

Why men need to think about empathy

By Simon Baron-Cohen, author of 'Zero Degrees of Empathy'

The traditional male role was to be tough, even ruthless, able to make strong leadership decisions no matter what the human cost, to show mental as well as physical strength, so that one's enemies could find no chink in our armour through which to gain advantage.

This traditional male role assumes that male society is strictly hierarchical, that our position on the ladder depends on gaining the respect of other males, or intimidating them into not challenging your position. It assumes that, as males, our purpose is all about social climbing, and to do whatever it takes to achieve this: to be alert for opportunities to make acquire more resources, power, and be ready to step on, or push aside, others to get there.

You'd be right to think the above description would fit a troop of male baboons on the savannah plains of Africa just as well as a bunch of guys in an office in central London or New York. And that's because the idea of male competition achieved via strength has long evolutionary roots: it's not unique to human groups, but seems to apply to any social primate.

Behind this veneer of strength and ruthlessness is a mysterious thing called 'empathy' (or caring about other's feelings). Traditionally, men couldn't afford to show too much of this, since to do so might leave you incapable of stabbing someone in the back, walking over them in the pursuit of power, or switching your alliances as opportunities present themselves. Empathy might just get in the way or slow you down.

Imagine a military leader with empathy: they just couldn't do the job. Imagine the political leader saying 'after you' to a fellow politician, so as not to hurt their feelings. They would just never ascend the ladder to gain more power. Imagine not wanting to clench your fist visibly when you feel someone is 'dissing' you, in case your fist frightens them. Surely, they'd just see you as a 'loser', someone easy to 'diss', and they'd walk all over you?

It's not hard to understand how – in this evolutionary scenario – males may have ended up with less empathy than females, or how males with lower empathy might have been more successful in the competition for resources, power, and status. And as evolutionary biologists will tell you, the higher your status, the higher your 'reproductive success', or 'fitness'. Expressed bluntly, the higher your status, the more likely you are to find a mate, and thereby pass on your genes. And if there are genes that 'code' for lower empathy as a successful style of behaviour, it is not hard to see that if lower levels of empathy win out over higher levels of empathy, this means we are breeding sons who themselves will have lower empathy.

My previous book was called *'The Essential Difference'* (Penguin, 2003) and explored this key difference between the sexes, and how *on average* lower

empathy in males may be the result not just of how we raise our children, but also the consequence of biological differences between the sexes (genes and hormones, including testosterone). My recent book is called '*Zero Degrees of Empathy*' (Penguin, 2012) and explores the idea that empathy is on a spectrum (the empathy bell curve) with zero degrees at one end, and six degrees at the other. Empathy can be measured in different ways, one way being a questionnaire called the Empathy Quotient (EQ). You can have a go at filling this out yourself. The research shows that, *on average*, males score lower on the EQ than females. In my book I explore why this difference in average empathy levels between males and females might also help us understand why there are more males with antisocial personality disorder ("psychopaths") who are willing to do "whatever it takes" to get what they want in their selfish pursuit of power, status, and pleasure.

The above portrait of males may appeal to you if you want a society that is totally hierarchical and based on power. Fascists wouldn't have any problem with that kind of social organization. But most of us (perhaps more women than men) would like a society based on human values of respect for others (whatever their status), not hurting others, caring for others (especially the vulnerable), helping others (especially those less fortunate than oneself), and even reducing the extremes of injustice of inequality (for example, between the super-rich and the super-poor). The 1960s social revolution was not just about drugs, sex, and rock'n'roll. It was also about 'give peace a chance', 'make love not war', and about feminism and equality.

Fortunately those ideas were not just dismissed as irrelevant or pie-in-the-sky. Those ideas took root, so that most of us have seen what it is like to have fathers who show emotions, play an increasingly equal role in child-care, and who parent not by wielding the rod, but by listening and reasoning. Most of us have grown up seeing hugely positive changes in our important institutions: Primary school classrooms are no longer places where children sit in fear in quiet rows intimidated by a teacher threatening corporal punishment for non-conformity (as existed in the 1950s). Paediatric wards in hospitals are no longer places where parents are told to leave their young child in the charge of a stern matron, causing traumatic emotional distress to young kids to compound their medical condition (again as was the case in the 1950s). Rather, primary schools and paediatric wards are warm, attractive places where parents are welcome to cross the threshold, get involved, and where children feel safe, confident, free from intimidation, fear of separation, or bullying (of any kind), and where (ideally) children feel happy.

These changes in the family and in wider society are not just because there are more women at the helm, though it is likely that women in leadership roles have fortunately brought in values based on empathy to replace those based on competition and strength. These changes are also a sign that men (whether as fathers, teachers, doctors, employees or employers) want to change the way they do things. The traditional male role is not the only model available, and human beings – as the 1960s social revolution reminded us – are not automatons, genetically programmed to behave in only one mode. Men may have millions of

years of evolution pushing them to operate in one way, but human beings have an advantage over all other animals: we can exercise choice over whether to follow our biological destiny or to change our behavior. The fact that empathy is not just the product of our biology but also of our social experience means that there is 'plasticity' in the system: we can encourage empathy, foster it, and see it blossom and develop in men and women, in boys as well as girls.

When you fill out the Empathy Quotient, keep it in mind that your score is not fixed once and forever in stone. You can decide to learn to be more empathic, if a society based on the values of empathy over pure competition is important to you. Think what kind of political leader you would prefer to have: one that 'nukes' the enemy to teach them a lesson? Or one that sits and talks and listens to the enemy, to understand their point of view, in case behind the conflict is an enemy who has the same human needs as we do, needs that can be accommodated through a negotiated understanding of how we are at root more similar to each other than different. If you prefer this second kind of political leader, who also values caring schools and caring hospitals, then your own values are based on empathy. As men, we need to remind ourselves that whilst displays of strength have their benefits, so do displays of empathy.

The Adult Version of the Empathy Quotient (EQ)

1. I can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation.
2. I find it difficult to explain to others things that I understand easily, when they don't understand it first time.
3. I really enjoy caring for other people.
4. I find it hard to know what to do in a social situation.
5. People often tell me that I went too far in driving my point home in a discussion.
6. It doesn't bother me too much if I am late meeting a friend.
7. Friendships and relationships are just too difficult, so I tend not to bother with them.
8. I often find it difficult to judge if something is rude or polite.
9. In a conversation, I tend to focus on my own thoughts rather than on what my listener might be thinking.
10. When I was a child, I enjoyed cutting up worms to see what would happen.

If you agree with items 1 and 3, this would get you two EQ points. If you disagreed with item 2 and items 4–10, this would give you a total of ten EQ points. In this case, the higher your score, the better your empathy. This is the short EQ: the full EQ is available in the appendix of 'Zero Degrees of Empathy' (Penguin).

