

WE ARE BUILT TO BE KIND

One of the hardest questions when you think about the evolution of the human species from the standard framework of evolution which really is about individual survival, competing, getting your genes to the next generations. One of the hardest questions within that framework is “Why are people so frequently, and routinely good? And generous? And sacrificing?”

And you know most people think that Darwin had this idea of Survival of the fittest that really is the most ruthless and bloodthirsty to thrive and survive. That is not Darwin’s view of human evolution at all. He really felt that sympathy is the strongest instinct that humans have.

“Communities that have the most sympathetic members would flourish and raise the greatest number of offspring.”

That notion of Darwin led to this sense that out of the vulnerability of our offspring emerged, first of all, social structures like cooperative care giving, and then also physiological systems shaped the evolution and helped us take care of the carriers of our genes, our offsprings.

Wired to Care

We have learned from neuroscience down at UCLA that if you feel physical pain, a part of your brain lights up. And if I see you have that physical pain, the same part of my brain lights up. It’s as if we’re wired to have the same experience as other people.

Empathy is this really complicated task. It really engages the frontal lobe, these newer regions of the cortex that are involved in more complex, symbolic processes like language and imagining the future. Because empathy requires that you think there is someone else out there who has feelings and thoughts that may be different from mine. That’s a really complicated cognitive achievement.

In my lab, the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab, we showed images of prototypical suffering to our participants. They trigger massively powerful reactions of compassion.

And what we found in the brain is that a very old part of the brain, called the periaqueductal grey which is common in mammals when they take care of things, lights up when you feel compassion. So that tells us, compassion is really “old” in the nervous system as Darwin speculated.

Empathy deficits

My students and I got really interested in social class. What does it do to the human mind?

Our lab and other labs are interested in something called the vagus nerve, it’s the longest bundle of nerves in the human nervous system. In our research, compassion, the feeling of

caring for someone in need, activates the vagus nerve. Lower class individuals, if we show them images of suffering, they have a vagus nerve response. You don't see that in upper class individuals. It literally is a compassion deficit that's produced by lots of wealth.

Next set of studies on charity. Who gives? Economic analysis would say, if I had a lot of money, it should be easy to give. If I have 900 bucks in my bank account, giving away money is, it really matters, you know, what you put in your fridge. And in spite of that, what we find is lower class individuals give more. And this was replicated in studies of philanthropy.

You know one of the things that this science tells us is there is enormous strength in these poor communities, of generosity, and empathy, that you know, many people in more privileged circumstances miss. It's strong community.

Redefining self interest

Yeah you know, 60% of what we do is really about maximizing an individual's personal gratification, desire, it's the classic survival of the most competitive. But 40% of the time, we're really doing things for other people. And we sacrifice, and we risk exploitation, and we still do it. And not only that, but it actually becomes personally fulfilling and inspiring to engage in that work. We find these secondary delight in acting on behalf of others. And it really requires that we have to redefine human self interest.

You know, the great ethical traditions have always been exploring this, and now we see the science that yeah, the brain really cares about other people.