



VERA SIFFNER

Becoming Compassionate:

The Origins and Development of Empathic Concern

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UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINS OF COMPASSION takes on special meaning and urgency in times like these when acts of atrocity are so much in the forefront of the news. We wonder what motivates callousness and cruelty, and why some people shatter and destroy the lives of others. Were they born without empathy, without a capacity to be moved by the suffering of others? Did they learn to hate? My collaborators and I have studied the origins and development of children's concern for the welfare of others. Greater knowledge of these human potentials can be used both to encourage more caring, peaceful interactions and to overcome feelings of disregard and disrespect for others. If children can learn to empathize with an injured person, even when they have caused the harm, they should be less likely to hurt others in the future.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Over the last few centuries, religious ideas influenced philosophical thought, which in turn influenced the development of psychological theories about altruism. The commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" is a basic tenet in Judaism and Christianity. Similarly, the parable of the Good Samaritan who pitied and helped an injured man is often cited as an example for Christians. In Buddhism, core virtues include *dana* (giving), *metta* (kindness), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *karuna* (compassion). Similar themes are present in other major religions. There has been a recent surge in funding of research initiatives on these and related topics of prosocial behaviors (e.g., altruism, compassion, service,

and forgiveness). These calls for further scientific research are encouraging, as is the recent interest of neuroscientists in brain mechanisms that underlie empathy. Also, there is greater recognition that science alone cannot provide all the answers and that integrated, interdisciplinary approaches are needed. Neuroscientists and Buddhists, for example, now study and dialogue about these issues within the broader context of discussions on mind, emotion, and consciousness.

The study of morality within psychology has been very recent compared with the centuries of ideas that have emerged from the world religions and philosophies about the meaning of life, how it should be lived, and the motives or reasons that guide human interactions. More than two centuries ago, Adam Smith and his theory of moral sentiments stood out from the work of other philosophers and theologians by placing the construct of empathy squarely in the moral domain. He defined empathy as the ability to have a visceral or emotional reaction to another's distress and to understand another's perspective. Taking another's perspective into account means we also have to understand that the experiences and feelings of others may differ from our own. Empathy is important to the development of insight, for it allows us to see ourselves through the eyes of another person. In emotions theory, empathy or sympathy are seen as "higher-order" or "moral" emotions, along with guilt and shame.

Early views of human nature that became embedded in twentieth-century Western thought and theories of psychology often described people as primarily selfish and hedonistic. Both in psychoanalytic and Piagetian cognitive theories, young children were seen as egocentric,

demanding, dependent on others, and socially inept. Conscience and sympathy were presumed to depend upon slowly maturing cortical structures needed for reflective self-awareness and sensitivity to others' internal states. It also was thought that conscience, which includes feelings of responsibility for others, first required resolution of the child's early sexual and aggressive impulses. Thus children in the first years of life were viewed as incapable of conscience and compassion. This negative view of human nature is not restricted to young children. Some still believe that even in adults, prosocial behaviors are ultimately motivated by desire for reward, fear of punishment, or the need to reduce aversive arousal caused by others' negative emotions. The view of young children as empathic was also counter to most sociobiological theories where the self-serving nature of human social behavior was emphasized. Later derivatives of modern Darwinian evolutionary theory were based on individual reproduction, on "selfish" genes that have been selected at the expense of others that might act for the greater good. Fortunately neuroscience research with adults and naturalistic studies of young children have begun to dispel these simplistic, unidimensional views of human nature.



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EMPATHY IN YOUNG CHILDREN

In recent decades Adam Smith's conception of empathy has become firmly entrenched in research designs. Operational definitions now focus on (1) affective expression or emotional joining, such as feeling sorrow for the suffering of others; (2) cognition, that is, in apprehending or understanding the other's experience; and (3) physiological substrates, as in patterns of autonomic nervous system activity. Empathy is also linked to action, seen in such caring behaviors as helping, providing physical comfort, sharing, or offering verbal sympathy.

Initially empathy was difficult to study, especially in young children, because we lacked accurate, reliable ways of measuring it. Early data were based solely on introspections and self-reports of adults. Where language is minimal or nonexistent, other approaches are required. These include naturalistic observation, mood inductions, and other experimental probes. Using such approaches it becomes possible to analyze different features of children's responses to others' distress. This includes their cognitive

apprehension, facial and vocal expressions of emotion, behavioral responses, and physiological reactivity as indices of concern for others.

