

# Why Empathy Is Not a Reliable Source of Information in Moral Decision Making

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Current Directions in Psychological  
Science  
1–6

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DOI: 10.1177/09637214211031943

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## Abstract

Although empathy drives prosocial behaviors, it is not always a reliable source of information in moral decision making. In this essay, I integrate evolutionary theory, behavioral economics, psychology, and social neuroscience to demonstrate why and how empathy is unconsciously and rapidly modulated by various social signals and situational factors. This theoretical framework explains why decision making that relies solely on empathy is not ideal and can, at times, erode ethical values. This perspective has social and societal implications and can be used to reduce cognitive biases and guide moral decisions.

## Keywords

empathy, emotion, evolution, cognitive biases, decision making, morality, social psychology, social neuroscience

Seeing the photo of a young girl crying because her mother had been arrested by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents in south Texas near the U.S.-Mexico border evoked moral outrage and deep sympathy in many people. Moreover, this emotional reaction had sociopolitical consequences. This photograph elicited unanimous criticism from across the political spectrum against President Donald Trump's policy of separating children from parents who were detained for entering the United States illegally. Trump subsequently signed an executive order reversing this policy.

This example illustrates how empathy, the affective response that stems from the apprehension and comprehension of another person's emotional state or condition, increases the likelihood of showing compassion and caring for other people. Furthermore, it supports the notion that empathy is a core aspect of humanity, playing a fundamental role in motivating concern for others.

However, contrary to popular belief, empathy is not always the best guide for moral judgment (Bloom, 2016; Decety & Cowell, 2014). People can behave compassionately or insensitively depending on whom they include and exclude in their category of humanity and depending on the social context. The complex relationship between morality and empathy is exemplified by numerous empirical findings from behavioral and social

sciences. At times, empathy can interfere with morality by establishing partiality toward an individual, clashing with the moral principle of justice for all (Batson et al., 1995). Empathy is less likely to be experienced for individuals in groups than for an identifiable victim, and it gives higher priority to friends over strangers (P. Slovic, 2007). Empathy is parochial, favoring in-group over out-group members (Bruneau et al., 2017). Indeed, empathy, binds individuals to inherent biases as much as it blinds them to other people. It is worth examining why this is the case in order to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating empathy into moral judgment and conduct.

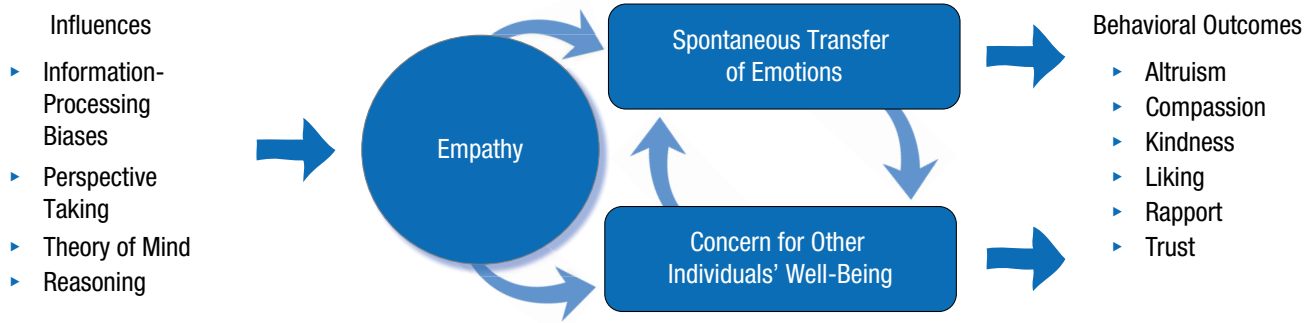
Empathy is both costly and beneficial in that it draws upon attentional and emotional resources but also assists in the maintenance of social relationships and encourages people to serve the needs of others (DeSteno, 2015). The balance between these costs and benefits determines the empathy people experience and is not always voluntary because it involves mechanisms tuned for specific signals. One can intentionally choose whether or not to feel empathy for a stranger, but caring for kin, close friends, and folks one associates with is

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**Fig. 1.** Empathy and its consequences. Empathy at its core encompasses (a) the capacity for spontaneous transfer of emotions (emotion sharing), which has evolved to facilitate coordination, social cohesion, and bonding, and (b) concern for other individuals' well-being, which relies on biological mechanisms selected for the care of offspring. Both components interact within social contexts and have behavioral interpersonal outcomes. Empathy is partly constrained by information-processing biases that channel certain kind of environmental input selected by ecological pressures. Other cognitive capacities, such as perspective taking, theory of mind, and reasoning, can influence the extent to which empathy can be experienced, as well as reduce biases.

almost unavoidable. Even so, some scholars have proposed that being empathetic may stem from motivated choices to prioritize and balance competing goals within specific social contexts (Cameron, 2018). After all, people are not passively subject to external determinisms. They possess a cognitive capacity for thinking and reasoning. Although empathy can be motivated and regulated (Zaki, 2014), research in social psychology, behavioral economics, and social neuroscience demonstrates that empathy is unconsciously socially modulated.

