FASHION & STYLE

Found on Facebook: Empathy

Future Tense

By TEDDY WAYNE OCT. 9, 2015

In a widely circulated clip from "Conan" in 2013, Louis C. K. went into a jeremiad against cellphones. Among other criticisms, he argued that they were destroying the ability of children to feel for others.

"They don't look at people when they talk to them and they don't build empathy," he said. "Kids are mean, and it's 'cause they're trying it out. They look at a kid and they go, 'You're fat,' and then they see the kid's face scrunch up and they go, 'Ooh, that doesn't feel good to make a person do that.' "

"But when they write, 'You're fat,' " he continued, pantomiming typing on a phone, "then they just go, 'Mmm, that was fun, I like that.' "

The riff was a darkly humorous version of what has become conventional wisdom about the increasing number of screens and our decreasing capacity for empathy.

Sherry Turkle's new book, "Reclaiming Conversation," and a pile of research and many highly publicized cases of cyberbullying have backed up this assertion, especially as it pertains to youth.

A 2010 study from the University of Michigan found that the empathy of college students between 1979 and 2009 dropped off considerably after 2000, with the researchers speculating that the rising prominence of personal technology was one of several factors.

Yet there is a different interpretation of young people's levels of empathy, one that takes into account their far greater tolerance today for lifestyles and values not their own. Larry D. Rosen, a psychology professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, who specializes in the effects of technology, worked on a recent study in the journal Computers in Human Behavior that measured the impact of spending time online on real-world empathy.

Dr. Rosen's team found that being on the Internet "does not displace face-to-face time nor reduce real-world empathy" and that "virtual empathy was positively correlated with real-world empathy."

Empathy, their study suggests, can be dispensed and felt virtually, though in-person empathy — a hug, for instance, as opposed to a Facebook "like" — has six times the impact on feelings of social support. (The study also found that the specific type of online activity can be crucial; playing video games, for example, had "negative effects" on empathy.)

"I don't think it's a problem with a lack of empathy, but a different style," Dr. Rosen said in an interview. "We have to think of empathy as a continuum. The experience that we hear from kids and young adults is they do feel like they're being empathetic."

This new style of empathy may play out most saliently in acceptance of people whom previous generations have judged more harshly. According to the General Social Survey, administered by the research organization NORC at the University of Chicago, the percentage of American adults who viewed homosexuality as "always wrong" rose through the 1970s and '80s, peaking in AIDS-phobic 1987 at three-quarters of the population.

As of 2014, the most recent year for which data are available, it stands at 40 percent, overshadowed by the 49 percent who think there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, while support for same-sex marriage, especially among 18-to-34-year-olds, has risen sharply.

Dr. Rosen credits at least some of this considerable change to social media.

"Now we're all so open and seemingly somewhat honest behind the screen," he said, "so there's more opportunity to observe it and go, 'Hey, this friend of a friend is going through a gender-change operation, and I see it on his Facebook page.' We have more of an opportunity to build up a feeling of fairness and equality because we're exposed to much more of everybody's lives now."

While critics of social media may contend that seeing someone's status update is a weak replacement for a person-to-person conversation, "that indirect access feels to younger people like direct access," Dr. Rosen said. "It's substituted for it. They feel more connected rather than less connected."

A 2014 study from the University of North Florida found patterns suggesting "that Facebook, in facilitating great social connection, may encourage some aspects of empathy in contrast to previous reports."

One reason we may condemn social media for its narcissism is because we view it as a monolith, when there are numerous subcategories of its use. There is a great difference, for instance, between posting a dozen selfies at a rooftop party versus linking to a charity's donation page and writing a personal statement about the cause.

The study, which drew mostly from unmarried participants, examined how empathy changed related to a few user activities on Facebook, including private chat and messages and publicly commenting on status updates.

Men scored higher than females on "Perspective Taking" — that is, a cognitive "ability to place oneself in another's situation" — from both private messages and public commenting, although those actions were negatively correlated with "Personal Distress," or "the anguish felt during others' hardships and troubles."

Women were not affected as much by these two activities, though the researchers noted that they "scored significantly higher than males in all empathy subscales, except for Perspective Taking."

What these findings suggest is that certain types of Facebook interaction may help a person put himself in another's shoes — and, in this study at least, it is usually a "himself" who gains the most benefit, even if it doesn't always result in the Clintonian registration of pain.

"In face-to-face connections, you tend to stay with people you're most familiar with or have most in common with," said Tracy Alloway, an associate professor of psychology and the lead author of the paper. "But Facebook can break down those boundaries. We can be exposed to different ways of thinking and emotional situations. On a somewhat superficial level, individuals disclose things about themselves, and that facilitates maybe not a deep sense of closeness, but the next time you see them, you may feel you know them a little better."

