

The Social Terrain of “Empathy”: A Preliminary Consideration

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Abstract

This article explores some of the ways in which “empathy” has in recent years come to be much talked about in society at large. In scholarly discourse, empathy is normally understood as a kind of vicarious experience of another person’s emotional or mental state, distinct from sympathy, compassion, and other related notions. While empathy can be understood in such terms, my interest in this article is to consider empathy not as a category of emotional and cognitive experience as defined in psychology and other academic disciplines, but instead as an object of societal discourse that has come to be invested with meanings and significance that extend beyond—and at times may even conflict with—the more narrowly academic definitions of the term. The article thus maps out some of the ways in which empathy—specifically named as such—has been taken up and made a focal point of discourse and practice in society, in contexts ranging from education to healthcare to immigration.

Introduction

This article explores some of the ways in which empathy, a fundamental aspect of human psychology and social interaction, has in recent years come to be much talked about in society at large. An illustrative example is provided by the Google engineer who made news in mid-2017 after circulating a long, point-by-point critique he had written about the company’s diversity initiatives. One point he emphasized was that the company should, in his words: “De-emphasize empathy. I’ve heard several calls for increased empathy on diversity issues. While I strongly support trying to understand how and why people think the way they do, relying on affective empathy—feeling another’s pain,” he said, was not the way to go (Conger, 2017). His anti-empathy statement was met with rebuttals in columns in *Forbes* and other online publications, detailing how wrong he was about the importance of empathy in the workplace.

What initially drew my interest to the matter of “empathy” was not this Google case but instead reading, in 2015, the comments section to an online article in a UK

newspaper about the refugee crisis facing Europe. In one of the comments, a reader flatly stated—amid the daily stories and images of refugees from Syria and elsewhere attempting to reach European shores on dangerously crowded boats—that we should not be giving refugees our empathy, a perspective that I found astonishing. Even if one is unable or unwilling to do anything to tangibly help refugees, some of whom had lost family members or suffered other difficulties fleeing their home countries, I thought, why not offer our empathy? What rationale could one have for being *against* empathy?

As it turns out, the anonymous person who wrote that comment and the Google engineer are not alone in voicing anti-empathy stances, but they would appear to be a very small minority. Overwhelmingly, the more pronounced view found in society today is that empathy—having it, learning it, in some cases even making others aware that you are feeling empathy toward them—is a social and moral good, and as such, empathy today has come to be very much talked and written about as well as acted upon in spheres of practice ranging from elementary schools to hospitals. In this article, I consider some of the ways in which this is so, drawing on materials including news articles, publications by intellectuals aimed at a broad public audience, and scholarly works dealing with empathy. The present study represents a preliminary mapping out of some of the social terrain of empathy, including how the notion of empathy has been used in framing responses to refugee and other migration issues.

Orientation: empathy and “empathy”

In recent scholarly literature on empathy, coming from a diversity of academic disciplines including psychology, neurosciences, and philosophy, empathy is typically understood as a vicarious experience of another person’s emotional or mental state: e.g., “cases where a person experiences an emotion that another person experiences (or is thought to experience) as a result of recognizing that emotion” (Prinz, 2012, p. 532). In such views, empathy itself is generally not considered an emotion per se, but it serves as an other-oriented vehicle for experiencing emotions or other mental states.

In English, the contemporary concept of empathy owes much to psychologist Edward Titchener, who in 1909 used “empathy” as a translation of German psychologist/philosopher Theodor Lipps’s notion of *Einfühlung* (see Young, 2012). For Lipps, *Einfühlung* was a kind of spontaneous “inner imitation” whereby “I observe someone’s facial expression of affect and ‘there exists within me a tendency

to experience in myself the affect that naturally arises from that gesture’ ” (Young, 2012, p. 161). One might, for instance, recognize in another’s facial expression a look of arrogance and spontaneously feel within oneself that very arrogance; if the arrogant look of another is directed at oneself, this may be a negative experience for the observer, taken as denial of oneself.

