Empathy and Moral Development

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Moral behavior and development have long intrigued researchers because they epitomize an important existential human dilemma: how to handle the inevitable conflicts between one's egoistic needs and one's social obligations.

I have long been working on a comprehensive theory of moral development. A comprehensive theory should be able to explain human behavior in 5 types of moral encounters. (a) Innocent bystander: one witnesses someone in pain or distress (physical, emotional, financial). The moral issue is whether one is motivated to help the victim. (b) Transgression: one has harmed someone, or considers acting in a way that may harm someone. The issues are whether one is motivated to avoid the harmful act, and whether one feels guilty and acts constructively after the damage is done. (c) Multiple moral claimants: one must choose among two or more moral claimants, where choosing to help one of them may harm the others. (d) Caring vs justice: one must choose between caring, and more abstract issues of rights, duty, or justice. (e) Virtual transgression: one is innocent but views oneself as a transgressor.

My comprehensive theory consists of several interconnected mini-theories that cover these moral encounters. There is no time to present the mini-theories or their empirical support, but they have been published and I can give you the references if you are interested. Today I present the theory's main ideas and use them to make important points about empathy development and its contribution to moral development, empathy's limitations, and the merits of linking empathy to moral principles. First, I should state my definition of empathy: an affective response that is more appropriate to someone else's situation than to one's own situation. I also note that my focus is on empathic distress, which has special relevance to moral behavior.

The Bystander Model: Empathy Development

The heart of my comprehensive theory is an analysis of the innocent bystander situation. This analysis has led to a developmental scheme for empathy and several, empathy-based moral affects: sympathy, empathic anger, and empathic feeling of injustice. Many of you are familiar with this scheme, which is outlined in the Handout. I'll just say a few words about it.

1. There are 5 distinct modes of empathic affect arousal. These are listed in the Handout (I A, B, C, D, E). The first three modes — primary circular reaction, mimicry, and conditioning — are automatic and involuntary. The last two — language-mediated association and role-taking — are higher-order cognitive modes. The important thing about so many arousal modes is that they enable humans to respond to distress cues from different sources — from the victim's facial and vocal responses, from his posture, and from the situation. The result is that empathy is a multidetermined, hence reliable response. This fits the hypothesis I presented here last year — that empathy survived the pressures of natural selection and is therefore a necessary part of human nature.

2. There are four stages in the development of a cognitive sense of others (II A, B, C, D). These four stages interact with the empathic affect aroused in children, and the result is the four stages of empathy-development listed under III A, B, C, D. They are (a) a global empathic distress in which the infant lacks a clear self-other distinction and is confused about the source of his distress. An example is the 1-year-old child who saw a friend fall and cry. Her response was to stare at her friend, begin to cry herself, and then put her thumb in her mouth and bury her head in
her mother's lap — the same thing she does when she herself is hurt. (b) a quasi-egocentric empathy in which one is aware of the other as a separate physical entity and as the one who is in pain, but still cannot understand the other's internal states and confuses them with one's own. An example of this stage is the 14-month-old who fetched his own mother to comfort a crying friend, even though the friend's mother was also present. (c) a relatively veridical empathy for the other's feeling. (d) empathy for another's experience beyond the immediate situation (e.g., chronic illness, emotional deprivation, economic hardship).

3. An important part of early empathy development is that when children become aware of others as physically distinct from themselves (IIIB), their own empathic distress may be qualitatively transformed into a more reciprocal concern for the victim (IV). They continue to feel distressed but they also feel compassion (sympathetic distress) for the victim. From that point on developmentally, empathic distress may always have a sympathetic component, and children now want to help because they feel sorry for the victim, not just to relieve their own empathic distress. This empathic/sympathetic distress is the child's first truly prosocial motive.

4. Most people make spontaneous attributions about the causes of events. We can therefore expect them to make causal attributions about other people's distress that they witness (V). Depending on the causal attribution, they may feel empathic/sympathetic distress or empathic anger, or they may blame the victim.

5. In this developmental scheme, the most advanced, mature stage of empathy combines the advances of the previous stages. Thus, at the most advanced stage (IIID), a person can empathize with others, while knowing that they are physical entities distinct from oneself, and that they have internal states that are independent of one's own internal states. And one can also empathize with their life condition beyond the immediate situation.

There is considerable evidence that empathic arousal motivates helping behavior. It follows that this empathy-development scheme may explain prosocial moral action in innocent bystander situations.

An important final point about the bystander model is that the victim does not have to be physically present for the observer to respond with empathic affect. Humans have the capacity to form images and represent events, and to imagine themselves in someone else's place; and represented events have the power to evoke affect. For these reasons, it is only necessary to imagine the victim's plight for empathy to be aroused. Empathy may thus be aroused when reading about someone's misfortune, arguing about economic or political issues that involve victims or potential victims, or even making Kohlberg-type judgments about hypothetical moral dilemmas.

