Mind the Empathy Gap

By Charles D. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Here is some news from recent research in neuroscience that, I think, is relevant for FAS’s mission to prevent global catastrophes. Psychologists Dacher Keltner of the University of California, Berkeley, and Jonathan Haidt of New York University, have argued that feelings of awe can motivate people to work cooperatively to improve the collective good. Awe can be induced through transcendent activities such as celebrations, dance, musical festivals, and religious gatherings. Prof. Keltner and Prof. Paul Piff of the University of California, Irvine, recently wrote in an opinion article for the New York Times that “awe might help shift our focus from our narrow self-interest to the interests of the group to which we belong.” They report that a forthcoming peer reviewed article of theirs in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, “provides strong empirical evidence for this claim.”

Their research team did surveys and experiments to determine whether participants who said they experienced awe in their lives regularly would be more inclined to help others. For example, one study at UC, Berkeley, was conducted near a spectacular grove of beautiful, tall Tasmanian blue gum eucalyptus trees. The researchers had participants either look at the trees or stare at the wall of the nearby science building for one minute. Then, the researchers arranged for “a minor accident” to occur in which someone walking by would drop a handful of pens. “Participants who had spent the minute looking up at the tall trees—not long, but long enough, we found, to be filled with awe—picked up more pens to help the other person.”

Piff and Keltner conclude their opinion piece by surmising that society is awe-deprived because people “have become more individualistic, more self-focused, more materialistic and less connected to others.” My take away is that this observation has ramifications for whether people will band together to tackle the really tough problems confronting humanity including: countering and adapting to climate change, alleviating global poverty, and preventing the use of nuclear weapons. I

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find it interesting that Professors Piff and Keltner have mentioned shifting individuals’ interest to the group to which those people belong.

What about bringing together “in groups” with “out groups”? Can awe help or harm? Here’s where, I believe, the geopolitical and neuroscience news is mixed. First, let’s look at the bad news and then finish on a positive message of recent psychological research showing interventions that might alleviate the animosity between groups who are in conflict.

While awe can be inspiring, a negative connotation toward out groups is implicit in the phrase “shock and awe” in the context of massive demonstration of military force to try to influence the opponent to not resist the dominant group. Many readers will recall attempted use of this concept in the U.S.-led military campaign against Iraq in March and April 2003. U.S. and allied forces moved rapidly with a demonstration of impressive military might in order to demoralize Iraqi forces and thus result in a quick surrender. While Baghdad’s political power center crumbled quickly, many Iraqi troops dispersed and formed the nuclei of the insurgency that then opposed the occupation for many years to come. Thus, in effect, the frightening awe of the invasion induced numerous Iraqis to band together to resist U.S. forces rather than universally shower American troops with garlands.

Nuclear weapons are also meant to shock and awe an opponent. But the opponent does not have to be cowed into submission. To deter this coercive power, the leader of a nation under nuclear threat can either decide to acquire nuclear weapons or form an alliance with a friendly nation that already has these weapons. Other nations that do not feel directly threatened by another nation’s nuclear weapons can ignore these threats and tend to other priorities. This describes the world we live in today. Most of the world’s nations in Central Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia are in nuclear-weapon-free-zones and have opted out of nuclear confrontations. But in many countries in Europe, North America, East Asia, South Asia, and increasingly the Middle East, nuclear weapons have influenced decision makers to get their own weapons and increase reliance on them (for example, China, North Korea, Pakistan, and Russia), acquire a latent capability to make these weapons (for example, Iran), or request and receive protection from nuclear-armed allies (for example, non-nuclear countries of NATO, Japan and South Korea).

Is this part of the world destined to always figuratively sit on a powder keg with a short fuse? Perhaps if people in these countries can close the empathy gap, they might reduce the risk of nuclear war and eventually find cooperative security measures that do not require nuclear weapons. Empathy is the

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ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Empathy is a natural human capacity especially when dealing with people who share many common bonds.

If we can truly understand someone we now perceive to be an enemy, would we be less likely to want to do harm to that person or other members of his or her group? Empathic understanding between groups is not a guarantee of conflict prevention, but it does appear to offer a promising method for conflict reduction. However, as psychological research has shown, failures of empathy often occur between groups that are socially or culturally different. People in one group can also feel pleasure in the suffering of those in the different group, especially if that other group is dominant. The German word *schadenfreude* captures this delight in others’ suffering. Competitive groups especially exhibit *schadenfreude*; for example, Boston Red Sox fans experience glee when the usually dominant New York Yankees lose to a weaker opponent.4

Are there interventions that can disrupt this negative behavior and feelings? Cognitive scientists Mina Cikara, Emile Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe point out that “historical asymmetries of status and power between groups” is a key variable.5 If the same intervention method such as asking participants to take the perspective of the other into account is used for both groups, different effects are observed. For example, the dominant group tends to respond most positively to perspective taking in which members of that group would listen attentively to the perspective or views of the other group. A positive response means that people’s attitude toward the other group becomes favorable. In contrast, the non-dominant group’s members often experience a deepening of negative attitudes toward the dominant group if they engage in perspective taking. Rather, members of the non-dominant group show a favorable change in attitude when they perform perspective giving toward the dominant group. Importantly, they have to know that members of the dominant group are being attentive and really listening to the non-dominant group’s perspective. In other words, the group with less or no political power needs to be heard for positive change to occur. While these results seem to be common sense, Bruneau and Saxe point out that almost always perspective taking is used in interventions intended to bring asymmetric groups together and often this conflict resolution method fails. Their research underscores the importance of perspective giving, especially for non-dominant groups.6

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5 Ibid, p. 151.
This research shows promising results that could have implications for bridging the divide between Americans and Iranians on the different views on nuclear power, for example, or the gap between Americans and Chinese on the implications of the U.S. pivot toward East Asia and the Chinese rise in economic, military, and political power. I conclude this president’s message with encouragement to cognitive scientists in the United States and other nations to apply these and other research techniques to the grand social challenges such as how to get people across the globe to work together to mitigate the effects of climate change and to achieve nuclear disarmament through cooperative security.

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