

## Review Article

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## Empathy, Hot, Cold and Personality Disorders

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### ABSTRACT

Narcissists and psychopaths lack empathy. Empathy requires both the suspension of disbelief, indeed of one's very existence (by assuming someone else's identity if only for a moment, like actors do) and the surrender of control (by allowing other people to dictate how one feels). Both feats go against the grain of narcissists, let alone psychopaths. In the case of the narcissist, he has already suppressed his true self. To also suspend his False Self (to make room for the Other) would amount to self-annihilation.

It is safe to say that the same applies to such patients who are co-diagnosed (co-morbid) with other personality disorders, notably Schizoid, Paranoid, Borderline, Avoidant, and Schizotypal.

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### Paper

Normal people use a variety of abstract concepts and psychological constructs to relate to other persons. Emotions are such modes of inter-relatedness. Empathy may be an intuitive mode applied to the minds of other people, yielding an intersubjective agreement. Narcissists and psychopaths are different. Their "equipment" is lacking. They understand only one language: self-interest. Their inner dialog and private language revolve around the constant measurement of utility. They regard others as mere objects, instruments of gratification, and representations of functions.

This deficiency renders the narcissist and psychopath rigid and socially dysfunctional. They don't bond - they become dependent (on narcissistic supply, on drugs, on adrenaline rushes). They seek pleasure by manipulating their dearest and nearest or even by destroying them, the way a child interacts with his toys. Like people on the autistic spectrum, they fail to properly interpret or even grasp cues: their interlocutor's body language, the subtleties of speech, or social etiquette.

Narcissists and psychopaths lack empathy. Empathy requires both the suspension of disbelief, indeed of one's very existence (by assuming someone else's identity if only for a moment, like actors do) and the surrender of control (by allowing other people to dictate how one feels). Both feats go against the grain of narcissists, let alone psychopaths. In the case of the narcissist, he has already suppressed his true self. To also suspend his False Self (to make room for the Other) would amount to self-annihilation.

It is safe to say that the same applies to such patients who are co-diagnosed (co-morbid) with other personality disorders, notably Schizoid, Paranoid, Borderline, Avoidant, and Schizotypal.

Empathy lubricates the wheels of interpersonal relationships. The Encyclopaedia Britannica (2011 edition) defines empathy as:

"The ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions. It is a term coined in the early 20th century, equivalent to the German *Einfühlung* and modelled on "sympathy." The term is used with special (but not exclusive) reference to aesthetic experience. The most obvious example, perhaps, is that of the actor or singer who genuinely feels the part he is performing. With other works of art, a spectator may, by a kind of introjection, feel himself involved in what he observes or contemplates. The use of empathy is an important part of the counselling technique developed by the American psychologist Carl Rogers."

This is how empathy is defined in "Psychology - An Introduction" (Ninth Edition) by Charles G. Morris, Prentice Hall.

"Closely related to the ability to read other people's emotions is empathy - the arousal of an emotion in an observer that is a vicarious response to the other person's situation... Empathy depends not only on one's ability to identify someone else's emotions but also on one's capacity to put oneself in the other person's place and to experience an appropriate emotional response. Just as sensitivity to non-verbal cues increases with age, so does empathy: The cognitive and perceptual abilities required for empathy develop only as a child matures.

In empathy training, for example, each member of the couple is taught to share inner feelings and to listen to and understand the partner's feelings before responding to them. The empathy technique focuses the couple's attention on feelings and requires that they spend more time listening and less time in rebuttal."

Empathy is the cornerstone of morality.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011 Edition:

"Empathy and other forms of social awareness are important in the development of a moral sense. Morality embraces a person's

beliefs about the appropriateness or goodness of what he does, thinks, or feels... Childhood is ... the time at which moral standards begin to develop in a process that often extends well into adulthood. The American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg hypothesized that people's development of moral standards passes through stages that can be grouped into three moral levels. At the third level, that of postconventional moral reasoning, the adult bases his moral standards on principles that he himself has evaluated and that he accepts as inherently valid, regardless of society's opinion. He is aware of the arbitrary, subjective nature of social standards and rules, which he regards as relative rather than absolute in authority.

Thus the bases for justifying moral standards pass from avoidance of punishment to avoidance of adult disapproval and rejection to avoidance of internal guilt and self-recrimination. The person's moral reasoning also moves toward increasingly greater social scope (i.e., including more people and institutions) and greater abstraction (i.e., from reasoning about physical events such as pain or pleasure to reasoning about values, rights, and implicit contracts)."... Others have argued that because even rather young children are capable of showing empathy with the pain of others, the inhibition of aggressive behaviour arises from this moral affect rather than from the mere anticipation of punishment. Some scientists have found that children differ in their individual capacity for empathy, and, therefore, some children are more sensitive to moral prohibitions than others..."

