

# Us not Them:

## COVID-19 Lessons from the Brain Lab



What if simply changing your language from **them** to **us** could save lives in the COVID-19 crisis, whether you are a stay-at-home parent, an Instagram influencer, a journalist or the Chair of NATO? What if taking 5 steps could enable global dialogue, accelerate healthcare solutions and foster international co-operation? Even though lives depend on these 5 steps - would you take them?

### Empathy: the basis of social cohesion

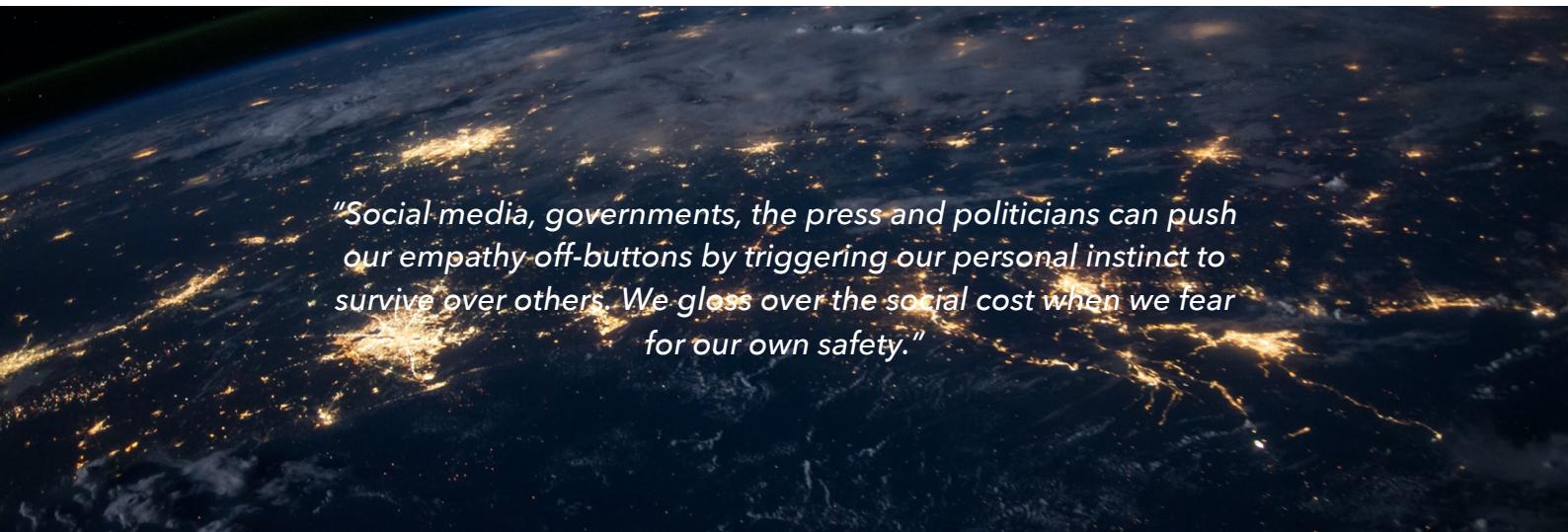
Our global society relies on members voluntarily co-operating. Co-operation works when we are empathetic: reading others' needs and wants, pains and hopes, and stepping in to help by investing our own personal time and resources. Just relying on this empathetic behaviour is risky. Our neural wiring means our innate willingness to care for others is fickle. Our empathy isn't automatic. It isn't a measure of how innately good or bad we are. Our empathy is susceptible to malleable on/off switches that stem from our need to belong to a social group. Our empathy depends on which teams we identify as belonging to - and we are being played. Left to our own automatic responses, we can be manipulated. We can fall back into biases and miss that this crisis affects all of us. Whilst we are

one species, on one earth, our biases will either save lives or cost them.

### Why you just don't care ...

When we see other people as "out group" (other /them) then the parts of the brain that feel others' social pain are dampened down. The implications are profound.

Professor David Eagleman put 130 participants into an fMRI scanner and scanned their brains while they watched hands with one-word labels being stabbed by a syringe. The labels described different religious identities (e.g. atheist, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist; but the labels could have said punk, rock, pop, country and western or even engineer, nurse, scientist, poet or even toilet-roll hoarder). The question they asked is, "Would their participant care as much when they saw an out-group member getting stabbed?"



