

(This post has been jointly written by Harvey WHITEHOUSE and Justin BARRETT)

Whatever else it may entail, de-humanizing involves the de-activation of our capacity to empathize. There is now a substantial body of research in experimental psychology showing that humans have highly developed capacities for empathizing (i.e. for assessing the mental and emotional states of others). Even though the nature and origins of human empathy continue to be contested, there exists extensive and robust evidence as to the psychological mechanisms involved, the way these emerge in childhood, how they operate at the neurological level, how certain pathologies affect the operation of these mechanisms, and how human empathizing abilities compare with those of other animals (especially other primates). Although humans are naturally sensitive to the feelings and intentions of other agents it has long been recognized that empathy can be switched off for special purposes, for instance when doctors seek to treat gross physical injuries, when military leaders engage in the strategic deployment of troops, and when battery-hen farmers are calculating their meat stocks. Under such circumstances reasoning about other agents ceases to be empathetic; indeed in many such cases it simply will not be relevant to consider what the agents in question are thinking and feeling.

Some researchers have begun to investigate non-empathetic ways of reasoning about other agents. For instance, speciation (the tendency to classify our fellow humans as if they were natural kinds with essentialized heritable qualities) may be necessary for various types of reflective ideas about human types, such as racial categorizing or attribution of charisma or religious specialization (witches, shamans etc. who are thought to be inherently different from other people). Or to take another example, teleological reasoning (the tendency to view our fellow humans as instruments with specialized functions, just like tools and weapons) seems to be entailed in certain types of strategic decision-making (e.g. the idea that foot soldiers can serve as cannon fodder in a strategic advance or that civilians can serve as a human shield).

What we currently know very little about is how various kinds of ecological factors promote non-empathetic and potentially de-humanizing responses towards others. In the hope of stimulating further discussion we propose the following candidates.

Role specialization. If the division of labour is weak, and everybody undertakes more or less the same repertoire of tasks and roles, we might predict that speciation of person categories (at least within the community) will be correspondingly limited or absent but, with a strengthening of the division of labour, roles and offices can eclipse individuality, leading to increasing speciation of social categories. Exploration of this topic might produce new insights into the nature and causes of modern forms of alienation, based on comparison across a wide range of societies past and present: from hunter-gatherer bands to kinship based polities and from traditional states to modern bureaucracies.

Domestication of animals. The hunting of animals often entails extensive speculation on the mental states of individuated quarry whereas the farming of livestock can encourage a more generic view of the way species as a whole think and behave. In human prehistory the shift from dependence on wild meat to the management and breeding of a range of animal species may have been revolutionary in cognitive as well as economic terms. At an extreme, the more mechanized farming methods of modern times appear to make empathetic reasoning entirely irrelevant in animal management: animals become more like a crop to be harvested than a type of agent. It may be instructive to track the effects of different forms of animal domestication on the role of empathy in human-animal relations, both in relation to the archaeological record and using extant sources. Such investigations could also open up new approaches to understanding of changing of social trends in such diverse areas as conservationism, animal warfare, consumer preferences, tourism, and even pet ownership.

Scope and effectiveness of conflict-resolution mechanisms. In resolving interpersonal conflict people must draw on empathizing capacities. But such efforts can break down, for instance on the grounds that an adversary cannot be reasoned with. When efforts to empathize fail, an adversary may be de-humanized. Such patterns can emerge when negotiations between warring groups reach an impasse, when estranged lovers divorce, when work colleagues shun each other, when kin groups feud, etc. Presumably the tipping point for this is regulated to some extent by institutional arrangements. Where conflict resolution mechanisms are highly effective or incentives to cooperate are very strong the tipping point might be seldom reached. Comparison across a wide range of institutional settings would be required to investigate these issues.

Urbanization. Whereas in rural settings it might seem that everybody knows everybody else, in urban environments encounters with strangers are routine. Since it is practically impossible to acquire rich biographical data on every person encountered we are obliged to fall back on simple categorical heuristics for dealing with strangers. This simple fact may help to explain the phenomenon of bystander apathy. The anonymity afforded by urban environments may well provide a cover for criminal behaviour just as everybody-knowing-everybody-else may deter anti-social behaviour in rural settings. But perhaps urban criminals are more confident of evading prosecution not only because they are harder to identify but also because observers routinely de-humanize those observed, regarding the latter's behaviour as 'not their business' unless a narrow range of considerations encompassed by human kind heuristics may be said to apply.

Commoditization. Whereas gifts establish empathetic obligations between exchange partners, commodity transactions may be portrayed as 'strictly business' such that once a transaction is completed the parties ideally have no further obligations. Commoditization may foster a de-humanizing view of others, as generic incumbents of roles (clients, investors, customers) rather than as individuals with personal histories. Research in this area might help us to solve some of the more enduring riddles of economic anthropology, such the origins of the obligations to give, receive, and repay gifts. It could have commercial implications too, for instance in helping industry to predict more accurately the changing dynamics of gifting in capitalist economies.