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1. Definition of Empathy

“the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.”

2. Habits of Empathy

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There has been a 40% drop in measured college student empathy since 2000 (Konrath, 2010). But is empathy really important for students? Empathy has been shown to improve test scores, develop leadership skills, strengthen classroom community, provide career skills, increase emotional intelligence, and reduce learner stress and reactivity.

Given the major drop in empathy, can college students develop more empathy? Researcher Roman Krznaric believes that people can "expand their 'empathic potential.'" In his article, "Six Habits of Highly Empathic People," he argues that "we can cultivate empathy throughout our lives" (2012).

According to Krznaric, empathy is the "ability to step into the shoes of another person, aiming to understand their feelings and perspectives, and to use that understanding to guide our actions. That makes it different from kindness or pity....The old view that we are essentially self-interested creatures is being nudged firmly to one side by evidence that we are also homo empathicus, wired for empathy, social cooperation, and mutual aid."

He suggests 6 habits to raise our empathy:

Habit 1: Cultivate Curiosity about Strangers

"Curiosity expands our empathy when we talk to people outside our usual social circle, encountering lives and worldviews very different from our own. Psychologist Martin Seligman identifies it as a key character strength that can enhance life satisfaction. And it is a useful cure for the chronic loneliness afflicting around one in three Americans. Cultivating curiosity requires more than having a brief chat about the weather. Crucially, it tries to understand the world inside the head of the other person. Set yourself the challenge of having a conversation with one stranger every week."

Habit 2: Challenge Prejudices and Discover Commonalities

We all have assumptions about others and use collective labels about others "that prevent us from appreciating their individuality." He suggests you challenge your "preconceptions and prejudices by searching for what [you] share with people rather than what divides them." Go beyond the labels and seek common ground. Thus the first two habits to increase empathy can contribute to cultural tolerance and diversity awareness.

Habit 3: Try Another Person's Life

People should "expand their empathy by gaining direct experience of other people's lives." Consider an experiment. Attend religious services of faiths different from your own, or a meeting of a non-religious community. "Or if you're an atheist, try attending different churches!" Spend some time volunteering in a town

or city. "Take the path favored by philosopher John Dewey, who said, 'All genuine education comes about through experience.'" Those instructors who assign service learning might reap a two-fold benefit, asking students to also report on any experience of increased empathy as a result of their project.

Habit 4: Listen Hard-and Open Up

"There are two traits required for being an empathic conversationalist. One is to master the art of radical listening. 'What is essential,' says Marshall Rosenberg, psychologist and founder of Non-Violent Communication (NVC), 'is our ability to be present to what's really going on within-to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing in that very moment.'"

People with high empathy [HEPs] "listen hard to others and do all they can to grasp their emotional state and needs, whether it is a friend who has just been diagnosed with cancer or a spouse who is upset at them for working late yet again. But listening is never enough.

The second trait is to make ourselves vulnerable. Removing our masks and revealing our feelings to someone is vital for creating a strong empathic bond. Empathy is a two-way street that, at its best, is built upon mutual understanding-an exchange of our most important beliefs and experiences."

Habit 5: Inspire Mass Action and Social Change

"We typically assume empathy happens at the level of individuals, but HEPs understand that empathy can also be a mass phenomenon that brings about fundamental social change. Just think of the movements against slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries on both sides of the Atlantic. As journalist Adam Hochschild reminds us, 'The abolitionists placed their hope not in sacred texts but human empathy,' doing all they could to get people to understand the very real suffering on the plantations and slave ships.

The overwhelming public response to the Asian tsunami of 2004 emerged from a sense of empathic concern for the victims, whose plight was dramatically beamed into our homes on shaky video footage....Canada's pioneering Roots of Empathy, the world's most effective empathy teaching program...has benefited over half a million school kids. Its unique curriculum centers on an infant, whose development children observe over time in order to learn emotional intelligence-and its results include significant declines in playground bullying and higher levels of academic achievement."

