define what was being measured. While the history of the term empathy by now spans over a century, its definitions still seem to elude us. According to the editors of one anthology on empathy in literature, we need to better understand 'what kind of process empathy is'; indeed, empathy seems to be 'a diffuse concept whose definition is a matter of considerable debate' (Hammond & Kim 2014, 1–2). It is 'a notoriously heterogeneous construct' (Mar 2011, 113), and 'there are perhaps as many definitions as there are authors' (Cuff et al. 2016, 144) writing about empathy. This difficulty in defining the concept is quite understandable from a conceptual historical standpoint; as a rule, the meanings of sociopolitically relevant concepts are contested.

The third topic, attempts to apply or use empathy, is highly relevant to this study, as it is intrinsically related to politics. Researchers have attempted to make empathy useful for society in numerous ways. Frans de Waal, talking about an 'Age of Empathy', has an evolutionary biological and positive take on empathy as a human capacity

² As a sidenote, Geulen suggested that while the 'social' became 'scientized' in the 20th century, this process has since slowly turned on its head, as the 'scientific' has become 'socialized'. Humanities and social sciences scholars attempted to scientifically explain society and interhuman connections, and this process has slowly turned into a drive to instead make those same fields useful for society. Such a statement is of course far from easy to prove, but I would argue that the 'scientization of the social' and 'the socialization of science' can occur in tandem.

that can better society (De Waal 2010; Olson 2013; Segal 2018).³ Others are more critical. Carolyn Pedwell (2014, 5), as a case in point, notes the many ambiguities in empathy, which is near-impossible to disentangle from notions of sympathy and compassion. I harmonize with this argument and hope to develop it further here. Crucially, research on empathy and politics seldom empirically studies empathy in politics. Both Pedwell and de Waal do refer to Barack Obama's usage of the word pair 'empathy deficit' to describe US society, and Pedwell (2014, 44–69) relates how it has been taken up in neoliberal discourses, in this way noting the term's impact on politics. All the same, scholarly and other literary works on empathy are the primary material for both studies. Therefore, I want to redirect our attention and focus specifically on the explicit language use of political actors.

With this effort in mind, the present article takes a historicizing approach to usage of the word empathy in a nonacademic setting. While empathy has been studied extensively in the academic sphere, less work has been done on the term's history outside specialized discourses—such as psychology—or outside of the USA. At least since its popularization after World War II, the term has had a parallel, at times political history. Where the scientific community has sought to distinguish clearly between empathy and related terms such as sympathy, within political rhetoric and nonacademic settings, empathy is generally explained as 'like sympathy'.

To study the nonacademic history of empathy, in this article, I draw on two sets of sources. First, I trace empathy's way into Finnish through newspaper articles, books, and archival documents. Second, I examine rhetorical applications of empathy in Finnish parliamentary material, mainly in the form of minutes from plenary debates. The word-searchable corpus maintained by the parliament itself has been enriched in research projects. At the earliest stages I searched the 'original' parliamentary database to locate where in the debates empathy has been talked about. To retrieve relevant debates, I first performed word searches on all inflections of *empatia* and *empaattinen* (empathetic) in the records maintained by the parliament,⁴ as it, due to its technical limitations, does not support truncated searches. Later, when I got access to the Parliament Sampo published by The Semantic Computing Group (SeCo) in the year 2023⁵ and the Voices of Democracy project corpus⁶ I performed searches in both, to make sure that I found as many hits as possible. While it was quite mechanical work, the manual searches in the original parliament database proved a more reliable method of finding hits than the newer databases. This is probably due to inaccuracies in the OCR scanning. Luckily the missed hits are very few and the ease of use makes Parliament Sampo and the Voices of Democracy databases superior to the parliament's database in almost every other way. Truncated search terms can be used to search them, and they provide an at-a-glance overview of hits on terms over time, type of debates, speakers' party affiliations, etc. Once speeches where empathy was mentioned explicitly were located, I performed a close reading of them to establish context of use and rhetorical function. The total number of hits

³ Olson too takes an evolutionary perspective on empathy. Segal argues that empathy is a capacity which, when learned, can improve relations between different social groups.

⁴ Debates 1907–2000: <https://avoindata.eduskunta.fi/#/fi/digitoidut/search>, accessed last 12.8.2024, debates 2001– : <https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/taysistunto/Sivut/Taysistuntojen-poytakirjat.aspx>, accessed last 12.8.2024.

⁵ <https://parlamenttisampo.fi/fi/speeches/faceted-search/table?page=0>, accessed last 12.8.2024.

