

Empathy and Justice Motivation

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Empathic distress is defined as an aversive feeling contingent on another's physical, emotional, or economic distress. The paper (1) summarizes a developmental scheme consisting of four stages of empathic distress; (2) suggests that causal attributions may partly transform empathic distress into sympathy, empathic anger, feeling of injustice, and guilt feeling; (3) notes the evidence that these empathic affects often serve to motivate moral behavior, and therefore that they qualify as moral motives; (4) points up limitations of these affects/motives and the need to embed them in justice principles; (5) discusses links between empathic affects/motives and principles of distributive justice; (6) argues that Rawls' theory of justice, which excludes empathy, may nevertheless require it for the "difference principle" to influence behavior in real life; (7) hypothesizes a functional equivalence between empathy and the "veil of ignorance"; and (8) speculates that the conjunction of empathic affect and justice-principle thinking—in life and in abstract didactic contexts like Rawls' "original position"—may produce a principle having the motivational and stabilizing properties of a "hot cognition."

I think it is highly significant that people who are feeling good can quickly shift to feeling sad when they observe someone in danger, pain, or economic deprivation. Indeed, I believe this human capacity for empathic distress may provide the affective and motivational base for moral development and just behavior and may thus be a major cohesive force or glue in society. I have long been working on a developmental scheme for empathic distress and related empathic affects and on the link between these affects, moral behavior, and justice principles (Hoffman, 1975, 1987, in press). My

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plan here is to briefly describe the developmental scheme, which some of you know. I then suggest how the empathic affects, though derived from a simple bystander model, may operate in complex justice-relevant encounters and, further, how they may contribute to and benefit from the acquisition of justice principles, especially those advanced by John Rawls (1971). First, a few words about the relation between affect, justice, motivation, and behavior.

Affect may contribute to justice in several ways. If one feels good about oneself when one's actions are in accord with justice principles and bad when one's actions are in discord with these principles, this should increase the likelihood of one's behaving in a just manner. Likewise, if one feels positively or negatively towards others who behave in accord with or in discord with justice principles, this should influence one's moral judgments and actions toward them. The question is: What affect might be aroused in justice-relevant situations, in both actors and observers, that makes a reliable contribution to justice? My answer is empathic affect, which I define as an affective response more appropriate to someone else's situation than to one's own situation. The advantages of this definition are discussed elsewhere (Hoffman, 1982a).

The idea that affect may have motive properties is not new. Psychology has always assumed a connection between affect and motivation. If one is angry at someone, one wants to strike that person. If one loves someone, one wants to embrace him or her. If one grieves at the loss of someone, one wishes for his or her return. For many of the 1940s' and 1950s' learning theorists, affect was the basis of reinforcement, which underlay motivation. For psychoanalysis, objects invested with affect are objects that one is motivated to possess. In all of these cases affect is viewed as motivating action on behalf of the self. It therefore seems reasonable to expect empathic affect to motivate action on behalf of the person or group with whom one empathizes, an expectation that has considerable research support. In addition, there are several lines of converging evidence that empathic affect may have become a reliable, biologically based human motive through the process of natural selection (Brothers, this volume; Hoffman, 1981).

DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHIC DISTRESS AND RELATED AFFECTS

My theorizing about empathic distress starts with a simple innocent-bystander model and generates five empathic affects that are mediated by social-cognitive development and various causal attributions or inferences.