Business Ethics Journal Review
SCHOLARLY COMMENTS ON ACADEMIC BUSINESS ETHICS
businessethicsjournalreview.com

Cite as: **Bus Ethics J Rev** 3(2): 8–14,
http://doi.org/10.12747/bejr2015.03.02

Edited by **Chris MacDonald & Alexei Marcoux**

ISSN: 2326-7526

The Science of Creating Organizational Connectedness

David Ohreen and Jim Silovs[1]

A COMMENTARY ON Kathryn Pavlovich and Keiko Krahnke (2012), "Empathy, Connectedness and Organisation," ***J Bus Ethics*** 105: 131–137, http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0961-3

ABSTRACT

Pavlovich and Krahnke's inclusion of neurological and psychological evidence to support organizational connectedness should be lauded. Unfortunately, we suggest a more fine-grained reading of the literature does not support their claim that empathy is critical to dissolving boundaries between employees and increasing altruism.

DEFINING EMPATHY IS challenging, in part, because it often means different things to different people. However, generally speaking, empathy has two separate but interlocking features. The first feature is affective resonance. Affective resonance is the matching of one's own emotions to that of another by virtue of imagining themselves in like situations as if they were 'in their shoes'. The second feature is cognitive simulation. Cognitive simulation is the imagining of another person's circumstances and situational specifics in order to construct an understanding of the target's mind. It's both the affective and cognitive elements of empathy that define contemporary usage.

[1] Mount Royal University (both). Email: dohreen@mtroyal.ca, jsilovs@mtroyal.ca

Pavlovich and Krahnke (2012) explore the affective and cognitive elements of empathy in creating organizational connectedness. According to the authors, empathy creates cognitive and emotional resonance within and between colleagues resulting in greater self-awareness, connectedness with others, and organizational harmony. They state (2012: 133),

> Empathy enables people to suspend judgement and to comprehend paradigmatic differences to foster more enlightened relationships. This in turn creates more humanitarian, interactive and creative environments.

In recognizing our connectedness with others through empathy, organizations can transcend atomistic self-interest to create inter-dependent communities focused on human flourishing.

This Commentary will focus exclusively on what we take to be the authors' two strongest arguments in support of organizational unity—mirror neurons and altruism. Although Pavlovich and Krahnke's use of scientific literature is intended to bolster their claims, we argue empathy is not necessary for cultivating connectedness and the indicators relied on by the authors to establish the existence of empathy (mirror neurons and altruism) may not be accurate predictors of empathy itself.

Mirror Neurons and Empathy

Discovered in monkeys (Rizzolatti et al. 1996) and then in humans (Gallese 2003), mirror neurons in the premotor cortex are stimulated when an action is observed and then resonates, mirror-like, in the observing person; there is a neural mirroring in the actor's brain and observer's brain. In other words, mirror neurons 'light up' when a goal-related action is performed in the target and when the goal-related action is observed by another person. This mirroring system is automatic and beyond consciousness.

The link between empathy and mirror neurons, says Pavlovich and Krahnke, creates unconscious cognitive and affective sharing between people. The sharing of neuropathways dissolves barriers between self and others and, as a result, empathy enhances "connectedness conditions of goodwill, suspensions of judgement towards the other and the finding of common ground for solution building" (2012: 135). Empathy can reframe the structure of organizations from atomistic self-interested machines to a humanistic coherent

whole and thereby work towards being caring and contributing members of society, rather than profit-oriented centers.

However, we take issue with a number of their claims. First, Pavlovich and Krahnke argue that empathy, as evidenced by the presence of mirror neurons, dissolves barriers between self and others leading to greater connectedness. But this is problematic because empathy is premised on the idea of imagining oneself in the situation of another as if they were 'in their shoes'. This means one does not project personal emotions or beliefs into the other but must quarantine them to avoid contaminating the imaginative process and, therefore, a clear demarcation between self and other must be made. If this is the case, contrary to Pavlovich and Krahnke, empathy does not dissolve barrier, but must create them. The upshot is that it's hard to see how a shared reality could be achieved to build organizational connectedness if empathy requires the erection of barriers which separate and disconnect individuals. Mirror neurons thereby are not evidence of connectedness, but evidence of a response to some situational stimulus that may evoke the same feelings or completely different feelings through the imagination.

Second, Pavlovich and Krahnke (2012: 133) argue that mirror neurons allow the observer "to acknowledge the current state and experience of the other individual." As we understand the authors, cognitive and emotional states must be harmonized between individuals at the biological level and then converted into ethical patterns of actions and behaviour at the organizational level. But the mere presence of mirror neurons may not be accurate predictors of empathic emotional or cognitive states because the latter, not former, requires an understanding of contextual information that is devoid at the neurological level. For example, witnessing someone crying at their cubicle may illicit neural mirroring in me but whether it's because they have been fired or promoted is relative to specific contexts. So, although at the sub-cortex level, mirror neurons might be significant in stimulating parallel responses, at the cortex level, understanding why someone is crying requires previous knowledge beyond unconscious neural processes. Moreover, given our previous argument that mirror neurons may not be accurate predictors of empathy, it is organization context, not brute neurological activity, that may or may not lead to enhanced connectedness.

