



Is Empathy Better Than Sympathy?

Dr. Mrinal Kanti Sarkar, Associate Professor in Philosophy, Department of Philosophy, Bidhannagar College, Kolkata, India

Abstract:

Empathy or Sympathy, which one is more important or what they are actually? These are always confusing factors to us and the confusion continues as our lives continue. We will understand the core differences between these two emotional aspects and before that we will find out origins of these two words. We will describe the concept of sympathy and empathy from the perspective of linguistic, philosophical, psychological and developmental.

At the second step we will try to find out the role of “compassion” behind these two human emotions. We will find the idea that how behind both the emotions, the core concept of universal well-being works.

We will try to understand the main logic of long term debate of which emotion is better and why or both are equally important as per the situation. And what are the main differences between these two concepts. At the same time, we will analyze these two concepts from developmental, philosophical, affective, cognitive, psychological perspectives.

And at the end of this article, we will try to figure it out whether empathy or sympathy is more important or both are equally important and the relevance of one emotion depends on the particular situation. There may not be any ultimate answer to it or it can not be generalized at all.

Keywords: sympathy, empathy, emotions, emotional intelligence, human behaviour, compassion, moral development, social psychology, emotional connection, human connection

Introduction:

The word "sympathy" originates from the Greek word "sympatheia," which means "fellow-feeling" or "shared feeling." The word "sympathy" is often used to describe an emotional response of compassion or understanding for someone who is experiencing a difficult situation or emotion.

From a linguistic perspective, "sympathy" can be analyzed as a compound word made up of two Greek roots: "sym," meaning "together," and "pathos," meaning "feeling" or "suffering." This etymology emphasizes the idea of shared feeling and suggests that sympathy involves feeling together with someone else.

From a psychological perspective, sympathy is often contrasted with empathy, which involves putting oneself in another's shoes and feeling their emotions as if they were one's own. Sympathy can be seen as a more distant emotional response that involves feeling compassion or concern for someone without necessarily experiencing their emotions directly.

In terms of its usage in society, sympathy can be viewed as a socially appropriate response to someone else's suffering or difficulty. It can provide a sense of connection and support, and may even inspire people to take action to help others. However, sympathy can also be criticized for being a passive response that does not necessarily lead to concrete solutions or meaningful change.

From a philosophical perspective, the word "sympathy" has been discussed and debated by many thinkers throughout history. One of the earliest philosophers to discuss sympathy was Aristotle, who believed that humans have an innate capacity for empathy and that this capacity is essential for building social bonds and developing moral character.

In the 18th century, the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith developed a theory of sympathy in which he argued that humans have a natural tendency to feel for others and to want to alleviate their suffering. He believed that sympathy is an important moral virtue that helps to promote compassion, generosity, and other positive social behaviors.

In more recent years, some philosophers have criticized sympathy as being a limited and even problematic response to the suffering of others. For example, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that sympathy can be too focused on the emotions of the person providing support rather than the needs of the person receiving it. She suggests that a more comprehensive response to others' suffering would involve a combination of empathy, compassion, and practical action.

Overall, the philosophical discussion of sympathy has highlighted its importance in building social bonds, promoting moral behavior, and responding to the suffering of others. However, it has also raised questions about the limitations of sympathy as a response and the need for a more nuanced and multifaceted approach to compassion and support.

On the other hand, the word "empathy" originates from the German word "Einfühlung," which means "feeling into." The word is often used to describe the ability to understand and share the emotions of another person, to put oneself in their shoes and experience their perspective.

From a linguistic perspective, "empathy" can be analyzed as a compound word made up of the prefix "em," meaning "in," and "pathy," which is derived from the Greek word "pathos," meaning "feeling" or "suffering." This etymology suggests that empathy involves "feeling into" the emotions and experiences of another person.

From a psychological perspective, empathy is considered to be an important aspect of emotional intelligence and social cognition. It is often contrasted with sympathy, which involves feeling compassion or concern for someone without necessarily experiencing their emotions directly. Empathy can be broken down into two main types: cognitive empathy, which involves understanding another person's thoughts and emotions, and affective empathy, which involves feeling the same emotions as another person.

