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IS EMPATHY ULTIMATELY JUST NARCISSISM?

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Is Empathy Ultimately Just Narcissism?

Question: Is empathic concern merely narcissism? Do mirror neurons cause me to see you as my mirror image and thus cause me to be concerned about your welfare because I am concerned about my own and I see myself when I look at you? Or does mirror neuron theory elevate empathy by saying that I use my own embodied state to understand your state, through a process of resonance, but I do so because I want to know how you feel and that resonance is the best way to find out?

Empathic concern can certainly be linked to concern for oneself. This is especially true of cognitive empathy. An example can be found with psychopaths.

Psychopaths are incapable of feeling emotion and, thus, are incapable of emotionally empathizing with others. They do practice cognitive empathy, however. They use cognitive empathy as a tool to control and manipulate others to further their own ends and personal ambitions. For example, a psychopath might cognitively empathize by putting himself in the shoes of a 'friend' in order to figure out how he thinks or plans; in this way, the psychopath can use that knowledge to take advantage of his 'friend.' Certainly, this is an example where cognitive empathy is completely self-serving. But what about emotional empathy — the type of empathy people probably think of first when the notion of empathy is brought to mind?

The majority of people in the world are not psychopaths. They are capable of emotion and emotional empathy as a result. But is empathetically caring for someone else entirely altruistic? Or is there perhaps an underlying level of egoism involved when someone expresses empathic concern?

I will argue in support of the existence of a non-altruistic, egoistic brand of empathic concern. First, it is more sensible to ask whether or not empathic concern is rooted in self-

interest, as opposed to the somewhat hyperbolic term *narcissism*. Second, while a number of studies have shown support for an empathy-altruism model over empathy-related reward and empathy-related punishment models (Batson et al., 1988), the findings have since been re-examined (Cialdini et al., 1997), demonstrating the notion of *oneness* as a factor accounting for prosocial behaviour. Finally, targets of helping belonging to an in-group, as opposed to an out-group, were rewarded with a greater empathic response, further illustrating the more impactful factor of oneness.

When it comes to studies involving narcissism and empathy, empathy and narcissism have generally been negatively correlated with scales used to assess these traits. For example, Watson et al. (1984) employed the use of three empathy scales: The Hogan (1969) Empathy Scale (HES), which was developed with a comprehension of empathy as an imaginative/intellectual understanding of another person's mental state without actually experiencing his/her feelings; the Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) Scale (MEES), which highlights emotional empathy; and finally, the Smith (1973) Empathic Personality Questionnaire (SEPQ), used to pinpoint people high in empathy (defined as a level of similarity one person assumes between him-/herself and another). For the trait of narcissism, the researchers employed the Raskin and Hall (1979, 1981) Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI).

Watson et al. (1984) correlated the abovementioned empathy questionnaires with participants' scores on the NPI and hypothesized a negative correlation between empathy and narcissism. Indeed, this is what they found: a negative relationship between the two traits. With results like these, is this proof that empathic concern cannot possibly be a form of narcissism? Let us take a look at what narcissism truly is.

Narcissism can be defined as an overweening concern with oneself. However, it is

important to distinguish narcissistic personality attributes from the narcissism label given to certain individuals in our society. A word such as 'narcissism' is usually defined in the context in which we usually use it; that is, as a psychological personality trait/label for individuals who act with overweening concern with themselves *relative* to others. Scales such as the NPI search for narcissistic qualities in individuals, but a person with some narcissistic attributes will probably not be labelled narcissistic on the whole. In our society, some people are labelled as narcissists, while others are not. Since empathy/empathic concern is a trait said to belong to *everyone* (bar psychopaths), it does not make much sense to say that they are all narcissists (the label).

Otherwise, we would conclude that nearly everyone is a narcissist and would not be able to distinguish those that we already consider narcissists in our society from those we do not.

Therefore, to avoid this definitional issue, it would be best to keep in mind the key aspect of narcissism we are focusing on in this paper: self-interest. Rather, than asking whether or not empathic concern is a form of narcissism, which comes off a tad hyperbolic, the question would better be structured in asking whether or not empathic concern is ultimately self-interested.