⁶ <https://vode.uta.fi/>, accessed last 12.8.2024. Not publicly available.

on empathy in the material is sufficiently low to read closely all the speeches in which the word appears and consider the ramifications of the debate in which the speech was made.⁷

This article thus takes a conceptual history, mostly qualitative approach to the source material. Lately, there has been increased interest in writing conceptual histories of the 20th century (Christiansen 2021; Eijnatten & Huijnen 2021; Jarlbrink & Norén 2023; Lamberty & Nevers 2023; Lie et al. 2022; Pörksen 1995; Steinmetz 2011). This article adds to that endeavor. As Geulen and others have argued, to understand political concepts of the 20th century, one might need a new set of categories to supplement those used to analyze earlier periods (Hoffmann et al. 2012). Geulen (2010, 86) proposes four overarching characteristics for analyzing 20th-century concepts: popularization, scientization, spatialization, and fluidization.⁸

In the present article, I focus on one of these: scientization. This is the notion that concepts which have a perceived basis in science have become popular in 20th century politics. That is, political language is increasingly colored by scientific terms. Of course, what is considered ‘scientific’ varies according to time and place. The experiments carried out by the early adherents to empathy would not necessarily qualify as scientific today, just as in English, the term ‘science’ has often been reserved for the natural sciences. Furthermore, scientization can sometimes be observed to emanate from specific parts of the academic world. Stephanie Mudge’s (2018) notion of the turn to ‘economistic’ leftism in social democratic parties during the first decades after World War II comes to mind as one example of how a certain branch of academic reasoning (economics) has made it into political thinking. Thus, when I apply scientization here, I more precisely do so with reference to especially psychology and sociology, as well as their interconnecting fields. I stress that the important part of the scientific background of empathy is the perception of it being scientific or based on some form of academic research.

PARLIAMENTARY UNDERSTANDING BEFORE EMPATHY

Although *empatia* entered the Finnish parliament in the 1970s, talking about ‘putting oneself in someone else’s shoes’ was of course nothing new. As in other languages, Finnish too had, for instance, a word for sympathy, in its Finnish form *sympatia* and *myötätunto* (*myötä* lit. ‘for’ or ‘along with’, *tunto* lit. ‘feeling’, ‘sensation’). As such, it would be ahistorical to say that empathy was somehow a completely novel concept in the 1970s parliament; instead, it must be treated as a later addition to a long rhetorical tradition in which political actors explicate the (un)importance of understanding others. To show how empathy simultaneously stood apart from and overlapped with the earlier notion of sympathy, consider the usage of sympathy in parliamentary debates.

⁷ Taken together, there are 221 hits on inflections of *empatia* and *empaattinen* in Parlamenttisarjo from 1978 to 2023. It is important to note that Parlamenttisarjo counts hits on speeches rather than on words, so the true amount of hits on the specific terms would be slightly higher. Furthermore, my search directly in the parliament’s own database, *avoindata*, indeed, provided some early hits that do not appear in Parlamenttisarjo, including the first hit on empathy, in 1975.

⁸ I use the English translations applied by Lie et al. 2022.

Out of the two terms for sympathy, *myötätunto* was the preferred word used in parliament and can, therefore, give some indication of how understanding others was presented in parliament before empathy's arrival. All the way up to World War II, the main way parliamentarians used sympathy could best be described as a phraseological element of calls to political action. The term itself lacked a certain sociopolitical charge. Instead, it was what followed sympathy that was important. Expressions emblematic for this type of use include 'the reason for the suggested appeal deserves *myötätunto*' (Tekla Hultin, Young Finns Party, 29 April 1912), 'without the *myötätunto* of the [...] working class this country cannot currently be defended' (Jaakko Keto, The Social Democratic Party, SDP, 10 October 1922), and the 'police would have already earlier had a [...] chance to gain more *myötätunto* from the left' (Kalle Myllymäki, SDP, 9 December 1932). While the statements can be contested—maybe the 'suggested appeal' did not deserve sympathy—the word *myötätunto* is simply used as a synonym for support or understanding signaling political action. It is less important that someone is sympathetic toward someone else than that sympathy somehow leads to support for a certain political action. Anyone can have sympathy for anyone else, but this becomes relevant only when translated into something 'real'; without working class sympathy or support, Finland cannot be militarily defended.

The meaning of sympathy itself was not contested until 1939. When the Winter War broke out between the Soviet Union and Finland on 30 November 1939, Finnish newspaper headlines were filled with the word *myötätunto*. As the Soviet Union was the aggressor, the papers announced how 'the *myötätunto* of the civilized world' was 'unequivocally on Finland's side' (E-S 1939) or how 'Finland gets *myötätunto* from all over the world' (AL 1939). This supposedly global phenomenon of sympathy was in some cases more precisely located. One paper stated how 'the great majority of Germans have *myötätunto* for Finland', even though the 'officials of Germany, due to the requirements of the situation, maintain [the] friendly demeanor of an observer [toward] the Russians' (EP 1939). It was declared that the sympathies Finland received could lead to favorable progress. 'The USA' strong *myötätunto* for Finland', one paper declared, could lead to diplomatic intervention by the USA in the conflict (UP, Å & K 1939).

