Compassion, Empathy, and Pro-Social Behavior: Degradation and Restoration
Nancy E. Snow
The University of Oklahoma

Introduction

First, I'd like to thank Christopher Caulfield for inviting me to participate in this conference and for organizing it, and Michael Slote for suggesting that I be invited.

It is well known that compassion and empathy can motivate pro-social behavior (see, for example, Batson (1998, 2011), Snow (1991, 2000), and Slote (2010), and that these qualities can be cultivated early in human development (see, for example, Slote (2010), Snow (2000), Carlo and Pierotti (in press), and Narvaez (2014). There is considerable complexity in the development of compassion and empathy, as well as in the kinds of motivations that can produce pro-social behavior. As we know, not all motives that produce pro-social behavior are entirely other-regarding. Some are egoistic (see, for example, Carlo and Pierotti (forthcoming), and some are a mix. For example, a person could be motivated to donate to a charity for the purely selfish reason of claiming a tax deduction, and a student could be motivated to do volunteer work at a nursing home not only out of compassion for the elderly but also to get credit on her resume.

Questions of development and motivation are extremely important. However, they are not my direct focus in this talk, though what I say could have implications for these topics. The aim of my talk is to explore conditions under which compassion and empathy can break down, that is, in which these qualities in adults – presumably already formed – can be damaged, blocked, or inhibited. I will also briefly explore how

compassion and empathy in these kinds of cases, which I will call 'degraded compassion'

and 'degraded empathy,' might be restored. I examine these topics against the

background of the recent rise of incivility in social and political life, especially in the

United States (see also Jindal (2018). I believe that much of this incivility proceeds

apace with the degradation of compassion and empathy. I briefly explain my

understandings of compassion, sympathy, and empathy, then offer an initial attempt at

diagnoses of the causes of the degradation of these qualities and conjectures about

possible restoration.

Compassion, Sympathy, and Empathy

Compassion and sympathy are ways in which we feel sorrow for someone. In

earlier work (Snow 1991), I defended the view that compassion is feeling sorry for

another who is undergoing serious misfortune.[1] I there distinguished compassion from

sympathy, which I believe is sorrow for another whose plight is not so bad. We feel

compassion for those who have been diagnosed with a grave illness, or who have lost

their jobs. It would be odd, however, to say that we feel compassion for those who are

experiencing a tight work deadline, or who suffer from the pain of an inflamed ingrown

toenail. The latter kinds of ills are not sufficiently serious to warrant a compassionate

response. Feeling compassion requires that we are able to identify with the suffering

other. We can do this either through imaginative dwelling on her circumstances, or

through identification via the belief "that could be me," or something similar. That belief

or something similar, I've argued, reflects the recognition that we, like the other for

whom compassion is felt, are vulnerable, and thus, not immune to misfortune.

Unlike compassion and sympathy, when we empathize, we feel with the other – we feel an emotion similar to what they are experiencing. In Snow (2000) I drew on the work of the psychologist Martin Hoffman to examine the numerous mechanisms and processes through which empathy or its precursors in infants and children can be produced: reactive crying, motor mimicry, affective synchrony, social referencing, and classical conditioning.

Let me briefly explain each of these phenomena:

Reactive crying: Studies have shown that infants cry more vigorously in response to human as opposed to non-human cries, and that reactive crying does not merely imitate other sounds, but has its own affective component.

Motor mimicry: This is the imitation of the physical movements or facial expressions of another. It is believed that facial mimicry of another's expressions produces a subjective experience of the same type of emotion that is felt by another.

Affective synchrony: Starting at about the age of two months, infants respond during shared play to the positive facial and verbal expressions of others with their own positive affective expressions.

Social referencing: This occurs when children check their caregivers' facial expressions when confronted with unfamiliar scenes and thereby pick up their caregivers' affect. It is related to gaze tracking, in which one person follows another's gaze to a shared visual reference point.

Classical conditioning: An empathizer initially observes physical cues of another's emotion and simultaneously experiences similar emotion. Eventually, cues from others become conditioned stimuli that elicit similar affect in the empathizer.

