Second Thoughts About Community and "Empathy"

By Alfie Kohn

We're too quick to ascribe neutrality to things that actually aren't neutral at all. Standardized tests, for example, don't provide anything like an objective "snapshot" of teaching and learning. Not only are they best at measuring relatively trivial intellectual capabilities, but administering them influences what gets taught, thereby distorting the results and corrupting the measure.[1] Similarly, the idea that technology in itself is neither good nor bad — "everything depends on how it's used" — is nothing more than a convenient fiction. Methods leave an imprint on goals, and tech in particular has a powerful causal impact.[2]

I've been making these sorts of arguments for a long time. But now I want to turn this critique on its head by asking whether, in other cases, we may be too quick to ascribe *positive* value to things that aren't necessarily good.[3]

Consider cooperation. Many of us (and I include myself here) are apt to endorse the idea of working together, not only because it's effective for accomplishing many goals but also because it just seems, well, more desirable than doing stuff

by yourself. And even lovelier than collaborating on a specific task is feeling part of a "community." But along come spoilsport questions like "Wait, working together toward what goal?" or "But what does your community stand for?" When one author lauded the kind of individual who "willingly subjects his own ego to the life of the community," it seems important to point out that that author was Adolf Hitler.[4]

"The problem is that communities often act like bloated individuals," observed educational theorist Nel Noddings. The ends they pursue so energetically can be appalling just as surely as they can be commendable.[5] Moreover, communities sometimes coalesce around disparaging and dehumanizing the members of *other* communities, with out-groups defined as enemies. This is particularly likely to happen, according to recent research, if a given nation or religion, say, comes to regard itself as exceptional and superior, a phenomenon that has been dubbed "collective narcissism."

It doesn't take long to spot a connection to education. An initiative called the Child Development Project (CDP)[6] worked on turning individual classrooms (as well as whole schools) into "caring communities." Its creators fleshed out the details of that concept, implemented it in a number of districts, and designed research to assess the effectiveness of their efforts. One of their findings was particularly intriguing: Students who said their classrooms felt like communities scored higher on measures of moral sophistication, but only in environments that "encouraged more active student influence and self-direction." In other (non-CDP) schools, which tended to be more traditionally teacher-directed, with an emphasis on getting students to do what they were told, a perception of community was associated with *lower* levels of moral reasoning.[7]

Apparently, community becomes a potential force for good only

if each member feels valued as an individual and participates as a decision maker. For Noddings, meanwhile, the ingredient that needs to be present to "keep [a community's] darker propensities from emerging" is *care*.[8] Similarly, for the philosopher Martin Buber, a community (by definition) not only affirms individuals but also supports meaningful relationships among them. Otherwise, he said, we're talking not about a community at all but a mere "collective" whose members are only parts of a group — and that's where we get into trouble.[9] Whether we call the latter a collective or a debased version of community, though, the point is that cooperation and commitment to a group can go very wrong.

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My second example of something that can turn out to be less than desirable is "perspective taking," which means imagining how someone else thinks about, feels in response to, or literally sees the world. (Many people refer to this as empathy, which is why that more familiar word appears in the title of this essay. It sits between quotation marks, however, because empathy is actually something else. It refers to *feeling* other people's emotions along with them — an affective, rather than cognitive or imaginative, act.) The ability and willingness to see things from someone else's point of view is the opposite of egocentricity, and it can foster a sense of connection to others as well as an inclination to help them.

As with community, however, we shouldn't just assume that perspective taking is always beneficial. First of all, it's often done poorly and unsuccessfully. One series of studies "found no evidence that the cognitive effort of imagining oneself in another person's shoes… increases a person's ability to accurately understand another's mind."[10]

Second, and more important, it can be put to dubious ends.

When early researchers set out to gauge a child's skill at perspective-taking, they often did so in the context of a competitive task. These studies provided measures of recursive thinking employed in the service of deviousness: If you're trying to outsmart an opponent at a game, can you figure out that he's expecting you to make a certain move (and that he expects you to expect him to make it), and then devise a strategy in light of this? Trying to outwit someone so you can defeat him is obviously not going to generate generosity, nor does it suggest a commitment to understanding others for its own sake. Not surprisingly, then, just as community in the context of compliance can retard moral development, it turns out that perspective taking in the context of competition often leads people to act more unethically than those who don't engage in perspective taking.[11]