The rhetorical line of argument that sympathy indicated political decision-making and concrete action seemed to be present at the outbreak of war, but this would rapidly change. Later historical interpretations of how and why the four-month Winter War ended have stressed the Great Powers' interests as well as geopolitical factors. In Finland during the war, the narrative was very much one of David and Goliath; Finland stood alone against the Soviet Union until the middle of March 1940, when the so-called Moscow peace treaty was signed. In connection to the signing, prime minister and later president Risto Ryti (National Progressive Party, KE, 15 March 1940) opened a parliamentary session by stating that 'We [Finland] were given plenty of *myötätunto*, but no effective help. Only when it turned out that Finland could maintain a successful defense, has plentiful humanitarian, physical and material help been given especially by Sweden and the Western world'. In Ryti's formulation the sympathies the world had given Finland were only words, not 'real' deeds. Ryti portrayed understanding negatively and framed it rhetorically as something one has or does only when one cannot or will not do something 'real'. This separation from the world of material reality is highlighted through Ryti's reference to how international aid was finally gained: by showcasing a successful defense.

In political rhetoric from the 1940s onwards, alongside earlier uses of the concept, the meaning of sympathy was cynically reformulated in this manner. Political actors quickly started applying the strategy in domestic matters. When displaced Carelians had to be resettled in Finland as a consequence of the war, new laws were signed to enable the appropriation of land for the evacuees (Finnish *siirtoväki*). In the debate on the proposed law, Yrjö Schildt of the Finnish Centre Party, (kesk., 3 May 1940) announced that he too was ready to help the cause and sell land to the Carelians, but he said, 'Surely I must get something more than *myötätunto* for my land'. In another debate on the same topic, Heikki Simonen (SDP, 30 May 1940) contended that 'It has been stated here today that the evacuees cannot live on *myötätunto* alone. They need land, and that has to be gotten for them. But neither can the agricultural poor (Finnish *maatalousköyhälistö*) live on *myötätunto* and neither do they want to live on the mercy of society. Their position too has to be safeguarded when this law is adapted'. Sympathy did not, for neither Schildt nor Simonen, guarantee sustenance in material reality. For sympathy to be worth anything, it needed to be backed up by something more substantial.

While in the early 21st century *myötätunto* is still a word used in the Finnish parliament, its usage follows a downward trend. It seems less and less relevant for rhetorical use. Partial explanations can be given. As *myötätunto*, before its cynical reformulation, had been a rather formulaic part of parliamentary parlance, its usage was subsequently likely to be perceived of as archaic or naive. Furthermore, as will be discussed, after World War II the Finnish translation of empathy, *empatia*, gained ground, partly taking on some of *myötätunto*'s connotations.

EMPATHY COMES TO FINLAND

Consider these three names: Paavo Koli, Irja Kilpeläinen, and Sakari Kiuru. The first was a sociologist and headmaster of Tampere University, the second a pastoral counselor, and the third a social democrat and chair of the Finnish national broadcasting company, YLE. On the surface they had very little in common—except for the initials of their last names—but, at some point in their career, all of them spoke or wrote about empathy. Importantly, they did this in very different situations and had diverging visions of what empathy could do.

The story of how empathy comes to Finland is incomplete. Proving that the word entered Finnish via a specific route is, at best, ignorant, and, at worst, arrogant. There are simply too many possible avenues for such a translation, probably simultaneous. Therefore, here I give examples of three routes empathy clearly took to enter Finnish. These showcase the plurality of often disconnected spheres, discourses, or fields where empathy came to be used and open up space for interpretations about how empathy became a political concept.

Paavo Koli plausibly came into contact with empathy through Olaf Millert, a scholar who had written his doctoral thesis on empathy and received a lecturing grant through the ASLA-Fulbright program to teach at Tampere University in 1965 (ASLA-Fulbright stipendiaatit 1964–1966; Millert 1961). One year later, Koli gave a speech at a jubilee for the Finnish Cultural Foundation's Southern Carelian Fund, which gained media attention. He talked about how society was changing from highlighting individual performance to cooperative or group-based performance. In this new, collaborative society, a necessary capacity was empathy. According to Koli, 'no