The degree to which humans experience empathy is partly constrained by cognitive adaptations that channel certain kinds of environmental signals and cues that positively contributed to fitness ancestrally, facilitating bonding, reproduction, and cooperation within social groups. These adaptations produce biases or heuristics—simple, approximate, efficient rules, learned or hard-coded by evolution. These biases are not necessarily design flaws. They are features honed by natural selection that allowed human ancestors to make decisions in ways that consistently enhanced inclusive fitness over evolutionary time (Kenrick & Griskevicius, 2013). Although these heuristics generally promote utility, they are imperfect and predictably fallible, and can misfire in the contemporary socio-ecological context. Human beings no longer live as small tribes in the African savanna, and humans' success relies more and more on large-scale cooperation among a diversity of cultures, in a world much more connected than ever before. Nevertheless, such design features persist and are manifest as unconscious, rapid, almost automatic tendencies to care for some people, but less for others, for one over many. Obviously, the outcomes of these functional features influence moral decision making.

### The Adaptive Value of Empathy

At its core, empathy is the communication of an emotional state from one individual to another (Fig. 1). Affective signaling and communication between conspecifics contribute to inclusive fitness by facilitating coordination and cohesion, increasing defense against predators, and bonding individuals to one another within a social group (Mendl et al., 2010). This phenomenon occurs automatically and unconsciously. Transmission of emotions from one individual to the next leads to information transfer, accelerates synchronization between group members, and facilitates decision making (Briefer, 2018). This unprompted transfer of internal states is essential for survival, social-group cohesion, and prosociality. Sharing of affect can elicit sympathy (also known as compassion or empathic concern), which piggybacks on a biological adaptation for mammalian parental care (Goetz et al., 2010).

### The Influence of Neotenous Characteristics

The ecological pressure to care for vulnerable offspring gave rise to several adaptations, such as powerful responses to distress vocalizations, neotenous traits (i.e., juvenile characteristics), and classes of attachment-related behaviors between caregiver and offspring. Neotenous characteristics, such as babyish faces, elicit social approach and nurturance. Such cues signal vulnerability, and genetic influences contributing to a perceptual bias for neotonous traits to attract attention were favored by natural selection to facilitate parental care. People with baby faces are perceived to have childlike traits—to be naive, submissive, weak,

warm, and honest—and these neotenous cues inspire caretaking, protection, and compassion.

Empirical support for this heuristic comes from an experiment conducted in the United States and in Kenya. People who found “lost” resumes more frequently forwarded them to a potential employer if the individual depicted on them (by a photo) displayed neotenous rather than mature facial features (Keating et al., 2003). In another study, conducted at the University of Kansas, female participants were asked to read an article about Kayla, who had a broken leg (Batson et al., 2005). For different participants, Kayla was either a fellow student, a child, a dog, or a puppy. After reading about Kayla, participants rated their empathetic concern for her and their willingness to help her. Results showed that empathetic concern was greater for the child and for the puppy than for the fellow student and dog.

Neotenous characteristics make people more attractive, and such features can sway criminal sentencing and imprisonment decisions. For example, a study that examined the effects of litigants’ facial appearance on judicial decisions in 506 cases heard in small-claims courts found that both babyfaceness and attractiveness significantly influenced adjudications (Zebrowitz & McDonald, 1991). As plaintiffs’ attractiveness increased, defendants were more likely to lose the case. Additionally, as defendants increased in baby-face characteristics, they were more likely to win cases involving intentional actions, and less likely to win cases involving negligent actions. Finally, as defendants increased in facial maturity, they were required to pay larger monetary awards to baby-faced plaintiffs, albeit not to average- or mature-faced plaintiffs. An analysis of a random sample of 1,200 men who had been convicted of felony crimes in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area in 2009 showed that individuals with baby-face features in their booking photos were significantly less likely than others to be incarcerated, even after analyses controlled for other relevant case characteristics (Johnson & King, 2017). Finally, a study with college students found that unattractive defendants, compared with attractive ones, tended to be penalized with longer, harsher prison sentences—22 months longer, on average (Gunnell & Ceci, 2010). That study also identified two kinds of jurors: those who processed information emotionally and gave harsher verdicts to unattractive than to attractive defendants and those who considered the facts rationally and focused less on defendants’ looks. Together, these studies demonstrate that neotenous characteristics elicit empathy, which in turn can affect judges’ decisions without their conscious awareness.

