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1

Introducing Empathy

Empathy, high and low

‘I thought about killing myself.’

‘Really? Suicide?’

‘Yes. Everything and everyone I loved seemed to have gone. Especially after my mum died at the end of last year.’

‘Right. Wow. Well, well. I mean, when you’re thinking about it, did you think about, like, how you’d do it? Had it got that far?’

‘Well no, but, you know, I sometimes feel there’s no point in going on. It all seems so bleak. I can still, you know, sometimes, feel very alone.’

‘Still, a pretty extreme thing to do. Ending it all. Big stuff.’

‘But it didn’t feel quite like that. Life, you know... I mean sometimes I wonder what there is to keep me going.’

This conversation might have taken place between two friends, two strangers who met on their way to visit a holy shrine, or a client and counsellor, although admittedly not one cut out for a long or successful career. Here is another similar conversation:

‘My mother died last year. I miss her.’

‘It can hurt. It’s surprising how it can affect you.’

‘Yes. I can still feel my stomach tightening. And I get these feelings of such emptiness. They come in waves out of the blue.’

‘You look very sad.’

‘Yeah. I do feel sad. It hurts. And the pain, the sadness won’t go away.’

‘Tell me a bit about your mother.’

‘She was good. We got on well. Nothing dramatic, you

know [said with a quick smile]. But after Dad died when I was still quite young, she was always there. And that was nice. And now she's not there. And I still can't quite take it in.'

'That sounds really hard.'

These exchanges both involve someone who is feeling very low and in a state of some despair. Where the conversations differ is in the quality of the other person's responses. The first respondent is clearly failing to tune into the other's feelings of bleakness and desperation. He or she continues to run on his or her own agenda. We might say that this individual lacks empathy. As a result, the connection and conversational flow stutter as cues and needs are missed.

In contrast, the second respondent is picking up some of the other's pain. He or she is trying to tune into the person's feelings: imagining, sensing what it must be like to be someone who is hurting and in grief. This effort helps the other stay with their feelings, perhaps with the prospect of exploring them in the safety of a caring relationship. We might say that the respondent is showing some empathy.

This is a book about empathy. It is one of those skills that, when present, humanises people and their relationships. When empathy is missing, however, the world feels harsh, indifferent, less caring, even brutal. Like most human traits, individuals vary in their capacity to empathise. Even one individual can be empathic sometimes but a little less attuned at others. Levels of empathy might shift depending on mood, the people involved and the situations in which we find ourselves.

We recognise empathy when it is present, but it can be hard to sustain. Not surprisingly, this seemingly virtuous but often elusive capacity has interested people from a wide range of disciplines and practices. Over the last hundred years or so, interest in empathy has steadily grown. In fact, the twenty-first century appears to be witnessing something of an explosion of enquiry and scholarship into the capacity to empathise, as a quick scan of this book's bibliography will confirm. We might also note that of all the groups that have taken an interest in empathy, the helping professions have probably shown the most enthusiasm and greatest commitment.

Mind reading

There is something heroic about our need to know and understand. Indeed, the need to know how the world works seems to be part of our very nature. Even babies, writes Bruner (1990), arrive with a readiness to search for meaning; meaning, note, not only knowledge. It is the search for meaning, rather than simple explanation, that makes life particularly interesting. Thinking based on cause and effect is all well and good, but when it comes to handling human relationships we seek meaning, we look for purpose, we fret over intention. We rarely take matters at face value. We observe, then interpret. We are a mind-reading species.

We take this ability to recognise and reflect on what other people might be thinking and feeling so much for granted that we sometimes forget what an extraordinary skill it is. We could say that this intense interest in what other people do is one of the defining characteristics of our species. We do it constantly, as we talk, gossip, plot and ponder. It explains our obsession with TV soaps, the fixation of newspapers with the lives of the rich and famous, and the fact that romantic fiction and crime thrillers are the bestselling genres of literature. We are fascinated by other people's behaviour.

Most of our everyday talk, whether we are taxi drivers or teachers, heart surgeons or hairdressers, is about who is doing what with whom, why they're doing it and what will happen next (Dunbar 1996). It isn't sufficient simply to observe behaviour; we want to know what is going on in people's heads that might explain it. 'Don't trust him. He may be all smiles, but he's really ambitious and will slag you off behind your back.' 'Do you know why she's in such a good mood today? She's won a holiday in a newspaper competition! How amazing is that?' It turns out that success in the social world depends on our ability to recognise and understand, interpret and anticipate the mental states and behaviour of others.

Indeed, so pervasive is this urge to make sense of behaviour and understand experience from the inside out that it has conjured up an astonishing range of human enquiry. Philosophers wonder how we might know other minds, and

whether knowing other minds makes us moral. Artists explore the world of form, substance and sensation, trying to feel things from the inside in order to communicate the experience in words, music, paint and stone. Social scientists and psychologists marvel at how we ‘do’ social life. How we relate, cooperate and create seems to depend on the ability to observe, interpret and understand the minds of others. And when our hearts are broken or our heads are in a muddle, we want to be understood. We seek love, we need comfort, we search for safety. At such times we turn to close friends and caring family, nurturing teachers and skilled counsellors.

And whenever there is talk of minds and morals, love and relationships, care and concern, there is also talk of empathy – that is, the capacity to read and maybe connect with other people’s minds and their interior experience.

Outline and aims

There is therefore a story to be told about empathy and its rise. In Chapters 2 to 5 we shall consider first what empathy is, why we have it and how it develops. These opening pages look at empathy as it crops up in art, aesthetics, evolutionary psychology, developmental psychology and the work of neuro-developmental scientists, who study the brain and how it processes social information.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, we recognize that the capacity to empathize varies between individuals, and we wonder why this might be so. In particular, scientists have taken a great deal of interest in people whose empathy levels appear to be low, including individuals diagnosed with autism, psychopathy or borderline personality disorder. This interest in ‘disorders of empathy’ is partly driven by a concern for those who suffer an empathy deficit and the impact this has on their social life, and partly by a recognition of the role that empathy plays in defining our shared humanity. Of course, it should follow that if low empathy predicts problems with social relationships, then high empathy should sponsor a more successful social life. The importance of empathy in the skilful conduct of relationships has long been appreciated by psychotherapists, counsellors and

others in the helping professions. It is to these groups and their work, via client feedback studies, that we therefore turn to in Chapters 9 and 10. And given that empathy is recognized as a key component of effective treatment, Chapter 11 considers what might make it therapeutically so efficacious.

Recognizing the many virtues of empathy, Chapters 12–16 review what philosophers and politicians, literary theorists and educationalists have to say about the part that empathy plays in behaviours that are regarded as moral, altruistic, decent and human, and how these might be promoted in both children and adults. Whatever the disciplinary background of the expert, there is a shared belief that empathy helps define and enrich our humanity, and by the same token its absence diminishes us.

It can be something of a surprise to learn that empathy has such an exotic and interesting provenance, and that so many disciplines have taken long, serious looks at its nature and potential. My hope is that if you are able to appreciate empathy's deep roots and marvellously varied and colourful character, you will be as excited, intrigued and committed to the concept as I have been in researching this book. The more one appreciates and celebrates empathy's long-standing appeal to writers and philosophers, artists and educationalists, psychologists and sociologists, counsellors and social workers, brain scientists and health professionals, the richer becomes one's understanding of this most human of qualities. I also hope that professionals – indeed all thoughtful citizens – who explore empathy at its widest and best will find their understanding a fraction improved, their practice a mite better and their nature a little more forgiving.

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