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INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL HARMONY THROUGH EMPATHY

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Abstract

Empathy, a concept that involves an interpersonal experience is found in all aspects of the social universe, especially in prosocial behavior, morality and regulation of aggression. In the context of the major medical and social crisis caused by the pandemic, the need to develop empathic social skills becomes a pressing need. Anxiety generated by the threat of disease and death has led to the emergence of paradoxical individual or social behaviors. Thus, by disturbing the cognitive harmony of the individual - irrational thoughts in relation to contamination and illness or on the contrary the denial of the disease was destructured emotional harmony (anxiety, depression, psychosomatic manifestations) with adverse consequences at the individual and subsequent social level. The objective manifestation of disharmonious cognitions and emotions materialized in the manifestation of maladaptive behaviors. The present paper is an analysis of the two theories on empathy - Simulation Theory and Mind Theory in order to improve prosocial behavior in a pandemic context. Studies show the significant influences of social and cultural factors on the empathic capacity of the individual. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that empathic skills can be learned and developed in relation to the environment and the social context. Understanding the concept of social empathy is important by being able to provide a model of thinking and action that opens new ways of contextual approach to the current situation that could ultimately lead to alleviating the crisis and improving social conditions by adopting an adaptive behavior in according to the limits imposed by the new epidemiological situation..

Keywords: empathy; cognition, emotion; pandemic; harmony;

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper was born from the desire to establish the theoretical framework in order to validate a theory in relation to the current events determined by the existence of the Covid - 19 pandemic. It falls into the category of theoretical studies belonging to the field of social medicine. In recent years, attention has been directed to a considerable extent to practical factual research and to a lesser extent to the development of new theories. Here that in the current situation of medical-social crisis is necessary the



theoretical approach capable of offering the perspective of the best solutions for reducing the emotional impact and establishing the state of individual and social harmony. This need has been felt since the beginning of viral aggression because people have acutely felt the need for emotional support in dealing with the fear caused by the specter of disease and death. In addition, anxiety is accompanied by uncertainty, hopelessness and loss of opportunity to make plans for the future. (Anderson C.E., 2019)

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Changing a hypothetical situation into a real one, turned us overnight into the protagonists of a gloomy scenario and what makes the situation even more dramatic is the need for isolation and distancing as a medically effective measure, which at a psychological level has a negative impact by loneliness of the individual who perceives this situation as an abandonment and as a limitation of access to social support provided by other individuals. In addition, people of all ages were forced to give up their daily routine at the family, professional or social level, which increased their sense of insecurity. Let's look at one example, namely the need to use digital media with which many of them, especially the elderly are not familiar. Beyond their real and undeniable benefits, digital communication mainly without eye contact has been a source of stress for certain categories due to the inaccessibility or low level of empathy offered by this type of communication which lacks non-verbal language and paraverbal is often difficult to decipher.

Certainly, the attention of the scientific world will be directed towards finding solutions for these problems that have opened new research horizons in a direction little explored so far. That is why I considered it necessary to approach such a subject, without claiming to solve this problem. It is sometimes necessary to formulate hypotheses that trigger a cascade of questions on a topic that will sooner or later receive appropriate answers.

Of course, we customized the concept for the pandemic situation, but it must be emphasized that the development of empathic abilities represents a progress of the human being and a step on the evolutionary scale for it. (Bell V.A., 2009)

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

Emotional harmony expressed through empathy determines the adoption of adaptive behavior and at the same time favorably influences prosocial behavior or materialized in prosocial behavior.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

It is important to us to develop at the social level the manifestation of an empathic behavior, but it is equally vital for well-being and social evolution to perpetuate this behavior. This fact can be assimilated to a positive experience detached from a tragic event, the equivalent of a type of social development that is embodied in the sum of individual experiences. It is also important for us to learn from a tragic experience in order not to repeat a series of errors but also to make a leap on the scale of human evolution. This can be done by introspection and equally by empathic bowing to those around us. (Freeman J.B., 2009)

5. DISCUSSION

We start from the premise that the fight against viral aggression corroborated with empathy and its manifestation at the social level through compassion, would determine each of us to adopt a prosocial behavior in order to limit viral transmission. Anxiety caused by contacting the virus can represent at the social level the common denominator of individuals' behavior and at the same time, the promoter of an adaptive behavior to determine the increase of social entropy, more precisely to lead to social harmony through individual harmony. (He S., 2016)

Current neurobiology studies, supported by neuroimaging evidence, have led to the reconceptualization of the notion of empathy. Initially, empathy, seen as a limited manifestation at the emotional level, is now assimilated to a new concept, with two components: one emotional and the second cognitive. Therefore, empathy is no longer included in the category of innate traits, being seen as a skill that can be "cultivated", learned or educated. In addition, the cognitive component completes the

emotional component, playing an eminently pro-social role when the emotional component is deficient or missing due to racial, ethnic, religious or physical differences. "(Brown R.A., 2009)

However, it is necessary to strictly delimit the meaning of the notion of empathy, this being often used to refer to a series of related phenomena. Defining empathy is extremely difficult and for this reason it is currently accepted to pass through the filter of several dimensions of the psyche. Thus the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of empathy are accepted. (Segal A.E., 2011)

Three senses of empathy are currently accepted:

1. Affective sharing that reflects the natural ability to become emotionally triggered by the emotions of others
2. Empathic concern that corresponds to the motivation to take care of the well-being of another
3. Taking perspective, which is the ability to consciously transpose oneself into another individual's mind and to imagine what that person thinks or feels.

