

Reflexive empathy: On predicting more than has ever been observed

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Abstract: A model positing that perception of another's affective state automatically generates matching emotional and instrumental responses predicts more than has ever been observed. Reflexive empathicness would produce emotional exhaustion, inhibitory strain, and debilitate everyday functioning. Self-regulation of empathic responses involves, not only reactive inhibition, but agentic proactive control. Pervasive inhumanities involve selective disengagement of empathic restraints through dissociative psychosocial mechanisms.

The article by Preston & de Waal (P&deW) is an ambitious feat of synthesis encompassing diverse theories of empathy and manifestations of empathicness across individuals, species, stages of development, and situational circumstances. In their view, their perception-action model can fully integrate this entire theoretical and empirical diversity. As the authors amply document, organisms have the capacity to react to another's emotional state. However, they do not come equipped with ready-made emotional and instrumental responses activated reflexively by evolved brain design. This capacity must be cultivated experientially. Once developed, empathic proneness remains subject to modification by experience. Moreover, in the case of humans, empathic responsiveness is extensively under cognitive control.

The capacity for vicarious arousal plays a vital role in empathic responsiveness. Learning experiences largely determine whether observers will be roused or unmoved by the emotional expressions of others. The research by Church (1959) underscores the importance of correlative experiences in vicarious arousal. Cries of pain by a conspecific evoke strong emotional arousal in animals who had suffered pain together; weak arousal in animals who had undergone equally painful experiences but never correlatively; and leave unmoved animals who had never been subjected to painful treatment. Monkeys reared in total isolation during their infancy remain unresponsive, behaviorally and physiologically, to the facial expressions of emotion by other monkeys (Miller et al. 1967). There is little in the preceding findings to support the view that perception of the emotional state of another automatically activates a shared emotional state in observers.

Correlative experience plays a central role in creating not only empathetic responsiveness, but counter-empathy as well (Englis et al. 1982). Past conjoint experiences in which modeled pleasure signaled reward for oneself and modeled distress signaled personal pain heighten observers' empathetic reactions to the model's emotional expression alone. Observers who had undergone discrepant experiences (e.g., when a model's joy brings suffering to oneself) respond indifferently or counter-empathetically to the model's joy and suffering (Englis et al. 1982). Vicarious activation relies heavily on a cognitive conveyance. Thus, when observers are merely led to expect cooperative interactions, the joy and distress of a cooperative model elicit similar reactions from observers. By contrast, displays of joy by an alleged competitive model distress observers and displays of distress calm them (Lanzetta & Englis 1989).

Similarly, observers respond empathetically to the emotional experiences of models simply depicted as in-group members, and counter-empathetically to those portrayed as out-group members, in the absence of having shared any experiences with them (McHugo et al. 1982). If a sense of mutuality has been created, so that the joys and distresses of an outgroup member foretell similar experiences for the observers, correlative outcomes transforms disempathy to empathy.

To underscore the continuity of empathy across species, P&deW minimize the power of the human advanced capacity for symbolization in the regulation of empathicness. Because a functional consciousness is not a hallmark of lower species, it too gets

short shrift in the perception-action model of empathy. According to P&deW, cognitive capacities may augment empathicness but the governing processes do not require conscious awareness. As already noted, thought processes play a regulatory role in both empathic and counter-empathic reactions to the emotional states of others. In social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986; 1992) vicarious arousal operates mainly through an intervening self-arousal process. Because of their capacity for emotional self-arousal, people can cognitively generate emotional reactions to cues that are only suggestive of a model's emotional arousal; their emotional reactions to the same expressive cues can vary markedly depending on what they believe about the situational causes of the model's reactions; and they can neutralize the impact of human distress by mobilizing calming trains of thought.

Cognitive self-arousal can take two forms: personalizing the experiences of another or taking the perspective of another. Evidence suggests that personalizing modeled experiences is more vicariously arousing than perspective-taking. Observers react more emotionally to the sight of a person in pain if, at the time, they imagine how they themselves would feel than if they imagine how the other person feels (Stotland 1969). Studies of the development of empathetic understanding in young children corroborate the importance of personalization over perspective taking (Hughes et al. 1981).

A major problem with an automatically activating empathic mechanism of the sort proposed in the perception-action model is that it predicts vastly more than has ever been observed. Moreover, it would exact too heavy an emotional toll to be adaptive. In their daily transactions, people are repeatedly exposed to others in distress, pain, apprehension, frustration, anger, and despondency. If perception of the affective states of others automatically generated matching emotions in observers, they would not only be continually burdened with emotional exhaustion but unable to conduct their daily affairs. Indeed, in many service professions, where each day brings endless lines of distressed people, if service providers fully experienced the agonies suffered by their clients, their viscera could not withstand the wear and tear for long. Those who cannot regulate their empathic arousal fall victim to emotional burnout (Bandura 1997; Maslach & Jackson 1982). Adaptive functioning requires effective self-regulation of empathic reactivity. Even informal observation of human transactions would reveal that people are hardly consumed by empathicness. All too often they act indifferently or callously to the suffering of others.

P&deW include an inhibitory function in their model. However, describing the neural mechanics of inhibition at the prefrontal and spinal cord locus does not explain how people come to regulate their empathicness. There is a difference between reactive inhibition at the neuronal level and proactive control at the psychosocial level.

In the conceptual scheme proposed by P&deW, empathy does not involve a conscious agent. The evolved perception-action mechanism does the empathic work automatically. In fact, people regulate their everyday emotional life by developing strategies for managing vicarious arousers, especially the aversive forms. This is graphically revealed in microanalysis of coping strategies in vicarious emotional learning through the painful experiences of models (Bandura & Rosenthal 1966). Observers under high epinephrine-induced arousal resorted to a variety of maneuvers to keep the model's pain out of sight and out of mind. By these cognitive and attentional means, they insulated themselves from the modeled distress and learned little from the model's aversive experiences.

P&deW comment on empathy impairments in sociopathy and autism in terms of dysfunctions in prefrontal systems. Deficient empathicness is a pervasive phenomenon rather than confined to pathologic types, as evident in the widespread inhumanities that people perpetrate on each other. Otherwise considerate people selectively disengage empathic restraints and moral self-sanctions in executing destructive activities in the name of religious doctrines, righteous ideologies, and nationalistic imperatives. The

conversion of socialized people into fierce fighters is achieved, not by altering their personality structures, aggressive drives, moral standards, or neural structures. Rather, it is accomplished by cognitively reconstruing injurious conduct so that it can be done free from the restraint of empathy and self-censure. The psychosocial mechanisms of empathic disengagement enable people to do extraordinarily cruel things (Bandura 1999). The prevalent failures in empathic control stem from ideology rather than impaired biology.