Habit 6: Develop an Ambitious Imagination

Krznaric believes that "we also need to empathize with people whose beliefs we don't share or who may be 'enemies' in some way. If you are a campaigner on global warming, for instance, it may be worth trying to step into the shoes of oil company executives-understanding their thinking and motivations-if you want to devise effective strategies to shift them towards developing renewable energy. A little of this 'instrumental empathy' (sometimes known as 'impact anthropology') can go a long way.

Empathizing with adversaries is also a route to social tolerance. That was Gandhi's thinking during the conflicts between Muslims and Hindus leading up to Indian independence in 1947, when he declared, 'I am a Muslim! And a Hindu, and a Christian and a Jew.'"

In the end, Krznaric argues that "the 21st century should become the Age of Empathy, when we discover ourselves not simply through self-reflection, but by becoming interested in the lives of others." Encourage your students to try out some of the Six Habits of empathy (perhaps begin by trying them yourself).

3. Does Empathy Have a Dark Side?

Jonathan Lambert

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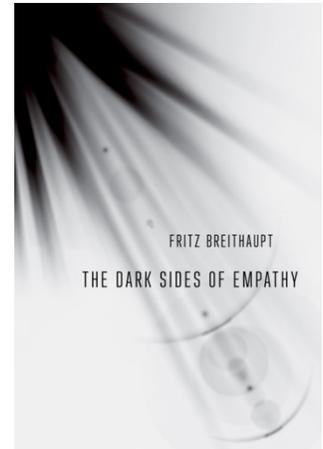
Empathy seems like a good quality in human beings. Pure and simple. It allows us to consider the perspective of others — to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine their experiences. From that empathetic vantage point, only good things can come, right?

Not necessarily, according to author Fritz Breithaupt. "Sometimes we commit atrocities not out of a failure of empathy but rather as a direct consequence of successful, even overly successful, empathy," he writes in his forthcoming book *The Dark Sides of Empathy*.

Breithaupt, who directs the Experimental Humanities Lab at Indiana University, argues that empathy is a morally ambiguous capacity, one that can lead us astray if we don't understand its many sides.

"Empathy is a riddle," Breithaupt says. While it can enrich our lives, Breithaupt says our ability to identify with others' feelings can also fuel polarization, spark violence and motivate dysfunctional behavior in relationships, like helicopter parenting.

Breithaupt, who reviews the cultural and scientific history of empathy in his book, explains that empathy is a relatively new concept. The term only emerged in 1909, when it was translated from a German conception of "feeling yourself into a work of art," he says. In the past 40 years, it has risen to prominence as evolutionary biologists started to explore its role in shaping the human brain. Since then, it's become a core psychological concept, and part of what biologists think makes us distinctly human.



Since empathy is baked into our very being, Breithaupt argues that we must be aware of the good and bad it can enable. NPR's Jonathan Lambert spoke with him about empathy's biological and moral dimensions. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How does science define empathy, and what light does that shed on more philosophical conceptions of it?

For a while neuroscientists thought there was an empathy center in the brain, some little spot somewhere. They thought we could understand this spot and then understand empathy.

But then they came to a much larger realization: Empathy is not in one place in our brains; it's everywhere. Imaging studies showed that we use every part of the brain both for our own actions, our own feelings, but also for the observation of other people. So basically the whole brain does empathy.

That changes a lot of things. It shows us that empathy affects all our thinking. It's with us every moment.

I think that means that empathy is so important to us that it's something we can't neglect. Yes, we're biologically primed for it, but we also have to cultivate it, and cultivation is something that can [be a] lifelong learning task. It never ends.

So science seems to suggest that empathy is sort of baked into our being. I think most people might assume that's a good thing. Why is it not necessarily?

I'm not going to try to convince you to say that empathy is bad or that we should be against empathy. I think it's fundamental for us. It's absolutely something that we have to understand to know how we operate.

I also think that in most cases empathy does more good than bad things. I want to put it in proportion — there are dark sides to empathy.

People assume that empathy is good because it is good for the recipient of empathy — I'm actually skeptical about this.

Empathy might be a little bit more selfish than many people assume. The empathizer feels less alone, they share experiences, they learn something. So we should ask for whom is [empathy] good? It's actually the empathizer in most cases.

How is empathy good for the empathizer?

