Ep

Empathy on Demand

Interview with

Maria Konnikova

Interview by Mark Frauenfelder

Author Maria Konnikova is the author of two bestselling books, "The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It . . . Every Time and "Mastermind: How To Think Like Sherlock Holmes." Konnikova writes about psychology and culture, with an emphasis on why and how we use emotions to persuade, reassure, frighten, and encourage each other in social interactions. We talked to Konnikova about the benefits and dangers of using technology to evoke a sense of empathy, and whether or not empathy is always an appropriate call to action.

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What does research tell us about how we empathize with other people?

There's interesting research showing that we like and identify with people who are like ourselves. We trust people more when they look like us.

We also empathize with people who like the same things we like, or have gone through similar experiences to us. You often hear of people who've gone through something really terrible, for instance, parents who've lost a child. They can't talk to anyone, because everyone says, "I'm so sorry." That's not true empathy. They don't actually understand what the parent is going through so they don't know how to empathize properly, even though they might want to. That's why victim support groups are really helpful.

That said, empathy is most often needed when someone's situation is totally *dissimilar* to your experiences. There are some interesting studies in which people are put in a brain scanner and shown different types of faces. If you look at the parts associated with empathy and with warm emotions, they don't light up with people who are totally different from the participant. Psychologist Susan Fiske at Princeton has found that when participants look at homeless people in a scanner, their brains respond as if they were looking at an object rather than a human. And if you told them, "Hey, you're reacting to this person as if they're an object." They would say, "No I'm not. Are you kidding?"

That is profoundly disturbing and really just terrifying. Obviously, what we want to do is try to break through that and try to get people to truly empathize on the deepest level.

How can technology address this?

One study merged strangers' faces with the faces of study participants. The participants didn't know this, but when a stranger's face was made to look more similar to a participant's face, the participant rated them higher on every measure. They trusted them more, they thought they were nicer, more likable, all of these things, just because they saw themselves in that person. But, again, it was on a subconscious level. When they were asked, "Does that person look like you?" They said no.

And there's some really interesting work that's being done on how your avatar affects your empathy for others. If you have a really overweight avatar, you start becoming more empathetic to over-

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weight people. This works with gender, it works with skin color, and it's actually really interesting how quickly people start identifying with an avatar and how quickly they think it represents them. The participants know it's an avatar and it's on a computer screen—it's not even virtual reality—and yet it actually makes a huge difference. It can help you make empathetic links that you wouldn't be able to do without that. It shows that it's not a very difficult intervention to do. You can even imagine people playing games like this in school and as a totally normal and integral part of life.

Are you familiar with the online ball throwing study about ostracism?

No. What is is?

It's basically a game of pass-the-ball. You're paired with two other study participants in a virtual environment. The three of you pass a virtual ball to one another, taking turns catching and throwing it. But at some point the other two participants start passing to each other and ignoring you. (As often happens in psychology studies, these two are confederates, not naive subjects like you are.)

People are so hurt by this. They feel ostracized. It has really horrible effects. You don't know these people, they're two virtual things. It shouldn't matter at all, but it does, it really matters. You think, "Wow, that really hurt. I felt really ostracized and that was just really awful. Why wouldn't they pass the ball to me?" Even though the study itself is about ostracism—rather than empathy, which is the opposite—it shows how these things can happen and how you can be made to be much more sympathetic to people by going through an experience like that.

Let's go back to your comment about making these kinds of simulations part of everyone's education. Could you envision some kind of technologically enabled empathy training so that we can feel what

other people are going through? Do you think that would be a positive thing to introduce into society?

It honestly depends on how and why it's used, because sometimes empathy isn't actually the best way forward. If you feel very emotional about something, you're not as reasonable and you're not as logical.

For example, there's a 3D film for the Samsung Gear VR 360-degree platform, called "Clouds Over Sidra" that follows a young Syrian girl in the Za'atari camp in Jordan. On the one hand it's really interesting, and you learn a lot. On the other hand, what if it makes you a total extremist—"The people who are doing this to Syrians are monsters. Let's kill them all." You could see it actually triggering too much emotion and not channeling it properly. A lot of this needs context, and it's sometimes important to look at things in a less emotional way so you can do more good, and help more people.

It can also give you a false sense of understanding. You often hear people say, "I totally know what it's like to be discriminated against. I had this experience." The people who were discriminated against respond, "You experienced this for two minutes. This is my life." It's very important to understand that no matter how much you empathize, you never know somebody else's experience.

You're right, empathizing is not the same as a simulated experience of what the other person is experiencing.

Exactly, and sometimes part of empathy is understanding that. It's understanding and acknowledging that you don't actually know, which is a different form of empathy from the "oh my god" response that we tend to consider as empathy. We think of empathy as just this emotional thing, but it's not. It has emotional elements but it also has very rational, logical elements and those can sometimes be more helpful.