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Thinking About People We'd Rather Not Think About

When we see another person crying out in pain from a nasty fall, or an empty stomach, or a broken heart, part of ourselves cries out too. This is the human response. Our capacity for empathy is unparalleled across the animal kingdom, and this sense of shared appreciation for the ups and downs of daily life forms the basis of our abilities to communicate, cooperate, and create in ways that no other species we know of quite can.

Surely, something as fundamental as empathy should supersede other differences that arise between individuals that appear more peripheral.

The problem is, it doesn't always work this way. When people encounter others who seem dissimilar from themselves—different looks, different likes, and especially different core values—their valves for empathy tend to tighten. And this indeed is a problem, including when it comes to politics.

Greater empathy for people who are different from ourselves would not merely make for warmer hellos and goodbyes, but presents the potential for a more productive society. Decades of research across the psychological sciences reveals the benefits of diversity for problem solving and group decision-making, particularly diversity in thought—that is, bringing together two people who have different life experiences and who approach issues from different starting points, over and above whether they simply appear different from one another on the surface. Politics represents one concrete example, wherein what's "best" for a country as a whole (particularly one as large and diverse as the United States) is often more ambiguous than we'd like to let on. Empathy should be the magnet that attracts people from dissimilar parties, ideologies, and other backgrounds to actually come together to put their unique minds to work for the betterment of the collective. But because we most easily empathize with existing in-group members and in turn struggle to empathize with dissimilar out-groups, individual factions predictably emerge. This isn't to say that those who vote for more staunchly liberal or conservative candidates are worse people. But it is to say that empathy, or lack thereof, plays a very special role in political partisanship.

How we think about others

Social and cognitive psychologists like me, who conduct laboratory research on evaluative judgment processes, tend to think of empathy as an exercise in simulation. When I see you go through an emotionally evocative experience—say I'm watching a struggling singer get laughed off the reality show stage following a pitchy audition—the degree to which I react empathically largely depends on the degree to which I imagine *myself* in the singer's place. If people think, "How would *I* be reacting here?", they tend to better appreciate how the other person must actually feel and hence become more likely to offer a helping hand. Of critical importance, then, is uncovering the factors that might influence this simulation process. What makes people more or less likely to step into others' shoes in the first place?

Researchers have uncovered a variety of such factors. Age matters: Older people tend to have a harder time empathizing with others, partly due to more general cognitive decline in imaginative thought. Gender matters: Men, in almost every data set available, tend to report less empathy than women, partly due to asymmetric norms for emotional expressivity. Culture matters: Individualistic cultures like those in North America tend to rank lower on standard indices of empathy than collectivistic cultures like those in East Asia, partly due to a higher emphasis on self-driven achievement. Sara Konrath at Indiana University and her colleagues have done an [especially thorough](#) job of mapping out these kinds of demographic and population-level differences in capacities for empathic responding.

In my own research, I've been investigating another critical factor: experience. Intuition suggests that the more personal exposure a person has with a given experience, the more that they should be able to empathize with others who go through it themselves. Back to the singer example: If I myself have experienced many embarrassing auditions, it follows that I should be able to more readily realize the pain of the situation as compared to another viewer who may have never even sung in public. Therefore, giving people a small "dose" of personal experience should do the trick to enrich their perspective.

Failures of perspective

Many studies have confirmed this intuition. Take, for example, a 2003 experiment by Leaf Van Boven of the University of Colorado at Boulder and George Loewenstein of Carnegie Mellon University. The researchers asked university participants to read a story about a hiker who got lost in the woods for an extended period of time. Their task was to answer a simple question: They were to circle whether they thought hunger or thirst was more painful for the stranded hiker. The real hook involved when and where participants were polled. Among people who were stopped to participate right *before* they entered the campus gym to exercise, just over 50 percent imagined that thirst was most painful for the hiker. However, among people who were stopped to participate right *after* they had exercised and before they could grab a bottle of water, nearly 90 percent chose thirst. The same exact pain of the same exact other person was interpreted wildly differently depending on whether the participants themselves were personally experiencing it. The implication, raised by this and many similar experiments, is clear: If you want to enhance

a person's appreciation for a particular cause, event, or experience, give them a personal taste of what it's like.