Well, she might. A Pew Research Center report from January found that women with an average-size Facebook network are aware of 13 percent more stressful events in the lives of their friends than those without an account; for men, it was an 8 percent increase. Not only was women's awareness of these events higher than men's, but their increased awareness leads them to bear a greater "cost of caring" than men (though researchers also noted that "women report higher levels of stress to begin with").

Moreover, the younger the user, the more aware he or she was of these stressful events, a finding that suggests the youngest generation may be the most amenable to screen-based opportunities for empathy.

The major progressive shift of attitudes about homosexuality in recent decades certainly has more to do with political changes and activism than it does with the Internet. And social media, as any tentative tiptoe through YouTube comments or Twitter posts reveals, is still often a pit of hatred, intolerance and bullying.

But it has gotten better. While the tormentor in Louis C. K.'s scenario may be lacking compassion, perhaps there will be others who see his meanspirited message and, instead of piling on, feel for the victim.

Teddy Wayne's next novel, "Loner," will be published in 2016.

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Top News

Racial, partisan divides shape American views of poverty, poor

By David Lauter Tribune Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON » Sharp differences along lines of race and politics shape American attitudes toward the poor and poverty, according to a new survey of public opinion, which finds empathy toward the poor and deep skepticism about government antipoverty efforts.

The differences illuminate some of the passions that have driven this year's presidential campaign.

But the poll, which updates a survey the Los Angeles Times conducted three decades ago, also illustrates how attitudes about poverty have remained largely consistent over time despite dramatic economic and social change.

Criticism of the poor — a belief that there are "plenty of jobs available for poor people," that government programs breed dependency and that most poor people would "prefer to stay on welfare" — is especially common among the blue-collar, white Americans who have given the strongest support to Donald Trump.

The opposite view — that jobs for the poor are hard to find, that government programs help people get back on their feet and that most of the poor would rather earn their own way — is most widely held among blacks and other minorities, who have provided the strongest backing to Hillary Clinton.

Roughly a third of self-described conservatives say that the poor do not work very hard, a view at odds with big majorities of moderates and liberals.

But while Americans disagree in how they view the poor, they're more united in their skepticism of government programs.

That skepticism has held true for decades. The first Times poll of American attitudes toward poverty, in 1985, broke ground by surveying enough poor people to compare their views with those of people in the middle class.

The new survey, which was conducted by The Times and the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank that is generally conservative, asked similar questions but with some updating.

Much has changed since the 1980s. Welfare got a major overhaul in the 1990s. The number of poor Americans dropped sharply in that decade, only to partially rise again, particularly during the deep recession that began in 2007.

But many attitudes have held steady, the new poll found, particularly doubts about the federal government's ability to run its antipoverty programs, as well as their justification.

Most Americans do not believe that the government bears the main burden of taking care of the poor. Asked who has the "greatest responsibility for helping the poor," just over one-third said that the government does. That figure has not budged in three decades.

Those who did not think the government has the main responsibility were split about who does. Just under 1 in 5 Americans said that the poor themselves bear the greatest responsibility. Family, churches and charities each got mentioned by 10 percent-15 percent.

Among Latinos, family came in second behind government; among blacks, churches took second place; Republicans were most likely to put responsibility on the poor themselves.

White Americans were less likely to call government responsible than were minorities, but the difference lay almost entirely with blue-collar whites — those without college degrees. White Americans who graduated from college were as likely to say government has the prime responsibility as were nonwhites.

Attitudes toward antipoverty programs also have not changed much since the 1980s.

In the original poll, 58 percent of Americans said that such efforts had "seldom" worked, while 32 percent said they "often" had. In the new survey, with a differently worded question, 13 percent of Americans said such programs have had "no impact" on reducing poverty, and 43 percent said they have had "some impact." Only 5 percent said they have had a "big impact."

Those living below the poverty line and those above it had largely similar views on that issue now and three decades ago.

College-educated minorities were most likely in the current poll to say that government programs have had a positive effect on poverty, with more than 7 in 10 taking that view.

At the other end of the scale, about one-third of Americans said that government programs had made poverty worse, a view that was particularly common among conservatives, 47 percent, and blue-collar whites, 43 percent.

In both surveys, about 7 in 10 Americans said that even if the government were "willing to spend whatever is necessary to eliminate poverty," officials do not know enough to accomplish that goal.

Blacks and Latinos were somewhat more likely to express confidence about the government's ability to end poverty. Even among those groups, however — and among self-described liberals — majorities said the government does not know enough to eradicate poverty.

Asked why antipoverty efforts have failed, more than half of Americans said the main problem was that programs were poorly designed. Among poor people, however, about 3 in 10 said the problem was that programs had not been given enough money to succeed.

On attitudes toward the poor, divides are sharper than on opinions about government.