The Transgression Model

So far I have discussed natural empathy-arousing processes that may occur in most cultures when an individual encounters someone in distress. These natural processes may not be enough, however, to motivate moral action in transgression situations, especially situations involving interpersonal conflict, because of the powerful egoistic needs that are often involved. To counteract these egoistic needs requires socializing children to have internalized motives to consider other people's welfare even when there is interpersonal conflict. This socialization is most likely to occur in discipline encounters, especially those in which the child has harmed, or may harm someone. The reason is that it is only in these discipline encounters that connections are made between the child's behavior, the child's egoistic needs, and the moral principle of considering the welfare of others.

The research shows that the most effective discipline for producing moral internalization is induction — discipline techniques in which the parent points out the consequences of the child's behavior for others. Inductive discipline not only teaches children how their actions affect others but it may also accomplish something more profound and important: It points up the victim's distress, and may thus trigger an empathic response in the child, at the same time that it points up the child's role in causing that distress. The experience of empathic distress, together with the awareness of being the causal agent may result in a feeling of guilt in the child. There is evidence that this
empathy-based guilt feeling often leads one to apologize, make reparation, and other constructive acts like resolving to be more responsible in the future. Thus, empathy-based guilt is important in moral internalization and may be an important moral motive in “transgression” situations.

To summarize so far, the first two mini-theories—one dealing with naturalistic empathy development in bystander situations, and the other with guilt and moral internalization in transgressions—intersect in discipline encounters: induction discipline contributes to moral development because of the child’s empathic capability. The two mini-theories together complete my theory of empathic morality. We now turn to situations involving multiple moral claimants.

Multiple Moral Claimants

I define this type of moral dilemma by a common example—writing a letter of recommendation for a student. The moral claimants are: (a) the student, (b) the colleague who requested the letter, and (c) other unknown candidates for the job. If the writer likes and empathizes with the student, the situation may fit the bystander model: the student needs a job and the writer helps him get it. But if the writer also empathizes with the colleague who requested the letter, and perhaps with the other candidates, it becomes more complicated. He then must make a choice among moral claimants, with each of whom he empathizes. More likely than not, he will decide in favor of his student, reflecting the human tendency to empathize more with people one cares about.

Caring vs Justice

Though more complex than the bystander model, this is still a “caring” dilemma. If, however, the letter-writer thinks his student may not be the best candidate for the job, then “justice,” mainly “distributive justice,” becomes part of the dilemma. Most principles of distributive justice require that merit or competence should be the primary criterion in selecting the best applicant for a job. Furthermore, academic people share the justice-related understanding that the integrity of the academic system requires that letters of recommendation tell the truth. Therefore, if the letter-writer follows his empathic tendency to strongly support his student, he will then have violated one or more principles of justice. This is an example of a “caring vs justice” moral dilemma that shows an important, overlooked limitation of empathic morality: it may lead to violations of justice.

Empathic Bias and Overarousal

To summarize so far, it appears that empathic morality may be an effective moral force in “bystander” and “transgression” dilemmas involving only one moral claimant. Empathic morality may be highly limited, however, when there are multiple claimants. The reason is that empathy is biased—in 3 ways: we are more empathic to people who are familiar to ourselves (friends), similar to ourselves (relatives), or to people who are present—even though people who are unfamiliar, different, or located elsewhere may be equally (or more) affected by our actions.

How big a problem is this? Most empathy researchers seem unaware of the problem and see only good in empathic morality. They may often be right, because most everyday moral encounters, especially those involving young children, may fit the simplest of “bystander” or “transgression” models in which empathic morality is most effective. But where there are multiple claimants and one must make a choice, empathic morality is not enough. Furthermore, empathic biases are essentially biases in favor of one’s kinship or primary group. These biases therefore become especially troublesome in contact between groups. Empathy for one’s primary group may even contribute to hostility toward outgroups.

What can be done to reduce empathic bias? Once we are aware of it as a problem, we can make efforts to overcome the bias and consider all moral claimants equally. We might, for example, try to generate empathy for strangers, who may belong to other groups, and to people who are absent, by using a voluntary empathy-arousing mechanism—role-taking (IE 1, 2, 3)—and try to put ourselves in their place. Or, we might imagine that someone we care about a great deal was in their place. For example, the letter-writer might put himself in his colleague’s place and think about how he feels when requesting letters of recommendation; or he might imagine that
someone he loves, perhaps his own child, is one of the
job candidates. These role-taking efforts could gen-
erate empathy for the colleague and for the job candi-
dates. This might help counteract, though probably
not totally neutralize, his empathic bias in favor of his
student.

Another limitation of empathic morality is the
phenomenon of empathic over-arousal. Increasing the
intensity of empathic distress will increase one's
motivation to help the victim — up to a point.
Beyond that point, empathic distress may become so
aversive that it is transformed into a feeling of self-
distress and no longer functions as a moral motive.
One is concerned about one's own distress rather than
the victim's. Though fundamental to the empathy
process, empathic overarousal may not be as serious a
problem as empathic bias, because it may only come
into play in certain highly circumscribed situations (e.
g., hospital workers in constant contact with termi-
nally ill patients).