While empathy thus may certainly involve the feeling of emotions within oneself, it is not limited to emotional experiences. A distinction often drawn in academic discourse today is between empathy as feeling what another person feels (*affective* empathy) and the cognitive taking of another’s perspective so as to be able to identify and understand what another person feels (*cognitive* empathy) (Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry, 2009; Hoffman, 2011). The latter is akin to a scenario where, for instance, person A is standing outside a room looking in through a window at person B, who is standing in the center of that same room, and person A imaginatively places himself in the shoes of person B and “sees” the room from the vantage point of person B. In this way, empathy may be as much about the cognitive imagining of oneself in the situation of another as it is about feeling what it is that the other person is feeling. Empathy is thus distinguished from sympathy, a “pro” attitude of feeling *for* another person (Smith, 2011, p. 103). As Allan Young puts it, the distinction between empathy and sympathy “is both analytical and moral—I comprehend Zande witchcraft beliefs without wishing to promote them. Sympathy readily blends into compassion and perhaps an impulse to improve the situation of the observed individual” (Young, 2012, p. 162).

While empathy can be understood in such terms, my interest in this article is to consider empathy not as a category of emotional and cognitive experience, as defined in psychology and other academic disciplines, but instead as an object of societal discourse that has come to be invested with meanings and significance that extend beyond—and at times may even conflict with—the more narrowly academic or “scientific” definitions of the term. This is similar to the manner in which aspects of language, distinct from scholarly linguists’ understandings of language and its functioning, can become invested with cultural and ideological meanings (Kroskrity, 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998). Rather than taking empathy as merely a psychological concept, then, I am interested here in mapping out some of the ways in which empathy—specifically named as such—has been taken up and even made a focal point of discourse and practice in society. One specific concern is the ways in which empathy has been given significance in contemporary debates

over refugees and immigration, with empathy itself at times becoming an object of contestation.

Rising interest in “empathy”

That “empathy” has grown in social significance is suggested by the fact that the term has come to appear increasingly in recent years in English-language newspapers. This can be glimpsed in the number of newspaper articles and commentaries containing the word. As shown in Figure 1 below, for instance, there has been a notable increase in usage of the term “empathy” in articles in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* between 1990 and 2015. The aggregate number of such articles appearing in those three publications per year more than doubled, for instance, between 2005 and 2015, from roughly 400 to over 900 (in fact, over 1000 for three of the four years between 2013 and 2016).