It's not a huge leap from competition to cruelty or outright sociopathy. If you can adopt someone's point of view for the purpose of triumphing over her in a contest, you can surely do so for the purpose of cold-blooded manipulation or sadism. As the psychologist Paul Bloom points out, perspective taking is useful, even necessary, "if you want to ruin somebody's life, if you want to seduce them or con them or torture them." Researchers have discovered that a few variables (beyond the presence or absence of competition) help to predict whether perspective taking will be constructive. These include whether the people attempting it feel threatened, how positively they feel about themselves, and how similar or different they are from the person whose perspective they're trying to adopt.[12]

So if perspective taking is more problematic than it first appears, what about empathy? Bad news again, but for a different reason. Empathy is an emotional state that mirrors someone else's, but it often references one's own memories or feelings. Seeing you start to cry makes me weepy, too, but I may be engaging in what the psychologist Martin Hoffman memorably called "egoistic drift": It looks as if I'm feeling

your pain, but I'm really feeling my own, which you just triggered.[13]

As I've argued elsewhere,[14] however, perspective taking (imagining the feelings or thoughts of the other) can compensate for what's missing in empathy (sharing the other's feelings), and vice versa. If my mind captures your world *and* my heart vibrates with its emotional impact, I am on your side and will likely try to help. But either alone is not nearly as promising as we tend to assume.

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A final thought. Normally, to argue that something can be good *or* bad is to imply that we need to consider the uses to which it's put. But one theorist invites us to look instead at the psychological dynamics involved — in other words, not at what we do with it but where it came from. Andras Angyal, a mid-twentieth-century psychologist, proposed a theory of "universal ambiguity," which holds that a healthy personality system and a neurotic personality system coexist in all of us, and any specific attribute can be claimed by either of those systems.[15]

Examples? Suppose I spend time reflecting on my limits and faults. This can be healthy or neurotic; it can suggest admirable modesty or gnawing self-doubt. Likewise, if I connect easily with other people, that can suggest appealing friendliness….or a desperate need to be liked (or, perhaps, an attempt to ingratiate myself in order to get my way). From one vantage point, someone can appear to have strong moral principles; from another angle, he's rigid and arrogant. There's a thin line between flexibility and indecisiveness, between persistence ("grit") and compulsiveness, between alertness and anxious vigilance. And so on.

To make sense of a characteristic's psychological status —

whether it's healthy or unhealthy — we need to look at what gave rise to it. To make sense of its moral status — whether it's good or bad — we need to look at what it's being used for. And in certain cases — say, the passion and energy with which people apply themselves to accomplishing tasks — both tests might make sense.

The conclusion is that focusing just on what's happening at the moment, or just on what's happening on the surface (that is, looking only at observable behaviors), isn't enough. When we pay closer attention, even some things that we're inclined to cheer may prove to be a lot more complicated than they seemed at first glance.

NOTES

1. This is true partly because values are implicit in the process of deciding what and how to assess, and partly because whenever we attempt to *measure* the quality of an activity, the very act of reducing it to numbers limits or warps what we're measuring. But standardized tests in particular are also problematic because of how they ignore intellectual proficiencies that don't lend themselves to standardized (one-size-fits-all) evaluation. And the damage is further compounded by specific features of many such tests, such as multiple-choice questions (whose purpose is to trick students into choosing a not-quite-right response), time limits (which privilege speed over understanding), and the construction of tests for the purpose of comparing students (rather than applying a set of criteria that everyone, in theory, could master). My book on this topic, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* (Heinemann, 2000) is one of many that shows how such tests are objectionable not merely because of how they're used but also because of how they're designed.

2. For more on this point, see Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Penguin, 1985/2005) and Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* (Norton, 2010). For a discussion of how artificial intelligence in particular not only predicts our actions but comes to cause them, see Jacob Ward's *The Loop* (Hachette, 2002).

3. One example that I've addressed elsewhere, and therefore won't bother to talk about here, is gratitude.

4. That passage from *Mein Kampf*, which praises Aryans for being exceptionally community minded, was cited by Nel Noddings in a sobering and thoughtful essay: "On Community," *Educational Theory* 46 (Summer 1996): 245-67.

