



# STRATEGIC APPLICATION OF EMPATHY: THE EMOTIONAL MINDFULNESS



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## Introduction

Every one of us possesses emotions. They are important in our daily experiences (e.g., love and relationship, learning and recreation, sports and learning) and emotions motivate us to behave in all sorts of manners or ways. “Our emotions are the feelings inside our minds that come and go” (Waters, 2015a, p.11). According to Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2007), an emotion is defined as a complex psychological state that is made up of three distinct components: (i) a subjective experience, (ii) a physiological response, and (iii) a behavioral or expressive response. Besides attempting to define what emotions are, researchers (e.g., Cherry, 2019; Waters, 2015a, 2015b) have also tried to identify and classify the different types of emotions. In fact, experts like Ekman (2004) have claimed that there are six main emotions – anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise – and that all the other emotions are some sort of combination or variation of these, while Plutchik (1991) identified eight basic emotions that both humans and mammals have in common: anger, anticipation, joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness and disgust.

Interestingly, Plutchik’s (1991) eight basic emotions are each marked with a recognizable color within his proposed Wheel of Emotions. As the intensity of the emotion increases, so does the intensity of the color. The wheel has different layers and dimensions and the intensity of the emotion and color increases toward the middle of the wheel (see Figure 1 below).

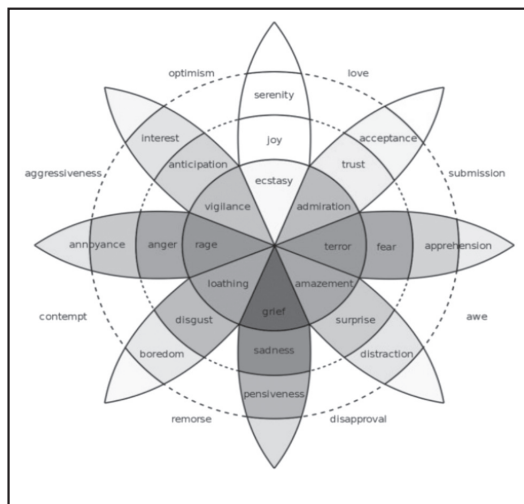


Figure 1. Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotions

According to Sir Charles Darwin (b.1809-d.1882), an English naturalist, geologist and biologist, emotions are the way our brain convinces us how we should react or respond in order to attain two most basic goals: survival and reproduction. Very few people know that Darwin as an early experimental psychologist had “conducted one of the first studies on how people recognize emotion in faces” (Jabr, 2010, para.2). In 1872, he published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, in which Darwin argued that all human beings as well as other animals show emotion through remarkably similar behaviors. For Darwin (1872/1965), emotion had an evolutionary history that could be traced across cultures and species. Such a view was very unpopular during Darwin’s times. Generally, in the Darwinian theory, emotions are what happen when our brain observes something taking place outside and then interprets what is going on in terms of survival. In other words, positive and negative emotions are all triggered by some external stimuli and then prompt an individual to behave in certain ways (e.g., giggling, screaming and weeping). They also include reactions such as fight, flee or freeze – known as the triple-F emotional reactions/responses.

Waters (2015a) has listed four basic facts about emotions as follows (p.55-57):

1. Emotions will not be exactly like anyone else’s;
2. Emotions can be acquired;
3. Emotions are shaped by those around us;
4. Emotions are partly shaped by our emotional make-up.

From our understanding of emotions, there is a need to define emotional ability as compared to the statistical norm or average for their age, taken as 100. This brings us to the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) or emotional quotient (EQ), which is defined in Lexico.com (2019) “as the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one’s emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically” (para.1). According to Goleman (1995), there are five main elements of emotional intelligence: (i) self-awareness (recognizing one’s feelings); (ii) self-regulation (finding appropriate ways to manage one’s emotions in different situations); (iii) motivation (self-control to channel one’s emotions toward a goal); (iv) empathy (understanding others’ emotional perspectives); and (v) social skills (handling social relationships and developing interpersonal skills). It is the fourth element of EI that is the focus of this short article.