Beings without empathy live in their own world. They can't really understand that other beings are out there with minds of their own. But beings with empathy understand that there are all these different minds around [that] have different experiences and different feelings. They can participate in them. Someone with empathy lives more than one life. Of course, sometimes that means that you have to carry the suffering of others, but in many cases their joy becomes your joy. So it's a richer, much more complex life. And in that sense, of course empathy is wonderful for you.

But there's a flip side too, right? In your book you talk about something you call "vampiristic empathy." What do you mean by that?

Vampiristic empathy is a form of empathy where people want to manipulate the people they empathize with so that they can, through them, experience the world in such a way that they really enjoy it.

An extreme case of this is helicopter parenting. Helicopter parents are constantly trying to steer their kids in the directions they think are the right directions. Of course they want the best for their children. Very understandable; I have kids and I want what's best for them too.

But I think there's something else seeping in. There's this sort of living along with the kids, imagining how it must be like to have a life that's marked by successes, where obstacles disappear and life can be enjoyed. But that also means that the parents are co-experiencing that life, so they start taking over ... they basically want to use the child almost as a pawn.

In a sense, extreme helicopter parents are robbing their kids of a selfhood so that they can basically project their own self into these kids.

You write that empathy can actually make us more polarized instead of bringing us together. How can that happen?

People imagine that empathy can help resolve tensions in cases of conflict, but very often empathy is exactly that thing that leads to the extremes, that polarizes people even more.

It can happen this way, be it a family feud or something that escalates to a civil war. Humans are very quick to take sides. And when you take one side, you take the perspective of that side. You can see the painful parts of that perspective and empathize with them, and that empathy can fuel seeing the other side as darker and darker or more dubious.

One example of this comes from Northern Ireland, which has a long history of conflict. In the early 2000s school administrators there tried to resolve the conflict between the Catholic and Protestant youth by bringing empathy into the curriculum.

They emphasized that students would learn both sides, and the atrocities committed by one side or the other were always put into context. Students learned this curriculum, but follow-up studies showed that this new generation was more polarized than the one before.

So what this group had internalized was there's always two sides and, in the end, they know their side. So they reorganized this information to empathize with people on their side and withdraw from the other side.

So Northern Ireland had to abandon this project.

The other case is that of terrorists. I think a lot of terrorists may not lack empathy. Rather, they see some plight of a group they identify with — they see them suffering and see it as something horrible, and that becomes more extreme and activates them to become active terrorists.

Are there other downsides to empathy?

[Empathizers] may overextend themselves. If you are a medical doctor who sees a lot of suffering and pain every day, it can very quickly become too much. Something like a third of medical doctors suffer from "empathy burnout" that is so severe that it affects their functioning as doctors and their personal life. They become the victim of feeling empathy.

In the end though, doesn't empathy cause more good than harm?

In one sense, yes. Empathy is weakly correlated with altruistic behavior. So there is a connection. I do think empathy can help people help each other, and that makes us human.

My core argument here is that in many cases of altruistic help or humanitarian aid, people actually don't really empathize as much with the person in need. They identify more with the helper, the hero, the person who intervenes even if it's an imaginary helper.

It can be good when it leads to good action, but it can have downsides. For example, if you want the victims to say 'thank you.' You may even want to keep the people you help in that position of inferior victim because it can sustain your feeling of being a hero.

If you want recognition and if that doesn't come, it can turn into resentment. That's an unfortunately common impulse. On the political scale, I think it happened in Germany. In 2015 Germany opened its borders, very laudably, to refugees. Initially there was a wave of huge enthusiasm, and then suddenly a huge drop in enthusiasm and a lot of resentment.

What are your big takeaways about empathy?

I think we can learn to use empathy in a somewhat controlled way. We can learn when to block it, when to not allow empathy to be manipulated and when to fully turn it on.

Yes, we are born with empathy, but it needs constant practice [to know] when to use it and when not to use it. So the dark sides are so important to know because they teach us that in some cases you shouldn't empathize.

But when it's good, we should embrace empathy, because it can lead to such richer, fuller lives.

Jonathan Lambert is an intern on NPR's Science Desk. You can follow him on Twitter: @evolambert.