This is true—with one big exception: Shared experience does not seem to matter for enhancing our empathy towards others with whom we simply disagree on the surface. Recently, Phoebe Ellsworth and I conducted our own version of the “hiker” experiment around the University of Michigan campus. We added a few twists. First, our story was set in the wintertime and the hiker was thus stranded in the bitter cold. Passersby were asked to indicate whether they thought hunger, thirst, or cold was most painful. We also actually conducted the study during the icy Ann Arbor winter, and recruited participants either within warm campus buildings or while they were standing outside and freezing at campus bus stops. You get the idea. Replicating Leaf's and George's original experiment, we found that people who were exposed to the cold themselves became much more likely to indicate that cold was most painful (also about a 30 percent spike in choice share). Critically, however, this boost in empathy completely turned off when we manipulated the political beliefs of the hiker. When Democrat participants were led to believe that the hiker was a staunch Republican who was trying to make it home for a conservative values rally, they were no more likely to show the boost. That is, even when they themselves were trapped outside in the bitter Midwest winter, they were no more likely to appreciate the painful coldness of this other person. The same went for Republican participants and Democrat hikers.

Another person's internal capacities should *not at all* vary as a function of their surface beliefs. Feeling hungry and cold, or even just sad and upset, are presumably human universals. Regardless of whether you support Hillary, Jeb, Bernie, or the Donald, I should know that you still feel pain when bad things happen to you, just like my own when the same things happen to me.

But remember: Empathy is about simulation. People empathize with others when they first think, “How would *I* feel in their shoes?” but sometimes the shoes just won't fit. If I could never imagine myself being a Republican (if I'm a Democrat), then I'll likely never think to take that first step into appreciating our deeper similarities and the shared challenges of everyday life. I'll fail to invite them onto the team, even though doing so could improve the quality of the game.

Mentally crossing the political aisle

Figuring out how to effectively bridge these empathy gaps between dissimilar others presents a monumental challenge. Differences abound in the world, and people feel especially distant from others who share opposing core values. Jesse Graham at the University of Southern California and his colleagues argue that liberals and conservatives operate on distinct moral codes that readily come into conflict. Jason Mitchell at Harvard University and his colleagues find that the brain recruits separate regions altogether when reflecting on others who agree versus disagree with the self; social differences may have neurobiological ties. And Mina Cikara, also at Harvard, and her colleagues highlight the tendency for people not merely to fail to take the perspectives of partisan rivals, but to actively experience pleasure at the thought of their pain. Unfortunately, it is precisely in

these kinds of sociopolitical domains in which coming together likely has the biggest impact. Creative ideas, novel solutions, and addressing complex decisions may require a representative understanding of the unique individuals involved in the group as a whole.

On the surface, it seems like getting a taste of personal experience in others' unique worlds should help our own understanding of opposing lives, and therefore make people more open to enlisting a diversity of disagreement. But clearly, this is no silver bullet. So what else can we do? Perhaps one of the most effective interventions might involve addressing the actual structural disparities between groups in conflict. Mentalizing is not enough. Real face-to-face interactions should be held. Real inequities should be heard and addressed (e.g., concerns about asymmetric power, status, or resources). And broader, superordinate goals should be explicitly drawn up, emphasizing the tangible benefits for the common whole, rather than the zero-sum tradeoff between individual factions.

To be clear, many sociopolitical gaps cannot be bridged by merely collating the opinions of the other side, no matter how empathic one's intention. Good people and noble causes can lose. Compromise for the sake of compromise can hurt. But until the "right" answer becomes obvious, first recognizing the basic truth that all of those other people possess thoughts, feelings, and minds as genuine as our own might give us the best shot at finding it.

Election season is upon us, and you'll soon be voting for whomever you think is best. But remember that that's what everyone else in the voting booth will be doing, too.

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