Balancing the empathy expense account: strategies for regulating empathic response

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21.1 Introduction

Is it *good* to be empathic? Even taking into account the wide spectrum of definitions associated with the term 'empathy', people are generally in favour of the concept. Psychological research and anecdotal evidence suggest that empathy is widely valued. Hogan's (1969) individual difference measure of empathy has items which suggest that high scorers are all-around good citizens in addition to being empathic (e.g. 'I usually take an active part in the entertainment at parties' and 'Most of the arguments or quarrels I get into are over matters of principle'). When Norman (1967) rank-ordered traits in terms of social desirability, empathy was rated on average at 6.7 on a 9-point scale, where 9 was the highest desirability. Many of the chapters in this book (e.g. chapters 2, 8) point to deficits in empathy or the absence of empathy as being prominent features of serious psychological disorders and mental disabilities. Indeed, respect for empathy is so great that many criminals, particularly sex offenders (e.g. Pithers, 1994), have been enrolled in 'empathy training' programmes (albeit some based on inconclusive research findings) as a part of rehabilitation. It appears that the ability to respond empathically is highly sought after.

However, there can be too much of a good thing, and although it has been said that one can never be too rich or too thin, there do appear to be costs to being too empathic, as well as costs associated with the more common other extreme (not being empathic enough). Thus, an individual's ideal level of empathy may not be that individual's maximal level of empathy, and having strategies for regulating empathy – both increasing and decreasing it – would be helpful. This chapter explores such strategies. First, we provide an overview of the major constructs associated with empathy that would be the target of these strategies. Next, we discuss the strategies themselves, including their effectiveness and costs. Finally, we

explore some cases of empathy regulation gone awry and the consequences of these regulatory misses, particularly those consequences related to mental health.

21.2 Defining empathy

It doesn't take much digging into the research on empathy to discover that there is quite a range of definitions and concepts associated with this concept (Chlopan *et al.*, 1985; Davis, 1983; Klein & Hodges, 2001). To make things more confusing, no consistent nomenclature is used to distinguish these strands of empathy, so that different researchers studying very different constructs may all claim to have found the cause, correlates or consequences of 'empathy'. This lack of precision may have emerged because everyday (i.e. lay) use of the term 'empathy' presupposes the presence of all the elements that make up this multi-dimensional construct (e.g. 'mindreading', concern for the other person, distress at another's plight and stepping outside of the self's egocentric frame), whereas many researchers have chosen to measure and/or manipulate only one element.

Despite the overabundance of operational definitions of empathy, consistent themes emerge. Empathic responses can be ordered along a continuum of simple to complex. The most rudimentary glimmers of empathy are found in emotional contagion (e.g. Hatfield *et al.*, 1993) and imitation – crying when another cries or opening one's mouth when another opens her mouth. These mirroring behaviours occur among the youngest of humans (e.g. Meltzoff & Moore, 1983), and the capacity to imitate is thought to be a fundamental and critical building block for other forms of empathy and perspective taking (Rizzolatti *et al.*, 2002). However, humans exhibit much more complex and impressive forms of empathy, and it is at these more advanced levels that another distinction in characterizing empathy becomes apparent, splitting the concept roughly into emotional and cognitive components.

Emotional empathy – an emotional response to another person – is what comes to mind for many people when they think of empathy. Emotional empathy itself has traditionally been further split into two additional constructs. The first, and the one that corresponds most closely to the concept referred to simply as 'empathy' in everyday conversations, is what we label 'empathic concern' in this chapter. Empathic concern entails feelings of compassion and warmth felt *for the* target of empathy. The second piece of emotional empathy, known as 'personal distress' can be every bit as emotionally charged as empathic concern, but in this case, the emotions are self-centred feelings of distress prompted *by* the target of empathy. Thus, watching a preteen engage in an awkward interaction with a romantic crush could prompt both – feelings of empathic concern, 'oh, the poor girl – is she going to make it through this ordeal?' as well as personal distress (e.g. the observer cringing and blushing when the preteen stutters).

