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# The Empathy Effect

## How Empathy Drives Common Values, Social Justice and Environmental Action

By Roman Krznaric

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## 1. Introduction: From Self-Interest to Common Interest

Over the past decade there has been an extraordinary shift in thinking about how change happens. A concept that has been buried in psychology textbooks for nearly a century – empathy – is coming to be seen as one of the fundamental forces for tackling global challenges ranging from humanitarian emergencies and violent political conflicts to the climate crisis and biodiversity loss.<sup>1</sup> This paper puts empathy under the microscope, exploring what it is, why it matters for campaigning organisations in civil society, and how to harness its power to create change.

Empathy – to give a working definition – *is the imaginative act of stepping into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide our actions.*<sup>2</sup> The concept has never been more popular: it's on the lips of politicians and business gurus, religious leaders, happiness experts and social activists. What explains this popularity? There are three main factors:

- New research in neuroscience, evolutionary biology and behavioural psychology revealing that the capacity to empathise is wired into our brains and is a core human trait that exists alongside our selfish inner drives. Around 98% of us have the ability to empathise – although few of us put our full empathic potential to use.<sup>3</sup>
- Studies showing that empathy is a key skill of emotional intelligence and relationship-building, which have helped fuel the growth of empathy teaching in schools in Europe and North America, and the use of empathy in conflict resolution, from Rwanda to the Middle East.<sup>4</sup>
- The influence of political leaders who have championed the concept in public debate. Barack Obama, for example, has talked about the need to tackle the growing 'empathy deficit' in the United States – survey data suggest that empathy levels have dropped nearly 50% in the US over the past 30 years, with the steepest decline occurring in the past ten years.<sup>5</sup>

It still might come as a surprise that a concept normally associated with personal and emotional life could have substantive political impact and potential to forge radical change. Yet a growing number of civil society organisations are starting to recognize the importance of tapping into the power of empathy. According to the influential report '*Common Cause: the Case for Working With Our Cultural Values*', backed by organisations including Oxfam, the World Wildlife Fund and Friends of the Earth, empathy is a key to achieving social and environmental change:

'The values that must be strengthened – values that are commonly held and which can be brought to the fore – include: empathy towards those who are facing the effects of humanitarian and environmental crises, concern for future generations, and recognition that human prosperity resides in relationships – both with one another and with the natural world.'<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, there are two fundamental reasons why campaigning organisations are beginning to embrace empathy: first, empathy can transform our underlying mental 'frame' of thinking; and second, it can draw people towards prioritising intrinsic over extrinsic values.

Empathy is one of the most effective tools at our disposal for shifting us from a 'self-interest frame' of thinking to a 'common-interest frame', where our underlying mode of thought is structured by a concern for both ourselves and others.<sup>7</sup> At present, the self-interest frame is dominant, especially in Western societies: we have inherited the hyper-individualism of free market ideology and consumer culture that characterized twentieth century capitalism. But if we want people to take practical action on issues such as poverty in developing countries or climate change, it is essential to promote empathy, since it helps transform people's worldviews at the deepest level, moving them beyond the boundaries of the ego and the individualist thrust of consumer society. 'Empathy is at the heart of progressive thought,' writes George Lakoff, the cognitive linguist who has popularized frame analysis: it is by imagining ourselves in the shoes of others – such as oppressed minorities, future generations or even other species – that we extend our circle of moral concern and develop our sense of justice, and make the leap from a self-interest to a common-interest frame of thinking. As he points out:

'Empathy is at the heart of real rationality, because it goes to the heart of our values, which are the basis of our sense of justice. Empathy is the reason that we have the principles of freedom and fairness, which are necessary components of justice.'<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, there is convincing evidence that taking a rationalist approach of feeding people a barrage of facts and information about the extent of global inequality or environmental degradation is not enough to motivate action, and may exacerbate levels of denial.<sup>9</sup> So it is vital to work at the more profound level of using empathy to shift our mental frames.

This relates closely to research by psychologist Tim Kasser and others highlighting that our values – in the sense of 'what we find important or worthwhile in life' – divide into two types: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic values such as financial success and social status (typically obtained and displayed through consumer purchases like fashionable clothes) are based largely on external rewards, and play a key role in satisfying our deep desire for social recognition. Intrinsic values such as affiliation (quality of relationships with friends and family), community feeling (on both the local and global levels) and self-acceptance (sense of self-worth and autonomy), are based more on our inner psychological needs. While most people identify with both intrinsic and extrinsic values, there is an issue of what kind of balance we strike between them. Kasser has shown that people who prioritise intrinsic values relative to extrinsic ones have higher levels of personal wellbeing. Moreover, they 'tend to be more empathic, cooperative and caring', and exhibit greater levels of pro-environmental concern and behaviour. At the same time, a stronger focus on intrinsic values 'immunises' us against consumer culture – shopping becomes a less important and attractive way of nurturing our sense of self.<sup>10</sup> This matters especially for environmental campaigners who are acutely aware that higher levels of material consumption degrade the stability of ecosystems and erode healthy environments in which humans and other species live.<sup>11</sup>

The core message of this research is that we need to instigate a cultural shift from 'buying' to 'belonging' – from extrinsic to intrinsic values – where our personal identity and wellbeing is based much more on the quality of our relationships and sense of community engagement than on the size of our bank balance or the heady offerings of a luxury consumer lifestyle, and where more of us are willing to put common interests before self-interest. And if we want this to happen, we must create a revolution of empathy in everyday life, since empathy underpins intrinsic values based on relationships – it is the ultimate social glue that bonds us to others.

Yet none of this tells us enough about empathy itself, or how to make it a powerful tool for change. So this paper aims, for the first time, to bring together what we know about empathy from a range of fields – such as neuroscience, psychology, sociology, politics and ecological thought – and draws out practical lessons for how it can be put to use by a new generation of global empathy campaigners. It addresses four main issues:

- *The scientific foundations of empathy* – different types of empathy, how it develops and impacts on behaviour, and how empathy is distributed among various population groups
- *Empathy as a force for social change* – the historical evidence that mass empathy really has the teeth to make radical change happen, and how it is currently being used by civil society organisations to create social, political and environmental transformation
- *Using empathy to shift identities from 'me' to 'we'* – the key areas where empathy interventions should focus, especially empathy education and supporting an 'Empathy-Community Circle' model of change
- *Challenges for empathy campaigning* – empathy is necessary but not sufficient for change, and we need to recognize barriers such as power and inequality, and the challenges of empathising across distance, and with future generations and the natural world.

## 2. The Scientific Foundations of Empathy

### 2.1 The Two Types of Empathy

The concept of empathy has a long history. In his 1759 book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith recognized its importance when he wrote that our moral sensitivity derives from our mental capacity for 'changing places in fancy with the sufferer'.<sup>12</sup> In 1909 the American psychologist Edward Titchener coined the English word 'empathy', based on the German term *Einfühlung*, which referred to the way that we could 'feel into' other people's emotional worlds.

Today's psychology textbooks typically describe two different kinds of empathy:

- *Affective empathy*

This is about mirroring or sharing other people's emotions. So if you see anguish on a child's face and you too feel anguish, that is affective empathy. If, on the other hand, you notice their anguish but feel a different emotion, such as pity ('Oh, the poor little thing,' you might think), then you are showing *sympathy* rather than empathy. Sympathy generally refers to an emotional response that is not shared. Affective empathy can also

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include sharing positive emotions such as joy, which distinguishes it from the concept of 'compassion', which does not involve positive emotional resonance.

- *Cognitive empathy (or 'perspective-taking empathy')*

This is where you really try to put yourself in the shoes of another person and imagine their values, experiences, hopes and fears – their whole mental outlook. We do this quite naturally all the time. You might walk past a homeless person begging on the street and rather than just feeling sorry for her (which is sympathy) you try to imagine what it might be like to 'be her' – to sleep out rough on a cold winter night, or to have somebody walk straight past you without looking you in the eye.<sup>13</sup>

In practice, both these forms of empathy are closely intertwined. The more we connect with someone's feelings, the more likely we are to try to understand their perspectives, just as looking at the world from another's viewpoint makes us care more about their emotions.

The public perception of empathy typically focuses on the affective component – feeling the pain and suffering of others (as when Bill Clinton famously remarked 'I feel your pain' in response to an HIV AIDS activist who was urging him to take action on the epidemic). But the cognitive component of empathy is just as important, for two key reasons.

First, it is the basis of having an appropriate response to others' needs. Too often an emotional outpouring of sympathy and compassion leads to social action that doesn't meet the essential requirements of those in need. So well-meaning people might send old clothing, blankets and teddy bears to communities that have been affected by natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods when what the victims really need is sanitation provision or trauma counselling. In other words, there has been a failure to step into their shoes. Perspective-taking empathy enables us to better pinpoint the needs and feelings of others, so we become finely attuned to the viewpoints of people from other cultures, social backgrounds or life situations that may be very different from our own.

Second, we should recognise that throughout human history the failure to take the perspective of 'the Other' has been at the root of prejudice, exploitation and violence. The British colonisers of Australia, for instance, largely ignored the perspectives of the indigenous population: the British believed they were bringing 'civilization' whereas from the indigenous perspective colonisation was an 'invasion'. More recently, Western countries engaged in warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan have claimed they are bringing 'democracy' to the region and acting for the greater good, but this viewpoint has not always been shared by civilian populations subject to their bombing raids, who frequently view them as invaders rather than liberators.<sup>14</sup>

Empathy is sometimes – mistakenly – equated with the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. But it requires something more. As George Bernard Shaw pointed out, 'Do *not* do unto others as you would have them do unto you – they might have different tastes.' It's an amusing quip that makes a serious point about the importance of cognitive empathy.

## 2.2 How Empathy Develops and Impacts Behaviour

How does empathy develop in human beings? Is it nature or nurture? Can it be learned? How does it change behaviour and values? There have been enormous advances in our understanding of empathy development in the past two decades, which have overturned the traditional view that human beings are essentially self-interested, individualistic creatures. Research in the fields of evolutionary biology, neuroscience and psychology since the 1990s reveals that we are in fact *homo empathicus*: alongside our selfish natures we also have an in-built capacity for empathy, cooperation and mutual aid.

- *Evolutionary biology*

Frans de Waal's studies of empathic behaviour in primates such as bonobo chimps suggests that empathy probably developed in human beings for two reasons. First, to ensure that we respond to the needs of our offspring: if a mother did not react appropriately to the hunger cries of her child, the infant's life would be put in jeopardy. Second, to sustain the mutual assistance required for individual and group survival: in harsh primitive environments, humans needed to cooperate to make sure everyone had enough to eat or to ward off predators. As de Waal observes, 'Effective cooperation requires being exquisitely in tune with the emotional states and goals of others.'<sup>15</sup>

- *Neuroscience*

Neuroscientists have equally made the case that empathy is a core trait wired into our brains. In the early 1990s, the discovery of 'mirror neurons' – neurons that fire not just when we experience pain but when we see others experiencing pain or other emotions – offered insights into how affective empathy works: mirror neurons help us feel what other people or species are feeling. The current consensus is moving away from putting excessive emphasis on mirror neurons alone. Neuropsychologists such as Simon Baron-Cohen argue that they are just one part of a ten-section 'empathy circuit' in the brain.<sup>16</sup>

- *Psychology*

The latest research reveals that cognitive empathy develops in early childhood. By the age of two or three, most children have developed a capacity to recognize that other people have perspectives and interests different from their own. Affective empathy may develop even earlier. Researchers in the field of 'attachment theory' have shown that if a child does not have a strong attachment relationship with a parent or primary caregiver in the first 18 months of life, the development of empathy (especially affective empathy) may be stunted. A related insight is that one of the most effective ways to nurture emotional capacities such as empathy in children is to model them as a parent.<sup>17</sup>

According to attachment theory experts such as psychotherapist Sue Gerhardt, the growing body of evidence showing how empathy develops in early childhood offers a strong justification for why governments and civil society organisations should be supporting early parenting programmes that help develop healthy parent-child bonds. If we want to create a more empathic, less selfish society where people put a greater emphasis on common interests and values, this kind of early intervention is an essential long-term strategy.<sup>18</sup>

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While empathy develops in early childhood, there is equally strong evidence (such as studies of brain plasticity) showing that empathy is also a skill that can be developed throughout the course of life, though it gets harder as we get older since we develop ingrained, habitual forms of thinking and behaviour.<sup>19</sup> In other words, we can learn empathy, just like we can learn to ride a bike. Most of us have latent empathic potential that is ready to be activated. The real question is how.

