

Deconstructing the Empathy Craze

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On Sept. 11, 2001, virtually everyone on the planet with access to television was horrified as they watched the twin towers of the World Trade Center burn and then learn from the news commentators that people jumping from the smoking inferno. We couldn't but help shift our minds and feelings to those of the poor victims.

When the towers finally collapsed, horror was transformed into a sense of profound sadness. We all had a sense of empathy for those who died in this terrible tragedy.



We interculturalists are well aware of the empathy process. It's an essential part of our trainings. We associate it with goodness. People who are empathetic are those who are sensitive to the perspectives and sufferings of others, generating a sense of common humanity. The logical thinking we as interculturalists follow is that developing empathetic capabilities enhances intercultural communication and thus make the world a better place. The inability to empathize is apparently the key mechanism of sociopathy.

But what is actually empathy and what are its limits? Does empathy really make you more sensitive, so that it motivates us to take ethical action in intercultural relations? To answer these questions, we need to understand how our brain cognitively processes our emotions.

For that, I shall be presenting two premises that can give us some insights on how we can understand others. Both premises hopefully will provide us with a better understanding of the empathy phenomenon and lead to a discussion on what empathy really means.

1. Empathy is triggered only when the “identifiable victim effect” comes into play.

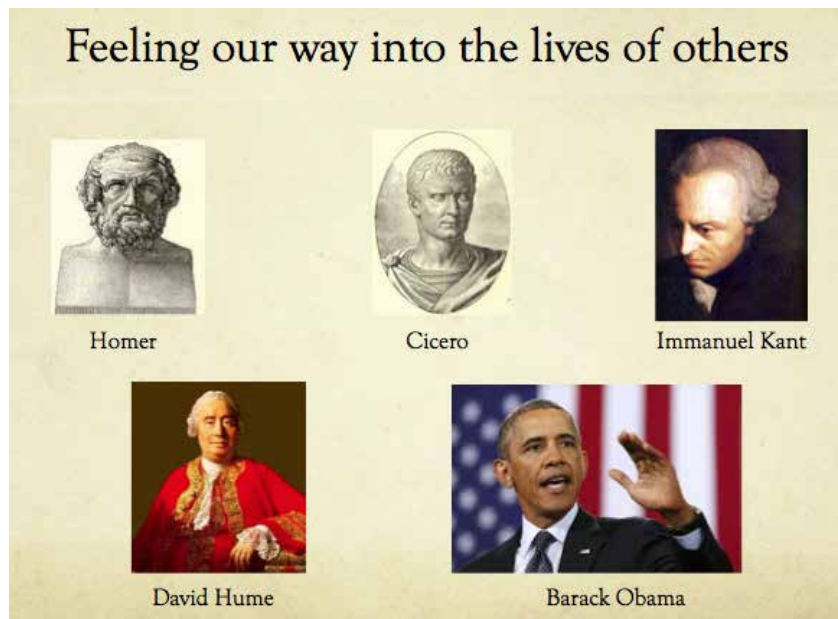
2. While being empathetic makes people more sensitive to problems and perspectives of others, it’s not clear whether empathy motivates us to take more ethical action on a large scale.

But before we deal with these two ideas, let’s examine the origins of the term ‘empathy’.

It is derived from the ancient Greek word ἐμπάθεια (empathēia), “physical affection, passion, suffering” which comes from ἐν (en), “in, at” and πάθος (pathos), “passion” or “suffering”.

Empathy was first used by the English psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909, as a translation of the German *Einfühlungsvermögen*. The German word literally means “the ability to feel into”. This was a new phenomenon being explored by German academics at the end of 19th century, mainly by the German philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps. He defined *Einfühlungsvermögen* as the capacity and willingness to recognize and understand the thoughts, motives and personal characteristics of another person. extending one’s boundaries. Or as the American interculturalist Milton Bennett puts it, it’s an “attempt to discover and understand others by participating in their different experience of the world through conscious-shifting”.

