

Reflecting on Empathy

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TP/SS

Introduction

- Thinking about empathy and compassion in the world today... what are some examples in the news lately of people not treating each other with compassion?
- What if the world were a more compassionate place?
- Is empathy a skill we can cultivate? If so, how?

The Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

- Mission: To cultivate well-being and relieve suffering through a scientific understanding of the mind
- Using scientific research to cultivate well-being of people of all backgrounds and ages
- Yes, we can cultivate compassion!
- <https://centerhealthyminds.org/about/overview>
- <https://centerhealthyminds.org/assets/images-general/compassion.mp3>

Defining Empathy

“Emotion researchers define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.”

- “What is Empathy?” *Greater Good Magazine*, Science Center at UC Berkeley, 2018

Brené Brown's Definition of Empathy (versus Sympathy)

<https://youtu.be/1Evwgu369Jw>

Types of Empathy

“**Affective empathy**” refers to the feelings we get in response to others’ emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling, or just feeling stressed when we detect another’s fear or anxiety.

“**Cognitive empathy,**” or “perspective taking,” refers to our ability to identify and understand other people’s emotions. Studies suggest that people with autism spectrum disorders have a hard time empathizing.

Paul Ekman and the Science of Emotions

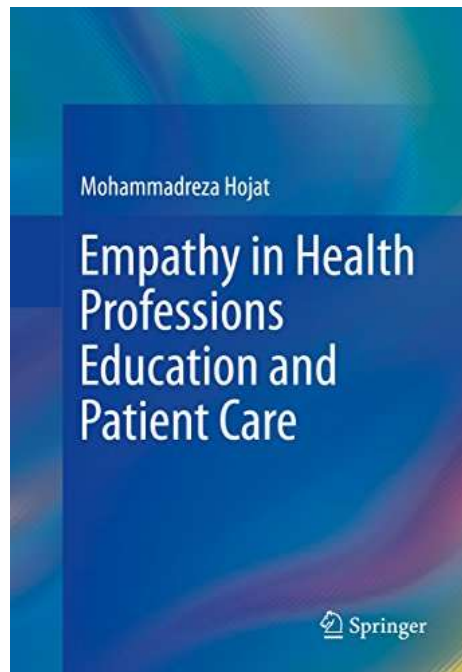
“Emotional empathy”—when you physically feel what other people feel, as though their emotions were contagious. This emotional contagion depends largely on **mirror neurons**, brain cells which activate when we sense another’s emotional state, creating an echo of that state inside our own minds. – “Hot to Help,” Daniel Goleman, *Greater Good Magazine*

The Downside of Emotional Empathy

This can lead to burnout and ineffective work. Think of first responders, medical workers, and social workers. In some cases, cultivated detachment may be more effective.

Are there times when educators need to be detached in order to be effective?

Advantages of Emotional Empathy



“Empathy is healing both for those who receive it and for those who give it.” – Dr. Mohammadreza Hojat



The Jefferson Scale of Empathy

Empathy in patient care is “a cognitive attribute that involves an ability to understand the patient's pain, suffering, and perspective combined with a capability to communicate this understanding and an intention to help.” – Dr. Hojat, Sidney Kimmel Medical College, Philadelphia

Compassionate Empathy

Paul Ekman: Compassionate Empathy: We understand, we feel with others, *and* we are moved to help. This can lead to “constructive anger” when we are moved to change social injustice and suffering.

- Daniel Goleman, *Greater Good Magazine* (2018)

Do we have an empathy problem in
the US?

