

Today's college kids are 40-per-cent less empathetic, study finds

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Today's college students are 40-per-cent less empathetic than those of the 1980s and 1990s, says a University of Michigan study that analyzed the personality tests of 13,737 students over 30 years.

The influx of callous reality TV shows and the astronomical growth of social networking and texting - technologies that allow people to tune others out when they don't feel like engaging - may be to blame, the authors hypothesize.

They examined 72 studies of American college students, mean age 20, from 1979 to 2009. All of them had taken the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which looks at empathic concern, an emotional response to the distress of others, and "perspective-taking," or the ability to imagine another person's perspective.

In previous studies, people who scored higher on empathic concern were more likely to have returned incorrect change, carried a stranger's belongings, let somebody ahead of them in line, given money to a homeless person or looked after a friend's plant or pet. Crisis-help-line volunteers had significantly higher scores for perspective-taking and empathic concern than a control group.

The researchers found a 48-per-cent decrease in empathic concern and a 34-per-cent decrease in perspective-taking between 1979 and 2009. In particular, post-millennial students were far less likely to agree with statements such as, "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me" and "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective."

"Young adults today comprise one of the most self-concerned, competitive, confident, and individualistic cohorts in recent history," the researchers write, referring to the "Me Generation."

They note that the most sizable empathy drop came after 2000 as social networks such as Facebook and MySpace began to flourish. These "physically distant online environments" allowed people to "lionize their own lives" and "functionally create a buffer between individuals, which makes it easier to ignore others' pain, or even at times, inflict pain upon others."

The authors cite a 2005 study that found significant decreases in empathic concern and perspective-taking among a longitudinal sample of medical interns from the start of their internships in 2000 to completion three years later. They also point to the recent case of a New

York medical student who posed smiling, giving a thumbs-up, with a cadaver, a photo that later circulated on Facebook.

Other cited studies reveal that more young adults are living alone, and more are materialistic. Both conditions are linked to lower empathy, the authors argue. Also on the rise is narcissism, a trait that has people viewing others in terms of their utility.

"Not surprisingly, this growing emphasis on the self has also come with a decreased emphasis on others," the authors write.

In the case of students who were attending college after the year 2000, developmental factors may be at play, says lead author Sara Konrath, an assistant professor at the university's Institute for Social Research.

"These kids were born around 1980. It could be a change in parenting style. ... Kids are getting the implicit message from parents that success is what really matters. It's hard to spend your life pursuing success and at the same time pursue empathy, because empathy takes work."

Mary Gordon, the Toronto founder and president of Roots of Empathy, also blames a "poverty of time" in families.

"You have to experience empathy to continue to develop it. If children don't have enough opportunity and parents don't have enough time to be with their children, it's really difficult," she said.

The non-profit organization offers an experiential learning program to students from kindergarten to Grade 8 to help beef up children's "emotional literacy." School officials typically call the organization after they've seen a spike in bullying. (The program was offered in 13,000 Canadian classrooms this year.)

"When you have social change, the children are always the canaries in the mine shaft," Ms. Gordon said.

The program invites a neighbourhood parent and infant to visit a classroom 27 times over the school year, along with a special instructor.

"They are coached in observing the baby, understanding its feelings and what's going between the baby and the parent, which is the attachment relationship, the template for every other relationship in life. The baby is a launch pad."

Although psychiatrists still squabble over the definition of empathy, Ms. Gordon puts it simply as "understanding how another person feels." She said the younger children who partake in the program quickly come to realize that "the baby has feelings, and that we're all grown-up babies."

Although Prof. Konrath is concerned about the empathy gap, not least of all because it's a key symptom of autism and sociopathy, she says programs such as Roots of Empathy make her optimistic.

"Empathy is kind of like exercise: People who are low in empathy are a little bit out of shape, and people who are high in empathy are practicing it a lot. The hopeful part of me wants people going to the empathy gym."