Blue-collar whites were much more likely than nonwhites to view the poor as a class set apart from the rest of society — trapped in poverty as a more or less permanent condition. Minority Americans, particularly blacks, tended to say that "for most poor people, poverty is a temporary condition"

A majority of whites see government antipoverty efforts contributing to poverty's permanence, saying that benefit programs "make poor people dependent and encourage them to stay poor."

Blacks disagreed, saying that the government help mostly allows poor people to "stand on their own two feet and get started again." The poor themselves divided evenly on the question. Latinos leaned closer to the skeptical view about government programs expressed by white Americans.

Asked whether poor people "prefer to stay on welfare" or would "rather earn their own living," Americans by a large majority, 61 percent-36 percent, said they believed the poor would rather earn their own way. Blue-collar whites were more closely divided on the question, 52 percent-44 percent.

That was one of several questions on which the views of minorities and college-educated whites were close to each other, while whites without a college degree stood out as different.

Nearly two-thirds of whites without college degrees, for example, said that benefits encourage poor people to remain in poverty. Among college-educated whites, about half took that view.

Blue-collar whites also took a dimmer view of President Barack Obama's handling of poverty than did other Americans. Majorities of blacks, Latinos and other minorities, as well as whites with college degrees, approved of Obama's handling of poverty. But among blue-collar whites, fewer than one-third approved, and nearly two-thirds disapproved.

Not only are Americans skeptical about whether antipoverty programs work, nearly 6 in 10 said that the percentage of people in poverty has been increasing from year to year. About 1 in 4 say poverty has stayed the same, and 1 in 8 say it has gone down.

Whether the public view of poverty getting worse is accurate or not is a tough question. A lot depends on the time frame.

Measured by the government's official poverty line, the percentage of Americans who were poor declined during the 1960s, plateaued during the 1970s, rose during much of the 1980s, then declined again during the boom years of the 1990s, only to rise again since 2000, especially during the recession. In the last few years, the poverty rate has leveled off at about 15 percent.

The official poverty measure, however, does not include the value of government benefits designed to help the poor. Including those payments, the share of people who are impoverished is now considerably lower than it was in the 1960s, although slightly higher than it was at the end of the 1990s.

One question on which views have changed somewhat since the 1980s is whether poverty is a temporary or a permanent condition.

In the 1985 survey, Americans by a very large majority, 71 percent-21 percent, said that most poor people would probably remain poor. Today, that remains the majority view, but the gap has narrowed somewhat, with 60 percent seeing poverty as mostly permanent and 33 percent saying it is a temporary condition that people can move into and out of again.

The poor divide closely on that question. So do minorities.

A correct answer to that question is complex. Census figures show that in recent years, people who fell below the poverty line typically stayed poor for about six months. A lot of people, however, cycle in and out of poverty, rising only slightly above the official poverty line, then falling back.

One recent census study found that about one-quarter of poor people were in poverty only briefly — the result of a job loss or other crisis. About 1 in 7 were chronically poor, spending much of their lives impoverished. In between are many who churn in and out of poverty.

Across the board, Americans overestimate how high the government's poverty line is and how many people live below it. Asked to estimate the poverty line for a family of four, those polled, on average, put it at slightly more tha $32,000, which is about a third higher than the actual figure of slightly more than $24,000. The public's figure may be more realistic, however; many poverty experts think the official level is far too low.

Those polled also estimated that about 40 percent of Americans live below the poverty line — far more than the actual figure of 15 percent. Again, though, the public may have the clearer view. Many experts on poverty say that in addition to the roughly 45 million Americans who live below the official poverty line, roughly an equal number are "near poor."

Many federal benefit programs, including health care subsidies, food stamps and Medicaid in many states, are open to people earning significantly more than the official poverty threshold.

The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, one of the country's largest nonpartisan polling organizations. The survey was conducted June 20-July 7 among 1,202 adults aged 18 and older, including 235 who live below the poverty line. The survey has a margin of error of 4 percentage points in either direction for the full sample.

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2007

Empathy

Stephen Dunn (2000)

Once in a small rented room, awaiting
a night call from a distant time zone,
I understood you could feel so futureless
you'd want to get a mermaid

tattoed on your biceps. Company
forever. Flex and she'd dance.
The phone never rang, except for those
phantom rings, which I almost answered.

I was in D.C., on leave from the Army.
It was a woman, of course, who didn't call.
Or, as we said back then, a girl.
It's anybody's story.

But I think for me it was the beginning
of empathy, not a large empathy
like the deeply selfless might have,
more like a leaning, like being able

to imagine a life for a spider, a maker's
life, or just some aliveness
in its wide abdomen and delicate spinnerets
so you take it outside in two paper cups

intead of stepping on it.
The next day she called, and it was final.
I remember going to the zoo
and staring a long time

at the hippopotamus, its enormous weight

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BLOG ARCHIVE

and mass, its strange appearance
of tranquility.
And then the sleek, indignant cats.