Studies have shown that we feel the pain of others in an attenuated form through representation in the brain. It is about the possibility to feel and act at the actions of other individuals, a fact called the theory of inner imitation. Thus, individuals are divided into empathic and non-empathic. But even in empathic individuals, the attenuation phenomenon is a mechanism of adaptation because the perception of pain at the same level of intensity would make us incapable of compassion for the person in suffering, being captured by their own pain. In other words, the suffering similar to that of the person involved in the situation would create a vulnerability of the observer who would lose his empathic capacity, this being counteracted by the appearance of self-empathy. Self-empathy is the precursor to the ability to direct this ability to others leading to what has been called empathic contagion. The origin of empathic compassion is in fact in the possibility of each individual to imagine that he is in the situation in which the suffering person is positioned. Suffering can take various forms: physical, mental, moral or social. (Shihui H., 2009). The peculiarity of suffering in a pandemic context consists precisely in the complexity given by the combination of all these types of suffering. Empathic capacity is different, conditioned through birth, which is why the intervention of the cognitive, learned, component of empathy is necessary which can cancel discriminatory behaviors due to prejudices related to race, religion, sex or education. (Dominquez J.F., 2009)

That is why we cannot talk about empathy in relation to pro-social behavior without referring to compassion, a related notion of it. We can define compassion as an objective manifestation of empathy, a response of the observer to the perception of the suffering of another individual.

Beyond the theoretical aspect, the question remains whether the learned empathy can achieve a stable balance materialized in an altruistic, pro-social behavior that is not affected by what is called the theory of compassion fatigue.

The general framework of the pandemic is particularly complex and involves individual and social elements. In this context, what would be the purpose and benefits of adopting an empathic behavior? What would be the common denominator of behavior, the bridge between individual and social behavior? (Karterud S., 2019)

Analyzing the situation only from the perspective of public health, the crisis we are in can be assimilated to the loss of a common good named, the health. Does this common good belong equally to all individuals? If we refer to the accessibility to the health systems or to the possibility to benefit from performant medical services, the answer will be negative. In the case of preventing infectious diseases, however, the answer is certainly yes. The aggressor is represented by the vital universal threat, and the common denominator of general individual and social behavior is one of an emotional nature, namely fear.

The ancestral mechanism of man in the case of any threat is represented by the reaction of flight or struggle. In the current situation, the flight reaction is maladaptive limiting social and individual resources. Instead, the fight reaction can be represented by the adherence to the sanitary measures, by the mutual help of the manifestation of empathy and compassion and by the increase of the interhuman connection.

We start from the premise that the fight against viral aggression corroborated with empathy and its manifestation at the social level through compassion, would determine each of us to adopt a pro-social behavior in order to limit viral transmission. Anxiety caused by contacting the virus can represent

at the social level the common denominator of individuals' behavior and at the same time, the promoter of an adaptive behavior to the situation. (Losin R.A., 2009)

Understanding the concept of social empathy is imperative in order to identify the factors that contribute to the initiation of prosocial behavior as an integral part of social medicine. We need a double approach to the notion of empathy, one from a psychological perspective focused on the cognitions, emotions and behaviors underlying them and a philosophical one strictly bent on the conceptual aspect of empathy. (Decety J., 2016)

The theoretical framework of the study of the theory of mind implies a confrontation of two theories, namely, Theory of Simulation (ST) and Theory-Theory (TT). The limitation at the theoretical framework failed to fine-tune the two theories. The development of neuroscience by perfecting neuroimaging allowed the translation of intuitive notions, purely speculative in the field of evidence based on possible evidence by testing the predictions made by the two theories.

The theory of theory (TT) refers to the human development of understanding about the outside world. The theory of theory is currently explained through the Bayesian inference that leads us to another theory in the context of the article, namely the theory of choice. The theory of choice can be divided into the theory of normative decision (norms representing a concept of practical importance that leads to certain actions). In this context, we must remember the optimal decision term that represents the best choice quantified by its usefulness. The second component of choice theory is represented by descriptive decision theory which analyzes how decisions are made. (Iapperly I.A., 2008)

Simulation theory postulates that simulation or cognitive empathy is a component that underlies our understanding of the behavior of other individuals.

Thus, cognitive social neuroscience, as a distinct branch of neuroscience, seeks to explain the psychological and neural mechanisms of human experience and behavior.

We must not eliminate from the equation the aspect of the benefits or disadvantages that result from an individual choice. Going further with the reasoning, in the context of the two theories mentioned above, how can we determine individuals to make individual choices that correspond to a desirable social behavior, adapted to a crisis situation?