Although the term empathy is only about a century old, the moral implications of feeling our way into the lives of others has been of interests among philosophers and thinkers for a long time. The ancient Greek writer and poet Homer best known for his works of the Iliad and the Odyssey, wrote “Yet, taught by time, my heart has learned to glow for other’s good, and melt at other’s woe.”



Later on, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106 – 43 b. c.) warned, “the whole foundation of the human community is threatened by treating foreigners worse than fellow Romans.” And Immanuel Kant noted in the 18th century 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.

When Barack Obama ran for U.S. President in 2008, he said that the USA had an ‘empathy deficit’ that needed to be filled.

Today, with expanding education, critical thinking and increased international contacts, we are being asked to recognize and negotiate new realities of globalization — in other words, to empathize. So, 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*. This represents a seismic shift in how we view the world. As Steven Pinker, Professor of cognitive psychology at Harvard University, writes in his stimulating book, "*The Better Angels of Our Nature*", we are living in an empathy craze.

Additionally, with our media-consumption lifestyle — satellite TV, smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, the concept of empathy has been turned on its head. We find ourselves increasingly identifying with people in the outermost circles.

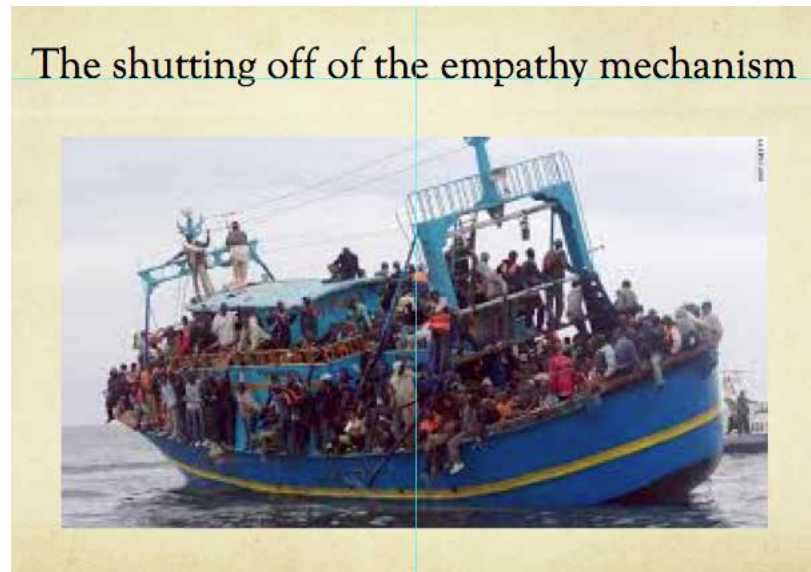
Take, for example, the tragic death of Princess Diana in a car accident in Paris. Most of us in this room watched her funeral procession. When Elton John sang '*Candle in the Wind*' at her funeral, hundred of millions of people around the world simultaneously shared a personal sense of profound sadness.



This sadness was provoked by what I mentioned earlier the “identifiable victim complex”. It’s a universal phenomenon. This was the theme in the internationally acclaimed film documentary *Special Flight*, where documented 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.

While people can respond to the misfortune of others, there are also situations where the misfortunes of others can cause people to shut off the mechanism of empathy.

In the year 2013, the world was horrified when some 300 African refugees drowned trying to reach Lampedusa in the Mediterranean sea. The Italian government ordered its navy to save “boat people” but, when other E. U. nations were asked to share in the cost, the response was a polite no. Right now, we are learning that Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Denmark, Sweden are all putting up stiff resistance to having refugees settle in their countries.



Author Carolyn Calloway-Thomas in her book *‘Empathy in the Global World’* offers an explanation for our inaction. High birth-rates and dramatic demographic changes among third-world countries, coupled wars and economic crisis, have generated massive immigration in the entire world. This development hasn’t brought out the best in people of the developed countries, leading often to collective inaction or rejection of those suffering. She argues that when numerical balance poses a threat to the dominant group, empathy takes a back seat to national identity.

