Empathy Doesn't Extend Across the Political Aisle

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When we try to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, we usually go all the way, assuming that they feel the same way we do. But a new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that we have limits: we don't extend this projection to people who have different political views, even under extreme circumstances.

The researchers chose to examine political differences because of the big divide perceived between people on opposing sides, as shown by earlier research. We can look beyond someone having a different gender or being from a different country, but if you're a Democrat and someone else is a Republican, that person seems extremely different. "Political values are emotionally charged. People get really fired up," says Ed O'Brien of the University of Michigan, who cowrote the study with Phoebe C. Ellsworth.

They were actually interested in the question of how we project visceral states. These are strong internal states that we want badly to change. For example, in one study, the researchers approached people who were waiting for a bus in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the winter. These people, it can be safely assumed, were cold.

Usually, visceral states are so overwhelming that people project them onto others: If I'm cold, you must be cold too. But the researchers set out to test just how far this effect extends.

Each person was given a short story to read. The story was about a person who was either a left-wing, pro-gay rights Democrat or a Republican proponent of traditional marriage, who goes hiking in winter but gets lost with no food, water, or extra clothes. After reading the story, they were asked whether the hunger, thirst, or cold was most unpleasant for the hiker and what the hiker most regretted not packing. They were also asked how hungry, thirsty, and cold the hiker felt, and what their own political views were. The researchers gave the same task to people who were warm and comfortable in the nearby library.

People who had the same politics as the fictional hiker judged the hiker to be cold like them, as previous research predicts. But if the hiker had different politics, subjects weren't affected by their strong feelings; cold outdoor participants didn't think the dissimilar hiker was any colder than did warm indoor participants. Another experiment found something similar when people were fed salty snacks in the lab; they read the same story and were less likely to think a hiker of the opposing party was thirsty like them.

This shows that the tendency to project your feelings onto others does not extend to people who are very different from you, even when the feelings otherwise overwhelm your judgments. This might reveal a surprising limit to our ability to empathize with people we differ from or disagree with. For example, other research has shown that people are less likely to endorse torture after they're given a brief burst of pain. But these results suggest that people might feel less opposed to torture if it's being used on people very different from themselves. Similarly, feeling hungry or cold might not be enough to make people

appreciate the plight of the homeless, if they perceive the homeless as very different from themselves. “Even if you’re feeling shared pain, you may not let that connection affect your opinions of people are very, very different from you,” O’Brien says.