## The Information Function of Empathy

Affective information influences decision making and can result in costly behavioral responses. Cues of suffering can overpower fairness norms. One study examined altruistic decisions in a dictator game among participants in an empathy condition, who watched videos depicting human suffering, and among participants in a control condition (Klimecki et al., 2016). Participants exposed to the videos were willing to give more than 70% of their endowments to the people who were suffering, but participants in the control condition were willing to give only 30%. The marked increase in generosity was associated with participants’ reported empathic feelings. In another study, participants were asked how much money they would give to help develop a drug that would save the life of either one child or eight children (Kogut & Ritov, 2005). Initially, participants in the two conditions were willing to donate the same amount. However, when the single child’s name, age, and picture were shown, donations shot up for the single child. This effect was mediated by the participants’ empathy.

People’s capacity to experience emotion, which greatly influences their judgments, decisions, and actions, appears to be limited. This accounts for the decreased helping response when victims are referred to as a group using large numbers or statistics, compared with when they are identifiable (Västfjäll et al., 2014). Moreover, situational context and social coalitions play prominent roles in determining the extent to which affect is transferred and subsequently integrated into a decision to assist another individual in need.

## Responding to Human Suffering

Seeing other individuals in physical or emotional distress makes people feel for them and motivates people to reduce their suffering. At a rudimentary level, empathy elicits shared neural representations in the observer: Brain circuits that are activated when individuals feel negative or positive emotions partially overlap with the circuits that are activated when they observe similar emotions in others (Lamm et al., 2011; Lockwood, 2016). However, this seemingly automatic resonance is implicitly modulated by various social factors. The neurophysiological response to other individuals’ suffering is not automatic. Rather, it is modulated (enhanced or suppressed) by group allegiance, beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices.

Humans are inherently tribal. From an early age, they behave in a way that favors the group to which they belong, using an implicit social-exchange heuristic. This

is a set of assumptions about how social interaction is a form of mutual cooperation (Boyer, 2018). Group-dynamics biases do not operate consciously. People simply experience the value they assign to particular individuals.

In one study, Caucasian participants who watched videos depicting people experiencing either harmless or painful stimuli showed greater physiological arousal, measured with skin conductance, to pain experienced by members of their own race than to pain experienced by African people (Forgiarini et al., 2011). The reduced reaction to the pain of African individuals was also correlated with the observers' implicit race bias. Similarly, another study found that stronger emotional reactions and associated brain responses were elicited when participants observed people from their own ethnic group in pain than when they observed people from another ethnic group in pain (Contreras-Huerta et al., 2013).

People adopt arbitrary markers to signal their coalitional affiliation. It can thus be anticipated that knowing the religious affiliation of someone who is suffering differentially modulates the observer's brain response. In one study, all participants were Han Chinese in Beijing and therefore identical in racial features, but some were Christian and others were atheist (Huang & Han, 2014). Event-related potentials (ERPs) were recorded while they viewed pain and neutral expressions of Chinese faces that were labeled as Christians or atheists (by a symbol on a necklace). Both Christian and atheist participants explicitly reported experiencing greater discomfort and rated the target individual as less likeable when that individual's religious beliefs differed from their own. Christian/atheist identification significantly modulated ERPs amplitudes in response to the facial expressions. Specifically, 200 ms after stimulus onset, the difference between ERP amplitudes in response to pain expressions versus neutral expressions was greater when the observer and target shared religious beliefs than when they did not. Another study showed that a single-word label presented on a hand being stabbed and indicating the person's religious affiliation (Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Scientologist, or atheist) was enough to strongly modify the neural activity in the observer, and the direction of the effect, relative to baseline activity, was predicted by the observer's own religion (Vaughn et al., 2018). Neuro-hemodynamic responses were significantly larger when participants viewed a hand labeled with their own religion than when they viewed a hand labeled with a different religion, and the size of this bias correlated positively with the magnitude of participants' self-reported dispositional empathy. Such group biases are unfortunate today, but they evolved for their adaptive functions, including

encouraging humans to be kind to in-group members, who are likely to reciprocate, and, at times, to be hostile toward out-group members.

Simas and colleagues (2020) conducted a study with a large national sample and found that higher levels of dispositional empathy were associated with higher levels of political polarization. In a follow-up experiment, the authors demonstrated that individuals higher in trait empathy showed greater partisan bias in evaluating contentious political events. This empathy gap can result in real-world consequences, for example, a reduced likelihood of helping out-group members and a devaluation of their lives (Pratto & Glasford, 2008). Interviews with people who engaged in extreme political or ethnic violence indicated that they were characterized not by a lack of empathy but rather by high levels of empathy and communal concern for their in-group (Argo, 2009).

