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## Understanding and overcoming empathy walls: The first steps toward civic conversation


Adriana J. Deras  
*Louisiana State University*

Angelle Leger  
*LSU College of Medicine, New Orleans*

Abdullah Alturaifi  
*Louisiana State University*

Jacqueline Begue  
*Louisiana State University*

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 James Blake  
*Louisiana State University* Part of the [Biomedical Engineering and Bioengineering Commons](#)

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### Authors

Adriana J. Deras, Angelle Leger, Abdullah Alturaifi, Jacqueline Begue, James Blake, Christopher Bologna, Leandre Bonmardion, Valentino Browning, Christopher Charleston, Ann Clark, Amber Cradeur, Kenzie Dupont, Jarred Favrot, Faye Foret, Brett Fulmer, Tanishq Goribidanur, Sayma Hanif, Savannah Heath, Matthew Hutchins, Nathan Istre, Gracie Kennard, Gabrielle Kerkow, Sayou Ketcha, Kallie Kilchrist, Timothy King, Akua Kumi, Meggie Lam, Tiffany Le, Zachary Lehmann, Spencer Lemoine, Andy Lin, Zoe Martin, John Marzullo, Cameron Matherne, Laura Moldovan, Adriana Montoya, Michelle Opiri, Shivani Pandya, Victoria Parsley, Brogan Pathi, Kendall Raymond, Jordan Remont, Sydne Rigby, Barrick Roberts, Trey Schexnayder, Samantha Seetharama, Prianca Shrestha, Meghan Sills, Jhacory Simien, L. Elena Soto Handel, Jonathan Thomas, Austin Veal, and Britt Young

# Understanding and Overcoming Empathy Walls: The First Steps Toward Civic Conversation

## AUTHORS

Adriana Deras  
Angelle Leger  
Abdullah Alturaifi  
Jacqueline Begue  
James Blake  
Christopher Bologna  
Leandre Bonmardion  
Valentino Browning  
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Zoe Martin  
John Marzullo  
Cameron Matherne  
Laura Moldovan  
Adriana Montoya  
Michelle Opiri  
Shivani Pandya  
Victoria Parsley  
Brogan Pathi  
Kendall Raymond  
Jordan Remont

Sydne Rigby  
Barrick Roberts  
Trey Schexnayder  
Samantha Seetharama  
Prianca Shrestha  
Meghan Sills  
Jhacory Simien  
L. Elena Soto Handel  
Jonathan Thomas  
Austin Veal  
Britt Young

## Introduction

All but one of the authors of this piece are juniors and seniors in biological engineering at LSU. We were enrolled in a course on ethics and professionalism specific to our field. As part of our class we read, discussed, and wrote about the book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* by Arlie Hochschild. The following essay represents our collective thoughts and answers to three reflective prompts about empathy walls, one of the central themes of the book, and their role and importance in civil conversation.

As young adults with impressionable minds in a politically charged climate, it is easy to feel secluded from our peers and the world around us because of our personal beliefs. This seclusion is not only a perception, but a shared idea that we think has deepened the divisiveness that plagues our modern society. These seclusions we have placed ourselves in can be dubbed “empathy walls,” a term used by Hochschild in her book.

Hochschild argues that empathy walls are made up of our own set of personal beliefs, emotions, and feelings, which may not always be rooted in facts. As a result, while we may often feel as though empathy walls are defense mechanisms we construct to keep others out, they also tend to keep us blocked in. The concept of empathy walls is a complex one, and the way they are built and maintained not only varies greatly from topic to topic, but from person to person. As a result, navigating empathy walls might involve crossing them or destroying them; some, in fact, may never truly be crossed or destroyed. Nevertheless, no

matter an individual’s belief on what an empathy wall is, or how difficult it may be to cross one, we believe that examining our empathy walls is crucial to initiating civic engagement and making societal progress.

