



Center for Empathy in International Affairs

Exchange with Simon Baron-Cohen

Simon Baron-Cohen is cognitive neuroscientist and professor of Developmental Psychopathology at Cambridge University, in the departments of Experimental Psychology and Psychiatry. Professor Baron-Cohen is also the Director of the University of Cambridge's Autism Research Center and a Fellow of Trinity College. He has carried out research into social neuroscience over a 20 year career. His book 'The Essential Difference' has been translated in over a dozen languages and his most recent book, 'Zero Degrees of Empathy', seeks to explain human cruelty. Professor Baron-Cohen is interviewed here by Matt Waldman, Director of the Center for Empathy in International Affairs.

What do you consider empathy to mean and involve?

Empathy for me has at least two major components: Cognitive empathy is the ability to put yourself into someone else's shoes and to imagine their thoughts and feelings. It is the recognition element. Affective empathy is the drive to respond with an appropriate emotion to someone else's thoughts and feelings. It is the response element. One without the other is not really empathy – to empathise you need both elements.

In some medical conditions, we see one without the other, or at least one of these functioning below average. For example, in those with psychopathic or antisocial personality disorder, individuals may have excellent cognitive empathy (enabling them to deceive others, as they can easily keep track with what someone might know or think) but reduced affective empathy (they just don't care that someone is suffering or in pain).

People with autism spectrum conditions may show the opposite profile: they struggle with cognitive empathy, finding it hard to take other people's perspectives or imagine what others might know, think, or feel. This often causes them to avoid social situations. And yet they often have intact affective empathy, since when it is pointed out to them that someone is suffering, this upsets them and they typically want to alleviate the other person's suffering.

In your book, Zero Degrees of Empathy, you argue that certain people are predisposed to have more or less empathy – that we all lie on an empathy spectrum. Can you explain what you mean by this?

The idea is that in the general population there is an empathy bell curve, where most people have average levels of empathy, some have above average empathy, and some have below average levels of empathy. The book explores what social and biological factors can lead to a person having 'zero degrees of empathy'.

Examples of social factors that can lead a person to be at the low end of the empathy bell curve include early neglect and abuse, or ideology (e.g., to a belief system that treats a class of people as if they are inferior or the enemy), or obedience to authority (e.g., when ordinary Nazis said they were only following orders).

Examples of biological factors that can also lead to below average empathy include genetics, prenatal hormone levels (particularly testosterone, which shapes brain development), and



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brain damage or neurological immaturity of one or more components in the ‘empathy circuit’ in the human brain.

And of course, social and biological factors interact, to explain why we react with cruelty or with kindness.

You have argued that certain parts of the brain that are used for empathizing. How do we know this and what does it actually mean?

MRI brain scanning is currently our most powerful tool that enables us to explore the brain regions underlying empathy. MRI scanning reveals that empathy doesn’t reside in a single brain region, but rather in at least a dozen different brain regions, including the amygdala (subcortically), the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and the inferior frontal gyrus. The structural development, connectivity, and the functioning of this empathy circuit determine where we are on the empathy bell curve, and how we react to another person’s mental state.

You have argued for ‘replacing the unscientific term evil with empathy erosion’. Does this in any way detract from personal responsibility for cruel or criminal acts?

I find the term ‘evil’ isn’t really an explanation, even if it expresses how horrified we are by a person’s behaviour. In contrast, the term ‘empathy erosion’ can explain human behaviour because empathy can be studied scientifically: it can be measured, dissected, and studied at multiple levels (behaviour, cognition, neurology, genetics/biology, and social/environmental factors).

The legal system needs to hold individuals responsible if they commit crimes and needs to draw a line to indicate that in any given society, if an individual transgresses and they are responsible for their actions, they will be punished.

But if a person commits a crime because they have zero degrees of empathy, and if this is due to the empathy circuit “going down”, either transiently or in a more enduring way, might this in some cases be outside the individual’s control? In such cases, perhaps it is more appropriate to see the person as suffering from a form of neurological disability, in which case it raises the complex question of whether the criminal should be in prison or receiving care. Such a perspective reveals the line between the criminal justice system and the health care system is actually quite blurred. This is of course separate to the question of whether the person needs to be detained in a secure setting, because they might pose a danger to others.

Have there been world events – perhaps in recent years – where you think empathy, or lack of empathy, helps to explain what happened?

In my book I explore how the ending of Apartheid in South Africa was in part the result of the friendship between Mandela and De Klerk, a relationship across the political divide and across ethnic groups, a relationship based on each man having empathy for the other’s community, and based on mutual respect.

Is empathy lacking in international affairs? You have said that empathy is the ‘one of the most valuable resources in our world’ and it can be considered as a ‘universal solvent’. Can you explain what you mean?



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This is very relevant to the Center for Empathy in International Affairs. Let's take the Middle East conflict as an example, where military solutions have been tried and failed. For 100 years we have witnessed a repeating cycle of military violence, of tit-for-tat retaliations, with tragic loss of life on both sides. This is a good example of an international crisis where, in addition to conventional diplomatic efforts, an empathic approach could be explored as a way of taking steps towards peace.

If Israelis said to themselves "What must it be like to live in the poverty of Gaza or the West Bank, feeling your rights are being violated?" and if Palestinians said to themselves "What must it be like for Israelis to live in fear of being attacked?" this might bring about a change in the minds of people in both communities. It might enable the start of meaningful dialogue, where each community feels listened to and understood, and where new solutions towards peace can be imagined. This empathic approach doesn't have to happen in every individual of both communities, but if it happened in the minds of their leaders, we might expect very different political decisions to be made. It is already happening at a grass roots level in non-governmental organizations like Seeds of Peace or The Parents Circle Family Forum, but as we saw in South Africa, it helps if such changes also occur in the minds of leaders.

The South African and Israeli-Palestinian contexts are more different than they are similar, so one should be wary of drawing any comparisons. But in the latter case there may also need to be a process of "truth and reconciliation", where past hurts are acknowledged and apologies given, since this is one step in an empathy process.

The Middle East conflict however raise issues that apply to many – perhaps all – political conflicts and are discussed by expert speakers from Israel, Palestine, and internationally at the British Academy Conference entitled "Empathy Neuroscience: Translational Relevance for Conflict Resolution" (7th and 8th March 2016).

I wish the Center for Empathy in International Affairs (CEIA) success, and am pleased to support its work in any way I can.

Simon Baron-Cohen, thank you for the kind offer and thank you for joining us in a CEIA Exchange.