More could be said about each of these phenomena. Suffice it to say, however, that they rely heavily on an empathizer's receiving physical cues from a target, they do not wither away or change beyond recognition as children become adults, and they are not supplanted or replaced by more cognitively sophisticated forms of empathizing.

Three cognitively sophisticated forms of empathizing that merit mention are simulation, imaginative projection, and observation and inference.

Simulation: In this view, advanced by Robert M. Gordon and Alvin I. Goldman, I empathize by bracketing my own beliefs and affect and simulating in myself how you feel in your situation.

Imaginative projection: Adam Smith believes that I empathize by imagining how I would feel if I were in your situation.[2]

Observation and inference: Hume maintains that we empathize with others by observing their behavior and inferring that they are experiencing a certain type of affect. Our inferences to the inner states of others are legitimated by correlating our own, similar behavior with the forms of affect that we experience. If I mope when I am sad and observe you moping, for example, I infer that you are sad. How this generates similar affect in me, however, is far from clear. Among other factors that contribute to empathy, Hume maintains, are resemblance and physical contiguity.

I wish to highlight two main points from this all-too-brief overview. First, as Hume realized, resemblance is crucial. Both empathy and compassion are made possible by similarities between people, and are heightened by the recognition of those similarities. Second, the processes by which we develop our capacities for empathizing in infancy and childhood form the bases for capacities for empathy that continue into adulthood. Because of this, I believe that we often empathize with others as parts of our social learning histories without having to give thought to what we are doing. Yet, social forces can be deliberately used to distort or undermine the capacities we develop from infancy and childhood, resulting in what I call 'degraded' compassion and empathy.

Degradations of Compassion and Empathy: Possible Causes

For an article on Abu Ghraib that I wrote some time ago (Snow 2009), I had occasion to delve into some of the extensive literature about how seemingly ordinary people can commit atrocities. Much of this literature was produced in the wake of the Holocaust. I found the work of Ervin Staub, a psychologist and Holocaust survivor, quite insightful. Staub (1989, 15) maintains that difficult life conditions can threaten psychological as well as physical well-being, and that powerful self-protective motives arise when people are faced with such threats. He (1989, 18-20; 51-56) also contends that violent responses to such threats are made more likely by predisposing cultural factors, among which are tendencies to aggression, an authoritarian culture, and the presence of scapegoats.

Staub's remarks are suggestive of the kinds of social conditions that can degrade capacities for compassion and empathy, and should strike a resonant chord, given the

present situation in the United States. Many people, especially in rural areas, apparently felt disenfranchised and disrespected by the way the country was headed before 2016. Apparently they perceived their physical and psychological well-being to be threatened. Along came Trump, who, in campaign rallies and subsequently, introduced a new level of aggression and incivility into political rhetoric, making scapegoats of women, the disabled, minorities, and immigrants, and encouraging a culture of authoritarianism by claiming that he, and he alone, could solve the problems that beset the United States. I am not suggesting that Trump created tendencies to aggression, authoritarianism, and scapegoating in people. I am suggesting that he identified the fear that certain groups of people felt in response to what they perceived as threats to their well-being, and tapped into and publicly legitimated existing sentiments of aggression, inclinations toward authoritarianism, and scapegoating.

To me, this situation provides an interesting initial glimpse into the kinds of psycho-social conditions that can degrade compassion and empathy. How likely is it that one can feel compassion and empathy for others if one believes that one is threatened and feels fear? How likely is it that pro-social behavior produced by compassion and empathy would override impulses to act self-protectively? I suppose the likelihood depends on how strong one's tendencies to compassion and empathy are, how intense one's fear is, and how dire one perceives the threat to oneself to be. Trump's rhetoric weighed in favor of the threat/fear/aggression side of this equation, while concomitantly degrading the compassion/empathy side to one of softness and weakness. The message seemed to be that strong people (authoritarianism) protect themselves and their families

from threats (aggression) by undeserving, unwanted others (immigrants and others denigrated by Trump), whereas weak people (the compassionate and empathetic) allow themselves to be trodden upon and used to promote the interests of others. In such a climate, it seems that compassion and empathy for members of out-groups would be very difficult for members of alleged 'in-groups' to sustain, though in-group members would have been the beneficiaries of self-serving and myopic compassion and empathy.

