

Why are people cruel?

Multi-award winning Cambridge psychologist, Professor Simon Baron-Cohen suggests that Empathy – or rather, lack of Empathy – is at the root of all evil.

Simon Baron-Cohen is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology in the Departments of Experimental Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge. In his latest book, *The Science of Evil*, he offers a new theory on what causes people to behave with extreme cruelty, pointing out that there is no shortage of horrific examples.

"As a scientist, I want to understand what causes people to treat others as if they were mere objects," says Cohen.

"The challenge is to explain how people are capable of causing extreme hurt, by moving the debate into the realm of science."

To do this, he puts empathy - and the lack of it - under the microscope and suggests that it is quite probable that science will eventually be able to address the problem.

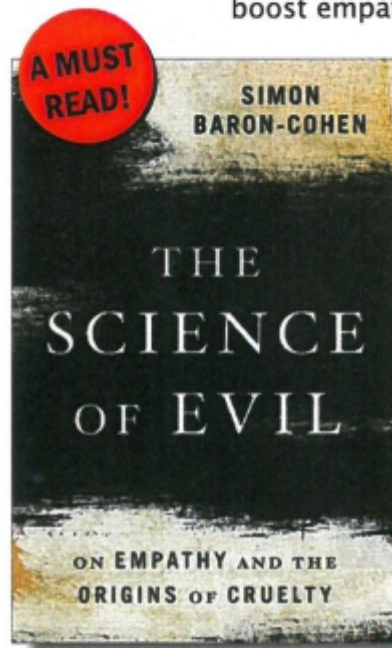
"Let's start," he says, "by substituting the concept of 'evil', with the term 'empathy erosion', a condition that arises when we objectify others. This has the effect of devaluing them, and erosion of empathy is a state of mind that can be found in any culture."

Empathy, he says, is like 'a dimmer switch' with a spectrum from low to medium to high. When empathy is dimmed, it causes us to think only of our own interests. When we are *solely* in the 'I' mode, our empathy is switched off.

Professor Baron-Cohen has developed a scale from 0 - 6 to measure the differing degrees of empathy among people. Level Zero is when an individual has no empathy at all. At Level 6, an individual displays remarkable empathy. The majority of people fall between Level 2 - 4 on the scale.

Research is in its infancy, but "there is growing evidence for the argument that instead of using the term 'evil', we should talk about reduced (or even absent) empathy," says Cohen.

The existence of an 'empathy circuit' in the brain is now established, he says, and indications are that genetic, hormonal, neural and environmental factors all contribute to the activity or under-activity of this circuit. Already there are promising developments - like, for instance, the fact that oxytocin nasal inhalation spray has been shown to boost empathy in some cases.



But, he says, the critical role of empathy in our society has been overlooked.

"Empathy is the most valuable social resource in our world... It is puzzling that in school or parenting curricula empathy figures hardly at all, and in politics, business, the courts, or policing, it is rarely, if ever, on the agenda. The erosion of empathy is a critical global issue of our time," says Cohen.

"It relates to the health of our communities, be they small (like families) or big (like nations)... Without empathy we risk the breakdown of relationships, become capable of hurting others, and cause conflict. With empathy, we have a resource to resolve conflict, increase community cohesion, and dissolve another person's pain."

Professor Baron-Cohen is passionate about what he calls 'the internal pot of gold' - a crucible that nurtures and supports the development of empathy.

"What a parent can give his or her child by way of filling the child up with positive emotions is a gift more precious than anything material. That internal pot of gold is something the child can carry inside him or her throughout their life.... This internal pot of gold is what gives the individual the strength to deal with challenges, the ability to bounce back from setbacks, and the ability to show affection and enjoy intimacy with others, in other relationships," he says.



Is there a scientific explanation?

“When we fail to nurture young children with parental affection, we deprive them of the most valuable birthright we can give them and damage them almost irreversibly. Such effects are not always evident in childhood or even adolescence and young adulthood, but they can come back to bite the individual in midlife.”

Professor Baron-Cohen says he believes we have taken empathy for granted and thus overlooked its critical value to us. “Psychology as a science virtually ignored it for a century. Educators focusing on literacy and mathematics have also largely ignored it. We just assume empathy will develop in every child, come what may. We put little time, effort or money into nurturing it. Our politicians almost never mention it...”

“Empathy is a universal solvent. Any problem immersed in empathy becomes soluble.”

The alternative, he says, is too horrific to contemplate and he refers to Cambridge historian Ian Kershaw's chilling phrase: “*The path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference.*”

“This book,” he says, “puts empathy back on the agenda. We need to realise what a powerful resource we as a species have, at our very fingertips, if only we prioritize it.”