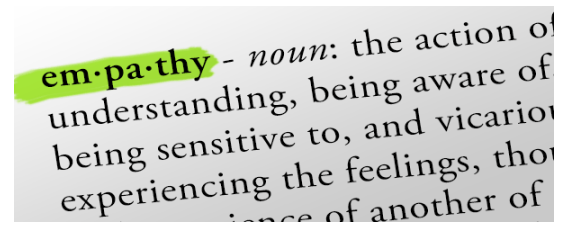


Deconstructing the “Empathy Craze”



by Patrick Schmidt

As any good practitioner of intercultural training will tell you, empathy is deeply embedded in—and inseparable from — intercultural and interpersonal sensitivity. It’s a way of conscious-shifting, extending one’s boundaries, or as Milton Bennett puts it, an “attempt to understand others by participating in their different experience of the world”. The ability to adapt is key to effective, appropriate communication.

Curiously, the word “empathy” itself is relatively new, dating from 1850, but with increased international contacts it’s no surprise we’re being flooded with books like “The Empathy Gap”, “Teaching Empathy”, “Empathy in a Global World” and “The Empathic Civilization.” They represent a seismic shift in how we view the world.

Some neuroscientists now theorize that the human brain possesses neurons which allow us to feel what is taking place in other people’s heads and trigger empathetic comprehension.

But empathy is by no means a new concept brought upon by globalization. The Roman philosopher Cicero (106 – 43 B.C.) warned that “the whole foundation of human community is threatened by treating foreigners worse than fellow Romans”. And, in the 18th century, Immanuel Kant wrote that “respect for dignity is owed to all humans regardless

of their standing in the community.” His Scottish contemporary David Hume developed the idea of concentric circles of empathy, meaning people are loyal to their family first, then their village, region and nation in diminishing degrees. But as the world has continued to evolve, the concept has been turned on its head.

Given our multi-media, global-consumption lifestyle — satellite tv, smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube — we find ourselves increasingly identifying with people in the outermost circles. Virtually everyone on the planet quickly learned of the death of Princess Diana in a car accident in Paris. When Elton John sang “*Candle in the Wind*” at her funeral, hundreds of millions of people around the world simultaneously shared a personal sense of profound sadness.

But does empathy give you sounder morals or make you more compassionate in intercultural relations? While being empathetic makes people more sensitive to the problems and perspectives of others, it’s not clear whether it actually motivates us to take more ethical action. In fact, morality is a culturally-conditioned response.

Various researchers have investigated the connection between empathy and moral action, finding it to be weak at best. City University of New York philosopher Jesse Prinz summed things up in a recent paper: “These studies sug-

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We may feel sorry for a homeless woman, but if giving is too high a price, feelings of sorrow often stop.



gest that empathy is not a major player when it comes to moral motivation. Its contribution is negligible in children, modest in adults, and non-existent when costs are significant.” Others term empathy a “fragile flower,” easily destroyed by self-interest.

Research found that feelings, such as a short spurt of joy, generate a stronger influence on human actions than empathy. In a famous experiment carried out in the 1970s, researchers placed a 10-cent coin in a phone booth. An amazing 87% of those who found the dime offered to help a person who accidentally dropped some papers nearby a few seconds later. Of the people who didn't find the dime, only 4% offered to help.

Empathy can be seen more as an intellectual, cognitive action. As Milton Bennett writes, “it's the ability to recognize and shift context, a core competence of critical thinking.” But if there's a personal cost, the process usually stops. You feel sorry for the homeless woman across the street but it's unlikely you're going to cross that street to give her a Euro.

In the internationally-acclaimed “*Special Flight*” undocumented immigrants are filmed in a detention center in Geneva. Viewers sense that Swiss prison officials are struggling to reconcile humane values with the harsh reality of deportation. When the immigrants are handcuffed before

being led onto the plane to take them back to their home country, the guards are visibly affected and try to show human solidarity with soothing words — “Don't worry, it's going to turn out all right”. Everyone knows it's not true but everyone also knows there's nothing anyone can do. This modicum of kindness, of respect, does both groups good.