Altruism is generally considered the antithesis of self-interest. However, altruism is not always defined the same. The *Free Online Dictionary* offers two distinct definitions of altruism: 1) Unselfish concern for the welfare of others; selflessness; and 2) Instinctive behavior that is detrimental to the individual but favors the survival or spread of that individual's genes, as by benefiting its relatives. *Merriam Webster* and *Dictionary.com* offer similar definitions. From the two aforementioned definitions, we can derive two categories of altruism: intentional altruism and behavioural altruism, respectively. Intentional altruism involves a selfless concern for others, while behavioural altruism involves *acts* that benefit others (possibly at the acting being's expense). I am under the belief that intentional altruism does not exist in the sense that entirely

selfless concern is non-existent; all concern is rooted in self-interest, whether it be the gaining of a good feeling or the avoidance of a bad one. However, this claim is ultimately unfalsifiable, as I do not have complete access to every individual's inner thoughts/intentions; indeed, individuals often do not have complete access to their *own* thoughts/intentions. As such, my claim cannot be proven either way.

Behavioural altruism *can* be tested, however. Of course, individuals display behaviourally altruistic acts all the time (e.g., a pedestrian leaping onto the train tracks to rescue a stranger who fell, or a soldier jumping onto a grenade in order to shield his comrades in battle). When an individual shows empathic (emotional) concern for someone else, this could be considered a behaviourally altruistic act in the sense that feeling what another person is feeling is an *act* that benefits the other person, possibly at the empathizer's expense (e.g., feeling another person's pain or sadness brings about comparable feelings in oneself).

According to Batson et al. (1988), the empathy-altruism hypothesis states that "prosocial motivation associated with feeling empathy for a person in need is directed toward the ultimate goal of benefiting that person, not toward some subtle form of self-benefit," (p. 52). Batson et al. conducted five studies testing two egoistic alternatives to the *empathy-altruism* hypothesis. The two alternative hypotheses they investigated were the *empathy-specific reward* and *empathy-specific punishment* hypotheses.

The empathy-specific reward hypothesis states that prosocial motivation related to empathy is focussed toward receiving social or self-interest-related rewards (e.g., pride). The empathy-specific punishment hypothesis states that prosocial motivation related to empathy is focussed toward avoiding social or self-related punishments (e.g., guilt).

In their first study, Batson et al. (1988) tested the empathy-specific reward hypothesis by

designing a set of circumstances where all participants were 1) confronted with an individual in need and 2) told they could carry out a task that would alleviate the victim's need (at little to no cost to themselves). Participants subsequently filled out a measure of self-reported emotional empathic reaction to the victim and a preliminary measure of mood. By chance, half of the participants later learned that they would no longer be doing the helping task and, both amongst participants permitted to carry out the task and those not permitted, half were told the victim was still in need and half were told the victim was, by chance, no longer in need. Following this, participants were requested to fill out a second measure of mood.

The researchers' second study tested the empathy-specific punishment hypothesis. They used a paradigm designed by Coke et al. (1978, Experiment 1) whereby 1) the relationship between empathy and providing aid was known to occur and 2) prior assistance from others (or lack thereof) would not abolish the victim's need for assistance from the participant. Batson et al. (1988) had participants discover a young woman's need over a fake radio newscast, and then were given an unanticipated opportunity to aid her. Empathy was manipulated by asking participants to take a certain perspective as the newscast played.

Batson et al.'s (1988) third study replicated the design of their second study, but operationalized the need situation, helping response, and independent variables (empathy and justification for not helping) differently. The person who was in need now was a peer of the same sex who was by chance set to receive an electric shock for errors made. Participants were given two options for which there were no punishments: For each accurate response for the first option, they would be rewarded with a prize and for each accurate response for the second option, they would reduce the number of shocks their peer was getting. Working on the second option over the first one represented helping. Self-reports from participants helped characterize high- and

low-empathy groups.

For their fourth study, the researchers once again tested the empathy-specific punishment hypothesis using a third method to offer justification for not helping, varying the performance standard difficulty on a task that participants carried out to be eligible for some assistance. The paradigm here was designed to illustrate that 1) aid is costly, 2) the empathy-aid association is known to occur, and 3) introducing an eligibility task for giving help is reasonable. A shock paradigm developed by Batson et al. (1981) was used as it met the aforementioned conditions. Specifically, female participants observed a young woman on television getting shocked when executing a digit recall task and the participants were given an opportunity to alleviate the woman's distress by taking her place.

