

What's Empathy Got To Do With It?

By Frawn Morgan

In her iconic song *What's Love Got To Do With It?*¹ Tina Turner questions why we need the emotion of love¹. The song lyrics argue love is a “second hand emotion”, and only confuses those who experience it. The song scrutinizes the purpose of love, which often exposes us to pain, resulting in the question of love’s necessity. The same could be said for empathy. What is empathy and why do we need it? If empathy is innate – if we are born with a sense of empathy² - it must have a purpose, but what is that purpose?

Empathy is often compared to compassion, but it is psychologically distinct³. Compassion is caring for someone else, as opposed to empathy’s feeling someone else’s pain; consequently, compassion is more objective. With the more socially useful compassion at our disposal, has empathy become a second hand emotion, much like love in Turner’s song? While compassion may play a more useful role in society, empathy is a necessary element in the personal relationships that are the foundation of our humanity.

It might be easy to think that as we have evolved, and our sense of compassion has become more useable and more useful, our need for empathy could become extinct. Empathy is a gut-level reaction, an impulse, which can overpower us if not controlled². Our sense of empathy is innate; evolution has equipped us with both empathy and compassion. If evolution has equipped us with empathy, it must be good for something! Empathy must serve a purpose to further the species, either by protecting us from some harm or causing us to continue to improve.

Empathy dissolves boundaries between people by creating a sense of shared feelings, allowing us to feel what others feel². In this sense, empathy can enhance personal relationships by causing us to more closely relate to someone else’s situation. This relating, however, results

in partiality, or a sense of bias toward others due to our feeling what they are feeling. When our significant other is feeling down, we likely feel at least a measure of those depressed feelings. When a child has been harmed by others, or bullied at school, the parents often get angry and want to retaliate. These shared feelings create a sense of distress in the empathetic person, although such distress is both acceptable and necessary when protecting those inside one's familial circle. However, when a social worker feels empathy for the children in her case load, she feels empathic (or vicarious) distress and her sense of impartiality, and with it her judgment, can suffer³. This distress can also interfere with pro-social behavior⁴, resulting in poor decisions where the overall social group is concerned.

Researchers have argued that empathy is unreliable as a guide for moral behavior, going so far as to imply empathy can be a liability, especially when considering actions which should be condemned⁴. He argues that the partiality of empathy can lead us to endorse reckless, unsustainable social programs when a more reasoned approach would be more sustainable, and therefore more useful. Using empathy as a guide can expose us to “moral mistakes” and “profound errors”⁴. In fact, empathetic pleas can result in feelings of aggression. Studies have shown that people can become quite aggressive, more so than their normal personality, when exposed to the suffering of strangers³. The fact that empathy can have this affect with respect to the suffering of strangers is where social distortion sets in. While useful in personal settings, the empathic response sets us up for very dangerous mistakes when that response is taken outside the personal relationship. Employing empathy, therefore, should be avoided in social or political situations due to its ability to manipulate the heart and mind³.

If empathy is not to be our guide for social and political situations, what should be? How can we be caring in social situations without using empathy as our guide? How can we make

intelligent and responsible political decisions without identifying with the impact of those decisions on the people they will affect?

While empathy and compassion are not necessary elements of each other, they often stand in for each other, however compassion can be a more appropriate motivator of helping behaviors^{4,5}. Compassion can be labeled empathic concern^{5,6}. Further, compassion is a feeling for the other that does not include sharing the suffering of the other, and these feelings are shown to be associated with pro-social behavior⁶. In this way, compassion serves to drive our desires to enhance the well-being of others, whether those others are disadvantaged youths in our own neighborhoods or people suffering at the hands of marauders in distant lands. Whereas empathy is a vicarious emotion, compassion is not⁴. This gives compassion an edge in motivating pro-social behavior. It can be impartial, where empathy is not. Compassion is not subject to manipulation the way empathy is. Compassion, by its very nature, does not distort judgment the way empathy does^{7,3,4}. Compassion can cause us not only to feel concern for the suffering of others, it can also motivate us to help others⁶, unlike empathy.

Instead of using the suffering of distant others to pluck at our empathic heart strings and drive aggressive social and political policy, we should employ compassion to care about others without the empathic distress and its resultant distortion. In this way, we can understand the plight of others and investigate how to change the systems that result in their plight. Compassion allows us to be more utilitarian in our response. By using compassion as a guide for our political decisions, we are forced to consider all aspects of a decision, not just the emotional aspect. In creating new social policy, we would then weigh the cost against the proposed benefit, as opposed to being focused only on the existing situation. We might find that the proposed program is unsustainable, and realize that starting and then stopping that program could be worse

than doing nothing. This realization could result in finding better, more sustainable, responses to society's problems. Compassion allows us to understand the systems that result in social problems, whereas empathy demands action irrespective of these systems. Compassion allows us to use our intelligence, as well as our emotion, to find solutions.

As we reflect on Turner's question "what's love got to do with it" we may ask the same question of empathy in our modern times. What does empathy have to do with it? Do we really need this emotion any longer? Empathy causes us to be insensitive to those who we have not identified with and to those that are different than ourselves. The bias created by empathy can cause us to desire harsh punishments when we know or identify with a victim, even though the punishment may be inconsistent with the crime or other punishments in similar situations⁷. When we do overcome our natural empathic tendencies to biased attitudes favoring those we know, it can still distort our judgment to the point of spurring us to commit warlike acts against others who are not our immediate aggressors. The bottom line is that empathy distorts our judgment and the greater the stakes of the issue we are facing, the greater the impact of that distortion³.

The perspective presented here identifies compassion as greatly superior to empathy, especially for situations involving society as a whole. Compassion allows us to act from our higher selves, rather than react from our more base selves. Compassion is much more useful to the group than is empathy.

In the end, however, as with the emotion of love in Turner's song, we still need empathy. Based on the research I have explored in this paper, empathy is a critical component of our humanness. Empathy is what makes relationships work, and grow, and be fulfilling. Empathy helps parents bond to and protect their children and helps siblings bond to and protect each other.

Empathy helps strengthen the bond of the in-group. Empathy is, in many ways, an extension of the love emotion Turner was questioning; yet neither love nor empathy are second hand emotions. Just like love, we, as humans who are biologically wired for connection, need empathy.

Endnotes:

¹ Written by Terry Britten and Graham Lyle; recorded by Turner and released in 1984. The song ranked #309 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time". It also ranked #38 on the *Songs of the Century*.

² Bloom, P. (2013). *Just babies: The origins of good and evil*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

³ Bloom, P. (2015, September 25). The dark side of empathy. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/09/the-violence-of-empathy/407155/>

⁴ Prinz, J. (2011). Against empathy. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Spindel Supplement*, 49, 214-233. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00069.x>

⁵ Jordan, M. R., Amir, D., & Bloom, P. (in press). Are empathy and concern psychologically distinct? *Emotion*, <http://dx.doi.org/dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000228>

⁶ Singer, T., & Klinecki, O. M. (2014, September 22). Empathy and compassion. *Current Biology*, 24(18). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054>

⁷ Bloom 2014