The Secret of Getting Along With People

Despite shifting definitions, empathy remains an aspirational value.

Posted Sep 20, 2018


Coined by psychologists James Ward and Edward Titchener in 1908 as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung* (in-feeling), the term “empathy” was used almost exclusively in aesthetic, academic and psychiatric publications for decades. By the 1950s and ‘60s, it had become ubiquitous in popular psychology, counselling, social work, in fiction, advertising, on radio and television. “How’s Your Empathy,” *The National Underwriter* asked, advising executives to use it to “understand, predict and control the thinking, feeling, and actions of other people.” The American Council on Education advocated instilling “cultural empathy” in all students. Social psychologist Kenneth Clark claimed that empathy – “to see in one man all men; and in all men the self” – could play a pivotal role in combatting racism.

In *Empathy*, Susan Lanzoni, an historian of science, provides a fascinating account of this fascinating and elusive concept that remains an “aspirational value” in American culture.
Lanzoni illuminates the complex genealogy of empathy and shifts in definition. Best understood as “an array of ideas and practices,” the concept, she demonstrates, has been deployed as a method of appreciating art, a psychotherapeutic tool, an innate human trait, and an essential element of civic responsibility. Social psychologists and clinicians have tied empathy to the body (as a kinesthetic response); perceived it as an abstract idea; understood it as an unconscious or deliberate response.

Experts on empathy, Lanzoni reminds us, distinguish it from sympathy. They define the latter as a feeling of pity for another person; and the former as a capacity to inhabit his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions. That said, measuring empathy has proved to be difficult. High scores on empathy tests, for example, sometimes reflected the shared cultural values of judges and subjects. Researchers found that projection (of an individual’s own needs, interests, and attitudes) was pervasive. “Empathetic provincialism” (the refusal to empathize with someone from a different race, class, or religion) was common as well. The challenge associated with empathy, social psychologist Gordon Allport declared, “is, can we check ourselves, validate our subjective act, and yet make full use of it?”

In recent years, Lanzoni points out, neuroscientists seemed poised to unlock the mysteries of empathy. “Mirror neurons,” they discovered, “fired up” in simulation of another person’s action. “Agents of empathy,” mirror neurons, brain scientists theorized, were part of a complex system that underlay human ability to imitate and learn through socialization.

Widely disseminated in the mass media, claims about mirror neurons, Lanzoni reveals, have been subject to significant scrutiny. Empathy, critics assert, cannot be reduced to motor resonance and simulation. “The meaning is not in the movement,” declared cognitive psychologist Gregory Hickock; empathy relies on the architecture of cognition, which, ultimately, reduces the influence of the mirror neurons themselves.

“Rigidly separating emotional from cognitive processing,” Lanzoni adds, “may oversimplify brain activity.” Some researchers are skeptical about “the existence of universal, basic emotions relatively immune to cultural and situational factors.” After all, assessments of brain activation depend to no small extent on the capacity to describe, illuminate, and process meanings. For these reasons, many researchers now study “emotional regulation and top-down processing that link subcortical sites like the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex.”

One hundred years after empathy got its name, neuroscientists, psychologists, and clinicians, it seems clear, continue to struggle to understand the ways in which it aligns one’s experience to
something or someone else, while also resting on an ability to distinguish the self from the other. The hope, Lanzoni concludes, is that empathy will help us “move beyond the habitual borders of ourselves” so that we “recognize each other in our difference as equals.”