In the example in the previous paragraph, both the target of empathy and the empathic perceiver are presumably feeling embarrassed, suggesting that personal distress resembles a form of emotional contagion (discussed earlier as a very simple form of empathy). Personal distress can, but does not necessarily, involve emotional contagion: it can also occur when feeling a *different* emotion than the target of empathy. For example, the toddler who displays anxiety and agitation in response to his depressed and withdrawn mother is showing personal distress, but not contagion. Of the two emotions, empathic concern is thought to be a more sophisticated and complex empathic response than personal distress (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1998). It emerges later developmentally (Hoffman, 1984; Zahn-Waxler *et al.*, 1992), and may require the suppression or inhibition of one's own emotions, such as personal distress (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995). Furthermore, feeling empathic concern is considered to reflect healthy emotion regulation (Eisenberg *et al.*, 1996).

On the other side of the great empathy divide, cognitive empathy is tied to perspective taking. Sometimes called everyday mindreading or empathic accuracy (e.g. Ickes, 2003), this type of empathy requires guessing what another person is thinking or feeling. Cognitive empathy can get increasingly complex as the number of mental state inferences increases – e.g. 'She thinks that I think we're talking about how Susie quit her job, but I know that she's really upset about that disastrous incident at the club last night'. Although cognitive empathy ability can result in greater understanding and ultimately in helping other people (e.g. suggesting that a guest have a second helping when the host guesses that the guest is too polite to ask for more), there is no guarantee that 'empathic' accuracy might not be used for less charitable purposes (e.g. out-manoeuvring business rivals by guessing their game plan, or mortifying one's siblings by correctly guessing and then bringing up exactly the topic that is most embarrassing to them in front of their new date).

Such malevolent uses of empathic accuracy are rarely, if ever, considered 'empathy' in most everyday uses of the term. Outside of the laboratory, when we refer to someone who is empathic, we generally mean someone who both knows our thoughts and feelings, *and* cares about our well-being. In informal polls that we have conducted, asking people to name the most empathic person they know, mothers and best friends are most often nominated – these individuals not only have a proven record of concern about our well-being, but they also seem to know our thoughts and feelings without being explicitly told. Therapists, who are presumably also striving for this type of 'all-around' empathy, also seek to know what exactly is bothering us and then work to make it better.

However, just because we label someone 'empathic', this does not necessarily mean that they consistently co-occur. Although the majority of empathy researchers have

chosen to focus on one aspect or the other, when both constructs are measured, they can clearly vary independently (Davis, 1983; Klein & Hodges, 2001). This suggests that the regulation of empathy may also be multifaceted, and that different strategies may be recruited for regulating the different components of empathy, and thus, in the next two sections, we will consider strategies for regulating emotional and cognitive empathy separately. However, in no way do we mean to imply that there is a split between affective and cognitive systems of the mind and body when either component of empathy is being regulated: emotional empathy may be regulated using cognitive strategies, and affectively charged motivators play a key role in regulating cognitive empathy.

21.3 Regulating emotional empathy

The empathic emotions, empathic concern and personal distress, are like other emotions in that they provide a signal that something needs to be attended to. Most emotions are like uninvited guests – sometimes good, often bad and only partially under our control. When we feel empathic concern for the shy kid in the kindergarten class, or personal distress while viewing the victim of a gruesome car crash, arousal of these feelings seems unintentional (e.g. see Malle & Knobe, 1997). Like other emotions, empathic concern and personal distress can be seen as serving a survival value as well (distress at a conspecific's unfortunate fate might prevent the self from suffering the same fate; concern over a kin member's fate may have prompted altruistic caring behaviours that helped save the kin member, and her related genes, or may have facilitated attachment between mother and child or romantic couples).

Like other emotions, empathic concern, and particularly personal distress, can be costly. The heightened bodily responses that accompany stressful emotions consume physiological resources at rates greater than baseline states and cannot be maintained healthily for extended periods of time (Selye, 1978). In the case of empathic emotions specifically, there are additional costs. The altruistic urges that accompany empathic concern can result in material or opportunity costs. The empathic person may sacrifice some of his or her own resources to help another. Contemplating another's misfortune can be unpleasant (Schaller & Cialdini, 1988) and also may threaten cherished beliefs, such as the belief that the world is a safe and just place (Janoff-Bulman, 1989).

Because of these costs, generally when we talk about 'regulating emotions', it means dampening them; regulating rarely refers to amplifying a feeling. However, because the altruistic outcomes associated with empathic concern (e.g. Coke et al., 1978) are widely valued, empathic concern is actually one emotion that is subject to amplification attempts. Broad categories of regulation strategies include

suppression, reframing and exposure control. These strategies vary in the degree of effort involved.

