

Chapter 47

The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize changes in personality traits that have co-occurred with the rise of new social media, and to evaluate the plausibility of the hypothesis that new social media are a partial explanation for these dramatic changes. Studies have found a rise in social disconnection among recent generations of young Americans. Self-esteem and narcissism have been rising in college students from the late 1970s to 2010, with simultaneous declines in empathy. Scholars and lay people alike blame the rise of the internet, and in particular, self-oriented and self-promoting “social” networking sites. This new media landscape could lead to increasing social disconnection even as it superficially increases our social connections, and several studies suggest a direct link between social media use and social disconnection. However, since most research thus far is correlational, interpretations are limited, leaving open more optimistic possibilities for new social media.

INTRODUCTION

We suffer today I believe from a lack of connection with each other. This is common knowledge; so common in fact, that it may not even be true. It may be that we are overconnected, for all I know.
-(Barthelme, 1965, p. 50)

In this chapter I summarize recent empirical studies documenting changes in the self-perceptions of Americans in the past 30 years (from the late 1970s to 2010). The overarching purpose of it is

to weigh in on the role of new social media in causing these changes. I will attempt to answer such questions as: *How have Americans changed in the way they see themselves across the past 50 years? How has the media landscape changed in America across the past 50 years? Could there be a link between the two types of changes? If so, what kind of research has been conducted to help us answer that question?*

Whenever possible, I will rely on empirical or quantitative studies to answer these questions. Many of us have interesting stories to tell about

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changes that are occurring in how people relate to each other and in the new media landscape, and many of us can easily cite examples of how these two may be linked. I rely on empirical research in order to attempt to avoid biases that might occur because of our limited knowledge or perspective. However, since empirical research without these types of stories can be a bit deadening, I also intersperse anecdotes throughout.

Before reviewing research on changes in self-esteem, narcissism, and empathy over time, it is important to first discuss two inevitable targets of widespread prejudice: *young people* and *new media*. There is a long history of older adults criticizing younger generations for ways in which they are different from them. Older adults often complain that youth today are selfish, irresponsible, and have no sense of shame. Here is an example of a quote taken from the popular media. Can you guess when this was written? ¹ “The worst part is that they don’t care what people--their mothers and fathers and uncles and aunts--think of them. They haven’t any sense of shame, honor or duty ... they don’t care about anything except pleasure.” This kind of stereotyping has been occurring for a very long time.

Currently, almost half of all television stories about young people present them in a negative light (Amundson, Lichter, & Lichter, 2005; Gilliam & Bales, 2001). Obviously young people are not the only group to face such stereotypes, but it is still unfortunate that audiences crave such stories. In fact, reading negative news stories about young people boosts older adults’ self-esteem (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010), which may explain why they are so popular. In any case, since there is a prevalent bias against young people that has existed for generations, it is important to critically and skeptically examine the empirical evidence concerning generational differences in self-views, social attitudes, and social behaviors. Thus, in Part I of this chapter I will review the research on changes in self-perceptions among American young people in recent years. Importantly, these

data are obtained from young people’s self-reports, which hopefully eliminates some of the biases from older adults.

Another human tendency appears to have at least as long of a history, which is the tendency to be suspicious of new media in whatever form it might take. One such new medium was described as: a cause of “negligence and folly,” a “non-entity” that only “vulgar” people enjoy, a “poison,” a “casual disorder,” a “national evil,” “the reflection of our own weakness,” and a “vicious affection.” Again, you may be surprised which new media is referred to by these nasty names.² This is just one example of the predictable discomfort people have in the presence of major changes in media and technology. From our smug perspective, it seems laughable that novels were ever seen as such a threat, but future generations may find our endless debates about the perils of the online world equally amusing. It is with this historical lens that I will discuss recent research tracking changes in the individual and social identities of young Americans and linking these changes to the rise of new social media. In Part II, I will briefly review the history of major types of media available throughout the 20th century, and will then settle on a deeper discussion of new social media and its potential role in causing increased social disconnection in the past several years.

PART I: INCREASING DISCONNECTION

Recent research in psychology and sociology documents an increase in self-focus and a simultaneous decrease in a focus on others that is becoming more prevalent in American society, especially among young people (see Table 1, for a summary). Much of this research was conducted by me or my colleagues. In it, we examine changes in standard measures of self-esteem, individualism, narcissism, empathy, and attachment style, from the late 1970s until the present time. I also

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