"Young children's growing awareness of their own emotional states, characteristics, and abilities leads to empathy--i.e., the ability to appreciate the feelings and perspectives of others. Empathy and other forms of social awareness are in turn important in the development of a moral sense... Another important aspect of children's emotional development is the formation of their self-concept, or identity--i.e., their sense of who they are and what their relation to other people is."

"According to Lipps's concept of empathy, a person appreciates another person's reaction by a projection of the self into the other. In his *Ästhetik*, 2 vol. (1903-06; 'Aesthetics'), he made all appreciation of art dependent upon a similar self-projection into the object."

Empathy: Social Conditioning or Instinct?

This may well be the key. Empathy has little to do with the person with whom we empathize (the empathee). It may simply be the result of conditioning and socialization. In other words, when we hurt someone, we don't experience his or her pain. We experience OUR pain. Hurting somebody hurts US. The reaction of pain is provoked in US by OUR own actions. We have been taught a learned response: to feel pain when we hurt someone.

We attribute feelings, sensations and experiences to the object of our actions. It is the psychological defence mechanism of projection. Unable to conceive of inflicting pain upon ourselves - we displace the source. It is the other's pain that we are feeling, we keep telling ourselves, not our own.

Additionally, we have been taught to feel responsible for our fellow beings (guilt). So, we also experience pain whenever another person claims to be anguished. We feel guilty owing to his or her condition, we feel somehow accountable even if we had nothing to do with the whole affair.

In sum, to use the example of pain:

When we see someone hurting, we experience pain for two reasons:

1. Because we feel guilty or somehow responsible for his or her condition
2. It is a learned response: we experience our own pain and project it on the empathee.

We communicate our reaction to the other person and agree that we both share the same feeling (of being hurt, of being in pain, in our example). This unwritten and unspoken agreement is what we call empathy.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica:

"Perhaps the most important aspect of children's emotional development is a growing awareness of their own emotional states and the ability to discern and interpret the emotions of others. The last half of the second year is a time when children start becoming aware of their own emotional states, characteristics, abilities, and potential for action; this phenomenon is called self-awareness... (coupled with strong narcissistic behaviours and traits – SV.

This growing awareness of and ability to recall one's own emotional states leads to empathy, or the ability to appreciate the feelings and perceptions of others. Young children's dawning awareness of their own potential for action inspires them to try to direct (or otherwise affect) the behaviour of others.

With age, children acquire the ability to understand the perspective, or point of view, of other people, a development that is closely linked with the empathic sharing of others' emotions.

One major factor underlying these changes is the child's increasing cognitive sophistication. For example, in order to feel the emotion of guilt, a child must appreciate the fact that he could have inhibited a particular action of his that violated a moral standard. The awareness that one can impose a restraint on one's own behaviour requires a certain level of cognitive maturation, and, therefore, the emotion of guilt cannot appear until that competence is attained."

Still, empathy may be an instinctual REACTION to external stimuli that is fully contained within the empathor and then projected onto the empathee. This is clearly demonstrated by "inborn empathy". It is the ability to exhibit empathy and altruistic behaviour in response to facial expressions. Newborns react this way to their mother's facial expression of sadness or distress.

This serves to prove that empathy has very little to do with the feelings, experiences or sensations of the other (the empathee). Surely, the infant has no idea what it is like to feel sad and definitely not what it is like for his mother to feel sad. In this case, it is a complex reflexive reaction. Later on, empathy is still rather reflexive, the result of conditioning.

The 1999 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica quoted some fascinating research that supports the model I propose:

"An extensive series of studies indicated that positive emotion feelings enhance empathy and altruism. It was shown by the American psychologist Alice M. Isen that relatively small favours or bits of good luck (like finding money in a coin telephone or getting an unexpected gift) induced positive emotion in people and that such emotion regularly increased the subjects' inclination to sympathize or provide help. Several studies have demonstrated that positive emotion facilitates creative problem solving. One of these studies showed that positive emotion enabled subjects to name more uses for common objects. Another showed that positive emotion enhanced creative problem solving by enabling subjects to see relations among objects (and other people - SV) that would otherwise go unnoticed. A number of studies have demonstrated

the beneficial effects of positive emotion on thinking, memory, and action in pre-school and older children.”

If empathy increases with positive emotion, then it has little to do with the empathee (the recipient or object of empathy) and everything to do with the empathor (the person who does the empathizing).