Empathy and Moral Principles

The most effective way to strengthen empathic
morality and counter empathic bias may be to inte-
grate it with certain broad, relatively abstract moral
principles that foster impartiality. Among the major
moral principles in Western society, and I believe
Japan as well, are caring, and justice, especially dis-
tributive justice which deals with how society’s
resources should be allocated. Distributive justice
principles vary — from the view that resources should
be distributed “equally” to the view that they should
be distributed according to the individual’s “merit”,
his “effort”, or his “need”. The link between empa-
thy and “caring” is obvious, so I’ll focus on
“justice”.

If one thinks about how society’s resources should
be distributed, egoism would make one prefer princi-
pies that coincide with one’s own condition: high
producers would choose “merit”; low producers
would choose “need” or “equality”. If empathy is
activated, however, even people who are high pro-
ducers might consider the welfare of others, especially
those who are hardpressed economically. High pro-
ducers might then prefer “need” or “equality” as jus-
tice principles, even though these principles go against
their economic self-interest. Or, empathic high-
producers might prefer a system based on “merit” but
moderated by “need” and “equality” so as to prevent
extreme poverty or vast discrepancies in wealth. In
other words, because distribution systems have impli-
cations for other people's welfare, empathy may have
a potentially strong link to distributive-justice princi-
ples. This is in addition to empathy's more obvious
link to the principle of caring.

Given this potential link between empathy and jus-
tice principles, by the time children are old enough to
understand the principles, they may have a tendency
to accept them because of their previously acquired
empathic morality. Without going into detail, there
may be occasions when children are exposed to caring
or justice principles, at the same time that they experi-
ence empathic/sympathic distress, empathic anger, or
guilt. This cooccurrence of empathic affect with a
moral principle may create a bond between them.
The result may be an affectively charged moral princi-
ple — a “hot cognition”.

This bond is important because in future situations
when an empathic affect is aroused, for example in
multiple-claimant situations, the moral principle may
be activated. The principle may then help reduce
empathic bias, because of its relatively abstract, uni-
versal quality. Furthermore, moral principles are
cognitive structures, and cognitive structures can help
stabilize affects with which they are associated, that
is, they can help keep the affect intensity form getting
too high or low. In like fashion, when an empathically-
ly charged moral principle is activated it may help
stabilize the empathic affect and thus reduce the
likelihood of empathic over-arousal.

That completes most of what I have to say. I’ll end
by saying that despite its limitations, empathic moral-
ity is extremely important, especially in childhood,
because it is the only known morality that has a
motivational basa that is compatible with the develop-
mental requirements of prosocial moral internaliza-
tion. However, while empathic morality may be
suitable for kinship-based and other primary groups,
we live in an age in which social interaction is increas-
ingly multicultural, and economic transactions are
increasingly global. We must therefore pay more
attention to the need for moral education and sociali-
zation beyond childhood and beyond the primary group. The multicultural dimension requires an empathy-based morality, which can make people feel as well as believe in humanity's oneness despite its many variations. But to fulfill this potential requires moral education and socialization practices that can overcome empathy's primary group bias, and link it to appropriate moral principles and multicultural values such as tolerance and respect for difference. To me, this may be psychologists' and moral educators' most important challenge.

III. Developmental levels of empathy (coalescence of I and II)
A. Global empathy. One feels distress but is unclear as to who is actually in pain.
B. "Egocentric" empathy. One knows the other is actually in pain but is confused about the other's feelings.
C. Empathy for another's feelings. One feels distress and is aware of the other's feelings as distinct from one's own.
D. Empathy for another's experiences beyond the immediate situation. One feels distressed over the other's general plight.
1. Empathy for an entire group.

IV. Partial transformation of empathic distress (ED) into sympathetic distress (SD). Part of transition from III.A to III.B; one's response to another's distress may then have a pure empathic component and a sympathetic component (ED/SD). With age, SD overtakes ED and becomes the first truly "prosocial" motive (SD/ED).

V. Causal attribution and shaping of empathic/sympathetic distress into related moral affects
A. If victim is cause of own distress he/she may then no longer be viewed as a victim. This may remove the basis for the observer's empathy.
B. Sympathetic distress: If victim appears to lack control over the cause of distress (accident, illness, loss), or if victim's distress is highly salient though its cause is unclear, empathic distress may be transformed in part into sympathetic distress. Like what happens developmentally (as in IV), but may include causal attribution.
C. Empathic anger: If someone else causes victim's distress, one's empathic distress may
be transformed in part into empathic anger directed at the culprit.
1. Empathic anger may be reduced, or even turned toward victim if, for example, the victim previously harmed the culprit.
2. If the culprit represents society, empathic anger may contribute to criticism of society and acceptance of moral/political ideologies that embody the criticism.

D. Guilt despite innocence. Examples are: (1) guilt over proximity, (2) guilt over inaction, (3) guilt over benefitting from victim's plight, (4) guilt by association, (5) guilt over unearned advantage, (6) survivor guilt.

E. Empathic feeling of injustice: Often included in B, C, or D, or may occur because of a discrepancy between victim's character and his/her plight rather than causal attribution.