### **The Value Function of Empathy**

Clearly, empathy, when implicitly elicited and unregulated, can be imperfect. Nevertheless, it plays an important role in the decision to care for an individual outside one's family and friendship group. However, there are definite limits to an autobiographical approach to moral decision making, and statistics and numerical data are still essential even though the human mind struggles to grasp quantitative information (S. Slovic & Slovic, 2015). One does not know from an individual's story alone whether he or she has something in common with the rest of humanity, whereas a more reliable truth emerges from looking at statistical trends. When numerical information is combined with an individual's story, both are absorbed by the audience in a way that is distinctly different from the way in which statistical information is absorbed when presented alone. On September 2, 2015, the body of a 3-year-old boy was found washed up on a beach in Turkey. This little boy, named Alan Kurdi, drowned as his family tried to flee from Syria. The photo, along with reports on the refugees, spread around the world in a week and had a strong (though temporary) impact, raising interest in Syrian refugees, increasing donations to the Red Cross, and changing attitudes toward more acceptance of refugees among citizen of France, Great Britain, and The Netherlands (P. Slovic et al., 2017).

The testimony of a single victim can have a great impact by naming the crime and drawing attention and concern. For instance, the telling of personal stories, such as those of Holocaust survivors or victims of apartheid in South Africa, is imperative to the catharsis of a society with a history of mass violence. This is not about legal categorizations or distant abstractions. It is

about becoming aware of subjectivity by inspiring empathy, the recognition of another human being's suffering (Akhavan, 2012). Think about the powerful impact of the George Floyd video on humanizing the victims of police brutality.

By reasoning and arguing with one another, people can become aware of their limitations and extend their empathetic concern from one individual to many, and with assistance from institutions, they can take action. In this sense, moral progress is contingent on broadening sympathy guided by rational thinking and a valuing of universal principles. It may be important to know when to empathize and when not to, as well as to critically assess the motivations of people who try to elicit one's emotions.

People naturally vary in how much empathy they feel for others, depending on specific signals and social contexts. An apt example concerns legal professionals, for whom empathy may or may not be a problem. The judicial system's rituals and norms of behavior tend to make judges believe they are not affected by emotions or concerns for other people (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2016). Some legal professionals may even see empathy as a weakness. However, if they ignore their empathetic disposition and its ability to operate outside awareness, they risk being biased, which results in less fair decisions. Ultimately, people may benefit most from the positive aspects of empathy if they simultaneously mitigate its adverse effects on judgment and decision making.

## Conclusion

Empathy can encourage overvaluing some people and ignoring others, and privileging one over many. Reasoning is therefore essential to filter and evaluate emotional responses that guide moral decisions. Understanding the ultimate causes and proximate mechanisms of empathy allows characterization of the kinds of signals that are prioritized and identification of situational factors that exacerbate empathic failure. Together, this knowledge is useful at a theoretical level, and additionally provides practical information about how to reframe situations to activate alternative evolved systems in ways that promote normative moral conduct compatible with current societal aspirations. This conceptual framework advances current understanding of the role of empathy in moral decision making and may inform efforts to correct personal biases. Becoming aware of one's biases is not the most effective way to manage and mitigate them, but empathy is not something that can be ignored. It has an adaptive biological function, after all. What can be effective is to combine

empathy with reasoning with other people. Mercier and Sperber (2019) argued that reasoning has evolved for "social consumption" (p. 154). It is accomplished by psychological processes that have been shaped by evolution to allow humans to improve their beliefs and decisions, not by solitary effort, but through argument with others. Humans are not good at producing reasons, but they are much better at evaluating them. So when they argue with one another, biases can be corrected, sloppy thinking can become more precise, and together individuals can formulate more accurate beliefs and make wiser decisions.

## Recommended Reading

- Bruneau, E. G., Cikara, M., & Saxe, R. (2017). (See References). An empirical article presenting a series of experiments demonstrating across three cultural contexts that parochial empathy was a strong predictor of altruism and passive harm toward out-group members.
- Decety, J., & Cowell, J. M. (2015). Empathy, justice, and moral behavior. *American Journal of Bioethics - Neuroscience*, 6(3), 3–14. A theoretical article presenting the argument that empathy should be regarded with caution and is not enough to serve as a central motivation in driving moral judgment and decision making.
- Zaki, J. (2014). (See References). A review article that presents several regulatory strategies, including situation selection, attentional modulation, and appraisal, that can be employed to facilitate empathy.

## Transparency

*Action Editor:* Robert L. Goldstone

*Editor:* Robert L. Goldstone

*Declaration of Conflicting Interests*

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

*Funding*

This research was funded by National Institutes of Health Grant 2020-NP-267363 to J. Decety.

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## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Paul Slovic (University of Oregon) for his feedback on an earlier version of this article.

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