In what sense would the compassion and empathy of in-group members for each other be self-serving and myopic? It would have these properties if (a) it were premised on threats and grievances that were apparent rather than real; (b) it perpetuated a false culture of victimhood among in-group members; (c) it was exclusively reserved for in-group members qua in-group members and denied to out-group members; (d) it relied upon falsehoods, misconceptions, and dehumanizations of out-group members; and (e) the combination of these factors propagated an ideology of discrimination and hatred, privileging the interests and beliefs of in-group members at the expense of out-group members.

In the scenario thus understood, the compassion and empathy of in-group members is degraded in two respects – first, by being inhibited or truncated when directed toward out-group members; and second, by being ideologically biased when directed toward in-group members. Sadly, I do not think this is an uncommon phenomenon, nor do I think it can be attributed only to certain groups in the present-day United States. Similar psycho-social dynamics arose in pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany and can now be seen in alt-right movements in a number of European countries, as well as

among other nationalist groups, such as right-wing Hindutva in India (see, e.g., Nussbaum 2008) and Ma Ba Tha, a Buddhist anti-Rohingya group in Myanmar (Hunt, 2017).[3]

Let me now amplify the sketch I've given using Staub's insights with the work of social-cognitivist psychologist Albert Bandura (1998, 2004) on 'mechanisms of moral disengagement.' As with Staub, Bandura seeks to explain how apparently ordinary people can come to commit atrocities. Mechanisms of moral disengagement are factors that blunt the force of internalized self-sanctions that could otherwise curtail aggression, such as the fear of punishment, moral principles, codes forbidding violence, and empathy (Bandura 1998, 162, 180-181; 2004, 123). Mechanisms of moral disengagement focus on how perpetrators interpret their attitudes and actions, and how these interpretations facilitate their abilities to inflict harm. Here we consider moral rationalizations, blaming the victim, and dehumanization.

Moral rationalizations make destructive acts morally palatable by portraying them as being in the service of moral purposes (see Bandura 1998, 163). How might this work to curtail empathy? In my earlier paper on empathy (Snow 2000, 74), I described an example from Adam Smith in which we see someone being beaten.[4] The recipient of the drubbing is angry, and, in Smith's example, we empathize and become angry with him. Then, we discover that his beating is just punishment for a crime he has committed. Smith thinks that our anger should dissipate – that our empathy for the criminal and the anger we had felt along with him should be corrected by a moral norm.

Now consider the following example. Suppose that I am one of a group of people who are strongly opposed to immigration – I want Trump to build that wall! Yet, when presented with images of immigrant children being forcibly separated from their parents and held in cages, I feel compassion for the children and empathize with the parents. Then suppose I encounter rhetoric such as, "These people are breaking the law; the New Testament enjoins us not to break the law," "Only Congress can change this situation; the President's policy is merely upholding the law," "We need to stanch the flood of illegal immigrants who are taking away our jobs and other resources meant for *bona fide* citizens," "What kind of parent would subject their children to this?," and so on. These and similar messages are moral rationalizations – they are attempting to portray immigrant parents and children as morally in the wrong, and thus, as unworthy of our compassion and empathy. In the case presented by Smith, the presumption is that empathy was curtailed and corrected by the discovery of a fact invoking a legitimate moral norm. In the case of the immigrants, however, a faux moral purpose is being invoked for the separation and incarceration – that of lawfully protecting the country from an illegal threat. The immigrants and the children are placed in the wrong, as was the recipient of the beating in Smith's example. The overall message is that since they are in the wrong, we ought not to feel compassion and empathy for them. Unlike Smith's example, however, the moral purpose being used to rationalize the mistreatment of immigrants is a false one that ignores many relevant facts, for example, about the kinds of jobs that immigrants hold – many unwanted by citizens, and about the kinds of detention that are lawfully available. Note, too, the slur on the parenthood of adult