Finnish word', neither *myötäeläminen* (lit. with-living), *kanssakokeminen* (lit. together-experiencing), or *eläytymiskyky* (lit. capacity to be absorbed in something) accurately 'describes *empathia*'. But it was necessary for Finns to learn the meaning of empathy, because it was a 'prerequisite' for 'social change and social mobility'. The change Koli here referred to was the 'modernization' (Finnish *uudenaikaistuminen*) of Finnish society. With reference to changes in educational policy, Koli pointed out how 'studies covering numerous countries' had shown that *empathia* was an essential 'stance' in the modernization process and describing how children needed a less authoritative education in favor of more play to develop said empathic stance (E-S 1966; US 1966). Koli clearly saw the educational system as a way to get Finns to learn empathy. Finns needed to learn it, because Koli explicitly stated that at the time, due to their culture and history, Finns were 'inhibited' when it came to play and the expression of feelings. In essence, empathy would remove this inhibition and enable Finnish society to move into the future because it made individuals take more initiative. By adapting the empathic stance Finnish individuals and society at large could become modernized.

Although Koli might have picked up the new word from Millert, the way in which he talked about empathy was not how the term was used in the psychological profession. Koli's conception of empathy was indeed more focused on societal development. Of course, one cannot for certain know which international studies Koli was referring to when he talks about the empathic stance, but the way he framed them in relation to processes of modernization is highly reminiscent of the work of Daniel Lerner, a US sociologist who had applied the concept of empathy analytically to formulate his own modernization theory. In *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1967b, originally published in 1958), Lerner focused on Middle Eastern countries, and, in his iteration, empathy was something which people of 'developing countries' had to learn, if they wanted to reach the level of development of the West, meaning mostly the USA. For Lerner, empathy was, thus, more than a therapeutic term that would improve interpersonal understanding. It could and should be developed on a societal or national level and was directed 'upward' toward societies that were more advanced. In Koselleckian terms, empathy widened the horizon of expectations for inhabitants of so-called developing countries, as enabled them to see a modern progressive (Western) future (Lerner 1967a, 1967b; Shah 2011).

Around the same time, the Finnish Lutheran Church faced challenges. In tandem with the fear of secularization, certain actors within the church saw it as necessary to respond and redefine its role in society (Meinander 2019, 340–49).⁹ A formerly preferred authoritative style gradually gave way to a more 'therapeutic' approach. Discussions in the 1960s addressed questions about what pastoral care provided by the church should look like. Irja Kilpeläinen's (1969) book on pastoral care practices was instrumental in shaping this debate. Kilpeläinen, who had spent a year studying among pastoral counselors in the USA, argued that for pastoral care workers to be able to help people, they needed to adopt a much more client-centered approach (Karvonen 2021). Kilpeläinen and pastoral counselors more generally followed the so-called humanistic psychology advocated by US psychologists such as Carl Rogers. In both her book and her earlier pastoral treatise (Kilpeläinen 1966, 45–46), Kilpeläinen advocated for the cultivation of empathy among counselors.

⁹ Henrik Meinander has argued that although the 1960s indeed was a stormy decade within the Finnish Lutheran Church, one should not treat it as a symptom of widespread secularization of Finnish society, as the number of people leaving the church remained low.

Lanzoni has noted how humanistic psychology and, especially, one of its most public figures, Rogers, were important for the spread of empathy to different areas of life in US discourse. Before World War II, Rogers became interested in nondirective therapy (the therapist refuses to give advice to the client, instead asking questions and letting the client talk), which he later named ‘client-centered’ counseling. He first applied the term empathy in 1948 (Lanzoni 2018, 143–148). Later in his career, Rogers saw it as important that empathy would spread to different areas of life, consciously advocating separating it from its psychological, scientific basis. Pastoral counselors were one group influenced by the work of Rogers and others within the humanistic psychology tradition (Lanzoni 2018, 155–157).

In 1966, Kilpeläinen was clearly new to empathy. Archival sources from her trip to the USA reveal that she had come into contact with the term during her stay there, at least in writing (Lähetetyt kirjeet 1940–1960).¹⁰ In her treatise, which dealt with how to give pastoral care to ‘psychotics’, she noted that ‘about the attitude of the pastoral care worker and the therapist the term *empatia* has been used, which is significantly different from *sympatia*’ (Kilpeläinen 1966, 45–46). The word empathy was even given an explanatory footnote, where Kilpeläinen (wrongly) stated that the term was coined by a certain HS Sullivan, and later had ‘been given many different meanings’. For Kilpeläinen, in line with her US supervisor Georg Shugart’s notion, empathy was a form of ‘professional love’, which enabled the counselor to genuinely feel with the clients and help them, while retaining a professional distance. For other writers on the same subject within Finnish pastoral literature, such as Niilo Syväne, this professional distance that empathy enabled was imperative, as it stopped the ‘sins’ of the client (such as homosexuality) affecting the counselor (Syväne 1970, 279, 284–285).