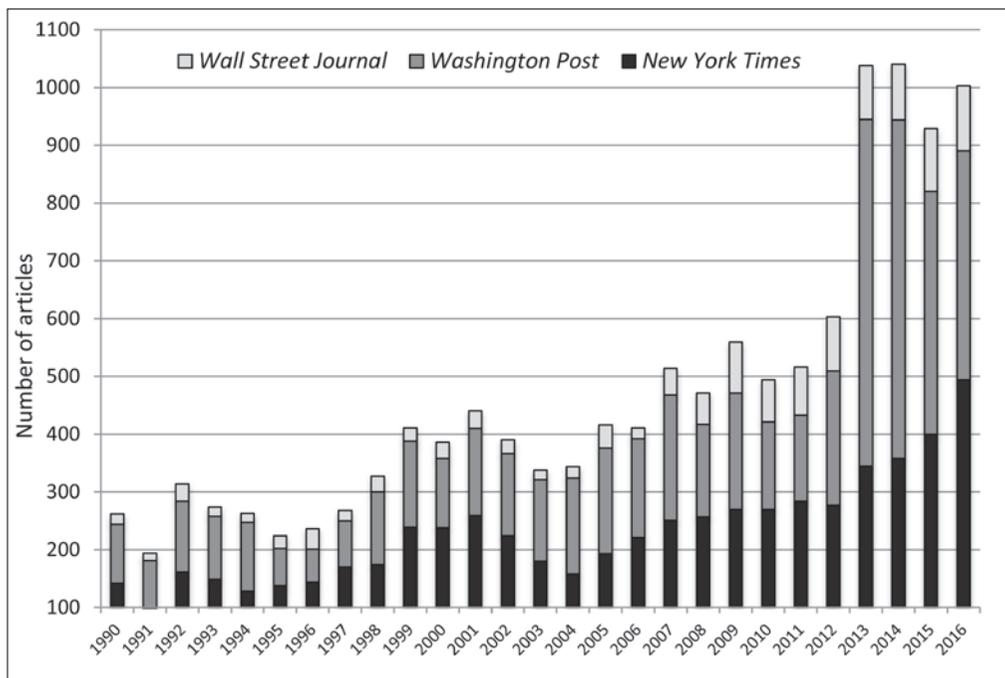


Figure 1. Aggregate number of articles containing the word “empathy” in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*.¹

1. Figures were obtained via *ProQuest* database search (November 26, 2017). “Articles” here is inclusive of regular news articles, commentaries, and other such content from the three news outlets shown in the chart.

While it is beyond the aims and scope of this article to speculate as to the probable factors contributing to this increase and how it may be linked to other, perhaps parallel developments in society (such as the “mindfulness” movement), it should be noted that this appears not to be a narrowly American phenomenon. A similar—if not even more pronounced—upswing in “empathy” articles is apparent in at least some English-language news outlets based in other countries, including the *Guardian* (U.K.) and the *Australian*.² In the five-year period spanning 2000-2004, for instance, the *Guardian* published 647 such articles; in 2010-2014, the number climbed to 2081. During the same period, the *Australian* saw an increase from 553 to 945. The international dimension of this increase should perhaps not be surprising, given the global dissemination of news content via services such as AP and UPI, but it also suggests that the public discourse on empathy is international in scope rather than a peculiarly American phenomenon. Indeed, some notable proponents of “empathy” hail from the U.K., Australia, and Canada, in addition to the U.S., as will be discussed below. Moreover, the discourse of empathy is not limited to newspapers but extends to a variety of spheres of practice in society, some of which will be discussed below.

Empathy as a social and moral good

Despite the fact that, in more narrowly scholarly considerations, empathy is morally neutral or even morally indifferent in the sense that imaginatively putting oneself in the position of another does not equate to “taking sides” with that person or advocating that person’s position, in more broadly *societal* discourse on empathy this is often not the case. Indeed, empathy has come to be regarded by many as a basic social good—as something that is intrinsically tied to bringing about positive effects in our relations with others. Or, contrarily, certain problems in society are sometimes attributed to a “lack of empathy.”

One highly prominent proponent of the notion that empathy toward those in positions of vulnerability is socially and morally good is Barack Obama, in the years both leading up to and during his presidency. In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama pointedly describes empathy as being “at the heart of my moral code” (Obama, 2006, p. 66) and diagnoses America as suffering from an “empathy deficit” that underlies any number of persistent problems in American society. Rather than seeing empathy as something that is morally neutral, for Obama empathy is itself a positive

2. Figures were retrieved from the *LexisNexus Academic* database (November 27, 2017).

value that “must be acted upon” (2006, p. 68). In his 2013 commencement speech at the historically black Morehouse College, Obama thus asked the school’s students to reflect and act upon their experience of knowing “what it’s like to be an outsider... to be marginalized... to feel the sting of discrimination.” Tapping into that experience, explained Obama, “should endow you with empathy—the understanding of what it’s like to walk in somebody else’s shoes, to see through their eyes, to know what it’s like when you’re not born on 3rd base, thinking you hit a triple. It should give you the ability to connect. It should give you a sense of compassion and what it means to overcome barriers” (Obama, 2013). In Obama’s terms, as he noted in his Morehouse speech, empathy is not simply putting oneself in another’s shoes; it is closely tied to the expansion of one’s sense of connection to others: caring “about justice for everybody, white, black and brown. Everybody” (Obama, 2013).