Then I went back to Fort Jackson.
I had a calendar taped inside my locker,
and I'd circled days for when I
had no plans, not even hopes—

big circles, so someone might ask.
It was between wars. Only the sergeants
and a few rawboned farm boys
took learning how to kill seriously.

We had to traverse the horizontal ladder,
rung after rung, to pass
into mess hall. Always the weak-handed,
the weak-armed, couldn't make it.

I looked for those who didn't laugh
at those of us who fell.
In the barracks, after drills,
the quiet fellowship of the fallen.

POSTED BY DAN AT 4:16 PM
LABELS: STEPHEN DUNN

1 COMMENT:

dan said...

from *The New Yorker* (April 10, 2000)

Stephen Dunn

OCTOBER 30, 2007 AT 4:28 PM

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AUTHORS

THE BLOG

What Does Your Courage Look Like?

11/13/2014 09:11 am ET | Updated Jan 13, 2015

Like 4

Trudy Bourgeois
President / CEO, The Center for Workforce Excellence

So here we are. Halloween over. Election Day over. Veteran's Day here. And all I can think about is: Courage.

A friend of mine was telling me about her four-year-old son and his trick-or-treating escapades. She shared how he (dressed as a Skylander — I know, I didn't know what that was either) and two of his little friends (Olaf the Snowman and Mr. Panda Bear) would gingerly and tentatively walk up to each home. Olaf would take the lead, and they would ever-so-slowly make their way up to the front step. Once there, they had to dig deep within themselves to actually knock on the door. Still, no relief from their fear. Not quite yet. Filled with hope-against-hope, they would stand there praying that no one would scare them once the door actually opened. She said you could see that actually speaking the words "Trick-or-treat!" were a relief because they'd done the hard part.

And this is how it went with every. single. house.

But the reward...oh, the reward...was SO worth it!

Candy. Bushels of it.

Over the past few weeks, I have led several panel discussions on (gasp) RACE in front of large audiences. If you're like 99 percent of the rest of the population in our country, just hearing the words "race discussion" stops you in your tracks like a deer in headlights.

People ask me how I do it. How I lead those hard discussions. As in, "Aren't you nervous, Trudy?" or "Oh Trudy, I could never do that. You're so much braver than I could ever be." And then, "Talking about race is so hard. I don't even know where or how to begin."

But like our little trick-or-treaters, I had to be bold. I had to step out. I had to do it afraid. I had to dig deep and let my courage lead me.

TRENDING

Trump 'Office' Parody Is A Glimpse At The Buffoonery We Have In Store

Fans Think This Photo Of Selena Gomez Is Photoshopped

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Taylor Swift Tweets Support For Women's

What Does Your Courage Look Like?

Why? Because it's time for courage like we've never had or seen before. Leading the race discussion at your organization, starting the courageous conversation, running for office and getting defeated, all of it and more. The more we do it, the less power it has over us. The less fear we feel.

It's time to be the "difference of one" where you are. Right now. To let your courage - not your fear - lead you.

I recently read an interview from author/journalist, Nicholas Kristof. It touched something deep in my soul. And we all have stories like this that we could share. Those stories of how one person made a difference in our life...

When people scoff and say individual charitable acts are "drops in the bucket, I push back," said Mr. Kristof, citing the case of the World War II refugee from Romania who was taken in by an Oregon family.

The refugee happened to be his father.

"They didn't solve the refugee problem around the world, but for my dad it was transformative. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for that drop in the bucket. That's how buckets get filled, drop by drop by drop."

Drop by drop by drop...YES. Every courageous conversation. Drop. Every hard discussion on race with your team or even with your family members. Drop. Every election (even when your candidate loses). Drop.

With courage, the bucket CAN get filled. But we must, must, MUST step out into it. Let it lead. Let it guide. Let it win.

On days like Veteran's Day, we celebrate the obvious and outright courage of our veterans. Of those who risked, continue to risk or GAVE their lives for our sake. It is easy for us to see and identify their courage. And to be oh-so-thankful. Beyond thankful, in fact.

But now it's time to...

Let your courage be seen. Let yourself and others know what your courage looks like. And, like our trick-or-treaters, reap the rewards of your courage. Because there ARE rewards...for yourself, for those closest to you and even for those you don't even know.

If you haven't yet watched Mellody Hobson's TED Talk, Color Blind or Color Brave, take a few minutes to watch it right now.

I can think of no better way to end than with her words:

"I'm asking you to show courage. I'm asking you to be bold. As business leaders, I'm asking you not to leave anything on the table. As citizens, I'm asking you not to leave any child behind. I'm asking you not to be color blind, but to be color brave, so that every child knows that their future matters and their dreams are possible."