It is interesting that, despite Rogers’s renown, Kilpeläinen attributes the term empathy to Sullivan. While she was aware of Rogers, an arguably much better-known figure, she did not give him much credit in her work (Kilpeläinen 1966, 55). She considered Sullivan more important. Thus, a local actor, who only had a chance to temporarily acquaint herself with the US discourse, picked up the word empathy not from its more famous advocate but from the literature that was available to her there and then. As her supervisor, Shugart, is mentioned in the same footnote about empathy’s origins, he may have supplied her with books, perhaps by Sullivan.

Our third example, Sakari Kiuru (SDP), shows how empathy could reach wider audiences in Finland and become explicitly connected to politics. On 21 January 1979, a full-page article in Finland’s largest newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* told the readers that ‘*Empatia* is television’s newest magic word’ (Anttikoski 1979). The article discussed how Kiuru—at the time director of YLE channel 1—promised that the television of the future would be based on an ‘empathetic program policy’ (Finnish *empaattinen ohjelmapolitiikka*). Although in his later memoirs (Kiuru 1990, 14–15), Kiuru himself would distance himself from the term empathy, it came to be attached to him throughout 1979. In October of that same year, Kiuru, together with his right-hand man, Pekka Silvola (kesk.), sat down for a televised interview with journalist Antero Kekkonen for YLE. The latter began the discussion by somewhat sardonically stating that he ‘here in front of [his] superiors, has to admit that [he] do[es] not understand what an empathetic program policy means’ and then proceeded to ask both Silvola

¹⁰ One letter has an attached evaluation which Kilpeläinen received for her studies at St. Luke Hospital in New York. It stated that she was ‘warm and giving. Good empathy and identification without loss of professional objectivity,’ The National Archives of Finland, Lampén-Kilpeläinen-suvun arkisto, Lähetetyt kirjeet (1940–1960).

and Kiuru if they knew what it meant. Kiuru answered that he would ‘rather ask that question [...] of you [Kekkonen], as we have taught it here for some years’ but then proceeded to explain that it meant making television programs that viewers could relate to on an emotional level (YLE 1979).

While Kekkonen surely had his reasons to ask the question in 1979, the answers that Kiuru and Silvola gave are less important for the current story. What is relevant is how much the term was discussed in the media and, thus, gained visibility. Of course, this new and interesting word received plenty of definitions (see, e.g., US 1983). But empathy also both explicitly and implicitly got connected to politics. Explicitly, the broadcasting program policy was empathic. Implicitly, empathy was connected to party politics through the nature of the leadership structure of YLE, where management as a rule had affiliations to different political parties. If Kiuru presented an empathic program policy, it implicitly became a social democratic program policy. Tellingly, in the interview with Kekkonen, another key theme was how a national broadcasting company such as YLE could ensure objective journalism, when its leadership all had ties to political parties.

Toward the end of the 1970s, empathy was, thus, slowly becoming an established term in Finland. It had even been used a few times in parliament. So, empathy became a political term by being introduced into many different layers of Finnish public discussions. Writers of pseudoscientific and popular works, such as Kilpeläinen or Syväne, disseminated the term among their audiences, making it possible to adapt its meaning to different topics. Empathy became societally relevant through people such as Koli, who linked it to notions of societal progress and modernization. Through party-affiliated people such as Kiuru, empathy was more directly linked to politics. In all three cases, empathy was disjointed from its original frame of reference. Koli talked about empathy as something society wide, Kilpeläinen attributed the term to actors who did not coin it, and through Kiuru it became an adjective for something as abstract as a policy. The concept of empathy was thereby metaphorically released from the shackles of scientific precision; its reference to an interpersonal connection was at once hinted at and made less relevant. While empathy could still be a connection between two human beings, it could also be a quality of policies, a moral stance, or something that society at large had or did not have. This insight is the basis for understanding why empathy has become a political buzzword in political language.

SCIENTIFIC POLITICAL ACTION WITHIN AN IMMATERIAL REALM

When introduced in Finland, empathy was generally perceived as a scientific, clinical form of understanding and during the decades after World War II it spread from various psychological subdisciplines to other fields and to popular discussions. For instance, during the ‘golden age’ of Finnish sociology, sociologists applied the term in studies on mass delusion (Finnish *joukkoharha*) (Eskola 1963; Mäkelä 1969). By its introduction to parliamentary debate in 1975, empathy had, thus, established both academic and less academic footholds in Finland. However, when the concept entered parliamentary debates, the scientific connotations of empathy became implicit, and empathy was molded into similar semantic nets as sympathy before it. This tension makes empathy useful for understanding changing dynamics in Finnish political rhetoric during the latter 20th century.

