

Empathy: What is it, and why does it matter?

By Lauren Bull

Empathy is like an English semicolon. The word is used frequently, by many people, but is rarely defined, and therefore is often misunderstood. Most of us feel that empathy is important, but struggle to explain exactly why, especially to the stubborn dissenters who argue against the need for it at all.

Despite being bandied about since the turn of the 20th century, the concept of empathy has received steadily growing attention in Western cultures over the past several decades. Recently, this focus has shifted onto younger generations, and attempts to determine how and why empathy develops (or doesn't) in children and teens, including how it impacts them later on in life.

Before diving into an exploration of young adults and empathy, however, we first need to clarify what the word means to us, and why it matters so much for youth today.

Alright, give me a one sentence definition of empathy.

If there's one thing librarians, neurobiologists, teachers, psychologists, writers, philosophers, and researchers can all agree on, it's that there is no one definition. Decety and Cowell (2015) describe empathy as "an unwieldy concept" that can refer to "a heterogenous collection of related phenomena" (p. 4), while Zaki and Ochsner (2012) call it "a term historically fraught with interpretational ambiguity" (p. 677). Given that 'sympathy' was previously used in English to describe what we now usually term 'empathy,' this confusion around the word is hardly surprising (Koopman, 2015).

So, what is it, then?

Historically, empathy has been described as bidimensional, having both a cognitive, intellectual component as well as an affective, emotional one (Keen, 2006; Kzarnic, 2008; Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012; Decety & Cowell, 2015; Koopman, 2015). Cognitive empathy is described as the practice of taking on another person's perspective, or mentally recognizing and understanding their emotional state, while affective empathy involves mirroring and sharing in those emotions (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012).

Whew, is that all?

Actually, some researchers have also proposed a third dimension that involves an active response or conscious decision-making, grounded in “prosocial concern” (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Krznaric (2008) argues, though, that since the concept of an “appropriate response” is both highly subjective and contextual, it shouldn’t be a necessary consideration for defining empathy. This debate is ongoing.

This is starting to sound complicated.

It can be. The real key, though, is distinguishing empathy from “personal distress.” This is when seeing and sharing in someone else’s emotions causes a person to feel anxiety and discomfort, triggering an aversive or avoidant response (Keen, 2006; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). They feel, are overwhelmed, and pull away. This self-oriented event is a far cry from empathy, as it lacks the cognitive self-awareness and emotional regulation that encourage other-oriented action (Keen, 2006; Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011).

Okay, well how is empathy measured?

Empathy has often been measured by having individuals complete self-report questionnaires, ranking themselves according to how well they fit certain statements or characteristics (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011). Advances in neuroscience have led to the use of more technologically-driven strategies as well, such as fMRI scans, facial expression mapping and electromyographic procedures, and heart rate and skin conductance monitoring (Keen, 2006).

A critique of these traditional measurements is that they have typically tested for only one ‘kind’ of empathy, using decontextualized cues and artificial situations (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). The Reading the Mind in the Eyes test (RMET), for example, targets the cognitive ability to identify another’s emotion (Koopman, 2015), but compromises its own validity through an oversimplified approach. More realistically complex and intersectional tests also yield inconsistent results, however (Decety & Cowell, 2015), prompting the conclusion that measuring empathy is complicated and imprecise at best.

If it’s hard to define and complicated to measure, why are we still talking about it?

Because, in the long run, empathy matters. Together with a whole host of other social

and emotional competencies, it has been demonstrated to lessen violent and aggressive tendencies and “boost self-esteem,” as well as “contribute to...the disposition to learn, improve [school] attendance and contribute to general academic success” (Kznaric, 2008, p. 8).

Empathy also “represents the foundation skill for all the social competencies important for work,” (Goleman, 1998, as cited in Kznaric, 2008, p. 14). People who are more empathic also tend to have better developed workplace and interpersonal skills, like cooperation, communication, and management (Kznaric, 2008).

Additionally, understanding and responding to others’ emotions is strongly tied to individual and collective decision-making and the potential for social change (Decety & Cowell, 2015). As Kznaric (2008) points out, if we can “learn to see the world from each other’s perspectives, and thereby treat one another differently...we will create the human bonds that will reduce social conflict and encourage new forms of mutual understanding, respect and cooperation” (p. 18).

And bringing it back to teens more specifically?

All of the benefits associated with empathy can be directly mapped to the Search Institute’s renowned framework of developmental assets for young adults. These include caring, self-esteem, positive communication, equality and social justice, engagement in academics, and interpersonal and cultural competencies, to name just a few (Brautigam, 2008).

Okay, I’m sold. Empathy is a game changer. Where do I go from here?

I’m so glad you asked. Let’s read on!

References

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