

Has Anyone Seen Our Verstehen?: A Call for Empathy

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Introduction

Sociologist Max Weber noticed during his lifetime, a century ago, that with the rise of capitalism has come a societal and cultural shift from a collective mindset, to an individualistic mindset. This shift has led to people feeling less morally obligated to care about and/or have empathy for others. This is becoming increasingly concerning given the serious and complex nature of the many social justice issues the world is facing today.

Thesis: In order to progress and grow towards a more equitable and just society, people as a collective need to start considering verstehen/empathy to be a moral obligation they have to their fellow citizens of the world.

Purpose

To review modern research studies to examine whether empathy truly is decreasing in our society, as Weber predicted.

“Empathy makes us human, but research suggests it may be on the decline” (CBC, 2019).

Research & Results

“Whose Hands Reach Out to the Homeless? Patterns of Helping Among High and Low Communally Oriented Individuals.”

Results of this study found that in response to the portrayal of homeless people as sad, people with high communal orientation responded with a more positive attitude, and people with low communal orientation responded negatively.

This shows how the degree to which people are communally oriented can directly impact the way people interact with one another in society, especially with regards to those suffering in society.

“Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis”

This study examined how empathy in American college students has changed over the thirty year span between 1980 and around 2010.

- This study used the valid and reliable Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which is a personality scale, to measure aspects of empathy.
- Results showed that there were significant changes in IRI scores in recent years, indicating a decline in EC (people’s affective reaction to the misfortune of others) and PT (people’s cognitive inclination to consider the perspectives of others) specifically.
- EC and PT are the most foundational features of empathy, therefore this study points to a serious decline in empathy.

“From empathy to action: Can enhancing host-society children's empathy promote positive attitudes and prosocial behaviour toward refugees?”

Researchers examined how inducing empathy in children of a host society can impact how they treat, and their attitude towards, refugee children entering their community.

Results:

- the children who were exposed to a “real-life” story about the experiences of immigrants demonstrated more empathy than did the children in the control group who were just simply given information.
- This is hopeful because it shows that strategies can be implemented in schools to help increase children’s empathy for others, and children are society’s future.

Conclusion

- In the century since Weber first noted the negative impact capitalism had on society’s morals and loyalties, research done by others on empathy has agreed with Weber.
- There has been a decrease in empathy/community oriented individuals in American society, and an increase in narcissism/individualistic individuals.

Future Research

- It would be beneficial for future research to look at the correlation between the **prevalence of empathy in a society**, and the amount and **seriousness of social justice issues in said society**.
- In tackling society’s issues the **understanding and respect of intersectionality** is essential in today’s world.

References

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