In terms of its usage in society, empathy is often seen as a desirable trait and an important aspect of interpersonal relationships. It can help to build trust and understanding between individuals, and may lead to greater cooperation and collaboration. However, empathy can also be criticized for being emotionally taxing, leading to burnout, and potentially creating an unbalanced relationship where one person's emotions dominate the interaction.

From a psychological perspective, empathy is a complex emotional and cognitive process that involves understanding and sharing the emotions of others. It is an important component of social cognition and emotional intelligence, and it can be broken down into two main types: cognitive empathy and affective empathy.

Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand and interpret the emotions of others. This involves accurately perceiving and interpreting facial expressions, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues, as well as understanding the social and cultural context in which these emotions are expressed. Individuals with high levels of cognitive empathy are able to recognize and understand the emotions of others even when they differ from their own emotions.

Affective empathy, on the other hand, involves sharing the emotions of others. This type of empathy allows individuals to feel the same emotions as those around them and respond appropriately. Affective empathy is often considered to be the more emotionally taxing type of empathy, as individuals who experience high levels of affective empathy may become overwhelmed by the emotions of others.

From a developmental perspective, empathy is thought to develop gradually over the course of childhood and adolescence. Infants and young children may display some aspects of empathy, such as responding to the distress of others, but they do not yet have a fully developed understanding of others' emotions. As children grow older and their social and cognitive abilities develop, they become better able to understand and share the emotions of others.

In terms of its relevance to mental health, empathy is often considered to be an important component of effective therapy and counseling. Therapists who are able to display empathy and understanding toward their clients are often more effective in helping those clients to overcome emotional and psychological challenges.

The base of sympathy and empathy is compassion:

The concept that the base of sympathy and empathy is compassion suggests that these emotional responses are rooted in a fundamental concern for the well-being of others. Compassion is often described as a deep feeling of sympathy or empathy that is accompanied by a desire to alleviate the suffering of others.

From this perspective, sympathy and empathy can be seen as two different expressions of compassion. Sympathy involves feeling sorry for another person's situation, while empathy involves experiencing the same emotions as another person. However, both sympathy and empathy are thought to be motivated by a genuine concern for the other person's well-being and a desire to help them in some way.

Research suggests that compassion can have a range of positive effects on mental health, including reducing stress and promoting feelings of social connection and well-being. It may also promote pro-social behavior, such as helping and sharing, and can contribute to the formation of strong social bonds.

However, it is worth noting that compassion is not always an easy or automatic response. Some individuals may struggle to feel compassion for others, particularly if they are experiencing their own emotional difficulties or if the other person is from a different cultural or social background. Additionally, the expression of compassion can be influenced by social and cultural factors, such as norms around gender roles and emotional expression.

Differences between two concepts:

Sympathy and empathy are two distinct emotional responses that are often used interchangeably, but actually have different meanings and implications. Understanding the main differences between these two emotional responses can help individuals to communicate more effectively, build stronger relationships, and develop greater emotional intelligence.

The key difference between sympathy and empathy is in their level of emotional involvement. Sympathy is typically described as feeling sorry for another person's situation or suffering, without necessarily experiencing the same emotions. Empathy, on the other hand, involves actually sharing the emotions of another person, and feeling what they feel.

This difference in emotional involvement has a number of implications for how sympathy and empathy are expressed and received. For example, sympathy is often expressed through verbal or nonverbal messages of condolence, such as "I'm sorry for your loss" or a pat on the back. Empathy, on the other hand, may involve actively listening to the other person, reflecting back their emotions, and showing a deeper level of understanding.

Another key difference between sympathy and empathy is in their potential to promote social connection and emotional growth. While sympathy can be a helpful way to acknowledge someone's suffering and show support, it can also create a sense of distance or separation between the individual offering sympathy and the person receiving it. Empathy, on the other hand, can create a sense of shared experience and understanding, which can foster greater emotional connection and growth.

Research has shown that empathy is also associated with a range of positive outcomes, including greater psychological well-being, lower levels of stress and burnout, and stronger relationships. In contrast, sympathy has been found to be less effective in promoting these outcomes, and may even contribute to a sense of helplessness or disempowerment.

