Empathy

A Neglected Topic in Psychological Research

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ABSTRACT: Empathy, as defined in this article, is that unique capacity of the human being to feel the experiences, needs, aspirations, frustrations, sorrows, joys, anxieties, hurt, or hunger of others as if they were his or her own. The author speculates that individuals vary in the degree of cortical development necessary to sustain functional empathy. He also suggests that the majority of human beings can be trained to that level of empathy necessary to counterbalance the more primitive animalistic determinants of behavior. He concludes that the blockage of functional empathy by power drives forms the basis of interpersonal and social tensions, conflicts, violence, terrorism, and war. Control of these destructive forces will require development of techniques to increase functional empathy among human beings.

When I chose the title for this address I did in fact believe that empathy was a neglected topic in social science and psychological research. In examining the literature in preparation for this address, however, I was pleasantly surprised to find that there are many, many articles listed in the Psychological Abstracts, Social Sciences Index, Social Sciences and Humanities Index, and Sociological Abstracts that contain the term empathy somewhere in their titles. As a matter of fact, since 1970 there were an average of from 15 to 20 items per month under that category. In 1978 there were 86 entries dealing in some way with empathy. The primary emphasis was as follows:

- students — 21
- children — 8
- therapy — 7
- counselors — 7
- measurement — 5
- hospitals — 3
- medical — 2
- language — 1
- family — 1

This conflict between my initial impression and the number of articles dealing with some aspect of the phenomenon of empathy should be an embarrassment to me. When confronted with an awkward and embarrassing situation, I, like most human beings, seek either to escape or to explain and reconcile the discrepancy.

As I looked over the titles of the articles that supposedly dealt with the subject of empathy, it became clear that there were relatively few articles that attempted to attack the more fundamental problems of the nature and the determinants of empathy—empathy and individual differences; the degree, manifestation, and salience of empathy; the extent to which empathy can be learned; the neurological, physiological, biochemical, or genetic determinants or limitations. In short, the available literature does neglect a clear definition and a comprehensive theoretical approach to this important phenomenon. It remains evident, therefore, that while there have been an increasing number of articles on empathy, empathy remains an important neglected topic in social psychology and social science. Following are my attempts to share some general ideas on this subject, which I believe to be a fundamental concept in social science—and which I believe to be most relevant to the public interest.

In his book Power: A New Social Analysis, Bertrand Russell observed that “the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics.” In my discussion of the issue of power in the Kurt Lewin Award address in 1956, I uncritically accepted Lord Russell’s thesis. While I am not prepared to reject this point of view at

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this time, I do feel compelled to expand it beyond previous thinking. I now believe that one cannot fully understand the fundamental nature of power as a key element in social interaction without at the same time seeking to understand the concept of empathy as a counter force to power.

In attempting to reconcile my past interest in power and my present concern with empathy as a key social science phenomenon, I now must view empathy and power as inextricable components of human dynamics. Power and empathy may be seen as conflicting or counterbalancing dynamics in the individual’s struggle for some sort of equilibrium in his or her interaction with others.

In this paper, I (a) seek to define empathy as a dynamic force, (b) speculate on the determinants of empathy, (c) discuss various forms, limits, and scopes of empathy, and (d) share some of the thoughts on the relationship between empathy and some selected problems of interpersonal, intergroup, and international tensions and conflicts.

Definition

In the unabridged *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, empathy is defined as “1: the imaginative projection of a subjective state whether affective, conative, or cognitive into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it . . . 2: the capacity for participating in or a vicarious experiencing of another’s feelings, volitions, or ideas and sometimes another’s movements to the point of executing bodily movements resembling his.”

It is of some significance that the second dictionary definition is the one that I would have placed as the first and most relevant. This aspect of empathy is the capacity of an individual to feel the needs, the aspirations, the frustrations, the joy, the sorrows, the anxieties, the hurt, indeed, the hunger of others as if they were his or her own. This rather broad and nontechnical definition of empathy establishes this phenomenon as the very opposite of rigid egocentricity; and certainly empathy is the other extreme of insensitivity. This proposed definition of empathy places this quality among the unique capacities of the human organism. The capacity of a human being to feel the experiences of a fellow human being is a characteristic that necessarily must have its base in the capacity of human beings to deal with abstract ideas and to create and function in terms of abstract realities.

The physiological imperatives of an organism are concrete. The animalistic needs of the human organism are directly experienced by the ego. In the more fundamental and concrete sense of reality, the biological, personal survival needs of the individual organism take priority. Hunger forces the organism to seek food. Thirst demands quenching. Sexual tensions require gratification. Power reflects the organism’s mobilization of its energies and resources in the struggle to obtain the gratification of the primary organic and egocentric needs. Empathy imposes upon the organism the capacity and need to balance concrete egocentricity and power gratification with the abstraction of concern for the needs of others. Empathy dictates that one’s hunger be placed in the context of the perception of the possibility that another might also be experiencing hunger. Empathy requires that in sensing the hunger of another, one might be restrained in satisfying one’s own hunger. Empathy intervenes and sometimes confuses the biological imperatives. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, to gratify egocentric needs at the expense of sensitivity to the needs of another. In this regard, empathy becomes a compelling abstraction that interferes with the free functioning of organismic, egocentric, concrete dynamics. Empathy is a liability to animalistic efficiency. Empathy interferes with the sheer survival struggle and the functional efficiency of the power drive.