Psychologists have repeatedly shown that we can tap into our latent empathic abilities by making a conscious effort to focus mindfully on the feelings and experiences of other people and species. Crucially, not only does doing so increase levels of empathic concern, it also motivates us to take action on their behalves, and shifts values and attitudes. There is especially compelling research on the power of perspective-taking empathy:

- Altruism expert Dan Batson asked two groups of US college students to listen to a recording of a woman in distress because her parents had just been killed in a car accident, and then to respond to a request. The first group were instructed to listen to the objective facts in the recording; the second group were asked to imagine the experiences and feelings of the woman involved. The result was that the second group not only recorded higher empathy levels, but were more willing to give time and money to help the woman. In over three decades of research Batson has consistently found that 'perspective-taking has proved effective at inducing empathy not only for total strangers ... but for members of stigmatized groups' and that it tends to produce moral or 'pro-social' behaviour.<sup>20</sup>
- In an experiment designed by Wesley Schultz at California State University, participants were shown three types of image: people engaging in recreational activities in a natural environment (e.g. a forest hiker), animals in a natural environment (e.g. a caribou on a hill), and animals being harmed or suffering (e.g. an otter in an oil spill). Half were told to look at the images 'objectively', while the other half were given a perspective taking instruction to 'imagine how the subjects in the images feel'. The results showed that perspective-taking of animals suffering induced the highest levels of environmental concern. Similar studies by other scholars reveal that empathising with suffering animals has a bigger impact on environmental concern and action than trying to empathise with other aspects of nature such as forests or plants.<sup>21</sup>

Although these kinds of experiments have been conducted under laboratory conditions, they make clear the impact of perspective-taking empathy on increasing both pro-humanitarian and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour. This still leaves open the question about the most effective ways to harness the power of empathy on a mass scale to tackle real world problems, and how to translate it into policy and practice in ways that avoid inappropriately distorting priorities (for instance towards those social groups who are easier to empathise with). Such issues are discussed in Sections 3, 4 and 5 below.

### 2.3 The Social Distribution of Empathy

So we know that empathy is a natural human trait that can be learned and consciously enhanced. But what do we know about how it is distributed across populations? Do some

individuals or social groups have more than others? And are there any trends in how empathy levels are changing through time?

Empathy is difficult to measure, and like measures of happiness or wellbeing, quantitative indices tend to be based on self-reported ratings (and so should be treated with caution).<sup>22</sup> One of the most respected measures is Simon Baron-Cohen's Empathy Quotient, where people rate themselves on a four-point scale on the extent to which they agree with 40 statements that tap into both affective and cognitive empathy (statements include, for instance, 'In a conversation, I tend to focus on my own thoughts rather than on what my listener might be thinking'). What does the data reveal?

- Empathy is distributed normally across the population in the familiar bell-curve shape.
- Around 98% of people exhibit at least some capacity to empathise.<sup>23</sup>
- A minority of some 2% show 'no empathy at all' or 'zero degrees of empathy', according to Baron-Cohen. These include people with psychopathic tendencies, and also those with Asperger Syndrome (who can find it hard to cognitively understand others' feelings although they may still have a caring nature).<sup>24</sup>

Another important empathy scale is the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which includes separate measures of both affective empathy ('empathic concern') and cognitive empathy ('perspective taking').<sup>25</sup> One of the most significant empathy studies of recent years looked at data from 72 separate IRI samples from nearly 14,000 US college students over a 30 year period, and found that both affective and cognitive empathy have been in decline, with the steepest decline occurring since 2000 (see Figure 1 below). Reasons for this apparent decline are difficult to pinpoint but include the following possibilities: increasing social isolation due to the decline of engagement in community activities (Robert Putnam's 'bowling alone' thesis), higher levels of media consumption such as watching TV and online entertainment, the impact of social networks like Facebook on increasing narcissistic tendencies, the impact of rising student debt and college accessibility, and a greater emphasis on self-centred intrinsic values such as financial success (a 2006 US study showed 81% of 18-25 year olds said getting rich was their most important life goal).<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately there are no substantive comparative studies of how empathy has changed through time in other countries. There is, however, research showing similar trends of decline using alternative indicators that are closely correlated with empathy. For example, in the UK there has been a precipitous decline of social trust in recent decades: the proportion of people who say they generally trust others dropped from 60% in 1959 to 30% in 2005, and has declined further since then.<sup>27</sup>

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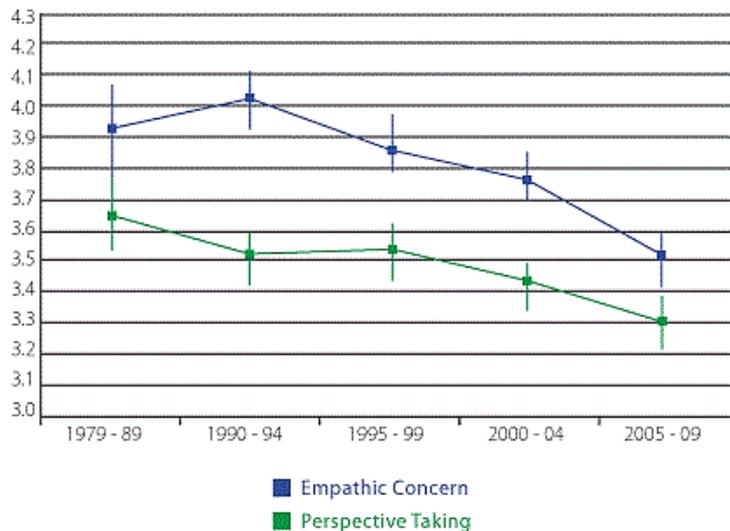


Figure 1: The decline of empathy in the United States: changes in student IRI scores over time (Konrath, O'Brien and Hsing, 2011)

Other key research findings that offer insights into the social distribution of empathy include:

- Women score, on average, slightly higher than men on empathy tests. When separating out types of empathy, the difference is clearest with respect to affective empathy. There is little if any significant difference between women and men on measures of cognitive empathy.<sup>28</sup>
- Multiple studies show that people from wealthy backgrounds have lower empathy levels than those from lower income backgrounds, even controlling for gender, ethnicity and religious background (they are especially less skilled at reading other people's emotions). This is consistent with research showing that the wealthier you are, the less ethical you are likely to be: studies by Dacher Keltner at the University of California, Berkeley, show that rich people are more likely to cheat in games, cut off other drivers and ignore pedestrians, and endorse unethical behaviour at work.<sup>29</sup>
- People with psychopathic tendencies who lack empathy are four times more common among senior executives than in the ordinary workforce.<sup>30</sup>
- There is some data showing that empathy levels are higher amongst those on the left of the political spectrum. For instance, in the US politically engaged Democrats exhibit higher levels of empathic concern than politically engaged Republicans.<sup>31</sup>
- Gap year students engaged in anti-poverty and environmental programmes in developing countries register increases in both their empathy levels and sense of social justice.<sup>32</sup>

The overall implication of this data for organisations involved in tackling social justice and environmental issues is that they should consider targeting their empathy interventions at young people (the next generation of political activists) whose empathy levels have been in decline,

and wealthy sectors of society (those holding the most power) where there is a substantive empathy deficit. Combining these, there may even be grounds for targeting the young wealthy.

### 3. Empathy as a Force for Social Change

#### 3.1 Collective Empathy in Human History

Before exploring particular empathy-based campaigning strategies, it is essential to understand what we know about the potential of empathy to create fundamental social change. Is there good evidence that stepping into the shoes of others can occur on a mass scale, contribute to social struggles and help tackle injustice? The answer is yes.

For most of the last century studies of empathy have been undertaken by psychologists at the level of the individual, but in the past decade there has been a growing number of cultural historians and sociologists – such as Lynn Hunt and Jeremy Rifkin – showing that *collective empathy* has been a motor force of human history, helping to forge a culture of equality and human rights.<sup>33</sup>

Their argument, in essence, is this: *empathy opens the door of our moral concern for neglected or marginalized social groups, then rights and laws wedge that door open*. In other words, the historical pattern (especially since the 18<sup>th</sup> century) is that empathising with others (such as slaves, women or indigenous people) makes us care about the plight of those outside our immediate community and treat them as human beings of equal value to ourselves, then we use policy instruments such as laws and human rights legislation to codify and universalize this moral concern. The historical lesson is that empathy and rights work together to create social justice: empathy is the reason *why we care* about the rights of others (a lesson that is lost on some critics of empathy who believe it is too ‘subjective’ to be a basis for social change and argue that we should rely on ‘objective’ instruments like rights and laws instead).<sup>34</sup> As the political thinker Matthew Taylor argues, ‘the emotional foundation of universalism is empathy’.<sup>35</sup>

What does this historical process look like in practice? Here are two examples:

- *The struggle against slavery in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century*

British campaigners against slavery and the slave trade developed an empathy-based political campaign in the 1780s to get members of the public to understand what it might be like to be a slave (at a time when half a million African slaves were being worked to death on British sugar plantations in the Caribbean). They printed tens of thousands of copies of a poster showing how many slaves could be squeezed onto a slave ship, published oral testimonies of violence used against slaves, and got former slaves to give public talks about their ordeals. The results were spectacular: public protests, parliamentary petitions, and the world’s first fair trade boycott (of slave-produced sugar). According to historian Adam Hochschild, the campaign combined with other factors such as slave revolts on plantations to play a key role in the abolition of the slave trade (1807) and the eventual abolition of slavery itself. Hochschild shows there was a ‘sudden upswelling’ of human empathy, remarkable for the fact that ‘it was the first time a large number of people became outraged, and stayed outraged for many years, over someone else’s rights’.<sup>36</sup>

- *The impact of evacuation in World War 2 on child welfare legislation*

During the Second World War, over a million British children were evacuated from urban areas to the countryside to escape the German bombs. An unexpected result was that relatively well-off rural people discovered the realities of life in the city slums, because most of the children they were charged to look after were clearly deprived: they were malnourished, they suffered from rickets and lice, they lacked shoes. The consequence of this mass meeting of strangers was a surge of empathy and social concern, including protests by women's organisations and political lobbying for welfare reform. The result was new public health, nutritional and education provisions for children, which were famously documented by the social historian Richard Titmuss. These changes, which became a cornerstone of the welfare state, were remarkable for occurring during a period of wartime austerity and resource scarcity.<sup>37</sup>