## What Is an Empathy Wall and What Does It Feel Like?

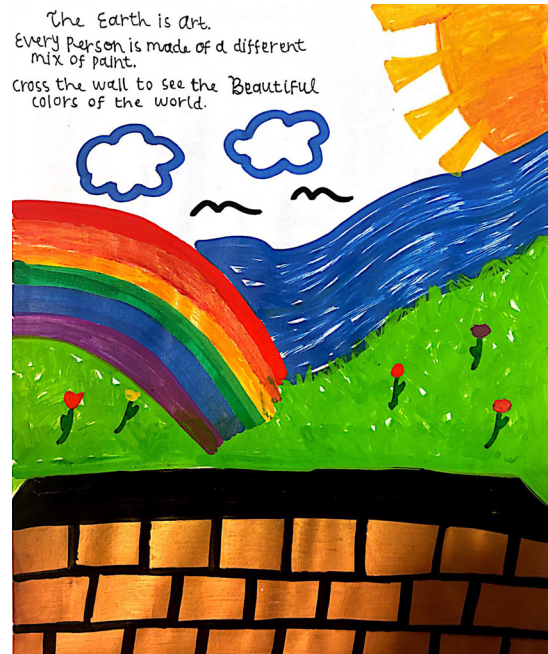
An empathy wall can be difficult to imagine. It can be thought of as a brick or mortar wall or even as a cascading mountain. However, in some respects, an empathy wall isn’t even a wall at all. It is a disconnect, a place where we lose common ground with those of varying beliefs. It is the stopping point where our ideas become incompatible with someone else’s, and we begin to experience an “us vs. them” mentality. And while this one difference may be something that the two (or more) sides can never agree upon, it is important to realize that there are many other things in which common ground may be found. Interestingly enough, we are not always the “us” in the “us vs. them” empathy wall dilemma. On the contrary, sometimes we may find ourselves as the ones being blocked out, or the “them,” that is shut out by someone else’s empathy walls. In these circumstances, we may feel as if someone is closing us off, shutting us out, or even forgetting to give us a chance because of who they think we may be. When this occurs, it is important to remember that the person with the empathy walls is completely disregarding the chance that they have to see some view or opinion that they had previously not considered. This situation reminds us to not disregard others when dealing with our

own empathy walls. We think that empathy walls have different shapes and sizes and textures, which means that they need to be navigated differently. Finally, although everyone's empathy walls may vary, they are central to a person's experiences throughout their lifetime, or more simply, based on the fact that we all experience life differently.

### How Is an Empathy Wall Built?

Every single person has a different story. We are each raised in different households with different political and religious views, and we have all encountered significant events in our lives that have had a great impact on the way we view the world. Some of us are an only child, some of us were raised by a single parent, some of us are adopted, and some of us were even forced to raise ourselves and our siblings. There is an infinite number of factors, based on both nature and nurture, that shape our unique outlooks on life. These differences, especially in today's political climate, can prove to be a wedge that separates "us" from "them" with respect to many issues. If not addressed properly, this wedge can begin to form a barrier, or an empathy wall, which lies between what is "right" and what is "wrong." It is, however, important to remember that our differences are what make the world what it is: dynamic, diverse, and colorful. Nevertheless, what sometimes occurs is that when we are faced with an opposing view, many of us fear that having "empathy" implicates that a belief, a solid pillar on which one's life may be formed, must be changed in some way. This fear only further misconstrues the true meaning of empathy. Empathy is in no way, shape, or form, the absolute changing of one's mind, or the rejection of one's beliefs. On the contrary, empathy is the ability to understand and respect the differences of others, recognizing that regardless of whether or not we agree with them, we honor them.

Although fear is not the driving force behind the creation of an empathy wall, it is the mortar that ultimately cements it; believe it or not, we ourselves are the builders. Eventually, this fear and refusal to understand secludes us from anyone or anything that is different from what we have established as normal. This seclusion, over time, takes a more permanent, rigid form. Brick by brick, the wall between our safety net of familiarity and what we misunderstand is built, and more often than not, this construction occurs early in childhood. Even before we are willing and able to challenge what we



know, our parents or other significant people in our lives supply us with our first foundation of bricks, a foundation that is later even harder to destroy. As a result, whether we like it or not, as we continue to grow, instead of tearing down the bricks we already have, we merely continue to pile on more.