The advocating of empathy as socially and morally good has come not only from individuals, like Obama, but from organizations as well. A Canada-based organization called “Roots of Empathy” represents one such case. Founded in 2000, the organization’s ambitious mission is to change the world by building “caring, peaceful, and civil societies through the development of empathy in children and adults” (Roots of Empathy, n.d.-b). Similar to empathy as characterized by Obama, empathy here is not merely an inner experience but something that calls for an outward response. As stated by the organization’s founder: “Empathy is frequently defined as the ability to identify with the feelings and perspectives of others. I would add *and to respond appropriately* to the feelings and perspectives of others” (Gordon & Siegel, 2005, p. 30; emphasis added).

The program works toward instilling empathy, as such, through regular classroom activities with elementary school children at their own school. Every few weeks throughout the school year, an elementary school class is visited by a neighborhood infant, the baby’s parent, and a Roots of Empathy instructor. In one such class in a Toronto public school, for instance, a class of 18 first-graders watched “spellbound” as the five-month-old baby in their midst struggled on the floor to reach for a toy and—after failing to get it—started to cry. As this transpired, the Roots of Empathy instructor prodded the school children, “What is he telling us? Is he frustrated that he can’t reach the toy?... What else do you think he might be feeling? How can we tell?” (Brown, 2013). Through such experiential activities and careful instruction, the Roots of Empathy program works to teach young children how to identify, reflect upon, and talk about both their own feelings and the feelings

of others. Now carried out in a number of countries—including Canada, the U.S., New Zealand, England, and Germany—the Roots of Empathy program aims to raise “levels of empathy, resulting in more respectful and caring relationships and reduced levels of bullying and aggression” in the short term, and in the long term to help cultivate more responsible citizens (Roots of Empathy, n.d.-a). Here as well, empathy is presented as morally charged and something to be actively promoted as a force for societal good.

The widespread sense of empathy as “an unalloyed good” (Bartlett, 2016) no doubt informs a great many other ways in which empathy has been taken up in recent years in various spheres of public discourse and action. The 2016 edited volume *Fostering Empathy Through Museums*, for instance, starts from the premise that, “[m]ore than ever, museums need to maximize their value in this troubled world” (Koster, 2016, loc. 85) and that a key vehicle for doing so is forging empathy through art, history, civil rights, and other museums and related activities. The Doctors Without Borders interactive exhibit “Forced From Home” attempts this by inviting the public to “see what we see” in providing assistance to refugees and other displaced people and thereby gain a deeper understanding of the global refugee crisis (Doctors Without Borders, n.d.-a).³ Another endeavor, the Empathy Museum founded by Australian sociologist/philosopher Roman Krznaric (2014), takes this a step further by making empathy the explicit focus of the museum. Said to be “the world’s first museum dedicated to helping visitors develop the skill of putting themselves in others’ shoes” (Morris, 2015), the museum’s aptly named “A Walk in My Shoes” exhibit invites visitors to literally put on and walk in the shoes of a stranger—e.g., a miner, a sewage worker, a refugee—while listening through headphones to stories from that person’s life (Gardner, 2016).

Empathy has as well drawn attention in medical care, where, according to a 2014 article, it “is widely agreed upon that empathy is a good thing, and that it should be the basis of attitudes towards patient care, or should at least play an important role in the doctor-patient relationship” (Decety & Fotopoulou, 2015, p. 1). The authors of that article report a “veritable tsunami” of publications dealing with empathy in

3. For younger visitors to the exhibit, an explicit aim is for students to “experience and articulate empathetic thoughts and feelings, and gain an enhanced appreciation for the experiences of displaced people” (Doctors Without Borders, n.d.-b).

