CellPress

Letter
Moving beyond Stereotypes of Empathy

Jamil Zaki[1],*

People tend to think that happiness is good and stress is bad, but neither of these propositions is always true. Bloom [1] counters another emotional stereotype: that empathy is a universally reliable moral compass that inspires kind and healthy action. In an earlier piece, he highlighted this point through the case of Baby Jessica, a child stranded in a well who drew immense empathy, and a disproportionate outpouring of aid, while others suffered in silence. Here, he lists other compelling examples of empathy's limits. However, in claiming that people would be 'better off without' empathy (p. 11), he replaces a positive stereotype with a negative one, and throws the baby out with the well water. Rather than claiming that any emotion is globally helpful or harmful, affective scientists chart contexts under which emotions serve or fail people's goals. From that perspective, Bloom makes at least three omissions.

'Empathy and affect sharing are not the same'. Bloom begins with a useful definitional exercise, but in doing so breaks from the majority of psychologists who study empathy. Most influential theories view 'empathy' as comprising multiple ways in which people respond to others' emotions (Box 1). Bloom opts for an unusually narrow definition, under which empathy connotes the single process of affect sharing. By later advocating for compassion instead of empathy, he points people toward what many scholars would describe as another component of empathy – empathic concern – not away from empathy altogether.

'Empathy can be controlled'. Bloom describes empathy as capricious and

Box 1. Pieces of Empathy

'Empathy' is a slippery term, and many discussions of it wisely open by clarifying definitions. According to Bloom [1], 'nothing of value rests on which [process] we choose to call "empathy," so long as we are clear what we are talking about' (p. 13). Clarity matters, but in his definition, Bloom parts from the majority of scientists who study empathy.

Most theorists agree that empathy describes multiple distinct but related processes through which people respond to others' emotions. These include an 'affective' component – vicariously taking on others' feelings – a 'cognitive' component – reasoning about others' emotions – and a 'motivational' component – desiring for others' emotional states to improve. Psychologists variably name these pieces of empathy (Table 1). Using 'empathy' as an umbrella term for multiple processes usefully organizes the study of interpersonal emotional, in the same way that 'memory' unites disparate processes through which the past affects people.

Terminological clashes arise, though, when psychologists use 'empathy' to denote a single component. For instance, Batson [3] uses 'empathy' to describe concern, whereas Bloom [1] uses it to describe affect sharing (Table 1). In arguing the merits of compassion over empathy, Bloom should be clear that – according to much of the psychological tradition – he is arguing for people to toggle from one empathic component to another, not to discard empathy altogether.

Table 1. Examples of Terms Used by Researchers to Describe Components of Empathy

Author	Emotional	Cognitive	Motivational
Zaki and Ochsner [10]	Experience sharing	Mentalizing	Prosocial concern
Davis [11]	Personal distress	Perspective taking	Empathic concern
Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright [12]	Affective component	Cognitive component	Sympathy
Batson [3]	Personal distress		Empathy
Bloom [1]	Empathy		Compassion

misguided, and commends people to instead turn to logic when considering moral matters. This harkens back to the Platonic metaphor, in which reason is a rider struggling to conquer the wild horse of passion. Modern affective science, though, discards this view, and characterizes emotion and cognition as pervasively intertwined. People 'point' their emotions toward ends they already desire, and 'change' their emotional states to align with their goals.

These abilities apply to empathy as well [2]. People regulate their empathy on a moment to moment basis, for instance, deliberately considering the world from others' point of view [3]. Even individuals with psychopathy can will themselves to vicariously share others' pain, in the process eliciting patterns of brain activity that closely approximate those of non-psychopathic individuals [4]. Through practice, people can also build their empathy over time [5]. Children exhibit a clearer grasp of

others' experiences after taking acting classes; communication training allows physicians to better connect with their patients. Finally, control allows people to conquer at least some of the empathic limits that Bloom laments. For instance, perspective taking can reduce prejudice and increase concern for outgroup members' well-being [3].

Bloom correctly compares empathy with a spotlight, but he fails to consider the agency people exert in pointing that spotlight in response to their goals. Of course, people can point their empathy in useless or counterproductive ways, even inciting violence toward enemies. However, if people's goals are naïve or disaffected, abandoning emotion will not solve their problems. Bias affects all manner of information processing, including attempts at dispassionate reasoning. Emotion and deliberation are partners in guiding moral action, and both can also foster immorality.

In fact, the very idea that empathy is uncontrollable can cause people to settle for narrower versions of it. In a recent set of studies, my colleagues and I found that people who believed – or who we convinced – that empathy was uncontrollable avoided 'empathic challenges', such as listening to the experiences of outgroup members. People who instead believed empathy was in their control embraced those challenges [6]. Thus, correcting outdated notions of emotion as uncontrollable can help people broaden their care.

'Empathy offers irreducible benefits'. I agree with Bloom that principle, not passion, should often drive moral decisions, especially when it comes to large-scale collective actions of organizations and nations. However, for individuals, empathy lends crucial emotional heft to moral actions. For instance, college students who help others experience greater well-being, but only if they empathize with the targets of their help. Empathy can also emotionally reinforce kindness, rendering helpers more persistent [7]. Finally, empathy characterizes effective social agents – not always, as Bloom points out, but more often than he implies. Among many other examples, emotion understanding tracks adolescents' social adjustment and partners' skillful support of each other [8], and managers' emotional concern tracks reduced stress-related complaints in their employees [9].

I sometimes ask my students to imagine a switch that would allow them to always or never feel the emotion of their choice. They nominate feelings to amputate or amplify, but quickly realize that all emotions are sometimes useful, and none are always or never useful. Instead of wishing for more or less empathy, scientists should think about when it most aids empathizers and their targets, and help people tune their emotional lives accordingly.

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Letter

Empathy, Schmempathy: Response to Zaki

Paul Bloom[1],*,@

Jamil Zaki begins his engaging critique [1] of my article by pointing out that emotions are never entirely good or bad. This is certainly true with regard to empathy. It is an important source of pleasure, central to art and literature, and can play a valuable role within intimate relationships. But it fails us when it comes to moral decision-making. It is biased, parochial, and innumerate and motivates irrational and often cruel actions [2,3].

Or so I argue. Zaki sees himself as providing a more nuanced perspective, describing what he sees as omissions in my account.

Terminology

I distinguish empathy, which involves feeling the experiences of others, from compassion, which involves caring for others without necessarily mirroring their experiences. I summarize research findings (including from my own laboratory [4]) showing that not only is compassion psychologically and neurologically dissociable from empathy, it is superior in many ways.

Zaki does not address these empirical arguments but focuses instead on my definition of empathy, which he considers 'unusually narrow'. For him, compassion is not different from empathy; it is a component of it.

I am comfortable with Zaki's use of 'empathy' as an umbrella term; he is right that this is a common practice. However, my own usage, distinguishing empathy from compassion, is also common. As just one example, a recent review of the literature in *Current Biology* by Singer and Klemicki is titled 'Empathy and compassion' [5] (for many other examples, see [3]).

Providing we are clear about what we are talking about, however, these terminological choices do not matter. So, in the spirit of amity, I will adopt Zaki's usage for the rest of this response, describing compassion as 'a component of empathy' and using the term 'emotional empathy', not 'empathy', to describe the psychological process that I am concerned about. Empathy, schmempathy.

Irreducible Benefits

After all, what Zaki and I are really interested in is the nature, development, and evolution of the various psychological capacities – including the many components of empathy – that influence how