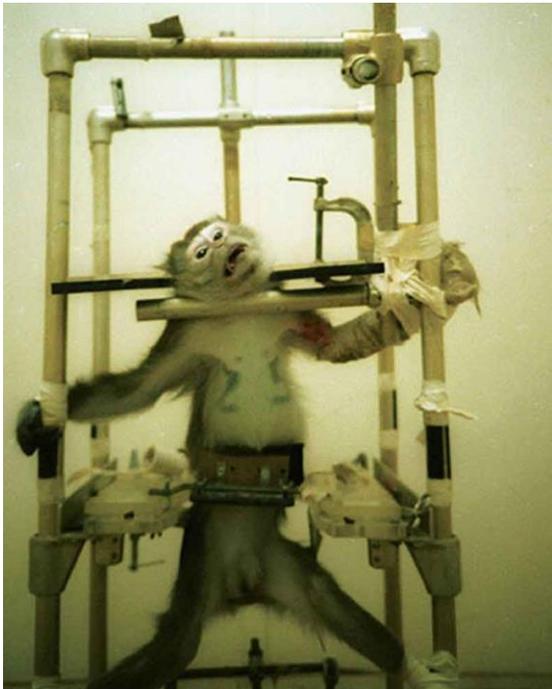
Over the past half century, expanding empathy has continued to power social movements and political change. This is evident in the struggles for US civil rights, gay rights and the rights of disabled people. Empathic concern has led to a variety of different strategies for change, ranging from political advocacy to mass demonstrations, non-violent direct action (such as undertaken by Gandhi in the Indian independence movement or the sit-ins of the US civil rights movement) and even armed violence (a strategy adopted, for example, by Nelson Mandela and the ANC in the late 1950s in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa). Empathy may sometimes be depicted as a 'soft skill' but the result of empathising has frequently been a decision to use radical political tactics to achieve system change.<sup>38</sup>

Empathy has also been a force for the creation of solidarity. This is clearest in relation to the expansion of workers' rights. The rise of trade unionism in the nineteenth century was in part a product of an empathic recognition of shared suffering and exploitation amongst industrial workers in different industries, cities and even countries (reflected in concepts such as international trade union 'brotherhood'). It was empathy – along with other key factors such as organizing efforts – that helped unite Catholic and Protestant dock workers in explosive strikes in Belfast in 1907, just as in more recent times empathy has played a role in forging solidarity in mass social movements, such as Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) (which has over one million members).<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that forging empathy within groups where there are shared experiences may be easier to generate than creating empathy-based solidarity between those groups and supporters in the wider population, and each may require different strategic approaches.

The impact of empathy on politics has additionally been visible in the ongoing campaigns for animal rights. Ever since the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Cruelty Against Animals in Britain in 1824, campaigners have attempted to arouse empathy for the suffering of animals (such as publicising conditions on factory farms or animal-testing in medical science). It has been a slow process, but by the 1980s it had led to serious consideration of the idea of animal rights – a concept that would have seemed unthinkable only a few decades earlier. A key episode was the campaign begun in 1981 by the US organisation People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which used empathy-inducing photos to highlight the cruel treatment of macaque monkeys in brain plasticity experiments in a Maryland lab (Figure 2). As social commentator Jeremy Rifkin points out, 'a new movement has emerged with the potential

to extend human empathy beyond the human race, to our fellow creatures'.<sup>40</sup> And the results are starting to be visible: in 2002 Germany became the first country to guarantee animal rights in its constitution. However, there are significant challenges of expanding empathy to non-human species, and to other aspects of the natural world, which will be discussed in Section 5.

In sum, it would be difficult to fully explain many major shifts in political history – especially the expansion of rights regimes – without including the role of empathy. Although organizing strategies, ideologies, leadership and other factors all play a role in social change, empathy is essential for forging the social connections that make us care about the plight of others, and is an underlying force creating bonds of common interest and solidarity.



*Figure 2: Photograph from a PETA investigation into lab experiments on macaque monkeys, Maryland, 1981. The resemblance to images of human torture is unmistakable.*

### 3.2 Harnessing Empathy as a Campaigning Tool

So we can learn from major historical movements about the potential of mass empathy to make change happen. But we can draw even sharper practical lessons from observing how contemporary campaigning organisations have designed empathy-based strategies to achieve their desired ends, whether in the fields of humanitarian aid, social justice or environmental change.

The evidence suggests three major approaches for expanding levels of affective and cognitive empathy amongst target groups:

1. *Experience*

Enabling people to actually experience what someone else's life might like (e.g. a person sleeping on the streets). This is the most difficult to organize on a mass scale but has the greatest potential impact.

2. *Conversation*

Creating dialogues across social divides to expand empathic connection (e.g. between people of different ethnic groups or political beliefs, at the global, regional and sub-regional levels).<sup>41</sup>

3. *Culture*

Using tools such as film, art, theatre, literature and interactive apps – especially involving personal stories and oral testimony – to help members of the public step into the shoes of other people or species and understand their perspectives (e.g. flood victims or wild mega-fauna).

What do empathy campaigns actually look like in practice? Here are five examples of particularly successful and creative campaigns on humanitarian and social justice issues that draw on these three approaches:

- *Hello Peace Telephone Line in Israel and Palestine*

The Parents Circle (also known as the Bereaved Families Forum) is an organization working in Israel and Palestine to create grass-roots reconciliation and peace building, whose motto is 'It won't stop until we talk'. It is comprised of over 600 Israeli and Palestinian families who have had family members killed in the conflict. As well as bringing the two sides together to share their personal stories in dialogue forums, they run mass-scale empathy building projects such as the Hello Peace Telephone Line. For this conversation-based campaign, any Israeli could call a freephone number and speak to a Palestinian stranger for up to half an hour, and similarly Palestinians could call Israelis. In its first five years of operation, over one million calls were made.<sup>42</sup> The Israeli Education Ministry has tried to ban the organisation's meetings, claiming they 'legitimise terrorists'.

- *Musekweya (New Dawn) radio soap opera in Rwanda*

This is a weekly soap opera created by the Dutch NGO La Benevolencija, which is listened to by around 90% of the Rwandan population. The storyline concerns Tutsis and Hutus living in adjacent villages, and mirrors the tensions leading up to the 1994 genocide. The script is specifically written to promote the importance of empathy, and foster community healing and national reconciliation. Studies have shown that the soap opera has increased levels of affective and cognitive empathy, made people more accepting of cross-group marriage, and increased inter- and intra-group trust and cooperation.<sup>43</sup>

- *Dialogue in the Dark*

This is a global network of pop-up experiential exhibitions where members of the public (children and adults) are taken by a visually impaired guide through a completely darkened environment for an hour. The aim is to give them an empathic experience of what it might be like to be visually impaired. Visitors have to cross a busy street with obstacles, ride on a simulated subway train and can buy a real drink at a bar then talk to their guide. Since its foundation in 1988, Dialogue in the Dark has appeared in over 130 cities in more than 30 countries in both the North and South, and has received over 7 million visitors. Impact assessments show visitors still have high recall of the exhibit experience after five years, and 80% say it changed their attitude and behaviour towards visually impaired people, and people with physical disabilities more generally.<sup>44</sup>

- *Live Below the Line*

Live Below the Line is an international anti-poverty campaign run by organisations in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia (including Oxfam and Concern), which annually challenges individuals and communities to eat and drink on just £1 per day for 5 days 'to bring to life the experiences of the 1.2 billion people currently living in extreme poverty'. Each year tens of thousands of people take part in this experiential empathy immersion and raise millions of pounds in the process.<sup>45</sup>

- *Most Shocking Second a Day Video*

This is a powerful and emotionally charged 90-second [video](#) created by Save the Children in the UK to create awareness of the plight of children in Syria's civil war and raise campaign funds. Launched in March 2014, it quickly went viral and received over 30 million views in its first few weeks online. The video has been designed to create empathy by showing a young girl in suburban London, whose life is gradually engulfed by a civil war. The viewer is taken into the world of a child who is 'like us' rather than a 'distant Other'. The final caption reads 'Just because it isn't happening here...doesn't mean it isn't happening'.<sup>46</sup>

These examples are all instances of channelling the power of empathy using experiential, conversational and cultural strategies. Their success is based on well-known phenomena in the psychology and sociology of behaviour change such as 'contact theory', which shows how shared experiences, conversations and goals breaks down social barriers and builds empathic connection between oppositional groups and across social divides (see discussion in Section 4 below).

However, it is important to note possible limitations of such strategies. For instance, online campaigns like the Most Shocking Second a Day Video might induce people to donate funds to an issue in the short term, but don't necessarily create new forms of long-term solidarity or spark other – potentially more powerful – forms of practical action such as mass public demonstrations or direct action. In other words, there is a danger that they encourage not activism but what the digital technology thinker Tom Chatfield calls 'slacktivism', where people believe that relatively easy actions like texting a financial donation or signing an online petition constitute genuine political activity.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, they may create what is known as 'empathic

bias' (see Section 5.1 below), drawing people towards caring about social groups that are relatively easy to empathise with (such as children), and distracting attention from other issues which may be less emotionally salient. Of course, any campaigning strategy, whether based on empathy or not, has the potential to highlight some issues at the expense of others that may also be deserving of attention. Empathy-based campaigns will be considered more legitimate when they focus on generating clear positive policy changes in realms such as human rights, and social and environmental justice.

Empathy has been similarly used in campaigning on environmental issues such as biodiversity loss and climate change, although not to the same extent as on humanitarian and social justice issues. Prominent examples include:

- *Klima X climate change exhibition in Finland*  
At the Klima X climate change exhibition at the Finnish Science Centre, which opened in 2012, the whole exhibition space was flooded and visitors had to wear waterproof boots to wade through it. The exhibit was also filled with the images, sounds and smells of melting ice to simulate the realities of living in a climate-change world. It received hundreds of thousands of visitors and over 500 school visits in its first year.<sup>48</sup>
- *Friends of the Earth's Infernal Combustion installation*  
Friends of the Earth created a 'sense-surround' empathy installation at the European Social Forum in London in 2008 as part of a campaign against Shell in Nigeria, in solidarity with fenceline communities directly impacted by Shell's oil and gas flaring. Visitors walked into a container and were bombarded by shocking, genuine video images and noise of gas flaring, simulating the polluting environment that local communities had on their doorsteps. Over 1500 people visited Infernal Combustion.
- *Greenpeace's palm oil campaign against Nestlé*  
In 2010 Greenpeace launched a successful campaign to get Nestlé to stop sourcing palm oil from companies that are destroying rainforests, particularly in Indonesia. Key to the campaign was using mega-fauna such as orangutans whose natural habit was being decimated by palm oil production to induce both sympathy and empathy. Images of orphaned baby orangutans who had lost their parents and treetop homes worked primarily at the level of inducing sympathy, whereas images of mass rainforest destruction induced a wider empathic concern about the loss of natural habit – and life – for a range of wildlife (a strategy similarly used by Greenpeace in their anti-palm oil campaign focused on Unilever's Dove products).<sup>49</sup>
- *Yeb Saño's climate change hunger strike*  
During the November 2013 Warsaw Climate Change Conference, Philippine government delegate Yeb Saño went on hunger strike in empathic solidarity with people whose livelihoods had been destroyed and who were starving in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan, which had hit the Philippines three days earlier. Choking back tears, he said he would fast until governments took decisive action on it, declaring: 'To anyone who continues to deny the reality that is climate change, I dare you to get off your ivory tower and away from the comfort of your armchair and pay a visit to the Philippines right now.' As George Marshall points out in his new book on climate change denial, *Don't Even Think About It*,

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Saño's actions made climate change 'seem real, immediate, and deeply moving' and 'spoke far more strongly to our sense of empathy and direct threat than the abstract data of graphs and scientific reports.'<sup>50</sup>



Figure 3: From top left clockwise: Dialogue in the Dark, Klima X in Finland, Save the Children's Most Shocking Second a Day Video, Friends of the Earth's Infernal Combustion installation.