patient care, including how it can be taught in medical schools (2015, p. 2).⁴ Empathy in medical practice is closely linked to *caring*—not merely providing treatment—and providing “compassionate” medical care. In this vein, one physician author has called for an “epidemic of empathy” in medical care, which would entail “a steady, relentless increase in the proportion of clinicians and other personnel who are clearly tuned in to what was *really* happening to patients and their families” (Lee, 2014; see also 2015). In such views, empathy in medical care is seen as beneficial to both patients and healthcare providers, with empathy not merely a capacity that doctors have or do not have, to individually varying degrees, but something that they can specifically be trained to develop (Wünderich et al., 2017). While empathy, narrowly defined, is something that can be achieved within the interiority of the self—merely by imaginatively placing oneself in the shoes of another—what would seem to be called for in healthcare is a kind of performative enactment of empathy whereby the patient herself can *feel* that the doctor is empathizing. Empathy must be not only achieved; it must also be demonstrated to the patient.

Empathy and immigration

Contemporary discourse on refugees and other migrants has been very much informed by the pervasive, though not universally accepted, notion that empathy toward those in positions of vulnerability is socially and morally good. Amid the European refugee crisis from 2015, and stories of migrant travails and tragedies and political reactions to the growing number of people entering Europe from the Mediterranean, photographs—particularly those showing the individual “human face” of the migrant experience—were undoubtedly key in influencing at least initial attitudes toward the crisis by stirring up empathetic reactions as well as commentaries invoking empathy as well. According to one AFP report, for instance, the father of the three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi, whose lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach, later “called for empathy and understanding for those caught up in the refugee crisis” (“Father,” 2015).

The British Red Cross has worked not only to help refugees, but has also endeavored to counteract negative societal attitudes toward them. For instance, in 2015 the British Red Cross produced a film on the refugee crisis called “I am

4. The authors’ chart showing the number of publications addressing clinical empathy and teaching empathy, between 1990 and 2015 (Decety & Fotopoulou, 2015, p. 3), has an upward trend similar to that shown in Figure 1 in the present article.

a human” to help put a human face on refugees. The film and its accompanying educational resources seek, in part, to help young people “develop empathy for refugees and asylum seekers who might experience the harmful effects of stigma [and] use facts to formulate more informed and respectful views on refugees and asylum seekers” (British Red Cross, 2016). On its website, the British Red Cross provides various downloadable teaching resources related to refugees and asylum-seekers, aimed at part in cultivating empathy toward them. A teaching resource called “The Long Road,” for instance, is targeted at students aged 14-19. One of its learning objectives is for young people to “[e]mpathise with refugees and asylum seekers through gaining deeper understanding of the reasons why people flee, what they leave behind, the difficulties of their journeys and uncertainty surrounding their arrivals and future lives.”

Commentators in favor of support for refugees and other migrants have often used the term “empathy” in an accusatory way toward those holding opposing views, depicting anti-immigrant views and acts as a “lack” or “failure” of empathy. An opinion piece in the *Washington Post* describes empathy as not only “the ability to see through another’s eyes, to understand and value the feelings of others” but also as “the bedrock of civil discourse and durable policy” (Von Drehle, 2017). In regard to the political climate in the U.S. surrounding the plight of long-term U.S. residents who were brought to the country illegally as children, the commentary finds in Obama’s presidential successor a disturbing “lack of empathy.” In a similar tone, a commentary in the *Independent* finds that, disconcertingly, amid British government cuts to subsistence payments for asylum-seekers and other such measures, empathy has become “an unfashionable political emotion” (Foster, 2015). Even German chancellor Angela Merkel, who all but opened her country’s doors to refugees in 2015, came under criticism for her supposed lack of “empathy” when, during a televised town hall-type event that year, she seemingly made a 14-year-old Palestinian girl cry by suggesting that her family would end up being deported (Dearden, 2015).