immigrants with children – what kind of parent would subject their children to this? This

slur completely ignores the dreadful situations, some involving threats to children, that

immigrant families seek to escape, and the historical role of the United States in creating

conditions that brought those situations about. In other words, the moral rationalizations,

in this and other kinds of cases, do not invoke legitimate moral purposes, and do not

objectively take into account the complex array of facts that bear on moral judgments in

such cases. Yet moral rationalizations are being used to suppress compassion and

empathy in cases in which those qualities are sorely needed.[5]

We also see blaming the victim at work in the example of the immigrant parents

and children. Blaming the victim is blatantly obvious in the slur on the parents – these

people choose to put their children in jeopardy and so, are not worthy of compassion and

empathy. Blaming the victim allows us to rationalize our mistreatment of them – to

distance ourselves from them. We are not like them – we are good parents who would

never do such a thing. This distancing prevents us from compassionate identification

with the other, from having the thought "that could be me," which I earlier claimed is one

mechanism through which we are able to identify with, and be compassionately moved

by, the plight of another (see Snow 1991). It also prevents us from engaging in

cognitively sophisticated forms of empathy, as when we seek to enter more fully into the

experiences of another by imaginatively projecting ourselves into her circumstances, or

by simulating in our minds what we think she must be going through (see Snow 2000).

Finally, the dehumanization of hated and feared 'others' has long been with us.

As I note in my discussion of Abu Ghraib (Snow 2009, 558), "Dehumanized victims are

no longer viewed as persons, but as subhuman 'gooks,' 'savages,' 'towel-heads,' and so

on (see Bandura 1998, 180–181)." Trump, for example, has called Mexicans 'rapists,'

and 'murderers,' and undocumented immigrants, 'animals' (see Scott (2018) and Reznick

(2018). Epps and Furman (2016) discuss the 'alien other': a culture of dehumanizing

immigrants in the United States. In an interesting article in *The Boston Globe*, Brodeur

(2018) discusses the 'culture of euphemism' in the United States, and how it can block

empathy by using terms such as 'fences' instead of 'cages,' 'tent cities,' instead of

'camps,' and 'blankets' instead of 'sheets of foil.' In an insightful letter commenting on

Brodeur's piece, Sarah Coletti (2018) makes the following points, worth reproducing in

full:

> Michael Andor Brodeur's @large column in the Sunday Arts section ("United
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> States of Euphemism") makes an important point. I have been noting for months,
>
> maybe years, the dehumanizing language being used to describe every topic in the
>
> immigration debate. I am disturbed when these terms are adopted by the media.
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> "Family reunification policy" became "chain migration." "Catch and release" is a
>
> phrase that I have always heard used about fishing. To hear it referring to people
>
> is appalling. Putting a "so-called" in front of it, or adding quotes, does not make it
>
> any more acceptable. These phrases completely remove the human being from the
>
> sentence.
>
> As the mother of a person with disabilities, I am aware of the movement toward
>
> people-first language. Learning to construct sentences thoughtfully and guard

against reductionist language changes more than the conversation. It affects our viewpoint, improves our vision.

Ms. Coletti aptly notes how language affects our viewpoint and our vision. But our vision – how we perceive others – influences the feelings we have for them. The kind of language used in the immigration debate and other contexts to dehumanize and denigrate others degrades compassion and empathy. I believe that the continued use of such language can have permanent effects on our capacities – truncating and distorting them to fit fear- and hate-filled ideologies. Can we combat these trends? In the final section of this presentation, I suggest possible solutions and resources.