The main content of the scientific debate on empathy concerned its relationship to cognitive and affective processes, or in lay terms: ‘rational thinking’ and ‘irrational feeling’. While historical research on the topic has convincingly argued that a clear divide between the two is historically situated and at best tentative (Reddy 2001, 3–33), the notion of two distinct realms of cognition and affection still clearly had an impact on the debate on empathy. Importantly for the case at hand, the consensus in the 1970s and 1980s posited empathy between these two realms, most often when the term was compared with sympathy. When for instance, in the first original Finnish popular scientific overview on empathy in 1983, Mirja Kalliopuska wrote about the differences between empathy and sympathy, she stated that, with regard to research:

Empatia is in no way simply *sympatia* or passion, but within *empatia* one can need *sympatia*, and *empatia* is a prerequisite for the experience of passion, for understanding another person’s needs in a precise manner. *Empatia* seems to require a temporary identification [...] after which a phase of [...] distancing observation takes place and from which identification is completely missing. (Kalliopuska 1983, 25)

Empathy was a way to separate cognitive and affective processes. The other person might be feeling, but the one empathizing should only ‘temporarily’ step into those feelings and then ‘observe’ them from a distance. The use of terms such as ‘distance’ and ‘precise’ indicates how empathy is supposed to be a way to categorize another’s feelings from afar but not let them interfere with one’s own rational thought processes, which are needed to observe and help the other.

Even when empathy has not been this strictly defined as a process whereby one can coolly observe another’s feelings, it has still been given meanings related to emotional maturity and rational action. As Kalliopuska (1983, 25) noted, referencing earlier studies: ‘*empatia* is [according to a cited study] subjective, because not everyone can simultaneously see, hear, and experience what a certain person experiences at any given moment. [The study] speaks of intuition, *empatia*, and good social relations: *empatia* is a means to achieve mature social relations’. Here too, the idea was that empathy is the way in which responsible, rational adults behave, contrary to irrational children (see also Overstreet 1951).¹¹ In scientific literature, empathy enabled some form of rational action. This was contrasted against sympathy, because when someone sympathizes with another person, one, Kalliopuska warned, ‘shares their experienced feeling [...] and gets stuck in that feeling without being able to function constructively for the other’s good’ (Kalliopuska 1983, 26).

When empathy entered political rhetoric, however, it could instead be framed as an opposite to rationality. For instance, Heli Astala (Left Alliance, *vas.*, 27 October 1993) stated that ‘[t]he preservation and development of *empatia*, that is, the true ability of *myötätunto*, as a counter weight to the cultivation of a one-sided rationality in children and youths is the main goal of education’. For Astala, empathy was a capacity which needed cultivation besides rational thinking. Furthermore, empathy was a ‘true’ sympathy. Academics have striven to distinguish between empathy and sympathy. In parliamentary parlance empathy has instead become an improved—or ‘scientific’—form of sympathy. Lanzoni (2018, 5) has noted a similar trend in the USA.

¹¹ Harry Overstreet’s *The Mature Mind*, 1949, translated into Finnish by J. A. Hollo in 1951, was another instance where empathy was presented as a mark of maturity.

Parliamentarians drew on nonacademic uses of the term in Finnish society, which further strengthened the similarities between empathy and sympathy. The rhetorical construct of designating groups or institutions as capable of empathy was present and so was the directing of empathy socioeconomically downwards. While empathy has been measured numerically and more recently understood as societal within scholarly literature, most research on empathy ties it to individuals (see, e.g., Head 2015, 376; Mehrabian & Epstein 1972). The idea of empathy as a collective trait is more common in nonacademic usage. Politicians often talk about the *empatia* of the government, political parties, or ‘us’, the society or people (Antero Kekkonen, SDP, 11 June 1990; Virpa Puisto, SDP, 19 March 2002; Hannu Takkula, kesk., 13 March 2002). Groups and institutions are, thus, given a commonly held, collective empathy. This mimics the usage of sympathy visible in the examples provided earlier.

In parliamentary rhetoric, empathy has become directed socioeconomically downward, just like sympathy had been earlier. While in research literature empathy was proposed as a neutral capacity for any fellow human being, who was not necessarily in a worse position than the empathizer, old habits of using the word ‘sympathy’ as a feeling directed toward those worse off took over for parliamentary usage of empathy. This was done in quite straightforward rhetorical constructs, such as when, in a debate on how to secure the livelihood of low-income households, Håkan Nordman (Swedish People’s Party, RKP, 24 October 2010) stated that ‘all single parents or unemployed people [...] have earned our true *empatia*’. But it was also done in a scienticized manner, making explicit references to scientific research, ironically enough, to posit empathy as basically another form of sympathy. Thus, Päivi Räsänen (Christian Democrats, KD, 20 May 2003) said that ‘research has proven’ that ‘if violence is portrayed as entertainment, it specifically lessens the *kyky empatiaan* [capacity for empathy], the capacity to identify with the victim’. In both examples, empathy is posited rhetorically in the same fashion as sympathy could have been decades earlier, except for the added scientization in the second example.