Emotion suppression is an easily understood concept when applied to empathic emotion – just don't think about whatever is causing the empathic response (e.g. telling ourselves, 'Just don't think about the civilians in a war-torn city who have been injured or lost family members'). However, suppression requires a mental vigilance which may interfere with other cognitive processing (Richards & Gross, 2000) and may in fact backfire when performed under cognitive load (e.g. Wegner, 1994). Furthermore, suppression of emotions in general has recently been linked to a host of negative psychological and physical health outcomes (Butler et al., 2003).

Reframing requires some cognitive effort at the front end, but may require less over time (and perhaps may even become automatic), if the 'reframer' is sufficiently convinced by his or her new story. Probably the most researched form of reframing used in regulating empathic emotions is perspective taking. Attempting to take another person's perspective generally results in increased empathic emotion. Asking perceivers to imagine things from the empathy target's point of view consistently increases empathic concern (Batson et al., 1997a; Klein & Hodges, 2001; Stotland, 1969), and perhaps even more impressively, altruistic behaviour (e.g. Coke et al., 1978). It is perhaps somewhat ironic that this cognitive strategy, the hallmark indicator of having achieved a Theory of Mind that is considered one of the milestones of cognitive development, consistently produces a change in affect. Of course, perspective taking produces cognitive changes too, such as increasing the degree to which representations of the self and the other overlap (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1997; Davis et al., 1996; Maner et al., 2002).

When instructing someone to take someone else's perspective, subtle wording changes can alter the flavour of the resulting empathic emotion, specifically by affecting the mix of empathic concern and personal distress. For example, Batson et al. (1997a) found that when we are told of another person's plight and asked to imagine how that person feels, empathic concern is produced. However, if those instructions are varied slightly and we are asked to imagine instead how we would feel in the place of the other person, empathic concern is joined by personal distress. It is perhaps no accident that empathic therapists (e.g. see Rogers, 1951) are trained to restate the client's feelings from the client's perspective ('So, you're feeling betrayed by your mother's actions') rather than putting themselves in the place of the client (e.g. 'If my mother did that to me, I'd feel so betrayed'). Such a perspective-taking strategy may keep feelings of personal distress at a minimum while still boosting empathic concern.

Other forms of reframing may be used to reduce, not increase, the intensity of empathic concern or personal distress. Just as increasing the overlap in representations of the self and other may be a key step in increasing empathic emotions,

reframing strategies that help to distance the self from other people may serve to dampen empathic emotions. For example, strategies that decrease the extent to which the other person is seen as less like the self, or even inhuman, should increase the distance between the self and other. Soldiers who may initially be distressed at the idea of bombing towns, leaving hundreds to become homeless, injured and killed, are provided with the alternative frame to see these outcomes as 'collateral damage'. Derogating victims is another potential reframing strategy – referring to them with slurs may cause us to view them as worth less, and thus reduce their deservingness of our concern. We may also feel less empathic concern for people in need if we can view them as having contributed to their own bad fates (see Batson *et al.*, 1997b).

However, not all reframing strategies to reduce empathic concern are rooted in such aggressive goals; parents who would otherwise feel concern for a child who is scared of the dark still turn out the lights at bedtime. Although they normally would respond to their child's fears with behaviours designed to soothe them, not scare them, these well-intentioned parents presumably reframe 'lights out' as part of responsible parenting. Some creative reframing strategies are rooted in people's attempts to allow themselves to feel *some* empathic concern in situations where a seemingly infinite amount could be evoked. For example, while collecting anecdotes in preparation for writing this chapter, we heard about people with jobs in social service or mental health care, particularly those who might be overwhelmed by clients who evoke a great deal of empathic concern (e.g. a counsellor working with a heavy case load of child abuse victims or aids in an inpatient facility for the severely mentally ill). This potential overload sometimes led to adopting a sort of 'gallows' humour'. By using terminology for clients or procedures that mocked the seriousness of these cases, potentially counterproductive levels of emotional empathy might be defused.

More than one person we know deals with pleas from the homeless by giving money to the first person who asks for a handout each day, and then turning down all subsequent requests. We think this is a hybrid solution that blends the first two regulatory strategies. It involves reframing (seeing the contribution to the first person as being perhaps a self-imposed social service tax, in the same way that one pays money for schools or roads), plus a dose of suppression (ignoring all subsequent pleas). The combination restrains empathic concern (and the potential financial costs associated with empathic concern in this context).