5. Consider, for example, the research literature showing that "collaborating with others fosters trust, builds strong relationships, and helps individuals achieve complex goals they cannot achieve alone" but "also can be a fertile ground for dishonesty" given that "people lie more when collaborating than when working alone, and in collaborative settings, dishonesty is contagious" (Margarita Leib et al., "Collaborative Dishonesty: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Psychological Bulletin* 147 (2021), p. 1241; citations omitted). One journalist, meanwhile, supplied a more specific and recent example of the dark side of community: "It's hard to imagine more antisocial behavior than attempting to undo a democratic election with mayhem and violence. But the [January 6] insurrectionists were doing it together, and pretty joyously, it seemed" – a reminder that "community, a powerful tool for solving our most intractable problems, can be a powerful incubator and accelerant of problems, too."

6. For more about the CDP, see the last section of my article "Caring Kids: The Role of the Schools" (*Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1991) or chapter 6 in *The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life* (Basic Books, 1990).

7. Daniel Solomon et al., "Creating Classrooms that Students Experience as Communities," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 24 (1996), pp. 742-43; and Victor Battistich et al., "Caring School Communities," *Educational Psychologist* 32 (1997), p. 139. A famous man once recalled being taught that his "highest duty was to help those in need," but he added that this lesson was learned in the context of how important it was to "obey promptly the wishes and commands of [his] parents, teachers, and priests, and indeed of all adults." The man who said *that* wasn't Hitler, but it was someone close to him: Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz. Thus, having a strong moral code (and a commitment to the value of generosity) is no more reassuring in itself than is an endorsement of community, particularly if it's accompanied by an emphasis on obedience to authority. This fact alone warrants a radical rethinking of the practices referred to collectively as "classroom management."

8. Noddings, op. cit., p. 265. For more, see her books *Caring* (University of California Press, 1984) and *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (Teachers College Press, 1992).

9. See, for example, Buber's *Between Man and Man* (Macmillan, 1965) and *The Knowledge of Man* (Harper, 1965). For educators, then, the challenge is to support students in developing a genuine commitment to one another and to the "us" composed of these real people. This is completely different from rousing them to jingoistic fervor in the name of "school spirit" or its equivalent. A collective might be considered a pseudocommunity; its point is conformity. By contrast, conflict is welcome in a well-functioning community. Indeed, it is essential to both moral and intellectual growth, as Piaget, among many others, has shown.

10. Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel, and Nicholas Epley, "Perspective Mistaking: Accurately Understanding the Mind of Another Requires Getting Perspective, Not Taking Perspective," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114 (2018): 550.

11. See Nicholas Epley, Eugene M. Caruso, and Max Bazerman, "When Perspective Taking Increases Taking," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91 (2006): 872-89; and Jason R. Pierce et al., "From Glue to Gasoline: How Competition Turns Perspective Takers Unethical," *Psychological Science* 24 (2013): 1986-94. Other research has shown that the experience of competing tends to coarsen people, morally speaking: It not only decreases generosity and the capacity for perspective taking but actually breeds "counterempathy" — a tendency to feel elated by other people's failures and depressed by their successes. This makes perfect sense when you think about it because competition by definition requires someone else to fail in order for you to succeed. (For reviews of research on this, see my book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* [Houghton Mifflin, 1986/1992]; M. Cikara et al., "Their Pain Gives Us Pleasure," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 55 [2014]: 110-25; and the studies listed in Jamil Zaki, "Empathy: A Motivated Account," *Psychological Bulletin* 140 [2014], p. 1628.)

12. Claudia Sassenrath, Sara D. Hodges, and Stefan Pfattheicher, "It's All About the Self: When Perspective Taking Backfires," *Psychological Science* 25 (2016): 405-10.

13. For more about the limits to, and biases of, empathy, which make it a poor basis for moral decision-making, see Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy* (Ecco, 2016).

14. See my book *The Brighter Side of Human Nature*, op. cit., chapter 4, for a lengthy defense of this proposition.

15. Thus, we can be described not by any specific traits we possess "but in terms of the overall pattern that organizes these traits and their multiple interconnections….We live, all of us, in two worlds…which are almost mirror reversals of each other, two alternate ways in which our basic trends can seek expression." The various features of our personality "change their mode of functioning" depending on whether they become

part of a healthy system or a neurotic system (Andras Angyal, *Neurosis and Treatment: A Holistic Theory* [Viking, 1965], pp. 99, 102). For more insight into the complicated and sometimes overlapping relationship between health and neurosis, see the work of Karen Horney (especially her book *Neurosis and Human Growth* [Norton, 1950]), Rollo May, and Erich Fromm.

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