This is just a sample of campaigns and actions that draw on experiential, conversational and cultural empathy to help people step into the shoes of others. Further examples include ethical consumer campaigns that help us empathise with the poor labour conditions of sweatshop workers in developing countries, videos and blogs in which flood victims in the North and South talk directly about their experiences, and photographic exhibitions of the human impact of natural and man-made disasters.

Although such examples are rarely described explicitly as 'empathy campaigns' there is a good case that they should be, since they form a very coherent and identifiable strategy of using affective and cognitive empathy to rouse moral concern, and shift behaviour and values. The implication is that civil society organisations should consider developing 'empathy strategists' who can analyse best practice, draw out lessons for change and use an empathic approach to design powerful campaigns and interventions. Just imagine, for example, if the Hello Peace telephone line model was used to create an online video conversation campaign that got hundreds of thousands of climate change activists to talk one-to-one with climate change

sceptics, or if Dialogue in the Dark was used as a model to create a new global network of pop-up experiential empathy exhibits on the impact of climate-changed induced flooding in both rich and poor countries.

As with empathy-based campaigns on human rights and social justice issues, those focused on environmental issues should similarly be wary of creating distortion effects. For instance, it may be easier to induce empathic concern for the plight of orang-utans and other mega fauna compared with concern for the plight of bees (see Section 5.2). For the latter species, it will be important to balance empathy-based strategies with alternative campaigning approaches.

Overall, the big picture is that empathy-based campaigning can be a powerful tool for change, as we know from examples ranging from the anti-slavery movement to the Rwandan radio soap Musekeweya. We must recognize that it is most effective when it goes beyond short-term behaviour change and creates new social bonds and common interests at the deepest levels (as with the programmes of the Parents Circle) that reinforce intrinsic relative to extrinsic values.

This raises the question of how to devise empathy interventions that do not just focus on immediate and specific issues like palm oil but are designed to generate longer-term systemic shifts in people's underlying values, forging identities based on 'we' rather than 'me'. It requires civil society organisations to focus on what Crompton and Kasser have referred to as 'identity campaigning' that helps to create a culture of common interest in society at large.<sup>51</sup> Empathy has the potential to play a key role in this. The following section identifies two forms of empathy-based identity campaigning that can help create such system-wide change: empathy education, and The Empathy-Community Circle.

## **4. Using Empathy to Shift Identities from 'Me' to 'We'**

### **4.1 Empathy Education**

Education has been one of the most prominent and successful tools in modern Western history for shifting identity and values on a mass scale. When political elites in nineteenth-century Europe wanted to forge national identities that would ensure citizen allegiance to the nation-state, they used the new public education systems to do so. French children, for example, were taught to sing the national anthem, speak the national language (many at the time did not) and learn the proud history of their country. Education still plays this role: in the United States, millions of children recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day, in a ritual designed to foster patriotism. Schools have long been at the frontline of creating the 'imagined community' of the nation state.<sup>52</sup>

So it makes perfect sense to consider how education systems today can be used to liberate us from the individualist focus of a consumer society based largely on extrinsic values, and forge more community and relationship-based identities that reflect intrinsic values. A powerful way to achieve this is to use empathy education, which can encourage children to step outside the narrow confines of self-interest and develop a sense of common interest with both people and planet (and beyond the boundaries of the nation state). Doing so is probably our greatest hope for creating a new generation of political and environmental activists, and may ultimately have more impact than supplying them with well-intentioned fact sheets that provide useful information without necessarily having a major impact on underlying worldviews. Empathy

education is what we need to activate young people to care about issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and global inequality. It is foundational for creating a 'common interest' frame of thinking.

The good news is that a revolution of empathy education has already been underway for at least a decade, providing evidence that empathy is a skill that can be learned. Especially in Western Europe and North America, school children have been the recipients of empathy teaching as part of a new wave of social and emotional learning programmes.<sup>53</sup> Some of the most important examples include:

- *Roots of Empathy*

Founded in Canada in 1995, this is considered one of the world's most effective programmes. A real live baby is used as the 'teacher'. The baby (plus parent and instructor) visit a classroom regularly throughout the year and the children (normally of primary age) sit around the baby and discuss what the baby is thinking and feeling, for instance why it might be crying or smiling – they are learning to step into the baby's shoes. They then use this visit as a jumping off point to do role-plays and other activities around issues like what it might be like to be bullied in the playground. Over half a million children have taken part in Roots of Empathy in Canada, the US, Germany and other countries. It is currently being piloted in South London, and has been adopted in schools across every Scottish local authority. Studies show that it not only improves affective and cognitive empathy, but increases 'pro-social behaviour' – such as sharing and helping – in 55% of pupils, decreases bullying and raises general academic attainment.<sup>54</sup>

- *Primary Years Programme (PYP) of the International Baccalaureate (IB)*

The PYP is a curriculum launched in the late 1990s for children aged 3 to 11. Unlike traditional curricula it is not organized around subjects like maths or science but around transdisciplinary themes such as 'Who We Are' and 'How We Express Ourselves'. Within this, pupils learn about key 'attitudes' such as empathy, cooperation and confidence. At the International School of Amsterdam, for instance, Year 5 students (aged 10-11) do an eight week unit on 'Different People, Different Lives' designed to foster the attitudes of empathy, respect and tolerance – and through which they learn maths, literacy and other skills. Activities to explore empathy include a visit to a 'blindness museum' where they are immersed in darkness (like Dialogue in the Dark). They also read stories that tackle themes of prejudice and stereotyping, for example related to refugees, then interview family members and others about migration experiences.<sup>55</sup> Studies of the impact of the PYP show improvements not only in empathy and intercultural understanding, but also in knowledge skills such as writing and mathematics.<sup>56</sup>

- *Service Programme at United World Colleges (UWC) schools*

The UWC international schools network engages all high school students in an extensive 'service programme' where they undertake community service activities throughout the year, such as helping in old people's homes or working with people with disabilities in community gardening projects. The purpose of the programme is that it

'fosters empathy and helps students to recognize that part of being human is seeking opportunities to put yourself aside in the service of others'. At the UWC South-East Asia school in Singapore, for example, the student body makes an average of 80 community visits each week, working with 46 local organisations, and interacting with 970 people.<sup>57</sup>

- *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, UK*

In 2005 the UK government introduced the SEAL programme into primary schools to foster five key social and emotional skills (based largely on Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence): self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy and social skills. The voluntary programme, designed to provide content for the subject of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), was extended to secondary schools in 2008. Resources on the theme of empathy included a topic called 'Say No to Bullying', which uses stories to prompt discussions about stepping into other people's shoes.<sup>58</sup> As noted below, the SEAL programme was deprioritised – if not completely dismantled – by the incoming Conservative government in 2010.

- *Climate Chaos teaching resources, Oxfam*

Development agency Oxfam has created a set of resources for a week of teaching on the impacts of climate change for ages 9 to 11, as part of their Global Citizenship education programme. Many materials are designed 'to increase empathy with people living in different situations from their own'. One has them write stories and draw pictures from the perspective of an islander in Tuvalu whose house is threatened by rising sea levels, and a homeowner in Shrewsbury in the UK faced by flooding. Another activity, 'From My Grandchild', asks them to imagine what the UK would be like in fifty years' time if the climate continues to change, and then to write a story or poem from the viewpoint of their own grandchild.<sup>59</sup>



Figure 4: A Roots of Empathy class. The teacher is the baby on the mat.

At their best, these kinds of empathy education programmes can play a vital role in activating and enhancing the latent empathic abilities wired into all children. They create the affective and cognitive foundations for young people to develop a 'common interest' frame of reference where they see themselves as part of a larger whole, and can open them to engaging with social, political and environmental issues at both the local and global levels. As Mary Gordon, founder of Roots of Empathy, points out:

'Empathy is integral to solving conflict in the family, schoolyard, boardroom and war room. The ability to take the perspective of another, to identify commonalities through our shared feelings, is the best peace pill we have... Although we may have the science to solve the issues of the environment, for example, if we don't care about people downstream who we don't see or know, we won't have the motivation to apply that science.'<sup>60</sup>

There are, however, important challenges for implementing empathy education. Programmes such as SEAL in the UK, for example, have been hampered by a lack of teacher training and inadequate space in the school timetable to implement the programme effectively. The teaching materials are often too narrow, revolving around family and local community issues with insufficient emphasis on global issues – such as biodiversity loss and our interdependence with the environment – that inspire young people to become planetary citizens with planetary concerns. Governments have also differed in their commitment to the programme. SEAL was introduced by a Labour government, but the Conservative government that came to power in 2010 has shown far less interest in social and emotional learning, being more intent on a return to 1950s-style traditional education with a focus on the 3Rs and a competitive testing culture. It cut funding for the SEAL programme, although some schools still use the teaching materials as part of Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE).<sup>61</sup>

Despite the challenges, there is little doubt that empathy education is one of the most effective methods not only to create common values at a deep level, but to inspire a new wave of active citizenship by future generations. It is a long-term strategy of change to shift the balance between extrinsic and intrinsic values, but one that cannot be ignored.

Civil society organisations – whether working on humanitarian, social justice or environmental issues – could be looking at best practice in empathy education and supporting the implementation of the most effective programmes. The evidence suggests that the highest-impact approaches involve experiential learning (such as Roots of Empathy and the UWC Service Programme) and have dedicated curriculum time. All this needs to be complemented by teaching materials that raise awareness of global issues such as environmental degradation and ecosystem fragility, and backed up by the political will from governments to take empathy education seriously and not dismiss it as a 'nice to have' soft skill. Given the current focus in education on testing and school rankings, and continued reliance on hierarchic pedagogic methods, it is also important to directly challenge such practices as well as promoting empathy skills teaching, in order to create space for the latter to thrive.

## 4.2 The Empathy-Community Circle

Alongside education, a second major strategy to foster a long-term shift from a society that focuses largely on self-interest and consumer-based identities to one that prioritises common interests and collective identities, is to grow empathy through community engagement.

It is important, however, not to romanticize the notion of 'community', and to specify exactly what kind of community involvement can make a difference to urgent environmental, social and political problems. Clearly some does, and some doesn't. Plenty of people, for instance, find community identity in high-consumption and resource-intensive activities such as motorcycle-racing or playing golf. Similarly, involvement in fundamentalist religious communities or extremist political movements might serve to fuel social divides and violence in some contexts (an issue I will return to in Section 5.1 when discussing 'in-group' bias).

Here I want to suggest that we consider this in relation to 'The Empathy-Community Circle', an empathy-based model I have developed for thinking about how to shift identities from 'buying' to 'belonging', where more people find their personal wellbeing and sense of self from having strong relationships (intrinsic values) than from financial success, shopping and social status (extrinsic values). Underlying this model is the work cited at the beginning of this paper by Tim Kasser and Tom Crompton, which shows that those who put a greater emphasis on intrinsic relative to extrinsic values will not only become less materialistic in their consumption patterns, but more engaged in pro-social behaviour, cooperation and environmental concern.

Of course there are many ways to erode the 'I shop therefore I am' model of personal identity that is so dominant today. We can try to ban advertising to children, dematerialize consumption by encouraging a shift to durable goods, or promote 'voluntary simplicity' and other forms of simple living. At the same time, though, we should be endeavouring to make ourselves less vulnerable to the attractions of consumer culture by bolstering our intrinsic values through community engagement that expands empathy.

So what does The Empathy-Community Circle look like, and how does it work?