The third regulatory strategy, exposure control, involves controlling exposure to factors that cause us to feel empathy. Exposure control is particularly effective for both heighten and reduce emotional empathy. Exposure control is particularly effective for the latter (if we are never exposed to the empathy-inducing stimuli, we will not feel empathic emotions and will not have to worry about further regulation or efforts to restore

ourselves to our pre-exposure states, which are often ineffective – see Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Thus, exposure control is probably the least effortful regulation strategy. However, it does require foresight, as well as meta-knowledge of the self to be effective: we have to turn the television off *before* we see the appeal to save starving children and we have to know our weakness for cute kittens well enough to stay out of homeless cat shelters.

Work by Shaw *et al.* (1994) demonstrates that people are capable of both the foresight and meta-knowledge necessary to effectively use exposure control as a means to control empathic emotion when they perceive that such emotions may cost them. In Shaw *et al.*'s study, college-aged participants were told they would hear an appeal for help from a homeless man, after which they would be given a chance to help the homeless. However, the type of help requested was varied: half the subjects heard about a low-cost form of help (addressing some letters for a few hours); the other half heard about a high-cost form of help (which entailed attending lengthy meetings over the course of several weeks). Participants were then given a choice between a high-impact appeal from the homeless man that would lead to an empathic appreciation of the man's needs, or a low-impact, objective description of his needs.

The study's results showed that when helping was costly, participants avoided choosing the high-impact appeal for help. In contrast, participants in the low-cost help condition were much less reluctant to expose themselves to the high-impact appeal, despite the fact that both groups of participants agreed at roughly equal rates that the high-impact appeal was likely to be more interesting. In sum, the study results suggest that when people think the cost of empathy will be too high, they practise exposure control, even if it means resisting their curiosity to see a compelling story.

Exposure control may be most associated with *reducing* feelings of empathic emotion, because it is such an effective strategy in this regard, but at least anecdotally, increasing one's exposure to certain stimuli can be used as a strategy to *boost* empathic concern. For example, in order to get in touch with the hardships experienced by his ancestors as they came over to the United States as slaves, Alex Haley spent time in a ship's hold (Haley, 1977). Holocaust museums and other educational memorials devoted to historically oppressed and persecuted groups serve a similar purpose on a societal level.

21.4 Regulating cognitive empathy

Whereas the majority of (but not all) attempts to regulate emotional empathy involve trying to dampen it, the majority of (but not all) attempts to regulate cognitive empathy involve trying to amplify it. Rarely are empathic accuracy levels

perceived to be unpleasantly or dangerously high (e.g. when people say, 'I know just what you mean' it is generally with enthusiasm, not with trepidation). The few circumstances in which excessive cognitive empathy is problematic provide some interesting cases that we will consider at the end of this chapter, but, in general, suppression of cognitive empathy is rarely an issue. (There is evidence that people can successfully suppress taking someone else's perspective if asked to do so, as long as they have the cognitive capacity to do so, but the kinds of rebound effects and costs associated with suppressing empathic and other kinds of emotions don't seem to accompany the suppression of a cognitive perspective – see Hodges & Wegner, 1997.)

What about reframing and exposure control as cognitive regulation strategies? It could be argued that cognitive empathy is, itself, a reframing process through which individuals attempt to see the world as it is viewed and processed by another person. A case could be made for exposure control having a small role too: exposing oneself to the experiences, habits and culture of another person may facilitate taking that person's perspective accurately. Most students who do foreign exchange programmes take a big exposure control step that will affect their ability to understand people in another culture when they choose to study abroad. And just as lying in a ship's hold increased the emotions that Alex Haley felt *for* his ancestors (described above), it probably also increased his insights into what they were thinking and feeling during their heinous transport. If nothing else, the Haley example should remind us that emotional and cognitive empathy routinely (but do not always) co-occur in everyday human experiences.

There is a certain all-or-nothing quality to emotional empathy that does not apply to cognitive empathy: although we can feel more or less empathic concern or personal distress, there is a minimal threshold that must be crossed in order for us to note feeling anything at all. In contrast, when it comes to taking someone's perspective, there is a theoretical continuum of empathic accuracy all the way from zero (absolutely no idea what the other person is thinking or feeling) to some maximum bounded only by an asymptote associated with the 'other minds problem' (i.e. we can never really get into another person's head and know what he or she is thinking).