Finally, in Batson et al.'s (1988) fifth study, the researchers employed a similar need situation and empathy manipulation to those used in the second study, where participants took on a certain perspective when hearing a fake radio broadcast that notified them of a young woman in need. However, this time a Stroop task and emotional response questionnaire (to gauge self-reported empathy) were added to the mix.

Results from all five studies unswervingly "conformed to the pattern predicted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis," and "in no study did the results show a pattern predicted by the empathy-specific reward or the empathy-specific punishment hypothesis," (Batson et al., 1988, p. 75). In other words, Batson et al. demonstrated that the prosocial motivation normally linked to empathic concern for another individual is, in fact, ultimately aimed at helping that person and not at some underlying facet of self interest. Findings implied that participants were not generally helping others in order to get a reward, nor to avoid some form of punishment. If this is true, then it would make a strong case against empathic concern having a narcissistic quality;

indeed, it would coincide most with the concept of selflessness. However, perhaps these findings were not the whole story. Maybe the evidence needed to be re-examined; and this is exactly what Cialdini et al. (1997) did.

Cialdini et al. (1997) reinterpreted data previously said to support the empathy-altruism model (i.e., Batson et al., 1998). The researchers noted the following:

[...] dozens of experiments have demonstrated that, first, the circumstances hypothesized to lead to perspective taking do increase empathic concern, and second, under conditions of empathic concern for another, individuals help more frequently in what appears to be an altruistically motivated attempt to improve the other's well being rather than an egoistically motivated attempt to improve their own. (p. 481)

The researchers further remarked that, up to this point, the empathy-altruism hypothesis appeared to have 'won the war,' with supporters of egoistic accounts surrendering to Batson and colleagues who "provided credible experimental evidence for the existence of true selflessness in the human character," (p. 482). Yet, the purpose of Cialdini et al.'s (1997) paper was to suggest a non-altruistic recount of the data so far.

Cialdini et al. (1997) conducted three studies that took into consideration a measure of perceived self-other overlap known as *oneness*, defined as "a sense of shared, merged, or interconnected personal identities," (p. 483). Cialdini et al. hypothesized that prosocial behaviour is not borne out of empathic concern, but rather a sense of feeling *at one with* another person (i.e., perceiving more of oneself in the other person).

In their first study, Cialdini et al. (1997) asked participants to concentrate on a particular person (either a close stranger, acquaintance, friend, or family member; this depended on the

condition). Their focus was represented in writing: the participant had to describe the individual's physical and personality characteristics, values, attitudes, and interests. After this, participants had to take a *need situation* into account where the individual (s)he described was evicted, specifying the level of assistance they would be willing to grant the individual. Participants were also asked to rate how much empathic concern, distress, sadness, and oneness they felt toward the individuals they described.

The researchers' second study was exactly identical to the first, save for the *need situation* and resulting *helping options*. In the need situation, after participants concentrated on/described a stranger/friend/acquaintance/family member, they were asked to envision that the described individual died in an accident, leaving his/her children homeless. For the resulting helping options, participants had to say how much aid they would be willing to provide by selecting one of the following seven helping options: "Nothing, donate \$10 toward a fund for the kids, donate \$25 toward a fund for the kids, donate \$50 toward a fund for the kids, start a fundraising campaign for the kids' welfare, have the kids come live with you until a permanent home was found, and have the kids come live with you and raise them as you would your own," (p. 486).

In contrast to the first and second studies, which involved more serious/atypical forms of need, the third study conducted by Cialdini et al. (1997) had participants declare how much assistance they would be willing to provide to a person who needed help making a phone call.

In stark contrast to Batson et al. (1988) who declared that empathic concern accounted for prosocial behaviour, results from all three studies by Cialdini et al. (1997) showed that it was a perception of oneness that explained participants' desires to help others — *not* empathic concern. Specifically, Cialdini et al. stated that "empathic concern had no such influence once perceptions of oneness were taken into account," (p. 489). This sense of oneness is directly

related to self-interest; individuals engage in prosocial behaviour out of concern for themselves (perceived in the other), rather than out of concern for the other person. Ultimately, this notion of *oneness* is another way of saying 'my mirror neurons cause me to see you as my mirror image and thus cause me to be concerned about your welfare because I am concerned about my own and I see myself when I look at you.' *Oneness is self interest*. When asking whether or not empathic concern is ultimately narcissistic, *oneness* is precisely the self-centered, 'narcissistic' notion that answers that question; and, crucially, Cialdini et al.'s paper demonstrates it as such.