As Paul Bloom notes in his contrarian essay, “The Baby in the Well”, published in the *New Yorker* (May 20, 2013), empathy is a blunt, biased, and stereotypical tool, ill-suited for guiding the design of public policy, which ought to be partial only to justice and constructive outcomes. We bestow our empathy on those who most resemble us and on identifiable victims who garner the most media attention. Empathy for individual sufferers blinds us to the overall picture and provokes in us the base instincts of retribution and vengeance. It distorts decision-making: thinking with one’s heart rather than one’s mind is bound to yield catastrophic consequences. This is precisely why we delegate the weighing of empathy and its implementation to faceless, bureaucratic institutions. They are less likely to be swayed by prejudice and preconception. They are more likely to optimize resources. In the long-run, they benefit the many, not the few.

Lidija Rangelovska suggested the intriguing possibility that empathy evolved to allow us to learn from other people’s experiences by tapping into their inner world. This ability grants us a tremendous evolutionary advantage as individuals and as a species.

**Cold Empathy vs. Warm Empathy and the Concept of “Uncanny Valley”**

“His heart was two sizes too small”

(How the Grinch Stole Christmas by Dr. Seuss)

Contrary to widely held views, Narcissists and Psychopaths may actually possess empathy. They may even be hyper-empathic, attuned to the minutest signals emitted by their victims and endowed with a penetrating “X-ray vision”. They tend to abuse their empathic skills by employing them exclusively for personal gain, the extraction of narcissistic supply, or in the pursuit of antisocial and sadistic goals. They regard their ability to empathize as another weapon in their arsenal. There are two possible pathological reactions to childhood abuse and trauma: codependence and narcissism. They both involve fantasy as a defense mechanism: the codependent has a pretty realistic assessment of herself, but her view of others is fantastic; the narcissist’s self-image and self-perception are delusional and grandiose, but his penetrating view of others is bloodcurdlingly accurate.

I suggest to label the narcissist’s and psychopath’s version of empathy: “cold empathy”, akin to the “cold emotions” felt by psychopaths. The cognitive element of empathy is there, but not so its emotional correlate. It is, consequently, a barren, detached, and cerebral kind of intrusive gaze, devoid of compassion and a feeling of affinity with one’s fellow humans.

To clarify: I propose a tripartite model of empathy, roughly corresponding to Freud’s postulated id, ego, and superego. In this model, normal empathy is comprised of three components: instinctual-reflexive, emotional, and cognitive. Children develop empathy in three phases which correspond to these three components, constructing the emotional and cognitive tiers upon an instinctual firmament. In adults, cognitive empathy always goes hand in hand with the instinctual element and the emotional correlate/component.

Cold empathy is not the same as merely cognitive empathy, though. It is intuitive: it is the residual instinctual component coupled with cognitive empathy, but divorced from and leapfrogging the emotional constituent. Cold empathy is the ossified consequence of “arrested empathy”. It is a predator’s “empathy”. It is all about resonance, not about “putting yourself in other people’s shoes”. Narcissists and psychopaths also appear to be “empathizing” with their possessions: objects, pets, and their sources of narcissistic supply or material benefits (often their nearest and dearest, significant others, or “friends” and associates). But this is not real empathy: it is a mere projection of the narcissist’s or psychopath’s own insecurities and fears, needs and wishes, fantasies and priorities. This kind of displayed, sometimes ostentatious “empathy” usually vanishes the minute its subject ceases to play a role in the narcissist’s or psychopath’s life and his psychodynamic processes.

Cold Empathy evokes the concept of “Uncanny Valley”, coined in 1970 by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori. Mori suggested that people react positively to androids (humanlike robots) for as long as they differ from real humans in meaningful and discernible ways. But the minute these contraptions come to resemble humans uncannily, though imperfectly, human observers tend to experience repulsion, revulsion, and other negative emotions, including fear.

The same applies to psychopathic narcissists: they are near-perfect imitations of humans, but, lacking empathy and emotions, they are not exactly there. Psychopaths and narcissists strike their interlocutors as being some kind of “alien life-forms” or “artificial intelligence”, in short: akin to humanoid robots, or androids. When people come across narcissists or psychopaths the Uncanny Valley reaction kicks in: people feel revolted, scared, and repelled. They can’t put the finger on what it is that provokes these negative reactions, but, after a few initial encounters, they tend to keep their distance.

At the other extreme of this spectrum, we find “empaths” whose super- or hyper- empathy amounts to a kind of “Empathic Personality Disorder”: their overabundant empathy leads them to ignore, deny, and suppress their own personality, needs, wishes, desires, dreams, and priorities in order to cater to the emotional requirements of significant others (or, in some cases, of total strangers). Empaths are not necessarily codependent or even people-pleasers: they are simply overwhelmed by their resurgent empathy, by their “exposed nerve ends” to the point of self-suspension. There is no merger or fusion with the recipients of their ministrations and commiseration - only a shared emotional ambience or a shared emotional psychosis [1-28].

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