One border away, the world was horrified when some 300 African refugees drowned trying to reach Lampedusa. The Italian government ordered its navy to save “boat people” in the future but, when other E.U. nations were asked to share in the cost, the response was no.

Prinz points out that empathy also has dark sides. You're likely to care more about cute malnutrition victims than ugly ones. You're more likely to hire someone you know than an anonymous candidate even if the latter is far more qualified. You react to shocking events like hurricanes but are somehow able to ignore the rising CO2 emissions and global warming that cause them.

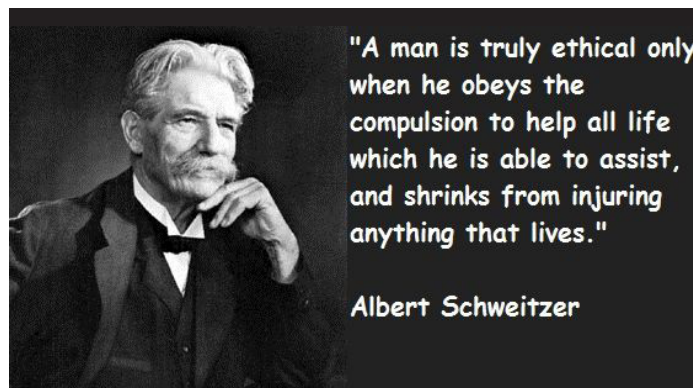
What Prinz and others are arguing is that empathy has become a catchword, an emotional shortcut to experience moral solidarity without actual “human” feelings. To put it in another way, it's to share in the illusion of ethical progress — political correctness — without having to do the dirty work of getting emotionally involved, making judgments and decisions. We're teaching

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*The philosophical code of
Albert Schweitzer*



people to cognitively sympathize while doing nothing to help them. Everybody is for empathy, but it isn't enough.

The real movers, those who truly want to change their objective reality and make the world a better place, follow their emotions: anger, disgust, guilt, admiration. Feelings shaped through cultural conditioning that provide the sentimental groundwork for morality, which translates into values and "sacred" codes. The codes that compel people to perform pro-social actions at whatever cost.

They are often the people the world admires most, such as Albert Schweitzer, awarded the *Nobel Peace Prize* in 1952 for his years of selfless work with lepers in Gabon. There's no doubt that he had empathic feelings, which generated a sense of common humanity. This sense of commonality enabled him to seek an alternative action, which was based on his sense of obligation to the social, religious and philosophical "certainties" he developed through cultural conditioning.

These cultural codes made him react to other people's suffering, not just sympathize. Empathy told him a leper was feeling pain, isolated, lonely, and this feeling for the other spiked primal anger and disgust that obligated him to act.

International conflicts can be understood according to

sense of duty. What Ukraine, Russia, Israel and Gaza all have in common is that they're fighting for their existence, for the cultural codes so fundamentally important to them. Debate over which side is morally right is impossible when propaganda takes the place of communication.

The point is that these codes aren't just a set of rules but the basis of one's identity. They reflect passion and joy, material and psychological comfort, ethnocentric emotions and personal commitments. Empathy is just a beginning point, a means to understand the behavior of others.

Interculturalists who hope to improve on the existing world need to help people understand, admire then debate, modify certain beliefs and put their feelings and slightly rethought codes into action. Invariably there will be conflicts but it's only then we become professionally relevant.

For further readings on empathy:

Bennett, Milton, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication - Second Edition*, Intercultural Press, 2013

Brooks, David, *The Limits of Empathy*, NYTimes, Sept. 29, 2011

Calloway-Thomas, Carolyn, *Empathy in the Global World — An Intercultural Perspective*, Sage Publications, 2011

Prinz, Jesse, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 2008

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