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# THE ROLE OF EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY IN CHARACTER EDUCATION

*by Dr. Radhi Al-Mabuk*

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to describe and highlight the role of empathy and sympathy in character education. More specifically, the bridging function of empathy and sympathy to civility and their role in promoting development in the context of forgiveness will be emphasized. The paper is organized in five major parts. The first one consists of an introduction and a brief historical overview of character education followed by a discussion of the aims of character education and the school's role in nurturing it. In the second part, an argument is made for forgiveness as a means of promoting development and enabling the individual to be an effective moral agent through the use of empathy and sympathy. In the third part, definitions and description of empathy are provided, steps of empathy are elaborated, and cautions in the use of empathy are offered. The fourth part defines and describes sympathy, its steps, and offers precautions in the use of sympathy. The fifth and final part gives a conclusion and offers implications for promoting use of empathy and sympathy as tools to strengthening character by restoring physical and socio-emotional well-being.

## 1. Introduction

Character education is not new. In fact, interest in shaping, developing, and nurturing character dates as far back as the time of the Greeks, particularly to Socrates. Cultivating character was also prominent in Native American culture. The founding fathers of America were certainly concerned with character development in citizens and made it a central focus in education. Leading thinkers in education such as Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Ernest Boyer were as concerned with character education as with academics. The Sputnik event, however, altered the focus of preparing for citizenship and character building to a more intense emphasis on academic achievement (Berkowitz, 2002; Lewis & Schaps, 1998).

In the last three decades, however, the pendulum swung in favor of character education in the United States and many other countries around the world. Character education has increasingly received renewed and intense attention and support. In the United States, the attention is reflected in increased funding for character education

implementation and research, in the national organizations established such as Character Education Partnership and Character Counts, in the many conferences devoted to it, in the increased offering of character education courses, in the number of workshops offered, and in the curricula and professional development resources devoted to it (Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

The tremendous resurgence of character education is largely a response to a spectrum of social ills including rampant unethical behavior in a variety of aspects of public life, social deviance, high rates of violence and crime, decrease in public respect to other people's rights and properties, and social and economic inequity. The renaissance in character education is also due to increasing Federal support for character education initiatives and research and the overwhelming acceptance of character education as a response to societal trends.

Character education has several different labels. Berkowitz (2002) pointed out that the choice of label used for the field of character education varies by history, geography, and ideology. In the United States, the label that is currently in vogue is *character education*, and is typically aligned with traditional, conservative, and behavioral approaches. The label *moral education* was the term of choice a decade or so ago. In Asia, the preferred term is also *moral education*, and in Japan, the term *moralogy* is more common. *Moral education* is associated more with liberal, constructivist, and cognitive approaches. Still, there are two other labels: *values education* and *values in education* where the first is popular in Great Britain and the second in Scotland. This label is aligned more with theoretical, attitudinal, and empirical approaches. Despite the labels, the aim of most, if not all, character education programs is to produce good and moral conscious citizens.

### **Aims of Character Education**

The primary aim of character education is to produce good citizens who have deep regard for themselves and others, who are committed to democracy and the core values of justice and caring, and who strive to be civil and considerate in their interactions with others (Lewis & Schaps, 1998). When instilled, these essential qualities will ensure the sustenance of social well-being as well as offer hope for a better world. Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon (1997) further stated that the purpose of character education aligns well with the historical goal of education, which is to help children to become caring, principled, and self-disciplined individuals.

In addition, Berkowitz (2002) defined character education as an effort to promote student development. That is, the goal is to enable the student to be a moral agent who engages in systematic and intentional pro-social behavior. According to Berkowitz, character is a psychological construct and as such the aim of character education is to promote psychological development of students. It enables and motivates children and adolescents to function as effective moral agents who are ethical, self-regulated, and are both socially and personally responsible.

A similar definition or description of the aim of character education is offered by Lickona (2012), which is summarized as the deliberate efforts to cultivate virtue which will result in good people, good schools, and good society. Lickona argued that increase in violence, dishonesty, greed, family disintegration, the growing number of children living in poverty, and disrespect for life must compel society to do something to combat them. A solution is to foster virtue in the minds, hearts, and souls of individual members of society.

