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Walking a Mile in Your Shoes

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At first glance, Americans seem obsessed with other people. From magazines like *People* to television shows like *Access Hollywood*, we seem to have an insatiable appetite for the details of other people's lives. Reality television differs from scripted television because it gives us the illusion that we are peering into the real life of other people. Much contemporary news coverage has a voyeuristic feel to it. We learn the details of the lives of people like Jerry Sandusky (child sexual abuser), Snookie (celebrity) and Whitney Houston (pop star) whether these details are relevant to an original story or not. I might assert that all this information gives us insight into the lives and perspectives of these people. From the popularity of these stories I might conclude that Americans are among the most empathic people on Earth. Data from psychological research, however, do not support this conclusion. Why not? Because people are consuming this information from a detached, objective perspective. At best, people feel sympathy for (some) of these people. But more often than not these stories provide the sweet sense of righteousness that we find so delectable. Passing judgment on others when they have done wrong is an addiction we have no interest in breaking. This addiction, like many others, has both benefits and costs. Fortunately, there is an antidote for this addiction: true empathy.

Empathy is a topic for many disciplines, including religion, philosophy, art, political science, and psychology. It would not be appropriate or feasible to try here to cover all of these treatments of empathy, and I am not qualified to do so. Thus, I will confine my description of empathy research to just psychology, and even this is a daunting task. Rather than providing a history lesson, I will describe our current understanding of what empathy is and how it works, inevitably smoothing over many and sometimes serious debates. One debate concerns the very definition of empathy. For the purpose of this discussion I will settle on the definition, that *empathy is the act of taking another person's perspective*. Many theorists argue for additional processes of accurately recognizing and appropriately responding to emotions in others, but I feel this is subsumed in the accurate taking of another's perspective.

Empathy emerges early in human development and develops through a series of stages or levels. Level 1 perspective taking involves understanding what another person sees. Infants initially believe that everyone sees the exact same thing that they see. If a baby was looking at an apple on a computer screen and you were sitting on the other side of the screen and could not see the apple, the baby would still believe that you could see the apple. Eventually, babies learn that others see things differently, and this lays the foundation for the next level. Level 2 perspective taking is a small jump to understanding that other people see the same objects in different ways. If you and a child were sitting at a table with box of cereal on it, the child might not understand that her view of the box and your view were not identical (you might be looking at the front and the child looking at the back). Once they get this, children are ready to move to the more abstract idea that other people have knowledge (and opinions and feelings) that they themselves do not have. This is called theory of mind. Secrets are favorites of children because they are learning that other people know things that they do not, and vice versa. Finally, recognizing (and some would say appropriately responding to) the emotions of others is another component of empathy. Ultimately, empathy requires the recognition of the subjectivity of other people—that other people experience the world in their own way, perhaps differently from us. And this points to the paradox of empathy: empathy is built on the idea that others understand their world differently than we do, but it is also true that we are more likely to experience empathy for those we believe are similar to us. More on this paradox below.

Despite the disagreement about the definition and process of empathy, many researchers have explored the benefits of empathy. The list of topics in this area impresses with both its breadth and depth. A rich and mature body of research suggests that empathy is the key not just to helping improve behavior, but also potentially to encouraging the rarer and morally desirable phenomenon of altruism. Dan Batson spent much of his long career attempting to demonstrate empathy's role in altruism (helping others when there is a cost but no benefit to the helper; Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981). People with higher levels of empathy also tend to have more satisfying close relationships than people with lower levels. Empathy seems to also curtail some anti-social behaviors like aggression. Several anti-bullying programs have

incorporated empathy. And there is some promising evidence that empathy may reduce stereotyping and prejudice. Simon Baron-Cohen (2011) has proposed that a lack of empathy is at the heart of psychopathy and narcissism.

So if empathy is so beneficial, why is it apparently so rare? Two obstacles stand in the way of frequent empathy, and they both relate to the paradox mentioned earlier. One is that we see ourselves as distinct from others. This seems like an obvious statement that needs no defense, but I suggest the truth is otherwise. Several lines of thought and research speak to this self/other distinction, including cross-cultural work on collectivism/individualism (Triandis, 2001). It turns out that people in Western cultures typically see themselves as more distinct and separate than do people in non-Western cultures, who see themselves as more connected to others. Research suggests that people who hold more collectivist attitudes are more empathic than less collectivistic people. Much of Western culture reinforces this mantra of individuality, from advertising ("Have it your way") to pop music (Katy Perry's "Firework," and many others). The main thrust of these messages seems to be that you are a distinct person, independent of others, which leads to the second barrier: our perceived dissimilarity from others.