Empathy walls are also built for the comfort of having like-minds surrounding you. It is easier to surround ourselves with like-minded individuals than people who challenge our opinions. It is this feeling of uneasiness and sometimes even offensiveness that drives us to continue to protect our walls. So over the lifetime of an empathy wall, we may begin to place images and labels on the wall. These false images reflect what we believe, or are told, that the group on the other side is actually like. With these images ingrained within our minds, we begin to feed on our fear of the "mysterious unknown" and thus start to lose sight of the other side. As a result, throughout this process, we begin to dehumanize the other side, trusting like-minded individuals but fostering contempt and hostility for anyone who attempts to challenge what we know.

What makes this issue even more complicated is that while we are building these walls to block out others, we are simultaneously being blocked out by the walls of others. This blocking results in a never-ending cycle that we believe is partially responsible for the lack of common ground we experience in society today.

### **How Do You Destroy or Cross an Empathy Wall?**

Just like the first step to solving a problem is admitting that you have one, the first step to destroying or crossing an empathy wall is admitting that you have a misconception. Although identifying an empathy wall is definitely important, it is what we do afterward that can eventually bring about real change. One of the most effective ways of breaking down an empathy wall is finding common ground and embracing the differences. Through this effort, the wall can be removed brick by brick, until just a few bricks remain. These bricks can then be handled with much more ease than an entire wall. Sometimes a wall cannot be completely broken down, and as a result, it is worth it to attempt to cross the wall, or to at least peer over the top.

Another effective move to peer over the wall is to step away from our old, accustomed safe zone, and into an uncertain spot where we begin to challenge our beliefs. This process is how we regain a clear, true image of what, or who, we have been blocking out for so long.

However, in this process, we must not forget that there is strength in standing up for what we believe in. When we cross an empathy wall, we may be tempted to leave our own beliefs on the other side, knowing that we have them to fall back on, if we should return. This temptation can be counterproductive and ultimately a waste of time. It may, nonetheless, be equally as unproductive to cross with the intention of completely changing. For this reason, it is necessary to employ an open mind when peering over the wall. This open mind should facilitate unbiased exploration and allow for possible change, without demanding it. Because empathy walls are strongly influenced by pure emotion, it is also important to incorporate logic and critical thinking into the journey to empathy. These perspectives should be used to gain an accurate, objective view of each side's beliefs. Once we see what the other side is actually like, breaking down an empathy wall becomes a much more approachable goal.

Finally, the most important aspect of crossing or defeating an empathy wall is the requirement of action. Peering over a wall and getting to know the other side is a noble first step, but it is what we do with the information gathered that propels our world into the future. This action can take many different forms, and again, depends on the situation and the nature of the wall. For example, a simple action can be acknowledging the feelings of

the other side or a small act of kindness. However, over time, these small actions can then blossom into genuine support and respect, or better yet, advocacy. For it is when we not only support someone else's beliefs, but also fight for them, that we can unquestionably say that we have defeated our empathy walls. Then, and only then, is a strong step taken on the road to civic engagement and societal progress and into the future: when we not only support someone's beliefs, but fight for them.

Every person is a piece of art that makes up the world, and every piece of art has a meaning and a story. Whether we are children, adults, or college students, we all experience empathy walls, or obstacles to this overall understanding, and for this reason, they must be acknowledged and addressed by everyone. Crossing an empathy wall is therefore an opportunity to appreciate this piece of art, or better yet, to influence more understanding and acceptance in our lives. One way we as college students can do this is through community engagement. By immersing ourselves in the community, our empathy walls may begin to open up, not only widening our views, but also our understanding of someone else's. Many people don't realize that the world is big enough to foster their beliefs and views without compromising the integrity of another's, until someone else makes them aware of it. When we immerse ourselves in the community, we have the opportunity to interact with those who can make us aware of it. As a result, community engagement is one way to bridge the gap between misunderstanding and empathy, thus opening up the opportunity to cross our own empathy walls and even inviting others to speak out about their own. We believe that this "bigness" is the profound impact that can occur when we engage with the community and tear down the empathy walls we have. And although such a future may seem idealistic and unattainable, these are the first steps to such a world, and the more people who know where to start, the better.

### **About the Authors**

Except for Angelle Leger, who is now a medical student in the LSU College of Medicine, New Orleans, all of the authors of this piece were juniors and seniors in biological engineering at Louisiana State University at the time of this writing.