## What is Empathy?

The word *empathy* comes from Greek that means simply “in feeling or feeling into.” It has been defined by Waters (2015b) as

“the ability to sense other people’s emotions ... able to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling ... recognize and understand another’s suffering. It’s the feeling that allows a person to ‘walk a mile in someone else’s shoes” (p.11).

Taylor (2019) identified two types of empathy. The first one he called it “shallow empathy” (also known as cognitive empathy) and it refers to the cognitive ability to put oneself in another person’s shoes in order to gain an inkling of understanding for how the other person is feeling based on his/her behavior, facial expressions, and speech. The second type of empathy that Taylor (2019) termed is “deep empathy” (also known as affective empathy), which refers to the ability not just to imagine, but also to actually feel what other people are experiencing. This is the ability to actually enter another person’s mind-space so that one can sense his/her feelings and emotions, merging one’s identity with others’ such that the demarcation between oneself and other selves fades away. In other words, the self-boundary melts away and the person who empathizes others has become them. “Deep empathy is the source of compassion and often leads to altruistic behavior, which is rooted in the desire to alleviate the suffering we can sense in others” (Taylor, 2019, para.7).

Ekman (2004) has differentiated two types of deep or affective empathy. The first one he called it “emotional empathy,” i.e., when a person physically feels what other people feel, and that is all. The second one he called it “compassionate empathy.” For this second type of affective empathy, a person not only understands and feels someone’s pain, but is also moved to take action, i.e., to help. Often compassionate empathy can lead to what Ekman (2004) called “constructive anger” – an emotional outburst that a person sets out to do something with some sense of social or spiritual justice. One good example of such a person with compassionate empathy is Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

In fact, all major religions teach about compassionate empathy: the “God quality” within a person that results in “active responses of respect, service, and are for those in need” (Waters, 2015b, p.17). The Hindus call it *ahimsa* while the Buddhists call it *karuna*. In Judeo-Christian tradition, compassion is seen as God’s way of interacting with His creation, and “it is the way people should interact with one another” (Waters, 2015b, p.17). Even the Muslims consider compassion to be part of Allah’s very nature and are called to imitate. Underlining all these major religious traditions is that Golden Rule: “Love others as yourself.” This is the commandment that Jesus Christ had taught His disciples (see Mark 12:30) to observe besides the Great Commandment: “To love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength” as recorded in the gospel according to Saint Mark (Chapter 12, Verse 30). For this reason, we have termed empathy (cognitive and affective, emotional and compassionate) as *emotional mindfulness*: the mental state attained by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. This is often achieved through some kind of a therapeutic technique such as meditation, psychotherapy or other mind training techniques (Deatherage, 1975).

There is more to learn about empathy as we trace it to affective behavior (or affect). Affect is a psychological concept to describe the experience of emotions/feelings. It mediates an individual’s interaction with stimuli and this is known as affect display, i.e., “a facial, vocal or gestural behavior that serves an indicator of affect” (Gary, 2006, p.26). The term “affect” is seldom used as a noun in other fields (Hogg, Abrams & Martin, 2010).

## Affective Behavior of Affect

According to Poland (1974), affect or affective behavior constitutes one of the three behavioral potentials; the other two being cognitive behavior and conative behavior. Together all the three behavioral potentials, which are inherited from birth, “become actualized depends upon the interaction between those potentials and an array of environmental factors” (Poland, 1974, p.12). They form the framework of human experience and it changes over time as an individual grows and matures.

Being a genetically based potential, affective behavior “has to do with a wide variety of behavior ranging from sadness and depression through happiness and ecstatic joy. Feelings are not directly observable, although they often may be expressed through action” (Poland, 1974, p.13). Slovic et al. (2007) argued that affect means “the specific quality of ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ (i) experienced as a feeling state (with or without consciousness) and (ii) demarcating a positive or negative quality of a stimulus,” and explained further that “[A]ffective responses occur rapidly and automatically – note how quickly you sense the feelings associated with the stimulus word ‘treasure’ or the word ‘hate”” (p.1333).