Restoring Compassion and Empathy: Possible Ways Forward

How might we combat the degradation of compassion and empathy? Ms. Coletti mentions 'people-first' language. According to that fountain of knowledge, Wikipedia, "People-first language (PFL), also called person-first language (PFL), is a type of linguistic prescription to avoid marginalization or dehumanization (either conscious or subconscious) when discussing people with a health issue or disability."[6] Instead of referring to 'the stutterer,' for example, people-first language enjoins us to say, 'those who stutter.' Similarly, instead of saying, 'the alcoholic,' or 'the addict,' it is better to say, 'the person suffering from alcoholism,' or 'the person battling addiction.' Extending these linguistic prescriptions to other groups can serve as reminders that immigrants, Muslims, Jews, Hispanics, gays, lesbians, etc., are not just members of groups that are stigmatized or looked down upon by some people, but are people in their own right, worthy of equal concern and respect.

Linguistic prescriptions alone, of course, will not be enough. In a recent opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* provocatively entitled, "There's Too Much Virtue in Politics," Joseph Epstein offers another piece of advice: meet people in the flesh. Once we actually meet other people, he contends, they are harder to caricature (Epstein 2018, A17). He makes this point by way of a discussion of a 1938 letter from George Orwell to the poet Stephen Spender, in which Orwell registers regret at having met Spender. Epstein writes:

> Before their encounter, Orwell reports, he had disdained Spender as a "parlour Bolshie because *a.* your verse, what I had read of it, did not mean very much to me, *b.* I looked upon you as a sort of fashionable successful person, also a Communist or Communist sympathizer, & I have been very hostile to the C. P. since about 1935, & *c.* because not having met you I could regard you as a type and an abstraction."
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> Orwell adds that "when you meet anyone in the flesh you realize immediately that he is a human being and not a sort of caricature embodying certain ideas." As a result, "I shall never again be able to show any intellectual brutality towards him, even when I feel that I ought to." . . . Partly for this reason, Orwell avers, "I don't mix much in literary circles."

Meeting people in the flesh, it seems, is one way to counter the kinds of bias and prejudice that block compassion and empathy. But Orwell himself identifies a pitfall: prejudiced people actively avoid physical encounters with those whom they dislike. We can add that if they do meet them, they are often so closed-minded that they cut

themselves off from the receptivity to others needed for compassion and empathy. How can we cultivate the kind of open-mindedness that would allow people to see the common humanity of others and foster their capacities for compassion and empathy? Education, of course, is one answer, but so, too, is encouraging shared activities. Some shared activities can break down barriers. I have in mind here the kind of camaraderie that can occur when parents of different ethnicities watch their children play sports. Differences seem to dissolve when parents rally around a shared goal – cheering on their children. Seeing the suffering of immigrant children separated from their parents broke down the apathy of the U. S. public enough to put pressure on Trump to end the separation policy. Perhaps what is needed to restore compassion and empathy, then, is for people to be united by common human aims to which they can deeply relate, such as raising children, having homes, creating family life. Appeals to the commonality of our deeper nature can, perhaps, triumph over the divisiveness of partisan politics. One can but hope.

Notes

[1] My explanations of compassion draw on Snow (1991), of empathy, on Snow (2000), and of Staub and Bandura (given later in this essay) on Snow (2009).

[2] Smith (1976) and Hume (1978) use the term 'sympathy,' but what they mean is what I have been calling 'empathy.'

[3] Ma Ba Tha can be roughly translated from the Burmese as the 'Association for the Protection of Race and Religion.' Buddhist authorities banned the group in May 2017, but it quickly reorganized under a new name. See
https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/faced-with-ban-myanmar-hardline-ma-ba-tha-monks-change-name.

[4] See Smith (1976, 71-73).

[5] For a comprehensive overview of the separation of immigrant families, see Domonoski and Gonzales (2018). Trump's reversal of his 'zero tolerance' policy represents a partial victory for compassion and empathy, as he capitulated to enormous political pressure from the U. S. public. I say 'partial' victory because as of July 27, 2018, at least 700 families remain separated, including more than 400 in which the parents have been deported. See https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2018/07/27/us/ap-us-immigration-families-apart.html.

[6] See Lydia Brown,"People-First Language," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People-first_language.

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