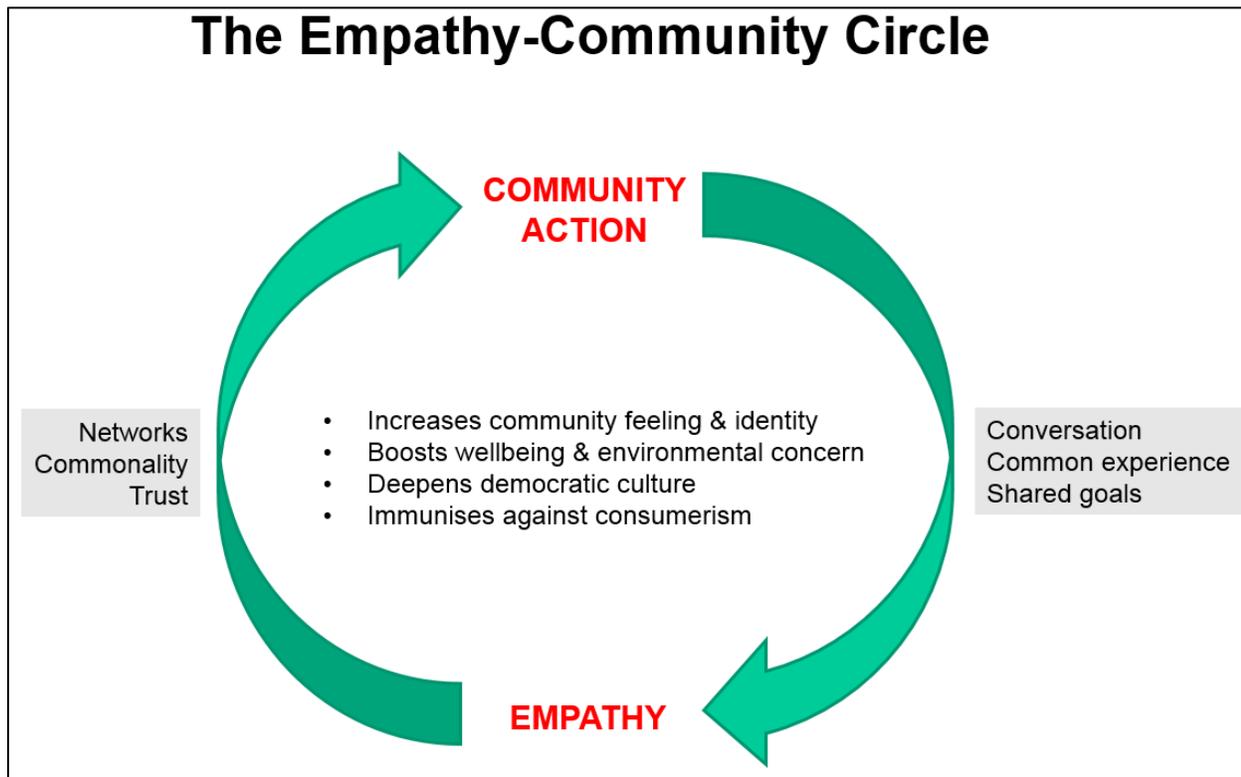


Figure 5: The Empathy-Community Circle

The model (Figure 5) depicts a virtuous circle. When people get involved in certain kinds of *community action* (such as a community choir, playing in a five-a-side football team, or joining the local campaigning group of an international environmental organization) the result can be to boost their *empathy* levels (across gender, ethnic, class and other divides), especially if their activity involves *conversations* with those involved, *shared experiences*, and striving with them towards *shared goals*. In turn, this empathy helps to build new social *networks* between community members, enables them to discover *commonalities* that make them bond with one another, and boosts levels of social *trust* – all of which can fuel new kinds of community action and makes wider community engagement more likely.

Imagine, for example, that members of a local community join to form a new neighbourhood choir, which involves people from different religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. By meeting each other on a regular basis, going through the experience of rehearsing together and striving to prepare for a concert, the result is to expand empathic understanding and connection between those involved. The differences between them begin to dissolve. They make new friends, realize things they have in common (from a love of singing to the fact that their kids are in the same class at school), and ultimately come to trust one other. In time, when some of the choir members want to form a low carbon living initiative in their community, or to fight against a corporate supermarket opening in their locality, there is a pool of engaged people who now

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know one another and may care about one another, who they can recruit to their cause. And so the circle can continue, drawing them into community action that may have both local and global impact.

This is not a speculative model. What I am describing here is known in social psychology as 'contact theory', an empirically proven model of how social change happens. The idea of contact theory – which dates back to the 1940s – is that if you bring different groups into contact with one another (for instance from different races or religions), in conditions where they have to regularly interact and cooperate with one another, and work together towards common goals (in the absence of strong hierarchies between groups) then the typical result is to reduce prejudices, stereotypes and other divides between them, and to boost empathy and mutual understanding.

The most renowned research finding on this phenomenon, by Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp in 2006, was a meta-analysis that reviewed 515 studies, involving around a quarter of a million subjects in 38 countries who had engaged in face-to-face contact. It showed that in 96% of cases, intergroup contact reduced prejudices and social divisions not only with members of the contact group, but for members of their own group and other types of group. The findings were strongest for contact between groups of different races and ethnicities, across the homosexual-heterosexual divide, and in relation to people with physical disabilities.<sup>62</sup> In other words – focusing on the right-hand side of The Empathy Community Circle model – if we can foster community action based on conversation, shared experiences and common goals, we can expect a concrete empathy dividend.

The end result of such community contact is to produce the four outcomes depicted in the middle of the circle:

- Increases community feeling & identity – people build new relationships and trust by engaging with others, embedding their identity more deeply in their community, which expands intrinsic values
- Boosts wellbeing and environmental concern – expanding intrinsic values improves personal wellbeing, and promotes the common values that make people open to developing concern about environmental issues
- Deepens democratic culture – by strengthening civil society and promoting the public over the private self
- Immunises against consumerism – through shifting the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic values, so people draw more of their identity from 'belonging' rather than 'buying'.

The Empathy-Community Circle model raises a fundamental question: What kinds of community activity or interventions are most likely to promote and sustain a virtuous Empathy-Community Circle? There are three key forms that emerge from the literature on community engagement:

- *Sharing Economy*

Promoting activities in the growing 'sharing economy' of co-production and collaborative consumption – what Jeremy Rifkin calls the 'collaborative commons' – is a vital area of community engagement. They will have most benefit if they involve face-to-face contact, common experiences and shared goals. Examples might include co-housing projects, time banks, tool sharing, community gardens, community currencies and green energy co-production. Car sharing clubs could fit this category when they are managed by local communities rather than corporate-owned (as is often the case).<sup>63</sup> Digital technology can help, especially with peer-to-peer sharing: for example, the UK website Landshare connects people who want to grow their own food with those who have spare garden space, and has over 50,000 members.<sup>64</sup> It is important to recognize just how much the sharing economy is growing. Rifkin cites data showing that European car-sharing membership is likely to expand from 700,000 to 15 million people over the next seven years.<sup>65</sup>

- *Anarchist-based community organisations*

In popular culture, anarchism is often associated with black-masked youths bent on the use of violence. But another anarchist tradition, dating back to the nineteenth-century Russian thinker Peter Kropotkin, and evident more recently in the writings of Colin Ward, Murray Bookchin, David Graeber and James Scott, espouses anarchism as a 'theory of social organisation'. In this approach to anarchism, we should be aiming to promote the growth of social organisations that are local, voluntary, non-hierarchical and based on mutual aid – and which are not dependent on big business or state intervention.<sup>66</sup> Examples might include community choirs and other music-making groups (especially counter-culture music), local sports associations, farmers markets, self-build housing groups, squatting communities, radical free schools, worker cooperatives and voluntary organisations like the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI).<sup>67</sup> Others may be more temporary in nature, such as the Occupy communities that evolved in Zuccotti Park, which were run along anarchist principles. This style of community engagement, even when not explicitly labelled 'anarchist', is exactly the kind of activity that powers the Empathy-Community Circle and puts contact theory into practice, building empathy and social trust through face to face encounters. It should be noted that the principles of anarchy as a mode of social organisation sometimes overlap with the practices of the sharing economy, especially in the realm of co-production.

- *Community empathy projects*

By this I mean promoting projects that are explicitly designed to get people in local communities to cross social divides and step into one another's shoes. One example is the Human Library movement, founded in Denmark in 2000, and which has now spread to over twenty countries. They organize community events that typically take place at local public libraries, but instead of borrowing a book you borrow a person for conversation. The Human Library is full of volunteers you can take out for around half an hour of free-form discussion. The aim is to create an empathic conversational encounter with the kind of person you may not normally get to speak to, such as an asylum seeker,

a Sikh teenager, a climate change activist, or a naval officer. The project aims to use conversation to overcome prejudice and stereotype, and build new community connections.<sup>68</sup>

It might seem unusual for civil society organisations campaigning on environmental issues, domestic child poverty or international human rights violations to consider how they might support co-housing projects, community choirs or Human Libraries. But if they are serious about deep value change, they could be looking to see how they can help initiate, sustain and spread such initiatives, directly or indirectly, whether independently or in coalition with other organisations.

The Empathy Community Circle model can also help overcome the tragedy of the commons problem through its positive impact on social trust. As the work of Elinor Ostrom has demonstrated, a key criterion for overcoming the tragedy of the commons has been to create communities with high levels of social trust and social capital, which helps generate the norms that enable people to share, manage and preserve common resources, even through periods of economic, political and environmental turbulence. Equally, Ostrom points out that most people are 'conditional cooperators', requiring the right conditions to work together – and empathy helps create those conditions that bring out the 'cooperative self'.<sup>69</sup>

As with empathy education, there are many challenges for creating a virtuous Empathy-Community Circle. It is vital to preserve public spaces where communities can convene, such as community centres, in an age where the corporate-owned shopping mall is fast becoming the default space for social interaction. The Circle model would be more effective with initiatives by local government that help to decentralise power, such as participatory budgeting and funding for local ownership of assets.<sup>70</sup> There are issues around sustaining community engagement over the long-term and avoiding the problem of 'burnout' amongst those involved, or people simply not having enough spare time in their hectic lives to take part. And how might an organisation like Friends of the Earth convince its members that supporting initiatives that build empathy and social trust in communities is actually an effective way – as part of a mosaic of strategies – of helping to save bee populations or the Amazon rainforest? It might make most sense, for instance, for an environmental organization to support empathy-building that resonates with their core aims, such as community car-sharing clubs that reduce car usage.

A potential challenge for the model is how to ensure that community groups contain a mix of people from different backgrounds rather than 'self-sorting' and social segregation emerging. Other policy interventions will inevitably be needed to reverse the effects of residential gentrification and private schooling, for example, but one way this can be avoided in empathy projects is by grouping people under a common identity that stretches beyond their typical gender, ethnic and income divisions. This is precisely what happened in the BBC TV series *The Choir*, where scratch choirs of amateur singers in communities and workplaces were trained up to give a public performance. So the Manchester Airport choir, for instance, had workers from a wide range of backgrounds: Sikh aviation officers were singing alongside baggage handlers and security guards with African-Caribbean heritage, and top managers with a Welsh cultural background.<sup>71</sup> A further issue to consider – which is discussed in Section 5.1 – is the impact of digital technologies on inter-group contact, and whether online culture might be able to effectively facilitate the cultural mixing required to boost empathy.