There is now a substantial scientific literature on how and why children begin to care about the problems of others, help in situations of need, share their belongings, and show empathy and sympathy. Research supports the idea that empathy begins in the first years of life. Infants cry in response to other infants' distress, and more so in response to real cries than equally aversive noncry sounds. This contagion of emotion is the primitive precursor of

empathic arousal, suggesting that humans are biologically predisposed to be receptive to the feelings of others. During the first year, the infant is also being prepared for later empathy through the attachment relationship with the caregiver. In this process of bonding, parent and infant begin to share emotions, cooperate, and take turns with each other. The ability, however, to transform emotional

reactions into prosocial behaviors requires symbolic skills and regulatory processes that emerge during the second year. One has to be able to separate self from others and to recognize that another's needs may differ from one's own. The ability to regulate emotions is also important, so as not to be personally overwhelmed by another's suffering.

In our own research we carefully trained mothers to provide detailed observations of their children's responses to the emotions of others. We asked them to describe both the distresses children observed (a hungry baby cries) and the distresses they caused in others (child bites mother). We also asked mothers to simulate a specific distress emotion each week (for example, they would pretend to be sad, hurt, or tired). Every three weeks a home visitor simulated a distress. In later studies we videotaped children's responses to simulated distresses in their homes and in our laboratory. This allowed us to obtain independent assessments and to check the validity of the mothers' observations. In all these studies we followed the children longitudinally to track developmental processes. We conducted three studies at the National Institute of Mental Health and a fourth study in Boulder, Colorado. The Colorado study compares monozygotic (all genes are shared) and dizygotic (approximately half of their genes are shared) twins in order to assess genetic influences.

We found that by one year of age, most children first show comfort to another person crying or in pain through simple physical gestures such as patting and hugging. These earliest gestures often appear to reflect a desire to receive as well as provide comfort. During the second and third years, children's comforting begins to become more frequent, more differentiated, and more appropriate to the circumstances (for example, fixing the hurt by trying to put a bandage on, covering mother with a blanket when she is resting, bringing a bottle to a crying infant). Sometimes when one response didn't work, the child would try another. While the most elaborate expressions of concern were typically directed toward the caregiver, they were also expressed toward other family members, friends, and even to strangers.

BIOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The role of biological factors in early expressions of empathy has been considered in several ways. Differences in temperament (inborn dispositions) can incline children toward or away from compassion. Sociable children are more likely to help others in need, whereas shy, inhibited children find this more difficult, particularly with people they don't know well. Physiological arousal activated by another's distress also matters. Extremes of arousal seen either in very high heart rate or very low heart rate can interfere with reaching out toward others in need, which requires more regulated arousal. Genetic influences can be inferred from the fact that monozygotic twins show patterns of empathy that are more similar than those of dizygotic twins. Together these approaches provide evidence of early individual variations in our biological propensities for empathy.

The environment also has a profound influence on children's concern for others. In one study with JoAnn Robinson, maternal warmth and sensitivity led to either a continuation or a heightening of empathy during the second year of life, whereas family conflict and lack of harmony led to a decrease. In another study of children this age, mothers who were empathic, used firm discipline when their children hurt others, and emphasized the rights and welfare of others, had children who later showed high levels of prosocial and reparative behaviors. Two other studies of young aggressive children confirmed the importance of socialization and empathic caregiving. Proactive mothers anticipated the child's needs,

showed sensitivity, exerted modulated and respectful control, and provided structure and organization when their children played with other children. Harsh, authoritarian practices, in contrast, led to diminished empathy over time.

NATURE AND NURTURE

Both theory and empirical data indicate the influence of both nature and nurture in the development of young children's empathy. The early appearance of concern for others indicates the need to revise earlier views of young children as mainly impulse-ridden, egocentric, and motivated to conform through fear. During the second year of life, given optimal environmental conditions, most children make a developmental transition from patterns of personal distress to more modulated and adaptive expressions of concern for the welfare of others. In adverse environments (such as a chaotic family life, child maltreatment, parental mental illness) children may become frightened, threatened, or angry and lash out or turn away from others in distress. In steeling themselves against their own pain, they may also become inured to the pain of those around them, which can adversely affect later social relationships and the ability to discover peaceful solutions to conflicts.

There is much yet to be learned about which conditions enhance our potential for empathy and altruism and which ones render us insensitive to the suffering of others. We need to know more about cultural, societal, institutional, familial, and parental influences on our biological underpinnings, and to understand nature and nurture as cooperating—not competing. Nature needs nurture to nourish our inherent capacities for humane behavior. 🌍

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