Michelle Borba, *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*

- Teens are 40 percent lower in empathy levels than three decades ago, and in the same period, narcissism has increased 58 percent. – *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2010)
- Youth bullying increased 52 percent between 2003 and 2007
-*Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2010)

**"WHAT GOOD
IS GRADES
AND GRIT IF
YOU DON'T
HAVE
EMPATHY
AND
PASSION?"**

- Michele Borba



Plugged-in, High Pressure Culture

- Teen stress levels now similar to adult levels (American Psychological Association, 2014)
- The “empathy gap” and mental health – When people experience intense anxiety and are in “survival mode,” they tend to be less empathetic to others.



nunchi (눈치)

(n.) lit. “eye-measure”; the subtle art and ability to listen and gauge others’ moods; the awareness of your surrounding that allows you to read the atmosphere and react to it appropriately

KOREAN | word-stuck 

The Korean Concept of *Nunchi*

Pamela Druckerman, *There Are No Grown-ups: a Midlife Coming of Age Story* (2018)

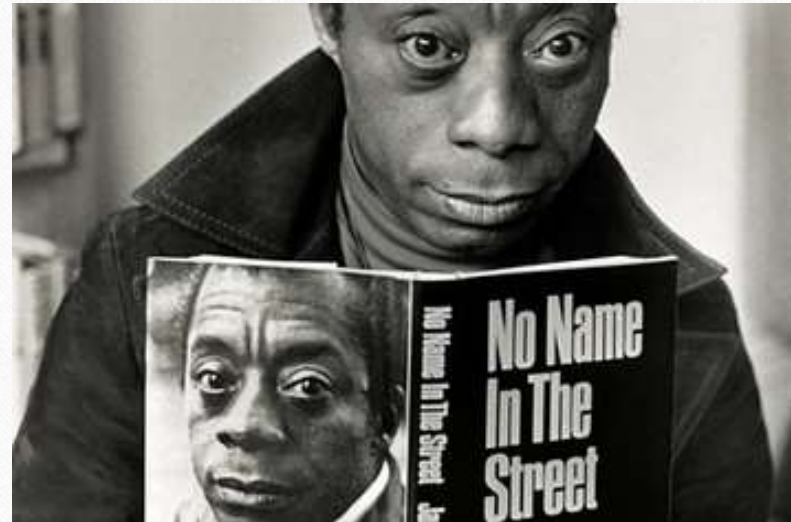
... Apparently, Korean parents often complain that their American-raised offspring lack nunchi. This skill, which goes by various names, is a prized quality in East Asian countries. “The requirement is to read the other’s mind,” the psychologists Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama write in their landmark 1991 paper, “Culture and the Self.” **This requires the “willingness and ability to feel and think what others are feeling and thinking, to absorb this information without being told, and then to help others satisfy their wishes and realize their goals.”**

In America there’s a different emphasis. Instead of tuning to other people, we’re encouraged to tune into our own feelings and preferences and express these. “American culture neither assumes nor values such overt connectedness among individuals, Markus and Kitayama write. In the US, “Individuals seek to maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique individual attributes.”

How can we nurture empathy?

