Empathy in a Moral Society

To live together in a social setting people must be able to relate properly to one another. That calls for an understanding of what the other is thinking and sensing what he or she is feeling. These capacities—to understand and feel—are called empathy, a translation of the German *einfüllung* (literally, feeling into) first introduced into English by the psychologist Edward Titchener (1909). Empathy, cognitive or emotional, probably evolutionary but also biologically based, is essential to a good relationship or communal living. It is not only a human attribute, since, for example, dolphins (Edwards, 2010) and bonobos (Sandin, 2007) also seem to experience it. Humans show it early in life. Already prior to 2 years of age, children are seen to show concern for others, seemingly understanding their emotional state and mental distress (Roth-Hanania, Davidov, Zahn-Waxler, 2011).

Interestingly, in the field of psychiatry there are illnesses that negate the presence of one or the other types of empathy. Indeed, schizophrenics, psychopaths, and narcissists seem to possess cognitive empathy but to lack emotional empathy, contrary to what is observed in persons diagnosed with a borderline personality disorder, who show only affective empathy, at times exaggeratedly so. These psychiatric behavioral manifestations have corresponding functional neural imaging findings, probably involving the inferior frontal gyrus or the ventral-medial prefrontal gyrus of the brain (Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry 2009).

In this issue, Posick, Rocque, and Rafter, in their very interesting and far-reaching article, extend the importance of empathy to the field of lawmaking, lawbreaking, and reactions to lawbreaking. They envision the possibility of preventing the development of future antisocial behavior by involving in treatment those children who manifest a lack of empathy and thus a possible predisposition to future psychopathic behavior. They also consider the usefulness of empathy in the field of policing, believing that more empathic police officers would make them more understanding and more successful in their activities. The benefits of empathy could be extended to the legal system and the creation of laws: Incorporating a new empathic feeling toward transgressors and their victims may diminish the application of harsh laws and the rebound misbehavior of already-troubled persons.

Corresponding Author:
George B. Palermo, University of Nevada, School of Medicine, Las Vegas, 2169 Silent Echoes Drive, Henderson, NV, 89044, USA.
Email: gbpalermo@gmail.com
In the ultimate analysis, what Posick and colleagues put forth in their article is that even the criminological and legal fields could benefit from the presence of a more empathic approach toward offenders. I believe that more understanding and discernment in dealing with miscreants and enacting laws more appropriate to the specific offender and offense would be more natural and more moral. I am quite sure that those living in a moral society would agree that more understanding of others and more feeling for them (cognitive and emotional empathy) would not only rectify some individual relationships but also create a better and more just social climate.

George B. Palermo, MD, MScCrim, PhD
Editor-in-Chief
University of Nevada, School of Medicine, Henderson, USA

References