A variety of factors determine empathic accuracy, and several of these are beyond the control of the empathic perceiver. For example, some targets of empathic accuracy attempts are simply more transparent than others, making them easier to read accurately (e.g. Simpson *et al.*, 1995). In addition, individual differences in empathic accuracy (e.g. Marangoni *et al.*, 1995) may be the result of personality characteristics that are hard or even impossible to tinker with (but see also Ickes *et al.*, 2000). However, a big chunk of the variance in empathic accuracy performance can be regulated directly by how hard the empathic perceiver works

at it. Thus, what most clearly categorizes attempts to use both reframing and exposure control towards a goal of cognitive empathy is the direct relationship between effort and success at this goal.

There's no two ways around it – trying to guess what someone else is thinking is hard and soaks up limited cognitive resources (Hodges & Wegner, 1997; Rossnagel, 2000; Sabbagh & Taylor, 2000). People's usual guesses about what another person is thinking in empathic accuracy studies are often far from the bull's eye (e.g. Klein & Hodges, 2001; Marangoni *et al.*, 1995; Stinson & Ickes, 1992). At the same time, people's attempts at empathic accuracy yield a range of scores with a mean well above that which would be achieved by chance.

Because of the effort required to achieve cognitive empathy, motivation is key. Sometimes that motivation may stem from a simple interest in the target of empathy. For example, Ickes *et al.* (1990) found that college students performed better at reading the thoughts and feelings of strangers when those strangers were physically attractive. At other times, motivation may stem from the anticipation of rewards associated with accuracy. For example, the investor who can accurately guess a CEO's future plans may stand to win big if such empathic accuracy guides that investor to buy or sell at the right moment. When Klein and Hodges (2001) translated empathic accuracy performance into concrete monetary rewards by promising research participants greater payoffs for greater accuracy, these participants achieved significantly greater empathic accuracy than participants not promised monetary payoffs.

Although money may be a nearly universal motivator, it is important to remember that motivation occurs within a social context. Desire to behave in a manner consistent with gender roles may also motivate greater accuracy (Klein & Hodges, 2001). In Western culture at least, women are expected to be more empathic than men (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Because empathy is a component of the female gender role, Klein and Hodges (2001) hypothesized that when the empathic nature of a task is highlighted, women, but not men, will be motivated to try harder. Consistent with their predictions, when participants were first asked how much empathic concern they felt for a target, prior to trying to guess what that target was thinking and feeling, women scored higher than men on empathic accuracy. When the empathic accuracy scale was given *after* measuring empathic accuracy, men's and women's empathic accuracy scores were comparable. (Interestingly, the monetary motivators described above overrode the manipulations designed to create sex differences in empathic accuracy!)

Although certain social roles appear to enhance empathic accuracy, conversely, there may be other roles or social situations that *dampen* the motivation to be accurate, or even lead people to be *inaccurate*. Simpson and Ickes (e.g. Simpson *et al.*, 1995, 2003) have outlined a model of this kind of motivated empathic

inaccuracy in the context of romantic relationships. When the empathic accuracy task involved asking heterosexual dating couples to guess how their partners felt about members of the opposite sex (a situation in which accuracy might reveal unpleasant information about their partners' interest in other people), the participants who showed the least accuracy were those whose relationship would be most threatened by their partners' potential interest in the other people: those whose partners were asked about very attractive opposite-sex people, those who reported greater interdependence with their partners, and those who reported higher levels of uncertainty about the future prospects of the relationship (Simpson *et al.*, 1995).

Later work by Simpson *et al.* (2003) shows that the intuitions of the couples about the costs of accuracy in the 1995 sample were correct. The 2003 study looked at married couples who were asked to infer their spouses' thoughts and feelings. When these thoughts and feelings were non-threatening to the relationship, greater empathic accuracy led to feelings of greater closeness. However, when the spouses were thinking thoughts that were threatening to the relationship, greater accuracy had its costs, leading to reduced feelings of closeness. Thus, just as in Shaw *et al.*'s (1994) study involving a homeless man, where research participants knew when empathic *concern* would cost them, Simpson *et al.*'s (1995) dating couples seemed to know when empathic *accuracy* would cost them. However, unlike *Shaw et al.*'s study, where participants took a fairly dramatic form of exposure control, Simpson *et al.*'s (1995) subjects seemed to 'blur' their exposure, rather than avoid it altogether.

