

RA- Weiss Empathy - Overrated?

To become stronger, better, faster and more competitive athletes, we need to work out and practice. We need to exercise. We need to stretch, sweat and push our way out of our comfort zones to achieve a higher level of skill and performance.

But what about the muscles needed to be an empathetically fit human being? How do we exercise those? And how do we create opportunities for greater compassion and empathy in our world?

Have you ever gone to visit a person or a place and left feeling refreshed for one reason or another? Maybe it was the beauty of the encounter or, perhaps, the exact opposite of that. Maybe its harshness offered you the chance to think about how people find the strength to persevere. Or maybe you read a story, listened to a song or viewed a documentary that ignited your thinking about the plight of another person, someone different from you. The ideas and questioning that come from life experiences like this can lead to the development of empathy.

Key Questions

- What responsibility do we have to try to empathize with others who are different from us? Is it even possible to truly do so?
- Can empathy make the world a better place? Or, is empathy overrated?

Part 1: Two different perspectives (readings on webpage)

1. **Nikolas Kristof - Pro Empathy**
2. **Paul Bloom - Against Empathy**
 - a. <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/474588/why-empathy-is-a-bad-thing/>

Is Empathy Overrated?

Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychologist, tells Mr. Kristof, “Probably the biggest empathy generator is cuteness: paedomorphic features such as large eyes, a large head, and a small lower face. Professional empathy entrepreneurs have long known this, of course, which is why so many charities feature photos of children and why so many conservation organizations feature pandas. Prettier children are more likely to be adopted, and baby-faced defendants get lighter sentences.”

Paul Bloom agrees with this point about empathy: “It is subject to bias — both laboratory studies and anecdotal experiences show that empathy flows most for those who look like us, who are attractive and who are nonthreatening and familiar.”

If empathy is inherently swayed by bias, is it therefore overrated as a skill to possess and nurture?

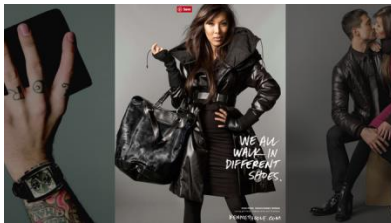
Mr. Bloom argues that it is. He makes the case that what we need is a combination of rationality and compassion to be good people.

“When we appreciate that skin color does not determine who we should care about, for example, or that a crisis such as climate change has great significance — even though it is an abstract threat — we are transcending empathy. A good policy maker makes decisions using reason, aspiring toward the sort of fairness and impartiality empathy doesn’t provide.”

Directions: Please read their articles available on www.mrweissushistory.weebly.com and write an agree / disagree Socratic response to each as well as 4 questions that you would want to ask the class in regards to the topic. (250-500 words for each)

Part 2: Consider Empathy in Advertising

Photo



Famous for his provocative advertising campaigns, Kenneth Cole introduced a series of ads in 2008 that served as a bold message about the power of empathy.

DOVE COMMERCIALS:

Beauty

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DdM-4siaQw>

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

Fatherhood

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoqWo3SI73c>

- Do you support the use of images in advertising that make for a highly emotional experience? Or, is it manipulative for companies to try to use empathy to sell products?
- Name some examples of groups, companies or products that you think have been successful in eliciting an emotional response from viewers. Can you name any that may have crossed a line?