Determinants

Given the perspective of the nature and definition of empathy, it is incumbent upon the social and behavioral sciences to address themselves to the important problem of the determinants of empathy. Some conjecture that the social and, particularly, the maternal behavior observed among subhuman species reflect an early form of human empathy. The care and feeding of a litter by its mother can be interpreted as a form of empathy. In all candor, I must state that I do not accept these anthropomorphic interpretations. It is my considered judgment that empathy, like language, humor, and the rituals surrounding sex and death, is uniquely human. It is my belief that the capacity for empathy is a consequence of the evolution of the most recently developed portion of the human brain, the anterior frontal lobes. I am
led to this belief by the evidence that comes from the consequences of lobotomies, brain injuries, lesions, and other injuries that impair the structure and function of this portion of the brain. After an anterior frontal lobotomy, the human patient loses, among other efficiencies of abstract thought, the ability to empathize with others. The patient is reduced to rigid approaches in seeking to gratify purely egocentric needs.

Assuming this perspective, one is then required to speculate on the possibility that individuals vary in the degree to which they have developed a stable structure and function in this area of the brain. One could speculate that some individuals, for presently unknown reasons, come into the world with a highly developed cortical base for empathic function. Others, probably the majority of people, have an adequate cortical base making it possible for them to be trained to that level of empathic interaction with others essential for a tolerable social system. Still others, hopefully a small number of individuals, come into the world with such stunted development of the cortical base for empathic functioning that it is difficult, and in some cases probably impossible, for them to learn even that limited degree of empathy essential for stable and moral interaction with their fellow human beings. Without regard to their degree of intelligence or language sophistication, these individuals remain strictly egocentric. In extreme cases, they are psychopaths, sadists, or tyrants.

**Forms, Limits, Scope**

Extremely empathic human beings appear to have no choice. The needs, the experiences, and the problems of others affect their organism. Functionally—as distinct from merely verbally—empathic individuals are compelled to assist, to advocate, to sustain, and to support their fellow human beings. The extremely empathic person seems compelled to assume risks and to jeopardize personal status and position from a compulsive need to identify with those who are less privileged.

The majority of human beings are able to make practical accommodations to the realities of inequality and injustice. They manage to control the extent of personal risk and jeopardy in seeking to discharge moral obligations. They balance the egocentric with the empathic. They are the realists. They accept the moral ideals up to the point where they interfere with their personal goals. The fact that the majority of human beings seem to fall into this category defines the basis of social realities and determines the pace of social progress.

The extreme psychopathic egocentric, lacking a modicum of functional empathy, is free of the need for realistic moral accommodations and is free of ethical anxieties, conflicts, and guilt. He or she functions in terms of the sheer efficiency of egocentric power in seeking personal and immediate gratifications.

The phenomenon of empathy, like the phenomenon of power, necessarily expresses itself in various forms, with various limits, and to various degrees. For the egocentric individual, empathy is limited to the self, which logically and psychologically is nonempathy. For other individuals, empathy extends slightly beyond the self to include some, if not all, members of the immediate family. For still others—probably a majority of human beings—empathy extends to other human beings who have qualities and characteristics similar to those of their family. These individuals are able to empathize with others who are similar to themselves in color, religion, nationality, sex, and status. This level of empathy is one step beyond that of empathizing with one's immediate family. This is chauvinistic empathy, a form of social egocentricity that provides the basis and justification for intergroup and international tensions, conflicts, wars, and, if not controlled, the ultimate extinction of the human species.

The highest and probably the least frequent form of empathy is that in which the individual is compelled to embrace all human beings. This expanded empathy is the most difficult level to achieve. It probably requires the highest level of development of the anterior frontal lobe of the brain, reinforced by training and experience. It is a level of empathy that can be simulated by verbal adherence but remains most difficult to express consistently and functionally. It is the level of empathy that religion seeks to reinforce, with varying degrees of failure. It is the level of empathy that is neglected by those practical and self-defined objective educators and social scientists who substitute moral relativism for moral sensitivity in propagating their trade. It is a level of empathy that intellectuals frequently seek to rationalize by obfuscating contemplations of the impossibility of verifying empirical ethics.
is the level of empathy that when real and functional can not be used to justify the naked use of power, tyranny, flagrant or subtle injustices, cruelties, sustained terrorism, killings, wars, and eventual extinction.

The inability of human beings with power to understand the legitimate needs and aspirations of other human beings—the inability of human beings to understand that their fellow human beings share their anxieties, their frailties, their posturing, their desire to make the most out of the limited interval of conscious and evaluative life—this lack of simple expanded empathy is in the eyes of this observer the basis of social tensions, conflicts, violence, terrorism, and war. One can hope that a disciplined and value-oriented social science will have sufficient time not only to study and understand the nature and determinants of empathy but also to develop the ability to increase the number of human beings who are functionally empathic. If this is done, there will be a future for humanity. The survival of the human species now appears to depend upon a universal increase in functional empathy. Trained human intelligence must now dedicate itself to the attainment of this goal.

APF National Media Awards for 1980

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Materials must include references to psychology and/or psychologists and depict the activities, ideas, and findings of individual psychologists or applications of psychological sciences. For example, entries that focus on social issues and mental health must include specific references to psychology and/or psychologists to be eligible. Materials nominated must have been produced or published on or after May 1, 1979, and before May 1, 1980. Nominations may be made by anyone, including the author, producer, etc. Deadline for receipt of entries is May 10, 1980. For entry forms write to Public Information Office, American Psychological Association, 1200 Seventeenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.