

Nov 04, 2016 by [Rob Asghar](#)

PD as Global Therapy: Can the Family of Nations Get Along? ^[1]

The nascent Obama era has captured the imagination of people everywhere who believe that the foundational aspects of international relations involve human, not economic, interests, and that those interests involve healthy dialogue. That has led to a pushback from those who suspect that Obama is, well, a wimp.

The latter view was captured recently in a *Wall Street Journal* [commentary](#) by Josef Joffe, a German-born fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. The passage that most riveted me was his conclusion, in which he tossed scalding abuse on the approach Obama has used in recent weeks:

Conflict between states is made from sterner stuff than bad manners or bad vibes, past grievances or imaginary fears. International politics is neither psychiatry nor a set of "see me, feel me" encounter sessions. It is about power and position, about preventing injury and protecting interests. Love and friendship move people, not nations.

I ended up offering a lengthy response to Joffe's words in a piece for [The Huffington Post](#), in which I employed as my rebuttal some of Joffe's own past words that indicated a bit more respect for issues within the realm of public diplomacy.

Yet I believe that the thinking articulated by Joffe in the *Journal* is pernicious, pervasive, almost eternal in its scope. It prompted me to ask questions about collective human behavior that are implicit in anthropology, sociology, and culture – but especially in basic human psychology.

I discussed the relevance of psychology to PD with Joanne Weidman, a family therapist based in Pasadena, California. "I think it'd be extremely helpful for people involved in global issues to have some basic understanding of family process and family systems theory," Weidman told me.

I find myself in agreement. Don't the essential dynamics of families and early development set the stage for how we perceive tribal, national and global threats years later? Isn't good public diplomacy, in this way, similar to being a family therapist (for a really, really large family)? Don't the world's citizenries represent the full range of family possibilities, from the stern father to the embittered and ignored middle child, to coalitions that assert or reject parental authority?

Those who study hard power, and who roll their eyes at the concept of soft power, often seem impatient with concepts such as dialogue, understanding and empowerment. That is "sissy talk," in a nutshell. In fact, all talk is sissyish to them, except for blunt expressions of "our"

interest and clear threats to make rivals back down.

At the international level, just as at the family level, these are the people who are currently in charge or who intend imminently to take charge. But they are not the people who can reduce conflict or violence, as they are convinced that conflict can only be reduced when they get their way. They mock the notion that "see me, feel me" encounters can offer a better way at any level of life, because they are quite threatened by what that can mean for their own ability to dominate, unchecked by others.

Still, the Age of Therapy has altered the Western societal landscape forever, and I believe it will eventually play a greater role at other levels.

Think of Karl Rove's partisan analysis of 9/11 in June 2005 at a fundraising event in New York: "Conservatives saw the savagery of 9/11 in the attacks and prepared for war; liberals saw the savagery of the 9/11 attacks and wanted to prepare indictments and offer therapy and understanding for our attackers." Rove's comments weren't simply a denunciation of ideological rivals, but of the very concept of PD, soft power and the willingness to listen to the concerns of allies and rivals and even enemies.

People such as Rove tend to favor an authoritarian approach, provided they get to be the authority -- otherwise they will probably prefer revolution. Such persons believe that "the system" works just fine as it is, without the need for any touchy-feely intervention, and that everyone has a voice at the table who is smart or strong enough to get such a voice.

Yet a family therapist can see the matter differently, whether at the level of families or the family of nations.

"All relationships are about power and position, " says Weidman, "including family and marital relationships. In all relationships, it's the misuse of power, especially when there is a power differential -- physical size, who holds the purse strings, age, wisdom or knowledge or experience, patriarchy, paternalism, racism, nukes, military prowess and so on -- that creates problems when it undermines legitimate autonomy or is simply abusive. That's where 'I'm the Dad' or 'I'm just looking out for the national interest' are used broadly to justify heavy-handed actions.

"Family therapy is about giving the voiceless a seat at the table, " she adds, "whether it's the sixteen-year-old who just wants to go to the movies with her friends but this threatens her parents or it's India in the late 1940s desiring home rule. "

An abundance of theories and approaches attempt to explain and predict and shape family process, with varying degrees of success. Like diplomacy, family systems theory is an emerging art, not a perfect science. But I believe it has great potential to inform formal and public diplomacy in the coming decades, and I intend to examine it more here in coming months.
