



The empathy bus

Description

Who could deny the need for greater empathy? Apparently the twentieth century was the era of *in* trospection and navel gazing. Letâ??s make the twenty first century about *out*rospection. At least thatâ??s the enthusiastic proposal of [Roman Krznaric](#) in his 2014 book *Empathy: Why it Matters and How To Get It*, and [related website](#).

Thatâ??s one of a legion of self improvement books currently on the market. I was drawn to this particular one in light of the soon-to-open travelling â??[Empathy Museum](#)â?? in which thereâ??ll be tools and encounters that enable you to put yourself in other peopleâ??s shoes, or headspace.

I see at least three problems in the book, the museum, and this style of self improving empathic thinking.

We canâ??t do without prejudice

The book identifies a problem with the current era. It seems that empathy levels have dropped 50% in the US, and the rest of the world is following this downward trend. Apparently â??we face four fundamental social and political barriers that block the full expression of our empathic imaginationsâ?? (5). These obstacles are â??prejudice, authority, distance and denial.â??

As someone schooled in the workings of interpretation I certainly have difficulty going back to the blanket denigration of prejudice. See post [What does it all mean](#). How can we interpret, judge and cope without some framework, prior understanding, i.e. initial prejudice, to make sense of the world, and that we open up to challenge? The removal of pre-judgement is an impossibility, and we couldnâ??t do without it anyway. We need to test and adjust our prejudices, not abandon prejudice.

Dealing with otherness

The book presumes that we need to get into the shoes of the other (figuratively). This is an old narrative similar to the easily delivered soft ethical injunction to reach out, build bridges, look for common ground. Itâ??s as if we are all the same after all.

The danger of this position is that it can silence the other by insisting that we understand, even if we don't or can't yet. A more interesting strategy is to identify, recognise and acknowledge the otherness of others. It's very difficult to converse with and seek to understand the other if you haven't already provided them with the space to be other. This takes us back to the [agonistics](#) of social relations as long as it doesn't get flattened by the empathy bus.



Us and them

The third problem is the presumption about 'us,' the 'we' of the book and the web site. The Empathy Museum video tells us that we'll be able to visit the 'human library bus,' where we can speak with someone we wouldn't normally meet, like a Sikh teenager or a gay father. So 'we' doesn't include Sikh teenagers and gay fathers. The 'we' is some kind of norm. It seems there's an *other* category on the edge of society that 'we' have to reach out to. Is the empathy museum for a 'normal,' self-defining majority tasked with empathising with those excluded from its definition?

It's commendable that people are talking about the emotions, empathy and inclusivity in ways that might have passed us by some years ago. The human propensity for empathy is certainly a rich and intriguing place to start, but I don't think Krznaric's is the only direction of travel. Also see blog post: [Posh boys and mirror neurons](#) and [Against empathy](#).

Empathy and emotion

Empathy and emotion are in the air. As well as visiting and testing the Empathy Museum I'm also looking forward to seeing Pixar-Disney's CGI animation set in the mind of a young girl where five personified emotions - Joy, Anger, Disgust, Fear, and Sadness - battle it out. It reminds me of the sitcom *Herman's Head* (1991-1994). It's fun fantasy, as long as we don't believe it's all in the head, and we can really go there.

Reference

- Krznaric, Roman. 2014. *Empathy: Why It Matters, And How To Get It*. Croydon, England: Ebury Publishing.

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1. Ethics

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1. emotion
2. empathy

Date Created

July 4, 2015

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