Reading Literature

- “You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.” - James Baldwin

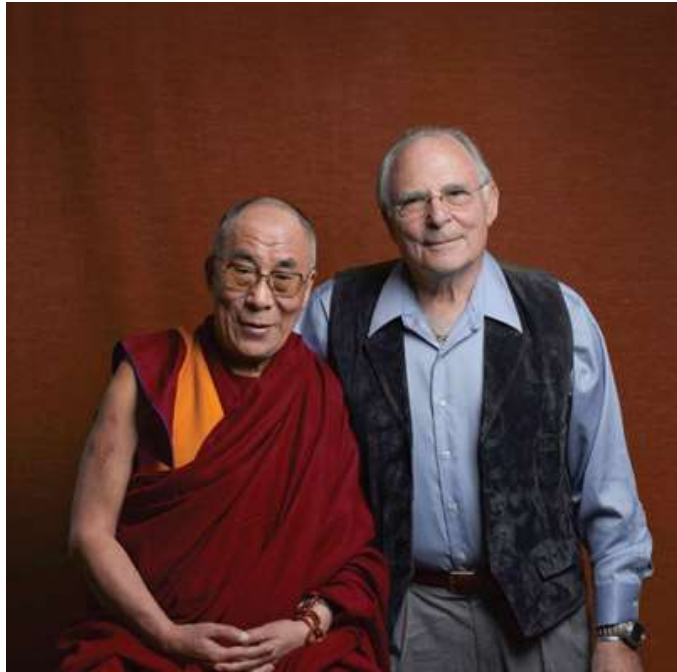


Literature and Empathy

- “A 2011 study published in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, based on analysis of fMRI brain scans of participants, showed that, when people read about an experience, they display stimulation within the same neurological regions as when they go through that experience themselves. We draw on the same brain networks when we’re reading stories and when we’re trying to guess at another person’s feelings.”
- “Other studies published in 2006 and 2009 showed something similar—**that people who read a lot of fiction tend to be better at empathizing with others** (even after the researchers had accounted for the potential bias that people with greater empathetic tendencies may prefer to read novels). And, in 2013, an influential study published in *Science* found that reading literary fiction (rather than popular fiction or literary nonfiction) improved participants’ results on tests that measured social perception and empathy, which are crucial to ‘theory of mind’: the ability to guess with accuracy what another human being might be thinking or feeling.” – “**Can Reading Make You Happier?**” by Ceridwen Dovey, June 9, 2015, *The New Yorker*

Michelle Borba: Empathy Building and Literature

- Step 1: Pose “What If” Questions
 - If you were that character, would you have made the same choice? If that were you, what advice would you give?
- Step 2: Ask “How Would You Feel” Questions
 - Have you ever had that experience? How did you feel? How do think that character feels when X happens?
- Step 3: Switch the Focus from “Me” to “You”
 - Imagine that you are this character. What would you need to overcome this situation?



Meditation & Loving-kindness

- *Emotional Awareness: Overcoming the Obstacles to Psychological Balance and Compassion, A Conversation Between The Dalai Lama and Paul Ekman (2008)*

Loving-kindness

- “Loving-kindness is used in the Buddhist literature in two different senses. There is one, which is, in a sense, the other side of the coin of compassion. **Compassion** is more focused on the suffering of the other, on the wish to see others free from suffering. **Loving-kindness** is focused on happiness, on the wish to have others happy. There is no sequence to them; in some sense, they arise together. When you wish others to be free from suffering, the wish for others to enjoy happiness comes side-by-side.” – The Dalai Lama

Loving-kindness

- “What is crucial for the practice of compassion is the other type. It is translated as **a sense of connectedness**, a sense of endearment to others, where the idea is cultivating a state of mind that makes the sight of others’ suffering unbearable to you. Cultivation of that is the crucial component of compassion. It is said that the stronger this sense of connectedness, the greater your feeling of unbearableness when you see others suffer... When you reach that state of mind, then others are seen almost as an extension of yourself, as part of you... This is the reason why Buddhist teaching refers to all sentient beings as ‘mother’s sentient beings.’ You deliberately try to develop attitude ‘as dear as your own mother.’” – The Dalai Lama

Service Learning

- How can service learning build compassionate empathy in our students?
- What types of service learning projects have you done?
- How can we help build a sense of connection to others through service learning?

Unplugging our Devices and
Building Connection to Others

Questions to Consider

- How can we become more empathetic to our students? Do we nurture our own empathy skills? How can we model empathy in the classroom?
- How can we promote well-being in our students? What role does technology play in well-being?
- Which works of fiction would you like to assign to your students? What kinds of writing / reflecting / discussion assignments could you give to nurture empathy?
- Are there service learning components you could integrate into your courses?

Resources

- The Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison
- *Emotional Awareness: A Conversation Between the Dalai Lama and Paul Ekman, PhD* (2008)
- *Greater Good Magazine*: www.greatergood.berkeley.edu/about
- *How to Break Up With Your Phone* by Catherine Price (2018)
- *In Search of Wisdom: A Monk, a Philosopher, and a Psychiatrist on What Matters Most* by Matthieu Ricard, Christophe André, and Alexandre Jollien (2018)
- The Jefferson Scale of Empathy, Center for Research in Medical Education & Health Care, Sidney Kimmel Medical College in Philadelphia
- *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All About Me World* by Michelle Borba, Ed.D (2016)

Michelle Stowe, Irish Educator

- Empathy: The Heart of Difficult Conversations
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UvDMQyBVLs>