## **Components of Character Education**

For this section, the models developed by Lickona (2012) and Berkowitz (2002) will be described. Their emphasis on empathy and sympathy as moderators of moral action is of particular interest as they relate directly to the central focus of this paper. Lickona (2012) stated that character has cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. The cognitive component is responsible for moral knowing; the affective part carries out the moral feeling; and the behavioral aspect carries out moral action. Thus, an individual with good character knows the good, desires the good, and does the good. Put another way, Lickona viewed the cognitive as the place where habits of mind are cultivated, the affective as the site for habits of heart, and the behavioral as the stage where habits of actions or behaviors are activated and enacted.

Lickona (2012) further elaborated each one of the three aspects of character by delineating its constituents. For the cognitive side of character which houses powers of rational thought, he provided these six components: (1) moral alertness where the individual thinks about the situation at hand and discerns whether it involves a moral issue that requires moral judgment; (2) understanding the specific virtue and what it requires of us in specific situations; (3) perspective-taking; (4) moral reasoning; (5) thoughtful decision making; and (6) moral self-knowledge.

The emotional dimension of character, which Lickona (2012) viewed as a bridge between moral judgment and moral action, included the following five factors: (1) conscience, which is defined as the individual's felt obligation to do what one judges to be right; (2) self-respect; (3) empathy, which is relevant to the primary focus of this paper; (4) loving the good; and (5) humility, which basically means that a person is willing to both recognize and correct moral failings.

For the behavioral side of character, which is the fusion of thoughts and feelings, Lickona (2012) gave the following three components: (1) moral competence, which is demonstrated through skills such as communicating, cooperating, and solving conflicts; (2) moral will, which an individual uses to mobilizes his/her judgment and energy. Lickona asserted that self-control and courage are the primary propellers of action; and (3) moral habit, which Lickona described as a reliable inner disposition to respond to situations in a morally good way. Moral habit is what character education aims at instilling in individuals. Lickona (2012) recognized that there are times when individuals know what they should do, feel strongly that they should do it, and yet they fail to

translate moral judgment and feeling into effective moral behavior. The third component can be strengthened through mobilizing and the proper use of empathy and sympathy.

Now we turn to the model of character development that Berkowitz and colleagues have developed (Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, 2007). According to Berkowitz (2002), character development aims at promoting development of children by targeting a subset of development which is character development. In so doing, character education seeks to enable and motivate the student to function as an effective moral agent. Berkowitz and colleagues (2004, 2007) contended that character education initiatives intended to promote character must rely on strategies that have been empirically demonstrated to effectively promote such development.

In the "moral anatomy" model, Berkowitz (2002) described the following seven aspects of character: (1) moral action; (2) moral values; (3) moral personality; (4) moral emotions; (5) moral reasoning; (6) moral identity; and (7) foundational characteristics. These components underscore how complex and multifaceted character is, and that any program that endeavors to nurture it must be comprehensive and intentional.

### **Desired Outcomes of Character Education**

Schools have the responsibility of preparing individuals for citizenship. Character education has been a primary mechanism for carrying out this task. For character education programs to achieve the desired results, they must strive to address the following as outcomes of their efforts: fostering pro-social attitudes and motives in children, promoting socio-moral reasoning competencies such as perspective taking, helping children develop pro-social self-systems demonstrated in moral identity and conscience, teaching and coaching children in internalizing relevant behavioral competencies such as the ability to disagree respectfully and learning effective conflict resolution skills, learning and acquiring characteristics that support enactment of such pro-social motives and inclinations, engendering and supporting the development of perseverance and courage, and enhancing knowledge of ethical issues and considerations as well as nurturing moral emotional competencies such as empathy and sympathy. The rest of the paper will focus on ways of nurturing empathy and sympathy in the context of interpersonal, deep, and unfair transgression.

## **2. Place of Empathy and Sympathy in Character Education**

As seen in the previous section, we highlighted the fact that character education aims to promote psychological development of individuals. It provides them with protective and development-enhancing competencies they will need for their personal and socio-moral well-being. In a sense, character education must provide the right character vaccine that will ensure the healthy functioning of the individual throughout life, especially in adverse

situations. What cognitive, affective, and behavioral moral competencies would an individual need when faced with an interpersonal, deep, and unfair treatment or transgression? In such context, an individual's character development is challenged and tested to the limit. Depending on how a person reacts to the transgression, there is a potential adverse impact on moral thinking, moral feeling, and moral action. One's thoughts about the transgressor are negative and are likely to fuel tendencies for revenge. The injured person is likely to experience negative feelings such as anger, resentment, and even rage, which potentially could be expressed in revengeful actions. Negative thoughts and feelings could wreak havoc on the person's psychological, physical, moral and spiritual well-being.

