

Why We Feel Others' Pain -- Or Don't

May 24, 2014

When the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 teenage girls from a schoolhouse last month, the world responded with an outpouring of undiluted emotion—shock, outrage, fear, and most of all deep sympathy for the victims and their families. It was impossible not to feel the suffering of these innocent, helpless girls in the hands of their cruel jihadist captors.

Well, maybe not impossible. Right-wing commentator Ann Coulter showed not a trace of empathy, as she chose instead to poke fun at a Twitter campaign to raise awareness of the victims' plight. While the world's heart went out to the hostages, Coulter responded with a display of callous insensitivity.

Many of us find this kind of reaction incomprehensible, but it serves as an important reminder that empathy is not a universal response to others' pain and suffering. People vary widely in their capacity for compassion, from deeply pained and troubled to indifferent to harsh and even accusatory and hateful.

Why would that be? What is it that makes two minds respond so differently to the same encounter with misfortune? Scientists have spent a lot of effort exploring the emotional, cognitive and neurological underpinnings of human empathy, but much less time studying how our fundamental world views might affect our ability to feel others' pain. We all hold theories about human nature and the world—whether we articulate them or not. Is it possible that these implicit theories play a role in our ability to empathize and care?

University of Alabama psychological scientist Alexa Tullett has been pursuing this idea. Specifically, she and her colleagues have been studying the way we think about happiness—our lay theories—as a possible precursor of empathy. To explore this question, the scientists had to develop and validate a scale for measuring people's theories of happiness. The so-called Lay Theories of Happiness Scale, or LTHS, assesses three important and interconnected aspects of our happiness beliefs: Does our level of happiness ever change, or is it fixed? Do we control our own happiness or not? Does happiness come from within or from external circumstances?

The scientists believe that our answers to these questions about happiness reflect our beliefs about personal responsibility and blame and justice in the world, which in turn determines our level of empathy. For example, if we think of happiness as a stable trait—if we believe that unhappy people cannot become happier—then we might be more apt to blame victims for their own unhappiness—and be less empathetic. Tullett and her colleagues tested this idea in several studies.

In one, for example, a group of volunteers completed the LTHS and also a measure of empathy as a trait or disposition. They found that those who believed in the changeability of happiness were also more empathetic and concerned about others—and much less callous. In another study, they had volunteers read vignettes about people with various travails—homelessness, obesity, recent immigration—and measured their empathy. They found again that beliefs in flexibility of happiness—as opposed to a fixed

emotional state—were linked to greater empathy. In a final study, the scientists manipulated volunteers' beliefs about happiness—stability or flexibility—and then measured both their empathy and behavior toward people with depression. Those who were primed to think about happiness as changeable—these people were more empathic, and donated a bit more money to help the mentally ill. They also found some evidence that believing in the changeable nature of happiness was linked to less blaming—which might explain the link to actual giving.

Tullett discussed these findings and others at the 26th convention of the Association for Psychological Science in San Francisco this week. The bottom line seems to be that people who believe that happiness is a stable trait—such people may be motivated to believe that unhappy people deserve their plight and, thus, are not worthy of empathy. That seems to be Coulter's attitude toward the Nigerian girls, although it's unlikely any theory will account for the conservative commentator's level of hatefulness.

Follow Wray Herbert's reporting from the 26th convention of the Association for Psychological Science this week in San Francisco in The Huffington Post and on Twitter at @wrayherbert.