Cognitive social neuroscience, as a distinct branch of neuroscience, seeks to explain the psychological and neural mechanisms of human experience and behavior. (Przyrembel M., 2012)

Behavioral changes in individuals involve volitional mechanisms closely related to obtaining rewards. In the current situation caused by the pandemic, rewards expected by individuals, materialized in the return to patterns of previous social behavior is not possible at this time, which leads to feelings of frustration, anger, revolt or disobedience. Changing beliefs does not guarantee changing behaviors. The mechanisms of action are much more complex and can be explained by the Theory of Self-Determination (SDT) which brings to the fore the fact that external behavioral regulations are based on the internalization process, namely the dynamic process of transforming an extrinsic motive into personally supported values. According to the theory of self-determination there are three fundamental psychological needs that contribute to psychological well-being and health, represented by: autonomy, competence and belonging (to the group). (Currie G., 2002)

Here is how our choices are determined by a personal interest or benefit, personal beliefs but also belonging to a certain social group and largely the existence of opinion leaders or currents of opinion easily conveyed through digital communication channels (network facebook, twitter, media) without to be verified or verifiable or elaborated and framed in a scientific context.

Baumeister and Leary's studies point out that belonging is a universal characteristic of the human being independent of cultural factors or personality type, constituting a fundamental human motivation. Dissatisfaction caused by the impossibility of regular social interaction leads to feelings of loneliness, mental suffering and the acute appearance of the feeling of establishing new social relations. On the other hand, the current society cultivates, obliges and conditions the need for belonging, thus reinforcing the need to transform extrinsic reasons into personally sustained values that lead to the increase of self-esteem.

The social distance absolutely necessary to limit viral transmission limits the regular physical contact of individuals who fail to satisfy their need for social membership only by establishing long-distance connections. The threat of social ties triggers negative emotional states: anxiety, depression and even the extreme form of their manifestation, suicide. Anxiety is born from the natural fear of illness and

death, but it is also a consequence of separation from others, by affecting attachment. The specter of one's own death and the news of one's death are the most traumatic events a human being can experience. Thus, by affecting the affiliation and attachment determined by social isolation, cognitions, emotions and consequently the social behavior of individuals are influenced.

Epistemologically, the action of social knowledge is different when individuals interact actively and directly with each other. Digitization offers the possibility of a remote interaction but the exact coordinates regarding the level of empathy offered in such a relationship are not yet well known.

Regarding the compliance with the imposed medical-social rules in a pandemic context, it would be interesting to analyze the issue of procedural justice. This is a process by which individuals assess their level of membership based on their ability to make a contribution to the group to which they are affiliated. Another important notion in adopting prosocial behavior is represented by fairness, a factor that maintains the individual's sense of belonging to the group. (Brock R. G., 2007)

It would be useful to use these theoretical notions as tools to create an action profile with certain coordinates clearly established in relation to a general individual profile applicable at the social level so as to trigger, educate or create prosocial behavior.

At this point we come to the philosophical meaning of empathy as a notion related to morality and justice. Analyzed from this perspective, empathy can be considered the determining factor that models and facilitates adherence to prosocial behavior. (Maxwell N., 2017)

More recently, there is talk of empathy and fairness. It is considered that the notion of fairness is fundamental in the context of interpersonal relations at the social level, in each of its dimensions: family, workplace, economic, political.

A study conducted on primates and the comparison of data obtained with data obtained from neuroscience studies in humans showed a link between the feeling of fairness and that of empathy. These two psychological variables seem to be the factors involved in downgrading the psychological mechanisms underlying prosocial behavior. Neural studies in humans show that the interaction between a sense of fairness and empathy is important for maintaining prosocial behavior and cooperation. (Yamamoto S., 2012)

6. CONCLUSIONS

One of the models of social empathy that can be considered most useful in the context of the approached subject involves three components: individual empathy, contextual understanding and social responsibility. There are three fundamental notions for understanding the context in which we find ourselves and they can constitute the premises that lead to the adoption and maintenance of a prosocial behavior.

In order to explain social harmony through empathy, it is necessary to appeal to a notion taken from thermodynamics, entropy. T. Parsons defined the social system as "a way of organizing the elements of action relative to the persistence or orderly processes of changing the interactive patterns of a plurality of individual actors." (Parsons T., 1951) According to this article, empathy can be considered a factor of progress in the evolution of social systems leading to increased entropy, assimilated in the current situation of social balance. In essence, balance and harmony can be considered equivalent notions in the context of the approached subject. The term social potential, taken from thermodynamics seems to define the potential of the human being. Studies show that from a pragmatic point of view the human being can train his emotions, being necessary to develop a model that leads to predictability and quantification of individuals' emotions.

A forecast model in this sense at the social level would provide useful information applicable in crisis situations such as the one we are currently going through. In addition, studies suggest that the emotions of online connected individuals are superior to those of face-to-face individuals. In a pandemic context, this is particularly useful given the need for social distancing. A model of emotion prediction would be useful for quantifying the phenomena of social coherence and consequently whether or not to adhere to established health rules.

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