Nurturing is what Klatt and Enright (2009) referred to as "developmental assets" in the individual that would expand his/her repertoire of responses to the transgression and increase his/her capacity to cope with unfair treatment (p. 42). The following section describes two developmental assets: empathy and sympathy with the goal of increasing one's capacity and inclination to move beyond negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to more positive thoughts, feelings, and actions. That is, moving the individual from the land of grudges, despair, pain, hurt, and revenge to the healthful, hopeful, and restorative territory of forgiveness. Now we turn to a discussion of empathy.

### 3. Empathy

Empathy is one of several strategies identified by Enright and The Human Development Study Group (1996) that we can use to forgive another person. In this process, we attempt to understand another person's feelings and thoughts (Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). We reach out for the person who injured us to get to know him/her more, so empathy is a key determinant of the ability to forgive (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). When we empathize, we try "to put ourselves in that person's shoes," and endeavor to perceive as accurately and fully as possible the "internal frame of reference of another" (Gold & Rogers, 1995, p. 79). Similarly, Rogers (1975), a noted psychologist, wrote that empathy

involves entering the private perceptual world of the other person, temporarily living in that person's life, and moving around within it non-judgmentally, delicately, and sensitive to the felt meanings and values of that person, and also being sure to check and communicate with the person as you go. (p. 4)

This description clearly indicates that to empathize we must adopt the other person's psychological viewpoint, or, what some call "fellow-feeling."

In addition, Hoffman (2000) indicated that "to empathize with someone means identifying with another's emotional set-up, i.e. in a sense, to feel the person's own feelings" (p. 30). In this sense, empathy operates as a "spark of moral concern" (Kristajansson, 2004, p. 298). Further, Hoffman (1990, 2000) asserted that empathy is

the developmental precursor of all moral concerns, and it is a catalyst for constructive interpersonal relations, cohesion, and unity in society.

### **Steps of Empathy**

Empathy can be used to gather data about the transgressor and clarify the problem. It involves an awareness of the influence of feelings upon the thoughts and actions of someone else. The process of empathy consists of at least three steps. First, one needs to be able and willing to detect the various emotions the injurer must have been experiencing before, during, and after inflicting the injury. After detecting feelings, one needs to try to see what experiences or circumstances might account for the injurer's feelings. Second, one needs to have the capacity to and the willingness to adopt the injurer's perspective to experience his or her emotional state. And third, one needs to be aware of the complementary feelings aroused within him/her as he/she engages in this process.

### **Cautions in the Use of Empathy**

As one engages in the strategy of empathy, a person must remember that his/her empathic involvement must be genuine and sensitive. One must be willing to enter his/her injurer's way of seeing the world to completely understand the injurer's feelings and thoughts. One must be able to enter into their feelings and thoughts without being judgmental. In other words, one must resist labeling the thoughts and feelings whether they are good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

Pseudo empathy might lead one to condone what the injurer did to him/her. This caution is related to the injured person's emotional reactions to the injurer. If the injured still feels angry or resentful toward the injurer as he/she tries to empathize, the injured must try to work through his/her anger first. Anger felt by the injured may interfere with his/her ability to sensitively and accurately feel what the injurer is feeling. In conclusion, empathy can be a powerful tool to understand as objectively as possible the emotional life of the person and how feelings contribute to decisions, choices, and ways of expressing. The goal of empathy is not to condone or excuse the injurer from what he or she did. Empathy and how to empathize are eloquently described in the following quote:

To care for another person, I must be able to understand him and his world as if I see it. I must be able to see, as it were, with his eyes what his world is like to him and how he sees himself. Instead of merely looking at him in a detached way from the outside, as if he were a specimen, I must be able to be with him in his world, "going" into his world in order to sense from "inside" what life is like for him, what he is striving to be and what he requires to grow. (Mayeroff, 1971, pp. 41-42)

## **4. What Sympathy Is**

Sympathy is derived from the Greek word "sympatheia"--sym means "with" and pascho means, "to suffer." Based on this, sympathy means to suffer with another person whose

suffering can be undertaken in the context of our own. The sameness can be attributed to our human condition and our affinity to experience much of life in similar ways. This affinity based on our feelings serves at least two purposes: (1) it provides us with clues as to the feelings of the other person; and (2) it creates in us a willingness to consider ways to alleviate their pain as we deal with our own.