The combined results of these two studies have led Simpson and Ickes to develop a model of regulating the costs of empathic accuracy in romantic relationships (Ickes *et al.*, 2005). According to this model, as long as a partner's potentially threatening thoughts are ambiguous, the other partner can go to the root of motivated inaccuracy. However, when the threatening thoughts are clearly unambiguous, the other partner is forced to see the truth and to pay a price for it in terms of relationship closeness; the cost of this truth varies according to just how threatening the thoughts are, how important the relationship is, and how much stress the relationship can withstand.

21.5 Shortcuts to cognitive empathy

One of the things that makes empathic accuracy so hard to achieve is that it is an idiosyncratic task – each target's thoughts are unique. However, there may be some similarity across targets with similar demographic or personality characteristics, or across targets who are in similar situations. Thus, just as humans are likely to develop heuristics and shortcuts in order to reduce the load associated with

cognitively taxing tasks (Payne *et al.*, 1993), an empathic perceiver inferring another person's thoughts may use theories, stereotypes and schemas to help guess the content of those thoughts.

One highly accessible schema that is frequently employed in perspective taking is the self. Often, our guesses about what other people are thinking are strongly influenced by what we ourselves are thinking (e.g. Hodges *et al.*, 2002; Krueger, 2002; Nickerson, 1999; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). In the absence of other sources of information, this strategy is defensible (Dawes, 1990). However, projecting from the self is often misleading, because people do not take into account other relevant information about the target person, because they are unaware of biasing influences on their own state of mind (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003), or even because they make incorrect predictions about their own state of mind under similar circumstances and project these incorrect states on to others (Van Boven *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, although there is a pervasive belief that having experienced a life event oneself will give one insight into another person's similar life experience, this belief may be unmerited (Hodges, 2005). Thus, seeking out similar experiences (a form of exposure control) as a means of increasing empathic accuracy may be of questionable worth.

Like other effortful tasks, there is also the potential for aspects of perspective taking to become automatic with repeated practice over time (e.g. see Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). For example, Baldwin *et al.* (1990) found that subliminally priming participants with people who played a significant role in their lives resulted in those participants making judgements that appeared to be influenced by the significant others' opinions. It was as if the significant others' perspectives were being automatically consulted and integrated into the participants' judgements. Similarly, Taylor *et al.* (2003) found that fiction writers – who spend a lot of time imagining their fictional characters' point of view – often experienced a strange phenomenon whereby their characters seemed to come to life, providing dialogue and action for the story without any perceived effort on the part of the author.

21.6 The dark side of empathy ... the costs of poor regulation

We opened this chapter with examples demonstrating how much empathy is valued, but alluded to the idea that, desirable as it is, too much empathy can be costly. Now that we have summarized some of the known mechanisms of regulating both emotional and cognitive empathy, we will explore examples of regulation gone awry – problems with hitting the ideal level of empathy both due to under-shooting (too little empathy) and overshooting (too much). Because of asymmetries in regulating emotional and cognitive empathy, regulatory problems are not evenly distributed across the two-by-two matrix that would be created by crossing

Table 21.1: Breakdown of regulatory problems by type of empathy

Regulatory problem	Type of empathy	
	Emotional Empathy	Cognitive Empathy
Undershooting	Callousness, insensitivity (fairly common)	Egocentrism (very common)
Overshooting	Personal distress (somewhat common)	Loss of self (somewhat rare)

'type of regulatory problem' (over/under shooting) with 'type of empathy' (cognitive/emotional – see Table 21.1). Problems in regulating cognitive empathy most commonly arise from undershooting (too little cognitive empathy), whereas problems in regulating emotional empathy perhaps more often come from overshooting (feeling too much emotional empathy), but also come from undershooting. Regulatory problems can also emerge when learned or practised strategies that were potentially adaptive in one context are maladaptive in another context.