This scientization is important, as it sets empathy apart from earlier words for understanding. Empathy was connected to a wider contemporary, both scientific and popular, discussion about the nonmaterial aspects of wellbeing. The idea of ‘immaterial’ wellbeing, while much older, gained new prominence through the convergence of numerous processes after World War II. The main thrust of the idea was that not only material reality and circumstances mattered for an individual’s health and contentment in life. A person’s immaterial reality was also important, be that mental health, a sense of purpose in life, or social surroundings. Certain circumstances and developments plausibly allowed this idea to gain prominence, at least in the USA and Europe. The significant rise in material living standards combined with contemporary visions of a future knowledge society, where work of the mind rather than the hands would make it possible, at least for those with secure incomes, to shift focus from material reality to a degree that was previously unthinkable. During the later 20th century, the breakthrough of psychology and self-help helped popularize the idea of an immaterial level to wellbeing (Couperus & Milder 2022; Hobsbawm 1996, 268–310; Illouz 2008; Lasch 1979; Madsen 2014).

As early as 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith had proposed the idea of the affluent society, where the main form of poverty was that of the mind. People did not lack food but rather a certain quality of life (Galbraith 1969; Lundberg 2020). He was not alone in shifting focus away from the material spheres of human reality. Others too predicted a move from a material to a postmaterial society (Bell 1973; Inglehart 1977). In the

Finnish context, sociologist Erik Allardt propagated the notion of immaterial wellbeing. In 1975, Allardt published the first version (in Swedish) of *Having, Loving, Being*, a book on different forms of wellbeing. Allardt explained that the book title was based on three spheres of human wellbeing: the first one, 'having', consisted of ownership and material wellbeing in general. The other two consisted of immaterial wellbeing: 'loving' was the category for human relations, while 'being' related to self-expression and development.

Borrowing Allardt's categories, empathy could be rhetorically posited as necessary for the cultivation of 'loving', a way to improve social relations and understanding for others. A prime example of when empathy was used in this positive sense but still divorced from material reality was when Riitta Kauppinen (kesk., 10 September 1992) expressed the idea that 'On top of real measures, the government is required to also have an eye for the psychological and the *empathiakyky* [capacity for empathy] to think about how the individual citizen reacts to these things and uncertainties'. Kauppinen divided political action into 'real measures' and the understanding of how those measures could be psychologically responded to. Importantly, the immaterial was not disregarded as less important but rather seen as a separate sphere of political action.

Previous discussions of sympathy did not draw this distinction between two different but both important spheres of political action, which is why it was easier to rhetorically reformulate sympathy as hypocritical. Sympathy was not genuine if it was not followed up by 'real measures'. In contrast, due to the increased political relevance of immaterial wellbeing, empathy could be seen as a real measure, albeit in another realm of political action. The first instance I have found of someone using the term empathy in the parliamentary debates is a prime example of this. In a debate concerning the state-owned monopoly for alcohol, Alko, in 1975, Ulla Järvillehto (KD, 11 December 1975) stated: 'One has to *empaattisesti* [empathetically] concentrate on the reasons for and the solutions to the problem [of alcoholism] in all sectors [...] Individual charity, AA groups, and evangelical work are all important for fixing peoples' internal emptiness, and broken divine and human relationships'. In a less religiously fashioned statement from a debate on a cultural policy report (Finnish *taidepoliittinen selonteko*) Kaarina Suonio applied empathy similarly. Suonio (SDP, 4 May 1978) noted that 'the criteria for something to be real action [literature, movies or television shows] is how it relates to humanistic values, how it advances thinking and imagination, how it helps to understand life and the world, how it improves feelings and *empatia*, creativity, will, understanding of beauty, power of concentration, aesthetics and the whole personality'. In both examples, empathy is portrayed as important and real and semantically linked to other immaterial capacities, phenomena, and problems. It is not immediately followed by a requirement for action in any sort of material reality.