Stürmer et al. (2006) further demonstrated the influence of *oneness* on the empathy-helping relationship. The researchers conducted two experiments with the purpose of testing a group-level perspective on empathy-stimulated helping. They hypothesized that similar group membership between the person helping and the individual being helped boosts the function of empathy when it comes to providing aid/assistance, while dissimilar group membership makes empathy-motivated helping less probable. Another way of stating this hypothesis is that the researchers predicted there would be a greater effect of empathy for targets who were members of an in-group (i.e., 'same kind'), rather than an out-group ('different kind').

In the first study, the aim was to replicate previous findings by Stürmer et al. (2006), the particular context being helping individuals with sexually transmitted infections. The researchers explored this helping between students of a Muslim and German cultural background in Germany.

In the second study by Stürmer et al. (2006), the aim was to validate this group-level perspective by reproducing the vital in-group/out-group difference in empathy-stimulated helping in a "modified minimal group paradigm," (p. 949). This paradigm permitted the researchers to get rid of factors that might confound with more 'natural' in-group/out-group

classifications and/or serve as alternative accounts for the perceived effect (e.g., stereotypes). Another aim of this second experiment had to do with cognitive processes motivating the moderation effect. According to Stürmer et al. (2006), the "group-level perspective suggests that, as common ingroup membership is salient, people come to perceive ingroup members (including the self) as similar to each other ("We are all alike")," and that "this similarity, in turn, should increase the likelihood that people act on feelings of empathy and help," (p. 949). To test this, a measure of perceived similarities between groups was incorporated into the experiment investigating how perceived similarity between groups affected the empathy-helping relationship with in-groups. The prediction here was that a high degree of *perceived* group similarities for the in-group (i.e., the self, target, and members of the in-group all seen similarly) should strengthen the empathy-helping relationship.

Results over both experiments conducted by the researchers showed that the researchers' predictions were accurate. Similarities between in-groups, or perceived similarities, bolstered the empathy-helping relationship. These findings directly relate to Cialdini et al.'s (1997) findings regarding oneness. In fact, Stürmer et al. (2006) explicitly concluded the following:

Cialdini and Colleagues suggested that empathy serves merely as an emotional signal for interpersonal oneness and that it is the perception of oneness and not empathy that ultimately promotes helping...In fact, in both Experiments 1 and 2, in the ingroup conditions, our measures of empathy and interpersonal oneness were positively correlated...Moreover, in both experiments, in the ingroup conditions, interpersonal oneness emerged as a unique predictor of helping intentions (or helping) even when empathy, sadness, and distress were considered as additional predictors. (p. 954-955)

Ultimately, *oneness* once again prevails as a predictor of the empathy-helping relationship — a *self-interested* concept. 'I am concerned about you because I see myself in you' is the message that keeps being sent. Perceived in-group similarity and oneness both adhere to this message, which is supported by evidence from both Cialdini et al. (1997) and Stürmer et al. (2006).

If altruism is the converse of self-interest, and self-interest (e.g., the notion of oneness/in-group similarity) has been shown to correspond with measures of empathy (Cialdini et al., 1997; Stürmer et al., 2006), then perhaps altruism and empathy are not so positively related after all. Despite Watson et al.'s (1984) assertion that empathy and narcissism are negatively correlated, the focus here is on the self-interest aspect of narcissism, not other elements related to the psychological disorder. Furthermore, while Batson et al. (1988) showed evidence supporting the empathy-altruism hypothesis over the empathy-specific reward and empathy-specific punishment hypotheses, Cialdini et al. (1997) demonstrated that it is *oneness* — a self-interested concept — that really motivates prosocial behaviour. Stürmer et al. (2006) showed that in-group similarity (related to oneness) also moderates the empathy-helping relationship. In conclusion, this paper defends a non-altruistic, egoistic strain of empathic concern. It might be heavy-handed to call it narcissism, but evidence has shown that empathic concern is certainly motivated by self-interested factors rather than selflessness.

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