And empathy is deaf to facts and figures. If the government announces that without an increased sales tax, the national hospitals will deteriorate and cause a 2% increase in preventable deaths — very few of us will be motivated to support this move. Rather, the action we will undertake is to complain to our neighbor and friends that taxes are going up again.

What can we conclude from all this? It appears that empathy tends to ori-

ent you toward moral action, but if the costs seem to be too high, it doesn't help much. Many studies have been carried out, researching the connection between empathy and moral action. Different researchers come to different conclusions, but City University of New York philosopher Jesse Prinz in a recent paper summed up the whole research this way: "*These studies suggest 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 see empathy as a "fragile flower," easily destroyed by self-interest.

So the question is now, what motivates people to actually act? Research found that certain 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.

Prinz points out that empathy also has dark sides and can lead you astray. The classic example is that we are more likely to hire someone we know than an anonymous candidate who may be far more qualified. Two years ago in Germany, there was a scandal in the distribution of organ transplants. It was discovered that some medical doctors were moving their patients up the line of possible recipients at the expense of others.

Or take global warming. We now know that we need to reduce carbon emissions to save the planet. However, your next-door neighbor, who works at a coalmine, will be out of a job. It's easier to empathize with your neighbor than the Bangladeshi people, whose land will be under water in the future.

Or think of Donald Trump. He talks about Kate to his crowds. An undocumented Mexican immigrant murdered her and Trumps wants to make Kate real to his audience, to make vivid his talk of Mexican killers. He uses the story to stoke our empathic feelings of innocent victims, to motivate his support for policies against immigrants.

Another point that people often forget is that empathy is not equally distributed. In its April, 2012 issue, *Scientific American* published a fascinating article, entitled *How Wealth Reduces Compassion*. It reviews the latest studies on the relationship between empathy and material wealth. Research has shown that one's sense of wealth vis-a-vis others determines to what degree he or she is willing to enter into another person's subjective world. The article comes to the conclusion that the richer you are, the less likely you are to act fairly.

On first reflection, this would seem to go against common sense. If you already have enough to take care of yourself and your family, wouldn't you be inclined to think about others' needs? Not according to Berkeley psychologists Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner.

They conducted experiments on whether social class influences how much we care about the feelings of others. In one study, they surveyed drivers at a busy four-way intersection that had stop signs. Drivers of luxury cars were three times more likely not to wait their turn than those with middle-class cars. In another study, it was found that those driving low-status cars respected pedestrians trying to cross the street. Upper- and middle-status cars were less likely to stop for a person, even after making eye contact.

Drivers of luxury cars



tend to cut off other drivers than wait their turn.

Another study examined how social class influences compassion. On a regular basis, less affluent people were more likely to describe feelings of compassion for people who were said to be suffering. Results were unchanged after controlling for factors such as gender, ethnicity and spiritual beliefs.

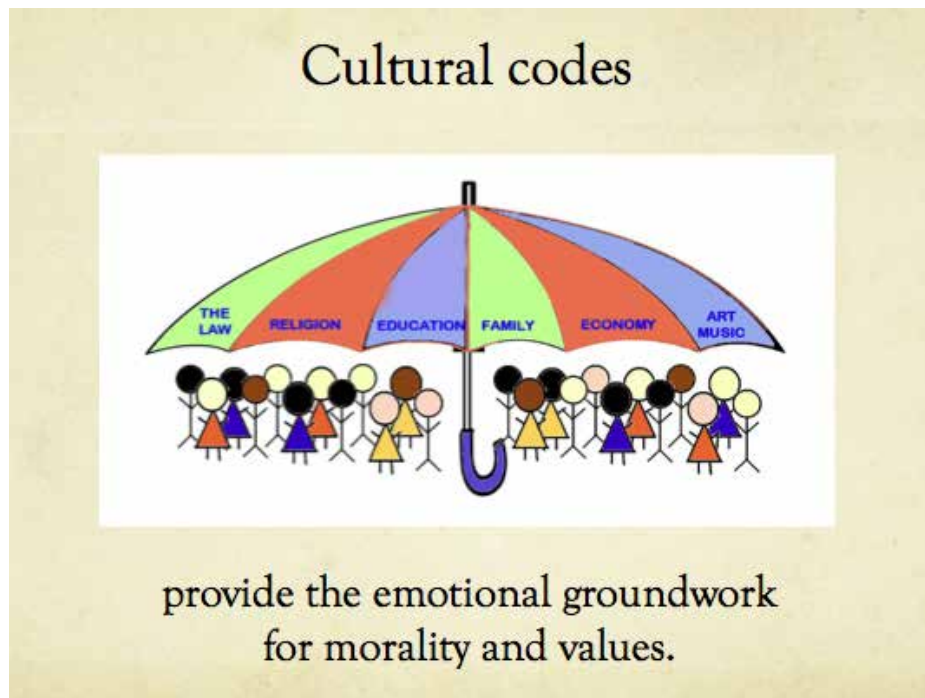
Other research tells us that the higher the social strata, the less likely people are to recognize the emotions of others. These people who think of themselves as being better in terms of social class also pay less attention to those with whom they interact, simultaneously doodling or checking email on their smart phones.