21.7 Undershooting emotional empathy

With empathy as a valued commodity, not demonstrating enough of it, especially not enough emotional empathy, can create serious problems. Several of the other chapters in this book address psychological disorders that result in such emotional empathy deficits. However, rather than focus on the plight of individuals whose capacity to feel empathy is damaged or even prevented by mental illness, we will instead present an example of what happens when someone with a normal empathic capacity for empathy adapts to an abnormal environment. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman's landmark book, *On Killing* (1995), explores the psychological process that humans go through when killing – and in particular, shooting – another human being. Grossman's main focus is soldiers, and, among other things, he points to an interesting historical shift in the number of soldiers who successfully fire their guns and actual kill enemy soldiers. For example, estimates of the percentage of soldiers not firing their guns in World War II are around 75–80%, whereas estimates are about 5% in the Vietnam War. Why the difference?

Grossman systematically enumerates the changes in armies and training (among other factors) that he thinks have made the difference: weapon innovations that allowed soldiers to hit their targets without being able to see distinctive (and humanizing) features of their targets; classical conditioning (including the use of more lifelike targets in target practice, so that soldiers practise hitting a human-like figure, rather than an abstract bull's eye); and the use of euphemistic terms for the act of killing (such as 'engaging the target'). Essentially, much of this training constitutes the reframing strategy discussed earlier as a strategy for reducing

empathic concern. (Aspects of this training have been perhaps unintentionally integrated into many young peoples' education' as well, as it has been found that violent video games may provide similar desensitization – Funk *et al.*, 2003.)

The increased shoot percentages and kill numbers from army statistics suggest that the military training is an effective strategy for overcoming natural tendencies to feel concern for the enemy. Alas, the training is perhaps *too* effective in destroying any kind of concern for those who may be seen as enemies, as behaviour by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and numerous other examples of wartime atrocities suggest. The reframing also appears to have a limited shelf life, working effectively only in the context that supports it (e.g. a combat situation). When restored to 'normal' human environments, which generally discourage killing others, soldiers who killed others at close range in battle tend to suffer more severe post-war distress than those who either did not kill, or killed from a distance (Grossman, 1995).

Suppression of emotional concern may also lead to long-term problems, particularly for groups of people whose jobs or lives entail spending a lot of time working with others who evoke empathic concern (e.g. medical personnel on intensive care units, counsellors of abuse victims, teachers of severely disabled children). In the short term, additional resources can be mobilized to regulate the response to an emotion trigger, such as suppressing thoughts about burn or incest victims. However, the circumstances that shaped the evolution of emotions as an adaptive response have created optimal operation among humans encountering the occasional other person in distress, not among modern-day care providers whose whole days are filled with interactions with such individuals. Eventually, the strain on caregivers can take the form of 'compassion fatigue', – the term given to the experience of therapists who get burned out from constant work with clients undergoing distressing experiences (Figley, 2002). We suspect that caregivers are particularly susceptible to 'compassion fatigue' when other routes to regulation are blocked – when, for example, work pressures require few breaks from victims (which would provide relief in the form of exposure control), or when reframing is difficult (for example, when the prospect of the victims making any progress is dim, or when the caregivers are unable to see their work as having any impact or meaning). This view is supported by empirical models of burnout among social service workers (Miller *et al.*, 1995).

A special group of people who might experience unique problems undershooting the ideal level of empathic concern are those who regularly interact with others who are likely to evoke sympathy for the purpose of exploiting it. Parole officers, guards (military or civilian) and therapists who work with sociopaths fall into this category. Becoming too empathically concerned (and the accompanying desire to help that accompanies empathic concern) could quite literally be a matter of life

and death for these people, which suggests that they may learn to set the default level of empathic concern quite low. Furthermore, their tendency to feel empathic concern may be generally dampened due to the fact that they encounter a much higher base rate of people who seem unworthy of empathic concern (i.e. these individuals develop a more cynical view of humanity). Together, these biases may also explain why abuses of power are closely associated with some of these positions (again, consider the Abu Ghraib scandal in Iraq).

21.8 Overshooting emotional empathy

Personal distress is one outcome that occurs when people fail to rein in emotional empathy. This 'evil twin' emotion often accompanies empathic concern, but focuses more on the perceiver's own feelings of distress while encountering another person, rather than feeling *for* the other person. The quintessential example of this phenomenon is the bystander who witnesses a gruesome accident and can only stand by, gasping and shrieking, rather than comforting the victim or going for help. Merely ramping up levels of empathic concern will not necessarily kick perceivers into the reaches of personal distress, but psychologists have suggested that the development of emotional regulatory processes is what allows humans to feel empathic concern (which is associated with desirable pro-social behaviours) instead of just personal distress (Hoffman, 1984; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992).