Other problems arise in relation to social status. The classic extrinsic-intrinsic values model depicts social status (popularity and image) as an extrinsic value that we should be weaning ourselves off.<sup>72</sup> I believe this is misguided. Throughout human history individuals have sought recognition and a sense of social worth from their peers – it is a fundamental psychological need. At this stage in history we tend to get status through financial success and consumption – the clothes we buy, the car we drive, where we go on holidays. This hasn't always been the case. In medieval Europe social status derived more from your skill as a warrior than your wealth, just as in pre-modern China the highest social status was awarded to members of the literati, the educated elite who occupied official government positions.<sup>73</sup>

The point I'm making is that status matters – and it can change its form. We should not turn our backs on it and relegate it to realm of 'negative' extrinsic values. If we want to draw more people into community engagement, we need to find ways in which it can offer status recognition. For instance, we need young people to think it's cool to work in local volunteer programmes. Organisations such as RockCorps, Year Here and the National Citizen Service, are extremely successful in this realm, making their community action programmes look fun, creative, and challenging, and a great way to make new friends and maybe impress your peers or a potential lover (just look at the images on their websites for evidence). Similarly in Brazil, community music projects like AfroReggae working in favelas have drawn young people away from drug culture by offering alternatives like involvement in reggae and hip-hop groups that satisfy their desire for peer recognition. In other words, we need to consciously attempt to shift what social status looks like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, away from materialism and towards community-mindedness.

Nobody said that deep social change was easy. But with creativity and commitment, such obstacles can be overcome. In an era in which individualism and consumer culture remain rampant (and are growing in countries such as India and China), it is absolutely essential to generate a culture of common interest that can challenge the self-interest drive at the heart of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. We need empathy to change our values, so we come to care about issues such as social justice or environmental degradation. Generating empathy through both educational reform and The Empathy-Community Circle are fundamental requirements for creating a cultural shift from me to we, from buying to belonging, from extrinsic to intrinsic values, that can raise our consciousness about both people and planet.

## 5. Challenges for Empathy Campaigning

For all the evidence I have presented about the effectiveness of empathy as a campaigning tool, there are still a number of challenges that need addressing directly, which I shall approach in a Question & Answer format.

### 5.1 Empathy across distance, with future generations and out-groups

**We tend to empathise most with people who are close to us and part of our families or local communities, rather than distant strangers. Doesn't this mean that empathy is too parochial and limited to really make a difference?**

It is certainly true that we typically empathise more easily with people in our backyards than distant strangers. So we might find it easier to step in the shoes of an elderly neighbour who

needs help with carrying her shopping than an earthquake victim on the other side of the world.<sup>74</sup> Although this may skew our empathic action towards the local and away from the global, distance is not a fundamental problem, for three main reasons:

- First, we need to understand that geographic proximity is also no guarantee of care. We can easily walk past a homeless person on our street, just as we can care about an earthquake victim in a distant country when we see them interviewed on television and hear their personal story, seeing the grief on their face.
- Second, the real question is *how to give people a human face and individuality*, whether they are near or distant, so we can understand more about the reality of their lives and expand our moral concern for them, and not treat them as little more than an abstract statistic or stereotype. This is precisely what the campaigners against slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century did, getting members of the British public to care about strangers across the Atlantic Ocean. The difficulties of empathising across distance shouldn't make us abandon it. We can do it but just need to be more intentional about doing it.
- Third, digital technology makes it potentially easier than ever to cross the barrier of distance. On the one hand most social networking technologies are designed to foster the exchange of information rather than intimacy, and encourage relatively superficial connections ('friends' on Facebook, 'followers' on Twitter) rather than deep relationships based on face-to-face interactions.<sup>75</sup> But even limited contacts with strangers can reduce prejudice and facilitate empathy. For instance, children participating in online bulletin boards for games and hobbies are more comfortable dealing with strangers and more civically active.<sup>76</sup> And video platforms like Skype can bring faraway strangers into our living rooms so we can build empathy with them. For example, a recent English teaching project called Speaking Exchange uses online video to get lonely pensioners in a Chicago retirement home to teach English online to teenagers in Brazil. As their relationships developed, the reported empathy dividend has been remarkable.<sup>77</sup>

**It's far easier to empathise with people in the here and now rather than future generations. How can we get better at stepping into the shoes of future people?**

So we can empathise across distance, but what about through time with future generations? This especially matters for the climate change crisis: we currently face a huge empathy deficit through time, in the sense that we are failing to step into the shoes of future people who will be impacted by our addiction to the carbon economy. We certainly find it difficult to embrace the idea of making personal sacrifices now for the benefit of people who do not yet exist. This is partly due to the short-term thinking that pervades Western culture, where politicians can barely see beyond the next election, and corporations beyond the next quarterly results.<sup>78</sup> It is also because the human brain developed in a way that enabled us to respond to our direct environment (e.g. foraging for food) and immediate dangers (e.g. predators) rather than longer-term challenges. Survey research shows that we have a limited ability to imagine the future beyond 10-20 years, and typically think of the future as around 15 years from the present.<sup>79</sup>

Studies of how to engage people to be concerned and take action on the future impacts of climate change reveal that empathic perspective-taking is one of the most effective methods. Rather than giving people statistics about future scenarios, we need to paint a narrative picture

of how particular individuals will be affected and ask people to step into their shoes. As psychologist Sabine Pahl argues, doing so is a way of 'making the invisible future visible' and 'represents a considerable advance over the simple provision of information'.<sup>80</sup>

Such research suggests several ways we might tackle the problem of empathising through time:

- We could emphasize it in empathy education, encouraging children to be thinking about preserving our planetary home for future generations, so that 'empathy through time' becomes part of their worldview. They should be presented with stories with strong visual images and asked to imagine the lives of future individuals.
- We could create new cultural projects that involve perspective-taking, from art exhibits to television programmes, which enable us to imagine not just how future generations might be impacted by climate change, but how they might judge us, especially our continuing reliance on fossil fuels.
- We need to end discrimination against future generations by challenging policy practices such as 'discounting', where diminishing value is assigned to the 'utility' experienced by future people in cost-benefit calculations – a recommendation of the recent Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations.<sup>81</sup>
- We ought to learn about long-term thinking from other cultures, such as the Iroquois maxim, 'In every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation...even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of pine.'<sup>82</sup>

**We empathise more with people who are 'like us' (part of our 'in-group'). Doesn't that make empathy potentially biased?**

A final issue is social distance: we may have empathic bias towards the in-group – people of similar socioeconomic or cultural background to our own, and be less willing to step into shoes of 'out-groups'. So a white male judge might give a more lenient sentence to someone who shares his educational, professional or social background.<sup>83</sup>

There is no doubt that empathic in-group bias is common. Yet this is no reason to abandon empathy as a tool for change. Instead we need to *extend* our empathy beyond the in-group by making a focused effort to understand the lives of people whose backgrounds and lived realities are different from our own. This is the value of projects such as The Human Library or campaigns like Live Below The Line, which use conversational and experiential methods to help us step into the shoes of strangers, and challenge stereotypes, prejudice and in-group bias.

We should also look to the potential of digital technology for breaking down the barriers between in-groups and out-groups, and more broadly overcoming intercultural divides and promoting empathy. On the surface it would seem that in a world where 2.7 billion people are on the internet, the possibilities of generating empathy across cultural, gender, ethnic, income and other barriers are enormous. Yet the reality is that this has not induced a mass expansion of global empathy. Several factors run counter to the potential positive effects, including: the rise of online abuse and trolling - 70% of people in the US have experienced online harassment<sup>84</sup> - partly due to opportunities to remain anonymous (known to psychologists as the 'online

disinhibition effect')<sup>85</sup>; and the fact that most social networking technologies tend to connect us to people similar to ourselves (in terms of music tastes, social and political interests, and so on), rather than different. There are some potential remedies: promoting face-to-face online dialogues that facilitate meaningful and sustained cross-cultural contact and avoid anonymity, as in the case above of Speaking Exchange; promoting the new wave of empathy-based video games, such as PeaceMaker, that avoid the typical violence of most games; and developing social networking platforms that are specifically designed to connect us with people who are different from us rather than similar, thereby systematically facilitating conversations between strangers. These are the kinds of approaches that can help harness digital technology to overcome barriers of social and geographical distance, and erode empathic bias.<sup>86</sup>

## 5.2 Empathy with the natural world

**The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argued that we can never really know what it is like to be a bat. So can we empathise with the natural world – with animals, plants and even the planet itself?**

This is a complex question with no clear-cut answer. So what do we know about our capacity to empathise with nature?

For a start, it is clear that we can empathise – particularly on the level of affective empathy – with certain animal species, especially those that seem to display similar emotional traits to human beings, such as chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas. We can connect empathically with the anger, agitation or fear they might display, or their joy when playing together. Equally, the sight of a dog whimpering and recoiling because it is about to be hit by someone triggers a visceral response in most of us: we may physically flinch and feel a desperate concern with its plight. In such cases our empathy is based on a fundamental characteristic we share with many species: a preference to avoid pain and preserve our own life.<sup>87</sup>

Yet there are limits to our ability to empathise with animals and other life forms:

- There is a risk of anthropomorphizing – attributing human emotions to animals that we cannot be sure they are experiencing. People often claim they can see guilt or sadness on the face of their pet dog, yet this may be an unwarranted projection.
- It is difficult to empathise with creatures that have minimal biological resemblance to human beings. How easily can we understand the perspective of a mosquito, a bee, an earthworm or a tiny Paedocypris fish, which is 8mm long? We know from neurological research that they may experience pain, but how readily can we really mirror their emotional states or grasp their mental outlooks? There are some organisms whose state of being remains a mystery to us, on both the affective and cognitive levels.
- We cannot, in a strict sense, empathise with plant life. There is no established evidence that sunflowers or oak trees possess consciousness or engage in purposeful thought (they lack a nervous system). This rules out empathy as understood in modern psychology: we cannot step into the mind of an organism that does not have one – there is no perspective for us to grasp, no imagination to comprehend.<sup>88</sup>

That said, empathy should still matter to organisations campaigning on environmental issues, for three reasons:

- *Empathy is closely related to 'biophilia'*

Even if there are limits to empathising with nature, it is clear that human beings can feel a close emotional connection with the natural world and have a symbiotic relationship with it. This is described by the evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson as 'biophilia', which he defines as 'our innate tendency to focus on life and life-like forms and, in some instances, affiliate with them emotionally'.<sup>89</sup> It is biophilia that may explain phenomena such as: the research showing that hospital patients get better faster if they are looking at plant life through their window rather than a brick wall; the way children with attention deficit disorder experience a reduction of symptoms when they step into the wild; and simply the way that we may cry when we see a favourite tree being cut down, or our desire to be surrounded by pot plants at the office. These kinds of biophilic responses have close resonances with affective empathy, and may eventually come to be seen as a special category of empathy itself that I would call 'bioempathy'. We should be encouraging the development of biophilia, for instance through 'Forest Schools' and other education programmes that take children into the wild, so that the balance is not so strongly tipped towards their immersion in digital culture (the typical US teenager spends an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day online).<sup>90</sup>

- *We can use the skills of empathising to connect with nature*

Empathic skills such as perspective-taking can be used to deepen our care for nature and appreciate our symbiotic relationship with it. For instance, as hedgehog expert and ecologist Hugh Warwick points out, you may not be able to exactly understand what is going on in a hedgehog's mind, but if you literally get down on ground level you will start to notice the obstacles that human beings put in the way of hedgehogs – roads they cannot cross, borders cleansed of plant life with agro-toxins, litter that collars and kills them, and gardens given over to car ports, decking and patios. In this sense, cognitive empathy is a transferable skill that can expand our concern for the environment.<sup>91</sup>

- *Empathy can create the common values and solidarity that make us care about the environment*

Successful environmental campaigning requires making people not just care about nature for its own sake but making them care about how environmental degradation will impact on human populations. This is where human-to-human empathy is important. With respect to an issue like climate change, for example, emphasising how it is affecting or will affect human lives is a key mobilization strategy: in general, we respond empathically more to the suffering of other people than polar bears. Similarly, if we want to do something about declining bee populations we need not only to care about the bees themselves, but about the impact that their decimation may have on human beings – such as the way global food production might be affected by a chronic decline in pollination. Empathy also matters when the focus is on preserving nature as something that is intrinsically valuable, from an endangered species to a particular patch of forest. Why? Because empathy can help forge the human solidarity that drives social

movements on these issues. Empathy serves to unite people in a common cause: we connect with others who care about the same things as we do.