Many studies have demonstrated that we are more likely to feel empathy for others who are similar to us, as I mentioned earlier, so feeling dissimilar to others is a problem for empathy. To say that every person is unique is both true and misleading. Most people have unique DNA, and even those with identical DNA (identical twins, for example) have different experiences, so each person's uniqueness seems assured. However, this universal uniqueness often implies a degree of difference not borne out by the facts. An apple and an orange are certainly not the same, but they are quite similar when compared to a bicycle. For a variety of perfectly understandable reasons (e.g., self-esteem needs, identification) people want to see themselves (though not so much other people) as completely unique. My point is not that people are not unique, but that *people are not as unique as they think they are*.

Many studies in psychology attest to differentiation, indeed an entire area of psychology (individual differences, or personality) focuses on the ways that people differ. There are literally thousands of scales designed to measure variability in humans, on a

wide variety of dimensions from narcissism to one-with-all-humanity-ness (McFarland, Brown, Webb, 2013). Perhaps the most influential of these approaches is commonly called the Big 5. Hundreds of studies have used this approach to personality. This approach suggests that there are 5 major dimensions to personality: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Studies have found these five dimensions not only in the U.S., but around the world. For example, a cross-national study (Schmitt et al., 2007) measured the Big 5 in more than 17,000 individuals from 56 nations. While they were able to detect cross-national differences on all Big 5 dimensions, the magnitude of the differences is worth examining. For example, the most extraverted country was Serbia (average score of 51.95) and the least was France (average score of 45.44)—a difference of just 6.51 on a scale that theoretically could range from 0-100. More to the point, the standard deviation for these scores were 8.59 for Serbia and 8.77 for France. Simplifying greatly, this means that there are many people in the "average group" in terms of extraversion in Serbia with the same scores as people in the "average group" in France. Similar statements could be made for the other four dimensions. Rather than emphasizing cultural differences, my interpretation of these data is that people all over the world are fundamentally similar. In addition, these researchers had little trouble translating the measure to all the various languages spoken in these countries, and their analyses indicate that the people in all these countries needed only 5 dimensions to describe them, not 4 or 13, and it was *these* five dimensions. These are apples and oranges comparisons, not apples and bicycles. This obsession with differences (and I do not mean to pick on these researchers, who have done solid and valuable research) is perfectly understandable, but comes with a cost in terms of empathy. If perceived dissimilarity is a barrier to empathy, then we as psychologists should carefully consider the ramifications of our focus on differences. To the extent that our research affects the culture we live in (and I am not naïve about the limitations of our research), we may in fact be making empathy less likely.

These are significant barriers to empathy, in my mind, but given the positive effects of empathizing discussed earlier, we can ask, what can be done to make people empathize more, and more accurately? Compared to the body of research on the effects of empathy (see above), the body of research on increasing empathy is less impressive.

Most interventions to raise empathy have targeted people with empathy deficits, such as bullies or child sexual abusers, who certainly need the intervention. But I assert that everyone could benefit from an increase in the frequency and quality of their empathy. To that end, my colleagues and I have been developing computer software designed to make people better empathizers. Our software is based on three principles: that empathy is a skill that can be improved, that the performance tests designed to assess empathy in children can become effective tools for increasing empathy, and that practice will drive that improvement. At time of writing, the plan is to create a game-like interface, with three modules each with increasing difficulty, each building on the previous module. The first module trains people in the very basic task of imagining what a series of objects would look like from a different viewing angle. This is based on the classic three mountains task designed by Piaget and Inhelder (1948) more than 70 years ago. The module starts out simply, presenting an image containing three simple objects (ball, cone, cube) with an arrow pointing at the image from one of the four cardinal angles (left, right, down, up). The task is to identify the correct image (from three options) that portrays the original image from that orientation. This is an easy task in the early stages, but we make it more complex by increasing the number of objects in the image, and adding impossible options they have to choose from (the objects are in the wrong relative order). Reaction time and response (correct or incorrect) are recorded. Again, people are told to go as fast as possible, and given feedback about their performance at the end of each trial. The second module is based on research by Keysar, Linn, and Barr (2003) and again requires people to understand that other people can or cannot see the same objects they see. The third module is based on the hidden-knowledge paradigm and requires people to understand that other people have or do not have the same information they do.

Our idea is to tap into people's competitive motivation. Currently the software is written for a web application, but we see this ideally as an app that people could play on mobile devices. That would allow us to provide users with other people's scores on the trial or module they are attempting. We could even manage Facebook or other social media integration so users could upload and compare their scores with their friends' scores, or perhaps narrow the comparison groups by region, age or interest. We hope that this information would motivate people to improve their performance, thereby improving

their empathy skill(s). We have at this point just developed and tested the first module, and the data are promising; people who completed the first module scored higher on related measures of empathy than people who completed a control task, and people who completed the module faster and more accurately scored higher than people who did worse on the module. We now need to secure funding to hire professional programmers to turn our student-coded proof-of-concept software into a slick mobile app.

To cycle back to Americans' voyeuristic obsession, can empathy transform our ridicule or revulsion into comprehension and compassion? Time will tell. The data we do have is promising; much more is needed. But there can be no doubt about the need for increased empathy in a world notable for depths of cruelty and outbreaks of violence.

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