The intriguing question is why research consistently shows that wealth and status decrease our feelings of empathy? Conversely, if you have fewer resources, wouldn't you be more likely to be selfish? Piff suspects this paradox is related to the feelings that abundance gives us, namely a sense of self-importance and relative independence. The less we depend on others, the less we may care about their feelings.

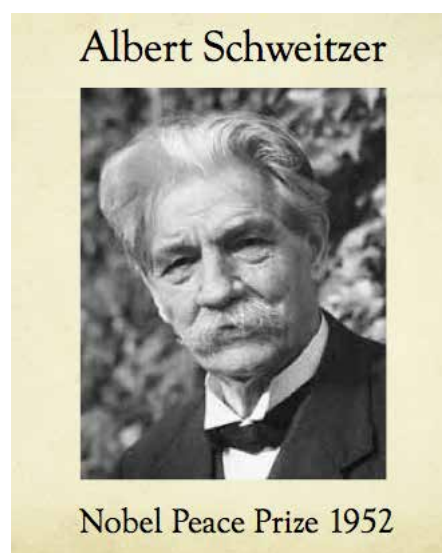
All this research in human behavior today appears to be pointing to a connection between high living standards and less empathy. This has major implications in intercultural relations. All people, including ourselves in this room, want to create a good self image of ourselves in a globalized world where there is growing wealth inequality. This may explain why Professors Pinker and Prinz and many others are strongly suggesting that we are all in the empathy craze. "Empathy" has become a catchword, an emotional shortcut to experience moral solidarity without really acting on it. To put it in another way, *it's to share in the illusion of ethical progress — political correctness — without having actually to do the dirty work of getting emotionally involved, making judgments and decisions.* We're teaching 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 of anger, disgust, guilt, duty. These feelings or codes, shaped through cultural conditioning, provide the emotional groundwork for morality and "sacred"

values, the codes that compel people to turn feelings into pro-social actions at whatever the 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 his empathic feelings told him a leper was feeling pain, isolated, lonely, and this feeling and participation in the other spiked primal anger and disgust that obligated him to seek an alternative action. His ensuing reaction and involvement were triggered by his sense of obligation to social and religious codes he acquired and developed through his Alsatian cultural conditioning. These cultural codes, not his initial feelings of empathy, compelled him to react to other people's suffering.



International hostilities can be understood according to cultural codes, i.e. a sense of duty. What the conflicts in Ukraine, Russia, Israel and Gaza, Syria 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 because morality is a culturally defined concept.

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. Empathy itself doesn't motivate action, it only generates a sense of common humanity and enables potentially adaptation or alternative action.

So, what conclusion can we draw from all this. I believe interculturalists who hope to improve on the existing world need to negotiate new realities. That is, help people understand, admire then debate, modify certain beliefs and put their feelings and slightly re-thought codes into action. Invariably there will be conflicts but it's only then we become professionally relevant.

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