Some have argued that empathy toward refugees and other migrants is not only desirable but necessary for properly formulating policy responses to immigration. As Empathy Museum founder Roman Krznaric puts it, “we can never have a cogent or just debate about the influx of immigrants into the European Union until we hear the voices of refugees squeezed onto death-trap boats in the Mediterranean” (Krznaric, 2015). In Krznaric’s view, it is not so much *affective* empathy that is needed here; it is *cognitive* empathy. He states: “The key is ‘perspective taking’—trying to imagine

what it might be like to be ‘the other’—which makes us care about the plight of those outside our immediate community and treat them as human beings of equal value to ourselves.” In such a view, while cognitive empathy may be taken as morally neutral in and of itself, it is clearly seen as opening the door to other, more “pro” responses: it prompts us to *care* about others and treat them as equals, not as strangers whose lives are of lesser significance. Empathy here is envisioned as a bonding and leveling mechanism—it *involves* us with others and has us do so respectfully.

Conclusion

Yale psychologist Paul Bloom has been a leading figure in arguing *against* empathy. Contrary to the widespread notion that empathy is a moral and social good, empathy in his view is in fact a poor guide for important moral decisions that we must make. Empathy, according to Bloom, by its very nature is focused on individuals’ predicaments and narratives and relies on our own biases toward people we can readily identify with. Following Bloom’s line of reasoning, we might thus be prompted to revisit the widely disseminated photos of the three-year-old Syrian boy whose dead body was found on a Turkish beach, a tragic end to one family’s attempt to flee to Europe, and ask ourselves if the outpouring of empathy generated at the time by those photos would have been any lesser had the boy been of a different skin color, or been dressed in clothing less like the clothing our own children wear, or otherwise looked less like a child we might see in our own neighborhood. Even worse, Bloom claims, the emotional pull of empathy is exploitable and can be used toward retributive ends, even violence (Kirkpatrick & Bloom, 2016).

In the U.S., somewhat less-profound, conservative criticisms of empathy have emerged, particularly when empathy has been perceived as something associated with liberalism. Indeed, conservative critics of president Obama sometimes latched onto his “empathy” as a focal point for attack. Gary Bauer, a one-time presidential candidate and president of a conservative advocacy NGO called “American Values,” argued in an online commentary that Obama’s empathy is unevenly applied, tilted in favor of the liberal causes he supports and the social groups aligned with his own views. Conservatives, Bauer claimed, can be every bit as empathetic as Obama, but they tend to believe that “it’s not the government’s role to be the primary dispenser of empathy” (Bauer, 2010; see also Ponnuru, 2012). Conservative U.S. congressman Steve King depicted Obama’s “empathy” as being at odds with rationality. Following a 2010 Obama speech calling for immigration reform, King issued a press release

stating that Obama’s speech had been “long on emotion and empathy, and short on rational thought,” and that, ominously, a “nation that substitutes emotion and empathy for rational thought will eventually digress into the Dark Ages” (“King,” 2010). To an extent, it may be that such conservative anti-empathy derives from a sense that in much of the public discourse on issues such as immigration, societal diversity, and the socially disadvantaged, “empathy” essentially functions as a codeword for liberalism; advocating empathy would mean aligning oneself with liberal positions.

There is, to be sure, no denying that in numerous spheres of social discourse and practice today empathy is a loaded term. Although in certain academic fields a clear distinction may be drawn between empathy, sympathy, compassion, and related responses, in “empathy” as a widespread sociocultural phenomenon—in elementary school classrooms, in museums, in hospitals—this is hardly the case. Indeed, advocates of empathy in society at large often seem to *want* empathy to blend into feeling *for* others; not just to stand in another’s shoes, but to stand *with* the other. Looking forward, we might recall Theodor Lipps, for whom the spontaneous “inner imitation” of *Einfühlung* was something that “naturally arises”; as empathy increasingly becomes something that is explicitly *taught* and in the long term quite likely becomes standardized in certain ways, it remains to be seen how it will play out in education, healthcare, politics, and other territories of practice.

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