*"Social media, governments, the press and politicians can push our empathy off-buttons by triggering our personal instinct to survive over others. We gloss over the social cost when we fear for our own safety."*

They found that when a participant watched a member of their in-group getting stabbed there was a large neural pain response and when watching an outgroup member there was a flat line. They simply didn't care. And the on/off switch of caring for others can come down to as little as a single word. So how we use language to define other people as like us or other, as "we" or as "they", changes the brain's unconscious responses and in doing so the extent to which we feel others' pain, and with it, our motivation to help.

So now when our global empathy tap needs to be on, we must intentionally frame humans as belonging to our same social group. We need to see what we have in common and not fixate on our differences. However, the media does not always help. Social media, governments, the press and politicians can push our empathy off-buttons by triggering our personal instinct to survive over others. We gloss over the social cost when we fear for our own safety. What then does neuroscience suggest that we do?

## 5 ways you can save lives today

### Action 1: Make the virus our common enemy

Shared enemies are a powerful way to reinforce in-group identity. COVID-19 is our common foe and this is an opportunity for us to bond together as humans in a single in-group. We are in a global war against an invisible enemy that is blind to national boundaries. When we focus on the virus as the bad guy and not other people, then we win.

When you see people blaming each other you can step in: help them frame their blame onto the virus instead. Let's take responsibility for the energy and framing you put into the world. Don't waste your energy on pointing the finger at another person when it's the fault of COVID-19



## Action 2: Symbolise our shared context and shared human identity

Humans use symbols to show they belong to tribes. Think of football colours, national anthems, body piercings, professional uniforms, mottos, chants, religious fashion or school ties. These symbols reinforce our belonging and trigger in-group empathy.

*"When we spend time with out-group members, we begin to gain perspective from the point of view of the other and we become less seduced by our generalisations and unconscious biases."*

What we need now are symbols of "being in this together". Global symbols create space for dialogue between you and I - and nations that don't readily trust one another. Brazil has led the way by taking a national symbol - the Christ the Redeemer statue outside of Rio de Janeiro - and making it a global message of solidarity. These symbols can create enough shared context and identity that we stop thinking in terms of out-groups and collaborate.



## Action 3: Frame everything as WE

Never before have we seen how interdependent we are across our world's economies, societies and healthcare systems. We must challenge a world view that elevates national interest above global, a world view which suggests that we don't need a pandemic of co-operation. You can bring us together by consciously using the words "we" and "us", not "I", "them" or "they". The word "we" is just as relevant at a community level as it is at an international level. We are "they". There is no "them".

#### Action 4: Spend time with your out-groups

A side effect of out-groups is that they allow our brains to homogenise our thinking about other people. When we have out groups, we are able to make sweeping generalisations about "those awful people fighting for toilet roll", "those anti-vaxxers", "those refugees". Exposure to out-group members inhibits this homogenous thinking. When we spend time with out-group members, we begin to gain perspective from the point of view of the other and we become less seduced by our generalisations and unconscious biases.

In a time of social distancing, the risk of these generalisations is greater. Social media creates echo chambers that reinforce our biases. So hang out with your out-groups. Be curious about the views of others. Start a dialogue.



#### Action 5: Distantly socialise

Think not just social distancing, but also "distantly socialise" (socialise from a distance). Belonging is fundamental to resilience. Our need to belong has intensified. Social bonds need to be reinforced for mental health, empathy and social cohesion. Get friends together online, set up those WeChat / WhatsApp groups. Send the text, write the email, make the call.

### So what's next ...

The our lesson from the brain lab is "Us not them, we not they" is everything. The power to create belonging, to create shared context, to create a shared identity in this time of global crisis is free and within each of us.

How you think and what you say now can save lives.

Originally written for the OECD forum network:  
This article is part of series in which OECD experts and thought leaders – from around the world and all parts of society – address the COVID-19 crisis, discussing and developing solutions now and for the future. It aims to foster the fruitful exchange of expertise and perspectives across fields to help us rise to this critical challenge. Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the OECD.

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