Third, Pavlovich and Krahnke assume empathy and the associated mirror neurons are ‘hard wired’. But, once again, they ignore the influence of the broader social context. Catmur et al. (2007) found mirror neuron activation is often the result of learning, which means it is not necessarily innate. They argue that neural resonance is a product and process of social interaction including sensorimotor experiences. Mirror neurons are correlated to match and perform actions developed through interacting within social context.

Empathy Leads to Helping (Prosocial) Behaviour

Pavlovich and Krahnke (2012) also use the link between affective empathy and altruism as support for creating greater organizational connectedness. Empathy, it is argued, creates a caring environment and builds good will, employee loyalty and improved performance. Interestingly, the authors don’t use any of the vast psychological research to support the link between empathy and altruism but make reference to primate studies. This exclusion is important because the empathy-prosocial hypothesis has been criticized in the literature and to suggest that humans are hard-wired to help and relieve the suffering of our fellow humans is doubtful.

To briefly illustrate. Batson et al. (1981) found that sympathy (compassion, tender, soft-hearted, etc.) and personal distress (anxiety, upset, perturbed, etc.) are motivating factors in prosocial behaviour. That is, empathy can either cause a person to become genuinely concerned for another’s well being and thereby help or be used to ameliorate one’s own feelings of emotional distress through helping others in need. Similarly, Eisenberg et al. (1989) also discovered, for both children and adults, sympathy was positively associated with prosocial intentions and behaviour, whereas personal distress was unrelated or negatively associated with prosocial intentions.

But the assumption that empathy leads to prosocial (helping) motivation is questionable. For example, Neuberg et al. (1997) found a weak correlation between empathy and prosocial helping. And, most importantly, the authors found concern for others was predicated on whether there was little or no cost to the empathizer. In other words, if helping causes significant costs to an individual, then he or she is less likely to offer assistance. As Neuberg et al. (1997: 515) state, “Indeed, our results reveal that the flower of empathy-motivated helping is more fragile yet, blooming only in the garden of superficial

assistance." They also suggest that helping others may be undertaken for self-interested reasons such as not wanting to be perceived as non-altruistic, having reciprocal needs met, or reducing hostility. In a follow up study, Maner et al. (2002) come to similar conclusions. Helping was the result of nonaltrustic motivation not empathic concern. In other words, taking another's perspective need not lead to prosocial helping.

The implications for Pavlovich and Krahnke are troubling. Either they have to explain how this contradictory evidence fits into their theory or alter their theory in light of the evidence. We suggest they must do the latter. As an alternative, we suggest proactive motivation, and by extension organizational connectedness, can be achieved by other means such as how much employees and managers value one another. Value sharing, we argue, to a large extent, is culturally driven by norms through intensive socialization processes. If we are correct about the cultural transition of values, then why is empathy necessary at all? Shared value systems within family structures, communities, or even corporations could create a sense of connectedness and thus lead to greater helping and altruism without empathy. Cialdini et al. (1997) support this conclusion. They argue that the motivation to help is not based on empathy but rests on our sense of self as it relates to others. Valuing others facilitates emotional attachments (family, kinship, or colleagues) and can produce vicarious experiences of what others are experiencing and thus lead to motivations to help.

Hence, contrary to Pavlovich and Krahnke (2012), empathy is not necessary for cultivating connectedness within organizations, but can be established by creating a culture of togetherness. Van Marrewijk (2004), for example, found credibility (genuine communication between employees and management); respect (supporting, caring, and collaborating); fairness (treating people equally, impartially, and justly); pride (in their work and organization); and camaraderie (friendly and welcoming community) could be used to foster positive interpersonal connectedness and increase organizational performance. Although it's unclear whether these cultural dimensions translate into increased moral motivation and ethical behaviour, it does suggest an alternative to the empathy-altruism hypothesis used to support organizational unity.

Pavlovich and Krahnke's use of mirror neurons and prosocial motivation to support empathy's inclusion is questionable. At the neural level, we don't do anything with the 'fired up' areas of the brain and have no access to their activation and, therefore, cannot use it as a form of empathy because using it requires higher level conceptual understanding. Mirror neurons are merely a kind of perceptual elicitation and cannot be used to definitively support the connection between empathy and ethics in the business literature. And using social-psychological research to support claims of empathy as it relates to prosocial motivation is not clear and, therefore, its incorporation should receive more fine-grained analysis to support organizational connectedness. In short, we disagree with Pavlovich and Krahnke's (2012: 131) claim that empathy is a "critical quality in the development of connectedness" and suggest a deeper reading of the philosophical, psychological, and scientific research fails to support this conclusion.

Received 13 February 2015 / Posted 31 March 2015

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