

### **A Dialogical Lesson on the Role of Misrepresentations in Misguiding our Empathy**

Humanity has always been selective in its empathy, social groups and entire populations suffered in the dark as the world stood in indifference. This indifference was often reinforced by (mis)representations: misinformation, false narratives, and distorted generalizations that dehumanized the victims of suffering and represented them as unworthy of empathy. Representations have been instrumental in justifying violence and keeping its victims outside the spectrum of human empathy: Representations of colonized people as “savages, cannibals, and brutes” facilitated the dispossession of their lands (Fleras, 2017, p. 84). Representations of marginalized social groups as delinquent justified their exclusion. Representations that demonized Vietnamese, Afghans, and Iraqis justified the wars against them and the human rights violations that happened during these wars. In this paper, we introduce a lesson on the role of misinformation and misrepresentation in dehumanizing social groups and populations. Our lesson is divided to three parts: We start with a discussion of empathy and indifference and how both traits have coexisted throughout human history. We then discuss psychological and philosophical theories that have attempted to explain the causes of and solutions to our empathy deficit and our failure to generalize our empathy. Finally, we discuss how misrepresentations and misinformation have functioned to misguide our empathy and construct social groups as unworthy of empathy and respect.

#### **Format of the Lesson**

The lesson that we present is dialogical: we provide students with historical facts and dilemmas, we support them in developing their own interpretations and potential solutions, and we use our students’ interpretations to critically reflect on our own interpretations. In addition to

examining misinformation and dehumanization, we guide our students in developing their own theories about why empathy favors some people over others.

### **Part 1. Human Wars and Chimpanzee Wars: Empathy, Indifference, and Violence**

When the Russian army invaded Ukraine, the democratic world was outraged and stood in solidarity with Ukrainians. Refugees escaping the conflict were welcomed with heartwarming displays of compassion and people across the world empathized with their suffering. However, this empathy did not extend to everyone: several people of color reported being victims of racially motivated assaults as they were trying to flee the conflict. Witness accounts and video footages documented the struggle of international students of color who were denied entry into neighboring countries and who endured verbal and physical violence on the borders. This contrast between empathy towards the suffering of some and indifference towards the suffering of others is not new, the Ukrainian crisis is just another instance of a pattern that has existed for centuries. In fact, this pattern predates humanity and can be found among our animal ancestors: In her five decades of observing chimpanzees, British primatologist Jane Goodall saw an abundance of compassion within chimpanzee communities. She also observed extreme violence and genocidal behaviour when two communities of chimpanzees engaged in war. The same chimpanzees who displayed kindness and compassion also engaged in killing, torturing, and celebrating the harm they inflicted on their victims.

### **Part 2. Can we overcome indifference through empathy or is indifference a by-product of empathy?**

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference,” said Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. It is our collective ethical duty to understand the sources of humanity’s indifference and to overcome its harmful impact.

***Theory 1: We are born with empathy and other prosocial instincts and we need to nurture them.***

According to Barack Obama, we are suffering from an “empathy deficit:” we are failing at generalizing our empathy and at seeing the world through the eyes of those who are different (Obama, 2008). President Obama’s statements echo a psychological and philosophical theory that sees in empathy a solution to humans’ violence and indifference. Among the earliest proponents of this theory is Charles Darwin who argued that we are born with prosocial instincts that make us enjoy supporting others and feel distress when witnessing the distress of others. However, because of affiliation and us vs them distinctions, we train these prosocial instincts to become selective and biased: “the social instincts lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them [...] But these feelings and services are by no means extended to all the individuals of the same species, only to those of the same association” (Darwin as cited in Keltner, 2009, p. 52).

***Theory 2: Empathy, like all other emotions, is biased, contingent, and cannot be a reliable moral guide.***

Not everyone sees empathy as the solution to human evil, many see empathy as part of the problem. According to psychologist Paul Bloom (2017), empathy is itself inherently biased, it favors those that we perceive as similar and, by putting the spotlight on their suffering, it orients our attention away from the suffering of those that we perceive as different. Many of

Bloom's arguments can be traced back to the deontological theories of ethics that warned against using emotions as grounds for morality because emotions are contingent and inherently biased.

We present both theories to our students and we support them in developing their own positions within this debate. To guide them in developing their perspectives, we ask them to discuss the following questions:

- Is it possible to generalize empathy and develop the capacity to empathize with every human being or is empathy inherently discriminatory and impossible to generalize?
- Is the discrimination against non-White refugees on Ukrainian borders a failure to generalize empathy or an instance of empathy's inherent limitations and biases?

**Part 3. Historical examples of dehumanization: The construction of others as threats and as inferior.**

Our empathy, like other emotions, is influenced by the narratives and representations that we see and hear. Hence it is crucial that we critically examine how representations and narratives have guided and misguided human empathy, and how populations and social groups have been represented as unworthy of empathy and respect. To guide our students in critically examining the role of representations in (mis)guiding empathy, we present historical examples of media representations that dehumanized populations and social groups and we ask students to work on the following assignment:

- Select a social group or population that have been dehumanized by the media. Provide historical examples of media representations that dehumanized this group/population and explain how these representations were used to induce indifference towards the suffering of this group/population.