The possibility for relevant political action within an immaterial realm was an important factor behind the most common way in which speakers in parliament proposed empathy—namely, stating a lack of it. The lack of empathy was expressed on a spectrum between capacity and morality, the two often overlapping. Politicians could both posit that their opponents lacked empathy and that more empathy was needed in certain political dilemmas. Typically, when political opponents lacked empathy, this was expressed rhetorically as a purely moral problem. When, for instance, Ozan Yanar (vihr., 16 June 2016) argued against the Finns Party's view on immigration in a debate on a proposition to change the law on foreigners in Finland, he posited that the Finns Party 'lacked *empatia* in this discussion'. Here, empathy was not a capacity but rather a moral good which Yanar argued the Finns Party did not have. This moral empathy recurred in arguments about the quality of politics itself and whether or not it was empathic enough. Bjarne Kallis (KD, 10 January 1995) argued that 'politics need more *empatia*'.

As some examples have already shown, empathy could also be viewed as a capacity, or as a mix between capacity and morality. Thus, in a debate on family wellbeing, Anne Kalmari (kesk., 20 March 2012) could state that Finnish society would be better off in the future if children were taught ‘a feeling of safety, the ability to love, [and] *empatiakyky*’. The addition of *kyky*, for capacity, was a clear indication that empathy was something that could be cultivated or learned (see also Sanna Lauslahti, kok., 20 November 2014). However, as stated, the divide between morality and capacity was not always clearcut. In a debate about Finnish development policies, Tiina Elovaara (PS, 17 February 2016) argued that ‘where the *empatiakyky* ends, evil begins’. Elovaara framed empathy as both a capacity which was important to learn—earlier in her speech she referred to how educating girls was one of the most important tasks of Finnish development policy—and a moral good which warded off evil. Here, empathy that can be learned in a meritocratic fashion, based on an axiomatic of individual improvement, is a counterforce to moral decay.

To summarize, when applied in political debate, empathy is an ambiguous mix of meritocratic improvement of personal capacities, collectivity, and moral essentialism. The scientific basis of the term makes it suitable to argue for political action within an immaterial realm of wellbeing. This ambiguity is what makes empathy potent in political debate. It enables political actors to draw on different forms of rhetoric: political opponents can lack empathy and, thus, be morally lost. If children can learn empathy, it is possible to envision a society which can improve through political action.

CONCLUSIONS

Empatia (or empathy) made its way into Finnish through a multitude of transfers, which all helped make the concept exceedingly versatile. It could be an interpersonal connection, a capacity of collectives, or something that politics itself needed or lacked. This plurality of both users and meanings made the concept ripe for rhetorical application. In contrast to the earlier contestation of *myötätunto* (or sympathy) the examples of how *empatia* was applied in not only Finnish parliamentary rhetoric showcase a shift in contexts, viable rhetorical strategies, and individual words but also certain overarching themes. On the one hand, *empatia* has been more difficult to rhetorically frame as hypocritical since a supposed immaterial realm has risen as a place for political action in the latter 20th and early 21st centuries. Empathy’s position as a rhetorically potent concept signaling something inherently good also draws strength from its perceived scientific basis. On the other hand, empathy has taken on many of the meanings present in preceding terms, such as *myötätunto*. In parliamentary debate, the explicated targets of empathy are—such as sympathy before it—mostly those considered worse off, contrary to the scientific notion of empathy as a more neutral, interpersonal capacity. This is somewhat self-evident, as saying that one should empathize with, say, the wealthy elite, might not play well with the electorate and would open for easy counter arguments. It does, however, give important insight into how the meanings of scientific terms change or are blurred when subjected to the logic of persuasion in parliamentary rhetoric. One at times gets the sense that *empatia* is simply a disguised *myötätunto*, garbed in scientific terminology but separated from its precise, scientific meanings.

Crucially, this article does not aim to give policy advice on whether empathy, however understood, should be part of politics. Rather, it has been concerned with how and why empathy came to be a rhetorically useful concept in the Finnish parliament;

the term carried notions of scientific precision and authority while its meaning has remained sufficiently vague. Empathy is potent as a political concept in parliamentary rhetoric because it teeters on the dividing line between multiple, supposedly separated, and, at times, conflicting categories: thinking and feeling, nature and nurture, and individual and collective. This not only creates tension in the concept but also makes it useful. Political actors can portray themselves as empathic individuals who feel with their constituents but who still take rational courses of action. They can either accuse opponents of being morally lost because they lack empathy or inspire action by portraying empathy as a capacity that can be learned. Also, to meet rhetorical need, they can flexibly designate individuals, societies, or the government as (un)empathetic beings. Thus, empathy is not only a tool for researchers wishing to improve politics, but equally for politicians in need of versatile rhetorical strategies.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Martin Pettersson  orcid.org/0000-0003-3260-3730

Doctoral researcher in the Doctoral Programme in History and Cultural Heritage, University of Helsinki, Finland

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