21.9 Undershooting cognitive empathy

A cynical, but not entirely inaccurate view of human nature would posit that humans' tendency toward egocentrism causes us to *consistently* undershoot cognitive empathy. Widespread and well-documented examples of human egocentrism abound (see Nickerson, 1999). Performance on simple perspective-taking tasks (Keysar et al., 1998) can be embarrassingly poor. However, to be fair, at least part of the problem is not regulatory in nature, but simply due to limits on ability and mental capacity. (As an analogy, if the average woman were trying to outrun Olympic sprinter Gail Devers and lost, we would be unlikely to chalk the loss up to regulatory problems!)

Just because studies have demonstrated that cognitive empathy (when measured in the form of empathic accuracy) increases in the presence of motivators (Klein & Hodges, 2001), these results do not necessarily imply poor regulation of cognitive empathy. They may instead reflect a well-calibrated optimizer that expends effort only to the degree that it is worth it. Even if we can bring to mind a few spectacular interpersonal disasters brought about by the failure to take

another person's perspective, it is still unclear whether routinely exerting greater effort would pay off, even if it did allow us to avoid the rare egocentric incidents that were truly damaging. In order to find an example of a true regulatory 'error' in undershooting cognitive empathy, it would be necessary to demonstrate that the advantages of greater empathic accuracy outweighed the costs of expending greater cognitive effort. All this said, there are clearly times when abandoning our egocentrism would not only be fairly easy, but also to our advantage, and yet we still seem reluctant to do so.

21.10 Overshooting cognitive empathy

Greater cognitive empathy generally requires greater effort, therefore regulatory problems that result in cognitive empathy levels that are higher than ideal may seem counterintuitive, but such instances can occur. One possible route to cognitive over-empathizing may be through practice: perspective taking might be like other processes that are controlled at first and become automatic. For example, learning to knit or play a musical instrument requires a great deal of concentration at first, but with time, aspects of these activities can become so automatic that they can be done while simultaneously performing other activities (Bargh, 1989; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986).

If (as we cynically suggested earlier) humans' egocentrism is a potential design flaw, then it may be hard to see the development of automatic perspective taking as leading to an 'overshoot' in cognitive empathy. Instead, it might be perceived as leading to more *optimal* levels of perspective taking. Indeed, we would like to go down on record as saying that routinely considering other people's points of view would generally provide a huge benefit to humanity. However, under some circumstances, particularly in close relationships, automatically taking the other person's perspective may come at the expense of the self. For example, Dana Jack (1987) describes the phenomenon of 'silencing the self', which is noted as being particularly prevalent in women who are mothers and wives. Attempts to satisfy others' desires take the forefront, while self needs go unmet (hence, the self is 'silenced').

Another example of potentially overshooting cognitive empathy is when people (often women) in abusive relationships devote a great deal of time and effort to figuring out what will trigger their partner's rage and working to prevent it. Rather than recognizing that the more effective strategy would be to exit or change the relationship, these individuals instead try to adopt a destructive perspective within it. Both of the previous examples suggest that women may be disproportionately likely to experience cognitive empathy overshoots, raising an interesting issue for future research.

21.11 Closing thoughts

We hope this chapter challenges the notion that more empathy is always good, while at the same time acknowledging that more empathy is *often* good. We have presented general strategies humans use for regulating both cognitive and emotional empathy, and discussed the merits and weaknesses of suppression, reframing and exposure control. We have tried to 'bring to life' instances where one or the other broad categories of empathy (cognitive or emotional) shows evidence of poor regulation – resulting in empathy levels that are either greater or less than ideal in a particular set of circumstances.

In closing, we hope that we have demonstrated the remarkable flexibility and creativity present in the specific techniques that humans use for regulating empathy. Some of these strategies are intentional; others occur without us consciously monitoring or adjusting our empathy levels. Some strategies are used routinely, every day or even every hour; others get called into play only to deal with special occasions. We concede that there may be several strategies not covered in this chapter, and that these strategies may fail to fit neatly into the taxonomy we have presented. We welcome these challenging cases as providing possible future directions for studying the regulation of empathy, and ultimately how the effective regulation of empathy translates into changes in human behaviour and interactions. Like fire, empathy is a powerful and valuable tool available to our species, made infinitely more useful when we know how to manage it.

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