This definition comprises the cognitive component, which includes an acknowledgement of the other person's pain, and the conative, which is manifested in our altruistic desire to abate the other person's pain. Malti, Keller, Gummerum, and Buchmann (2009) defined sympathy as "feelings of concern for the other person based on an understanding of that person's circumstances" (p. 442). Philosophers and developmental psychologists view sympathy as a quintessential moral emotion and a moderator of moral action (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hume, 1751/1957).

### **Steps of Sympathy**

To engage in sympathy, we need to first know the demands this strategy places on us. We must be both ready and willing to acknowledge our injurer's pain. It may be asked, "Why in the world would I want to acknowledge my injurer's pain? After all, he or she was the one who caused me all this pain?" These are realistic and reasonable questions, and good answers must be given before we can be motivated to understand the suffering of the injurer. Understanding can provide clues into the emotional and psychological world of our injurer. We may discover that we might have behaved similarly given similar circumstances. Understanding the negative life events that precipitated the behavior might help us feel less offended or retaliatory.

As we become more inclined to sympathize with our injurer, we need to check our emotions and be sure they won't stand in our way of understanding the feelings of the injurer. We must be able to believe the other person may have acted without being fully in command of his/her emotions and is now experiencing some regret for his/her actions. We must remember that we cannot genuinely countenance the actions of our injurer without dealing with the negative emotions these actions have evoked in us. In the absence of these conditions, it is difficult to feel charitable toward this individual.

Finally, before we sympathize with another individual, we need to understand our motivation for doing so. We seek consolation by recalling our own fallibility, our own imperfections in the face of trying situations. We all make regrettable mistakes. Surely the other person has regrets. The pain is a mutual experience of our shortcomings as human beings. Being concerned about the well-being of a fellow human being ennobles all of humanity. If we do not help, hurt becomes a way of life.

### **Cautions in the Use of Sympathy**

We must first distinguish between our own feelings and those of the other person. As we seek understanding, it may be sufficient to acquiesce, to gently dismiss our claim for retribution. We may choose not to take an action to alleviate the pain of the sufferer as

we try to get rid of our own pain. Secondly, when we sympathize, we more or less exchange places with the other person. In doing this, we may misconstrue the way the other person perceives the event. We may excuse them because we think they see it as we do. We may mistakenly believe they harbor regrets. However, they may not share our pain or feel the least bit responsible for it. Part of the difficulty deals with the complexity of human motives and the idiosyncratic expression of them. In addition, people have different action thresholds--some are impulsive while others are reflective. That is, some people don't act as responsibly as others. In addition, sharing responsibility for another person's actions or excusing them because of similar shortcomings in awareness requires emotional strength. Although, kindness and compassion do not come easily, emotional readiness is a prerequisite to sympathy.

Finally, keep in mind not to confuse sympathy with empathy. In empathy, the self is the vehicle for experiencing the life of another. In sympathy, our concern is to achieve communion with another. When we empathize, we substitute ourselves for the other person; when we sympathize, we substitute others for self. The goal of empathy is for us to know what something would be like for the other person; the aim of sympathy is for us to know what it would be like to be that person. Furthermore, in empathy we act "as if" we were the other person, while in sympathy we are the other person. As we empathize, we seek awareness, and as we sympathize, we seek understanding. In sum, empathy is a way of experiencing, while sympathy is a way of relating. Both contribute to the motivational force to move from negative affect to positive toward the injurer.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

Empathy and sympathy are two powerful moral assets that enhance an individual's development. In the context of interpersonal, deep, and unfair hurt, both of these processes can be used to rid oneself of negative emotions and thoughts as well as any potential or real negative actions toward the transgressor. It is natural to experience pain and to feel a host of negative emotions following a transgression. If a person gets stuck in this mental state, his/her development will be arrested and one's moral outlook may become more negative. The consequences of such a state of being can be detrimental to the individual, family, peers, classmates, workmates, and other members in the community.

Character education programs will do well to nurture and expand children's and adolescents' capacity for empathy and sympathy so that they can use these assets especially in times of adversity. Schools can help children to become caring, empathic, compassionate, principled, and self-disciplined. Schools can succeed in realizing this lofty goal only if children's psychological needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence are met. That is, students will identify and engage with the school and its initiatives when the school satisfies their psychological needs. Schaps et al. (1997) stated that schools can satisfy students' intellectual development and social and ethical

growth by providing opportunities for membership in a caring community of learners as well as important, challenging, and engaging learning opportunities. When these opportunities are provided in a concerted, intentional, and comprehensive fashion, students will be well on their way to becoming effective moral agents who know the good, desire the good, and do the good.

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