A Short History of Empathy

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The Atlantic:

In a column for *The New York Times* this past January, Nicholas Kristof lamented what he called the country's "empathy gap," imploring his readers to grasp the complex circumstances that could plunge someone into poverty. Meanwhile, the psychologist Paul Bloom has argued that a sense of empathy can actually be "parochial [and] bigoted," making it so "the whole world cares more about a little girl stuck in a well than they do about the possible deaths of millions and millions due to climate change."

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By mid-century, empathy's definition began to shift as some psychologists turned their attention to the science of social relations. In 1948, the experimental psychologist Rosalind Dymond Cartwright, in collaboration with her sociologist mentor, Leonard Cottrell, conducted some of the first tests measuring interpersonal empathy. In the process, she deliberately rejected empathy's early meaning of imaginative projection, and instead emphasized interpersonal connection as the core of the concept.

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The social psychologist C. Daniel Batson, who has researched empathy for decades, argues that the term can now refer to eight different concepts: knowing another's thoughts and feelings; imagining another's thoughts and feelings; adopting the posture of another; actually feeling as another does; imagining how one would feel or think in another's place; feeling distress at another's suffering; feeling for another's suffering, sometimes called pity or compassion; and projecting oneself into another's situation.

Read the whole story: The Atlantic