### 5.3 Power, inequality and institutions

#### **How effective can empathy campaigning and interventions be, given the entrenched power of political and business elites, and in conditions of growing inequality?**

Empathy campaigns and interventions, like all forms of campaigning and activism, must face the realities of power and elites whose interests they challenge. International negotiators on climate change will put short-term national economic interests before the interests of future generations; governments may block efforts to integrate empathy education into school curriculums, corporations and advertising agencies are in the business of expanding a consumer culture that emphasizes extrinsic over intrinsic values, and wealth inequalities widen the social distance between rich and poor and reduce the possibilities for empathy. Moreover, we know that the people at the top of powerful institutions are often those most lacking in empathy, having been driven by self-interested ambition to rise through the ranks (think Dick Fuld, former CEO of Lehman Brothers). None of this should surprise us. As Daniel Goleman writes, 'a growing body of recent research shows that people with the most social power pay scant attention to those with little power.'<sup>92</sup> The question is whether empathy can help resist and overcome such obstacles.

An initial point to note is that throughout history, as I have sought to stress in this paper, empathy has been used as a tool to challenge elite power and inequality. The anti-slavery campaigners of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were challenging slave traders and sugar companies who made their fortunes from buying and selling human beings. Since the nineteenth century, the international trade union movement has drawn on empathic solidarity to confront employer power and demand better wages and working conditions. Today, empathy is fuelling grass roots movements that challenge elites. During the Arab Spring, social networking platforms like Facebook and Yfrog were used to spread images of state brutality, rousing both anger and empathy, and helping spark street protests around the world. Social commentator Jeremy Rifkin described the use of such technologies as 'the beginning of an empathic civilization'.<sup>93</sup> Empathy is also at the forefront of global anti-poverty campaigns like Live Below The Line. More generally, as thinkers such as George Lakoff have pointed out, empathy is one of the primary reasons that we actually care about inequality and injustice – without it, we would be largely insensitive to other people's suffering and hardships.

At the same time as using empathy to create grass-roots change from below, we can also attempt change from above by introducing empathic thinking into both business and government. The purpose would be to kickstart deep changes in institutional cultures that, at present, are primarily organized around competition, hierarchy and the pursuit of narrow self-interest rather than more empathic and cooperative principles. How?

With respect to business, in the last few years there has been the rise of a popular new concept: 'empathy marketing'. This involves training employees – especially sales people – to get better at understanding the perspectives of their clients and customers. But this is little more than stepping into other people's shoes in order to sell them another pair, whether the product is a car or a hamburger. There is little that is progressive about empathy marketing, and its

popularity reveals the way that the various skills of emotional intelligence are open to potential abuse.<sup>94</sup> Instead, the focus should be on making the case that empathy is a tool to improve internal functioning in firms (or any organization), especially cooperation, teamwork and leadership. What might this look like in practice?

- *Empathy training for corporate board members*

Training employees in empathy skills is already common in many companies: affective empathy has been shown to improve teamwork through raising emotional attunement, and cognitive empathy is recognized as a source of innovation, helping people see new perspectives on problems.<sup>95</sup> This kind of training needs to occur at the apex of corporations to maximize the possibilities for internal cultural change. It can complement other approaches to transforming corporate culture, such as having employee, community and other representatives (e.g. future generation representatives) sit on boards.<sup>96</sup>

- *Empathy tests in recruitment processes*

Again, some companies are already integrating empathy tests into job recruitment psychological assessments. They increasingly realize that they need employees who don't just have technical skills, but who are emotionally intelligent, displaying relationship skills such as empathy. This is seen to be of growing importance especially amongst global firms in which employees have to work with people of many cultures. Here it is particularly important to influence the human resources profession. Amongst the best tests is the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test developed by the Cambridge University neuropsychologist Simon Baron-Cohen.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, we should beware of firms promoting emotional intelligence for manipulative or purely instrumental ends.

- *Empathy courses in higher education: Master of Empathy Studies*

For a more profound, long-term impact on corporate culture, universities could be offering empathy modules to students, which introduce them to the many facets of empathy research: neuroscience, evolutionary biology, sociology, history, politics and psychology. This should be complemented with experiential empathy training. For instance, business school students could do placements working with non-profit organisations, social enterprises and cooperatives that offer alternatives to standard corporate culture. Empathy education could be offered as a complete degree programme – a Master of Empathy Studies (MES) – a twenty-first century alternative to the MBA.

What about in government? Similar to the idea of empathy training for corporate board members, empathy courses could also be given to key government officials, such as international climate change negotiators. There is nothing particularly unusual in this, in the sense that government employees in many areas already do empathy training, including health professionals such as doctors and nurses, social workers and judges.<sup>98</sup> Ideally, this training should get beyond the classroom and involve conversational and experiential encounters, building on learning from programmes such as the World Bank's Immersion Programme, which has sent executives and economists (often with neoclassical economic training) to live for short

periods with families in developing countries.<sup>99</sup> It is important that such programmes are designed to maximize empathic learning rather than become instances of little more than voyeuristic poverty tourism. The personal and family nature of such experiences makes them real and counters voyeurism.

Finally, we should not be afraid of trying to empathise with those in power – indeed, it is essential to do so. It is tempting to reserve our empathy for the poor and the marginalized, the neglected and powerless. But if we do not attempt to cognitively step into the shoes of political and economic elites, we will lose opportunities for understanding their mind-sets and motivations. Putting this into practice can be challenging. On a personal level, for my doctoral research I spent several years interviewing members of Guatemala's economic elite about their views on poverty, violence and political change, in the aftermath of the country's 36-year civil war. It was difficult and psychologically confronting to step into the shoes of people who were not only extraordinarily wealthy (with their own private planes) but who often held racist views of the indigenous Mayan population, and who had funded paramilitary death squads during the war. It was also enormously worthwhile. The act of empathising does not mean you have to agree with somebody's views. But the result of trying to empathise with people who you may disagree with, or even despise – whether oil company executives or intransigent government officials – is a useful education, making us more informed about their worldviews (and our own), and wiser about strategies of change that will work.<sup>100</sup>

## **6. Conclusion: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Empathy Agenda**

Ultimately, creating a society where we care more about issues that matter collectively to all of us – from wealth inequality to environmental collapse – is about shifting our values. As George Monbiot argues, we need to 'stop seeking to bury our values and instead explain and champion them'.<sup>101</sup> And it is empathy that lies at the foundation of collective values. It's what can take us from a self-interest culture where we are constantly asking 'what's in it for me?' to a common interest frame of thinking where the natural question becomes, 'what difference might this make to us?' By harnessing the power of empathy, we can tip the scales from extrinsic to intrinsic values.

Yet there are no quick-fix solutions for shifting value systems. We know this from the history of the rise of neoliberalism. The key figures behind the emergence of neoliberal ideology took the long view, laying deep foundations for a cultural shift that would spread free market fundamentalism into universities and think tanks, business and political organisations, and media and public policy circles. It spread via institutions like the Mont Pelerin Society, founded in 1947 by thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and Milton Friedman. It grew out of long-term support given since the 1960s by the Koch brothers for libertarian think tanks including the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute. Thatcherism and Reaganomics did not emerge in the 1980s through spontaneous generation, but were rather based on a decades-long process of 'deep lobbying' that forged free market thinking as a powerful value system.<sup>102</sup>

So when it comes to challenging such individualist paradigms, and reversing the long trend of empathic decline evident over the past thirty years, organisations in civil society working on human rights, and social and environmental justice issues, need to get beyond short-term

strategies. It won't be a one-off viral video (remember Kony?) or a spectacular media coup – or even a five-year plan – that will shift us from a culture of buying to a culture of belonging, from extrinsic to intrinsic values. Fundamental change is most likely to occur through a long term vision and strategy with a generational time span, and which has amongst its key aims to create a more empathic civilisation.

This paper has argued that NGOs and campaigners could pursue two key long-term strategies to create this deep cultural shift from 'me' to 'we':

- Promote empathy education in schools through programmes like Roots of Empathy, which can help create the next generation of political and environmental activists, and forge intercultural understanding that counters tendencies of 'self sorting' and social segregation.
- Put The Empathy-Community Circle model of change into practice by supporting community engagement that uses face-to-face contact to build trust across social divides and reinforce collective identities, such as involvement in the sharing economy and anarchist-based social organisations.

At the same time, civil society organisations could:

- Develop inventive empathy-based campaigns to mobilise people on specific issues (such as labour rights, gender inequality, climate change or biodiversity loss) using experiential, conversational, and cultural empathy, modelled on examples like the Hello Peace Telephone Line or Dialogue in the Dark
- Consider developing an empathic campaigning strategy by appointing 'empathy strategists' who can analyse best practice, draw out lessons for change, and use an empathic approach to design powerful campaigns
- Be strategic about their use of digital technology in empathy campaigning, for instance by: promoting face-to-face encounters across cultural divides that avoid anonymity and create sustained online personal interaction on a mass scale; supporting development of social networking technologies designed specifically to connect people from different social backgrounds rather than reinforcing 'in-group' interactions
- Influence the institutional culture of political and business elites through empathy training for corporate executives and government officials (including international negotiators), introducing empathy testing in recruitment processes, and empathy modules in higher education
- Facilitate 'small group dialogues' at the global, regional and sub-regional levels between the most responsible and most affected on issues such as environmental degradation to foster conversational empathy between opposing negotiating sides and put 'contact theory' into practice, in order to help seed just outcomes<sup>103</sup>
- Generate concern for both people and planet by promoting empathy with future generations, using empathy skills to connect with nature, and drawing on empathy to forge the solidarity required to power grass-roots environmental action.

## The Empathy Effect by Roman Krznaric

Throughout this paper I have endeavoured to be realistic rather than utopian, raising challenges alongside opportunities. It is clear that empathy isn't a magic solution to all the pressing social, political and environmental problems we face. Nor should empathy be seen as an isolated guide determining the goals of our interventions. Rather, it has to be seen as part of a mosaic of strategies that can sit alongside or help deepen other approaches, from direct action to political lobbying, from challenging corporate power to supporting development of new technologies.

Nevertheless, the empathy initiatives above are an essential strategy to kickstart and underpin a cultural shift from the damaging hyperindividualism that has plagued the 20<sup>th</sup> century towards a greater emphasis on collective identities and values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Creating this shift is our greatest hope for forging more just societies and preserving the global commons. The Empathy Revolution begins now.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an interdisciplinary analysis of how change happens, and where empathy approaches fit in, see Krznaric (2007, 5-28).

<sup>2</sup> Krznaric 2014, x.

<sup>3</sup> Baron-Cohen 2011, 29-64; Krznaric 2014, xvi. The science of empathy is discussed further below.

<sup>4</sup> Goleman 1996, Chapter 7.

<sup>5</sup> Konrath et al 2011. I will discuss empathy measures in more detail below.

<sup>6</sup> Crompton 2010, 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Crompton (2010, 47-9) on the importance of promoting a common-interest frame relative to a self-interest frame of thinking. He points out that the common-interest frame 'will resonate with the empathic tendencies in human beings'. Frames, according to cognitive linguist George Lakoff, are structures in our minds that shape the way we look at the world. They are buried deep in our cognitive unconscious and influence 'the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions' (Lakoff 2005, xv, 3). Frames are similar to what the German sociologist Karl Mannheim called our *Weltanschauung* or worldview, or what the French cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu called the *habitus*.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-lakoff/empathy-sotomayor-and-dem\\_b\\_209406.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-lakoff/empathy-sotomayor-and-dem_b_209406.html)

<sup>9</sup> Marshall 2014. See also George Monbiot: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cif-green/2010/oct/11/left-values-progressive-self-interest>.