Both sympathy and empathy can be influenced by a range of individual and social factors, including cultural norms around emotional expression and gender roles. Additionally, both emotional responses can be challenging to express and receive in certain contexts, such as when dealing with chronic or terminal illness, or when the other person is from a different cultural or social background.

Differences with an example:

Three friends, Mrinal, Chandan and Sangita, had been friends since childhood. They were like family to each other. One day, they received the tragic news that Mrinal's father had passed away. Mrinal was devastated, and his friends were there to support him.

Chandan felt empathy for Mrinal. He knew how much his father meant to him and could imagine the pain he was going through. He listened to Mrinal as he talked about his father and shared his memories. He hugged him and comforted him as he cried. He wanted to be there for him and support him in any way possible.

Sangita, on the other hand, felt sympathy for Mrinal. She knew that Mrinal was going through a tough time, but she couldn't understand the depth of his emotions. She tried to console Mrinal by telling him that everything would be okay and that he should try to move on. She offered practical advice on what Mrinal should do next, but it came across as insensitive and lacking in emotional support.

As the days passed, Chandan continued to be there for Mrinal. He visited him regularly, cooked for him, and helped him with any tasks he needed. He encouraged him to talk about his feelings and shared his own experiences of grief to help him understand that he wasn't alone because 5 years ago, Chandan himself had gone through the same situation what Mrinal is experiencing now. So, Chandan knew how to act in this situation but Sangita was lacking that life teaching.

Sangita, on the other hand, distanced herself from Mrinal. She didn't know how to handle the situation, so she avoided it altogether. She stopped answering Mrinal's calls and texts, and when she did see him, she didn't know what to say.

As time passed, Mrinal appreciated Chandan's support and understanding. He had helped him through one of the toughest times in his life. On the other hand, Mrinal felt like he had lost a friend in Sangita. He wished that Sangita had been more understanding and compassionate during his time of need.

The difference between empathy and sympathy became apparent in the way that Mrinal's friends supported him during this difficult time. Chandan's empathy allowed him to connect with Mrinal on an emotional level and provide him with the support and understanding he needed. Sangita's sympathy, however, lacked the emotional connection, leaving Mrinal feeling isolated and unsupported.

Is Empathy better than sympathy?

The debate over whether empathy or sympathy is better has been a topic of discussion.

Despite the fact that people often use the terms interchangeably, empathy and sympathy have distinct meanings. Sympathy refers to feeling compassion or pity for someone's situation, while empathy involves understanding and feeling another person's emotions as if they were your own.

Some argue that sympathy is a better response because it allows for emotional distance, which can facilitate clear thinking and problem-solving. On the other hand, some argue that empathy is the better response because it promotes greater connection and support by understanding the emotions and experiences of others.

Research has shown that empathy can lead to improved relationships and prosocial behavior, while sympathy can sometimes lead to feelings of superiority or paternalism. However, empathy can also lead to burnout, while sympathy can be seen as detached.

Ultimately, the choice between sympathy and empathy depends on the situation and individuals involved. Those experiencing intense emotions may benefit from empathy, while those needing practical assistance may benefit from sympathy. Emotional intelligence involves recognizing the value of both responses and choosing the appropriate one for the situation.

Conclusion:

The debate between empathy and sympathy ultimately comes down to the question of which emotion is more effective in fostering human connection and understanding. While sympathy involves acknowledging and expressing concern for others' experiences, empathy goes a step further by allowing us to truly understand and relate to those experiences.

Some philosophers argue that empathy is superior because it allows for a deeper level of emotional connection and promotes greater compassion and understanding. Others argue that empathy can be overwhelming and lead to emotional burnout, while sympathy may be more sustainable and lead to more effective support and action.

However, it's important to note that neither emotion is inherently better or worse than the other, and the most effective approach will depend on the situation and individual needs. What's most important is the ability to respond to others' emotional needs with compassion and kindness, whether that involves sympathy, empathy, or a combination of both.

In the end, the debate between sympathy and empathy is a reminder of the complexity of human emotions and the importance of approaching each situation with an open mind and a willingness to connect with others in the most effective way possible.

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