Affect as behavior can be further categorized into 3 levels of feeling: apathy (being indifferent), sympathy, and empathy (being altruistic). Briefly, apathy refers to a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern; sympathy concerns a formal expression of pity or sorrow for someone else’s misfortune; and empathy is that ability to understand and share the feelings of another (see Figure 2 below). As already mentioned earlier, empathy can be identified as either cognitive (shallow) or affective (deep) empathy, which can be further differentiated into emotional empathy and compassionate empathy.

“Both empathy and compassion are just one kind of emotion” (Waters, 2015b, p.11), but there is a difference between them. Briefly described, empathy is the ability to sense other people’s

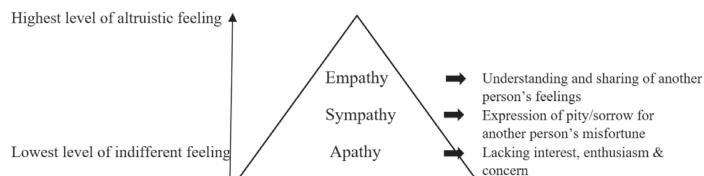


Figure 2. Apathy, Sympathy and Empathy

emotions, while “compassion is an active concern for another person’s pain; it’s not just a feeling, but it’s also a willingness to do whatever it takes to help the other person” (Waters, 2015b, p.15-16). Waters (2015b) argued that compassion often commences with empathy and it is bigger than empathy.

## Empathy Deficits or Empathy Erosion?

Is empathy deficit or empathy erosion the same as apathy? According to the Wikipedia Contributors (2019), “[A]pathy is a lack of feeling, emotion, interest, or concern about something” (para.1). It is a state of indifference, or the suppression of emotions (e.g., concern, motivation or passion). Someone with apathy has “an absence of interest in or concern about emotional, social, spiritual, philosophical, or physical life and the world” (Wikipedia, 2019, para.1). Apathy is not the same as empathy deficit or deficiency in being able to empathize with others. For example, people with autism often display problems in empathizing, i.e., “the drive to identify another person’s perspective and emotions and generate an appropriate socio-emotional response” (Escovar et al., 2016, p.1). In the neuropathological condition of autism, the

lack of empathy is not apathy but deficit or deficiency in empathy.

However, empathy erosion is not apathy or empathy deficit, but more of an apathetic attitude. Wombles (2011) has defined empathy erosion as a highly adaptive response to ensure one's survival. According to Baron-Cohen (2011), if a person did not suffer empathy erosion in the first place, he/she would not have enemies. When someone encounters affective insults repeatedly, empathy will erode over time and hence, empathy erosion becomes a natural, self-protective feature. In other words, empathy erosion now functions as a form of innate defense mechanism.

## Conclusion

Baron-Cohen (2011) has developed the Empathizing Mechanism to rate a person's empathy from level 0 to level 6 (p.26-28) as follows:

Level 0: Has no empathy at all;

Level 1: Still capable of hurting others, but can reflect on what has been perpetuated and show regret;

Level 2: Still has major difficulties with empathy but can feel the pain experienced by other person to inhibit any physical aggression;

Level 3: Aware of difficulty with empathy but may mask or compensate by avoiding tasks or relationships that involve empathy;

Level 4: Has a low average amount of empathy that is based more on shared activities and interests than on emotional intimacy;

Level 5: Marginally above average in empathy that may be based more on emotional intimacy, mutual support, and expressions of compassion; and/or

Level 6: Remarkable empathy that continually focuses on other people's feelings and go out to support them with action.

In summary, empathy is a spectrum of emotions ranging from no empathy at all to remarkable empathy such as altruism. With further fine-tuning of the Empathizing Mechanism, the rating scale would be a good measure of emotional mindfulness or an excellent forensic measure in identifying people with apathetic attitude, empathy deficit and cruelty to others such that they are "capable of committing crime, including murder, assault, torture, and rape" (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p.25).

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