<sup>10</sup> Kasser 2012, 1-2; Kasser 2011. A good summary of Kasser's argument appears in his video, The High Price of Materialism: 'Scientists have found that materialistic values and pro-social values are like a see-saw. As materialistic values go up, pro-social values tend to go down. This helps explain why people act in less empathic, generous and cooperative ways when money is on their minds. When people are under the sway of materialism they also focus less on caring for the earth. The same type of see-saw is at work here. As materialistic values go up, concern for nature tends to go down.'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGab38pKscw>

<sup>11</sup> McLaren and Childs 2013, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Smith 1976, Chapter 1.

<sup>13</sup> Krznaric 2014, 9-11.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/01/signing-off/266925/>

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Krznaric (2014, 19).

<sup>16</sup> Baron-Cohen 2011, 19, 26-27

<sup>17</sup> Rifkin 2010, 78.

<sup>18</sup> Gerhardt 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Baron-Cohen 2011, 87, 118; Klimecki et al 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Batson et al 1997, 508; Batson 2011, 121-138.

<sup>21</sup> Schultz 2000, 400; Berenguer 2007; Batson 2011, 179.

<sup>22</sup> For some critiques of empathy measures see:

<http://www.romankrznaric.com/outrospection/2010/01/30/359>

<sup>23</sup> Baron-Cohen 2011, 29-64; Krznaric 2014, xvi.

<sup>24</sup> Baron-Cohen 2011, 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> People rate themselves on a five-point scale, responding to statements such as 'I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look for their perspective'. Konrath 2013, in press.

<sup>26</sup> Konrath, O'Brien and Hsing 2011, 186-188.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/53523.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Baron-Cohen 2011, 15-16, Konrath 2013 in press.

<sup>29</sup> Kraus, Cote and Keltner 2010; <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-wealth-reduces-compassion/>; <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-empathy-gap/201111/we-are-the-99>;

[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/05/rich-people-just-care-less/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/05/rich-people-just-care-less/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0).

<sup>30</sup> James 2013, 3.

- <sup>31</sup> <http://www.polipsych.com/2010/02/12/a-difference-between-democrats-and-republicans-the-effects-of-empathy-on-political-interest/>
- <sup>32</sup> <https://www.teenlife.com/blogs/articles/gap-year-programs-teach-higher-order-empathy>
- <sup>33</sup> Rifkin 2010, 10; Hunt 2007, 32-40.
- <sup>34</sup> Bloom 2013.
- <sup>35</sup> Taylor 2010, 16.
- <sup>36</sup> Hochschild 2006, 5, 222, 366.
- <sup>37</sup> Krznaric 2014, 170-175.
- <sup>38</sup> For further discussion of the complex relationship between empathy and the use of violence, see Krznaric (2014, 83-89).
- <sup>39</sup> On the Belfast dock strike, see Gray (1985). For further detail on the empathic underpinnings of trade unionism, see Leeson (1979).
- <sup>40</sup> Rifkin 2009, 467.
- <sup>41</sup> This relates to Robyn Eckersley's ideas on 'inclusive minilateralism'. See [http://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/protecting\\_the\\_global\\_commons.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/protecting_the_global_commons.pdf)
- <sup>42</sup> Krznaric 2014, 188-189.
- <sup>43</sup> Batson 2011, 179. The explicit empathy aims of the programme are detailed here: <http://www.labenevolencija.org/rwanda/la-benevolencija-in-rwanda/>
- <sup>44</sup> [http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/files-dse-did/DID\\_2013\\_04\\_Social\\_impact\\_results\\_2012.pdf](http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/files-dse-did/DID_2013_04_Social_impact_results_2012.pdf); [http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/files-dse-did/DiD\\_Backgrounder\\_General\\_2011\\_09\\_074\\_3.pdf](http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/files-dse-did/DiD_Backgrounder_General_2011_09_074_3.pdf)
- <sup>45</sup> <https://www.livebelowtheline.com/uk>
- <sup>46</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBQ-1oHfimQ>
- <sup>47</sup> Chatfield 2013, 134.
- <sup>48</sup> <http://www.oras.com/en/consumer/NewsEvents/Pages/KlimaX%E2%80%93AnexhibitionaboutclimatechangeandglobalwarmingattheFinnishScienceCentreHeureka.aspx>; [http://www.exhibitfiles.org/klima\\_x5](http://www.exhibitfiles.org/klima_x5)
- <sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=od17pQFyjs0>
- <sup>50</sup> Marshall 2014.
- <sup>51</sup> Crompton and Kasser 2009.
- <sup>52</sup> Hobsbawm 1983, 1; Krznaric 2011, 236-7.
- <sup>53</sup> These empathy education programmes are extensively documented in Krznaric (2008). The first children exposed to them in the US have yet to reach college age, so such programmes cannot yet be expected to impact on the reported declines in empathy amongst college students.
- <sup>54</sup> [http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/5587656/roots\\_of\\_empathy\\_report.pdf](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/5587656/roots_of_empathy_report.pdf); Krznaric 2014, 31.
- <sup>55</sup> Krznaric 2008, 25-28; <http://www.isa.nl/Alumni/Voices2000/exemplaryservice.html>
- <sup>56</sup> <http://www.aare.edu.au/publications-database.php/8535/the-impact-of-the-pyp-in-australian-ib-schools>
- <sup>57</sup> <https://www.uwcsea.edu.sg/learning/service>
- <sup>58</sup> Krznaric 2008, 34-38.
- <sup>59</sup> Krznaric 2008, 29-31; <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/climate-chaos>
- <sup>60</sup> Gordon 2005, xvi-xvii; <http://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/lennon-flowers/roots-of-empathy-interview-with-mary-gordon>
- <sup>61</sup> <https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=1176>
- <sup>62</sup> Pettigrew 2006, 752-753, 757, 766. The Empathy-Community Circle has also been inspired by Rebecca Solnit's work on the way that empathy between people of different backgrounds emerges at the community level in disaster situations, such as in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Solnit 2010). For further work on contact theory, especially how contact can reduce prejudices not just between participant groups but amongst wider 'onlooker' populations, see Christ et al (2014).
- <sup>63</sup> See Agyeman, McLaren and Schaefer-Borrego (2013, 9-13, 17, 27) on the potential of the sharing economy for transforming cities, challenging individualism, building social trust and creating empathy. They suggest that 'a sharing culture offers the potential to build greater empathy and solidarity between rich and poor neighbourhoods, rich and poor cities, and the rich and poor worlds' (2013, 28).
- <sup>64</sup> <http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/home/local-food-project/growing-trends/615-land-sharing-schemes#Landshare>; see also Rachel Botsman's TEDx Sydney talk, 'The Case for Collaborative Consumption' at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQa3kUJPEko>
- <sup>65</sup> Rifkin 2014, 226. See also discussion of the 'peak car' phenomenon in Cohen (2014).
- <sup>66</sup> Ward 1973; Ward 2004, 73, 89; Scott 2012.

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- <sup>67</sup> In a research paper for Friends of the Earth, Agyeman, McLaren and Schaefer-Borrego (2013, 4) point out that 'sharing on the margins of legality, such as squatting, is a feature of sharing systems motivated by equality and justice'.
- <sup>68</sup> Krznaric 2014, 108-9. For further details on Human Libraries, see [www.empathymuseum.com](http://www.empathymuseum.com), a project I am leading to expand empathy in cultural and community life.
- <sup>69</sup> <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/325/5939/419.short>. See also Rifkin (2014, 159).
- <sup>70</sup> Dobson 2011.
- <sup>71</sup> Krznaric 2014, 96-98.
- <sup>72</sup> Kasser 2012.
- <sup>73</sup> Krznaric 2011, 91.
- <sup>74</sup> Bloom 2013.
- <sup>75</sup> Krznaric 2014, 155-165.
- <sup>76</sup> Research by Joseph Kahne cited by Thompson (2013, 263)
- <sup>77</sup> [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-05-15/news/ct-seniors-teach-brazilian-kids-english-20140515-56\\_1\\_retirement-community-chicago-bears-seniors](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-05-15/news/ct-seniors-teach-brazilian-kids-english-20140515-56_1_retirement-community-chicago-bears-seniors)
- <sup>78</sup> Oxford Martin Commission 2013, 45-6.
- <sup>79</sup> Pahl et al 2014, 2.
- <sup>80</sup> Pahl et al 2014, 9.
- <sup>81</sup> Oxford Martin Commission (2013, 7, 61). See also, for example, William Nordhaus's critique of the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, which he argued set the discount rate too low. [http://www.econ.yale.edu/~nordhaus/homepage/documents/Nordhaus\\_stern\\_jel.pdf](http://www.econ.yale.edu/~nordhaus/homepage/documents/Nordhaus_stern_jel.pdf)
- <sup>82</sup> Krznaric 2014, 193-5; Krznaric 2011, 120-2.
- <sup>83</sup> Krznaric 2014, 45.
- <sup>84</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>
- <sup>85</sup> Although anonymity also has important benefits for free speech and particularly for activism in oppressive societies.
- <sup>86</sup> For detailed discussion of these technology issues, see Krznaric (2014, 155-165).
- <sup>87</sup> Bourke 2011, 174.
- <sup>88</sup> Some deep ecologists and ecopsychologists disagree, and claim we can empathise with a forest or a lake (Bragg 1996, 95-6).
- <sup>89</sup> Wilson 1984, 1; Barbiero 2011, 13.
- <sup>90</sup> <http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/mh012010presentl.pdf>; Krznaric (2011, 212-219).
- <sup>91</sup> For further discussion, see my interview with Hugh Warwick: <http://www.romankrznaric.com/outrospection/2010/04/10/422>. See also Schultz (2000, 403) on how perspective-taking can expand environmental concern.
- <sup>92</sup> [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/05/rich-people-just-care-less/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/05/rich-people-just-care-less/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)
- <sup>93</sup> Rifkin quoted in Gabbay (2012).
- <sup>94</sup> Empathy marketing links strongly to the way many companies are trying to build (instrumental) 'brand communities' bringing together their customers or users. Victoria Hurth and her colleagues explore how responsible marketing might be developed in a companion paper in the Big Ideas series.
- <sup>95</sup> Patnaik 2009.
- <sup>96</sup> Thanks to Mike Childs for sharing his thinking on this.
- <sup>97</sup> <http://www.questionwritertracker.com/quiz/61/Z4MK3TKB.html>
- <sup>98</sup> I have myself been involved in giving empathy training courses to UK Employment Tribunal judges.
- <sup>99</sup> <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:20020087~menuPK:34459~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html>
- <sup>100</sup> Krznaric 2014, 65-67.
- <sup>101</sup> Monbiot is also explicit about the importance of empathy: 'People with strong intrinsic values must cease to be embarrassed by them. We should argue for the policies we want not on the grounds of expediency but on the grounds that they are empathetic and kind; and against others on the grounds that they are selfish and cruel. In asserting our values we become the change we want to see.' <http://www.monbiot.com/2010/10/11/the-values-of-everything/>

<sup>102</sup> On the influence of the Koch brothers, see for instance

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/jun/19/billionaire-brothers-take-us/>

<sup>103</sup> This 'inclusive minilateralism' is one of the ideas at the heart of Friends of the Earth's *Big Ideas Project* to help sustainably manage our global commons.

[http://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/protecting\\_the\\_global\\_commons.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/protecting_the_global_commons.pdf)