BEING COMPASSIONATE WITH YOURSELF MAY HELP BRIDGE POLITICAL DIVIDES

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SUMMARY

Being able to form relationships with people you disagree with or viewing them with compassion is not easy. In this study, the Center for Media Engagement wanted to find out what types of personal self-compassion are more common among people who are better at doing this. We found that:

• The more sense of common humanity – a type of self-compassion where people recognize that feeling down or that their own failings are common human experiences – people felt, the more likely they were to feel they had the skills to develop relationships with those they disagree with.

• However, counter to our expectations, the more self-kindness – a type of self-compassion where people are patient with their own flaws – people felt, the more they favored those who share their political beliefs over those who do not.

• Neither type of self-compassion showed any relationship with perceptions that society is politically divided.

Our findings show that fostering a sense of common humanity with others may be helpful in bridging some types of societal divides and may enable people to navigate societal differences more effectively.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

THE PROBLEM

Americans increasingly dislike or have animosity toward people they disagree with politically, and they often do not want to talk through those differences.[1] This can be harmful in a democracy because it can hamper people's ability to work together to solve problems or to see issues from a different viewpoint.[2]

A Center for Media Engagement study[3] recently found that some Americans have adopted strategies for talking with those who disagree with them, such as advocating for their own viewpoint, rather than criticizing others' beliefs. Another CME study[4] found that particular habits people have – such as wanting to talk about political differences – made it more likely that they would have more balanced views toward their political out-group and in-group.

This project expands on these ideas by examining whether people who have a lot of compassion for themselves might extend this compassion to others[5] and whether, as a result, they may be more likely to feel competent to form relationships with those they disagree with or be more likely to perceive their political opponents or society through a less divisive lens. This research is part of our connective democracy initiative, funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Connective democracy seeks to find practical solutions to the problem of divisiveness.

KEY FINDINGS

- The more sense of common humanity – a type of self-compassion where people recognize that feeling down or that their own failings are common human experiences – people felt, the more likely they were to feel they had the skills to develop relationships with those they disagree with.

- However, counter to our expectations, the more self-kindness – a type of self-compassion where people are patient with their own flaws – people felt, the more they favored those who share their political beliefs over those who do not.

- Neither type of self-compassion showed any relationship with perceptions that society is politically divided.

IMPLICATIONS

Our findings show that at least one type of self-compassion – a sense of common humanity with others – may be helpful to people seeking to form relationships with those they disagree with. Fostering this type of self-compassion may enable people to navigate societal differences more effectively. However, another type of self-compassion – self-kindness – may have unintended negative consequences for how people view their political out-groups in comparison to their in-groups. More efforts should be taken to balance the benefits of self-kindness with the potential unintended negative consequences.

FULL FINDINGS

We surveyed 1,010 people representative of the U.S. adult population about their attitudes regarding political disagreement. We looked at three items:

- Relationship skills – having a sense they could form relationships with those they disagree with. [6]

- Affective polarization – having negative views of those with different political beliefs while favoring those who share their political beliefs. [7]

- Perception of polarization – how divided people perceive that Democrats and Republicans are. [8]

We also surveyed participants about their sense of compassion toward themselves. [9] Specifically, we looked at two kinds of self-compassion: [10]

- Self-kindness – being patient with one's own flaws.

- Sense of common humanity – recognizing that feeling down or their own failings are common human experiences.

Then we performed statistical tests to see which types of self-compassion were more likely among people who felt more competent to form relationships with those they disagree with or among those with more balanced views about their political in-group and out-group or about how divided political parties are.

Our results showed the following:

- People high in a sense of common humanity were more likely to feel competent to form relationships with those they disagree with, but self-kindness showed no significant relationship.[11]

- People high in self-kindness were more likely to be affectively polarized (have negative views of those with different political beliefs while favoring those who share their own political beliefs), but sense of common humanity showed no significant relationship.[12]
- People high in either self-kindness or sense of common of humanity were no more or less likely to view political parties as more divided.[13]

These results held up when controlling for participants' age, gender, race, political beliefs, level of education, and income.

METHODOLOGY

This project was funded by the Knight Foundation as part of the Center for Media Engagement's connective democracy project. We surveyed residents through NORC's[14] AmeriSpeak Panel. The panel uses probability-based sampling of sub-groups of the U.S. population and statistical weighting, so that the percentages of each sub-group reflect the actual percentages in the U.S. population.[15] A total of 3,706 people were invited to the survey, and 1,010 participated for a completion rate of 27.3%.[16] The margin of error for our sample is 4.09 percentage points, meaning the likelihood is high that the results we found would be within 4.09 percentage points if we had surveyed the whole U.S. population.[17]

NORC administered the survey in August 2020. People could participate in either English or Spanish, and 978 people participated online and 32 through phone interviews. Participants answered questions about their political beliefs, media use, and personal characteristics.

Participant Demographics

	N = 1,010	U.S. Adult Population
Gender		
Female	53.2%	51.7%
Male	46.8	48.3
Race		
White	66.1	62.8
Black/African-American	10.1	11.9
Hispanic	15.4	16.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.6	6.4
Other	4.8	2.2
Age		
18 to 34	29.6	29.3
35 to 49	25.0	24.3
50 to 64	25.1	24.9
65 and older	20.2	21.5
Education		
Less than high school degree	5.4	9.8
High school degree or equivalent	16.5	28.2
Some college/associate's degree	42.7	27.7
Bachelor's degree	19.8	21.8
Master's degree or more	15.5	12.4
Household Income		
Less than $30,000	23.3	17.5
$30,000 to $74,999	38.9	33.1
$75,000 to $124,999	25.6	24.6
$125,000 or more	12.2	24.9
Political Beliefs		
Democrat/Lean Democrat	45.5	49.0
Republican/Lean Republican	36.1	44.0
Neither or unknown	28.3	7.0

Data from the Center for Media Engagement

Notes: Unweighted percentages are shown for the sample. Political beliefs' percentages for the U.S. adult population are from a June 2, 2020, report from Pew Research Center. Percentages for the U.S. population for other demographics were provided by NORC.

ENDNOTES

[1] Levendusky, M.S. (2018). Americans, not partisans: Can priming American national identity reduce affective polarization?" *The Journal of Politics*, *80*(1), 59–70; Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhorta, N., et al. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States, *Annual Review of Political Science, 22*(1), 129–146 https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034.

[2] Hetherington, M. J., & Rudolph, T. J. (2015). *Why Washington won't work: Polarization, political trust, and the governing crisis*. University of Chicago Press; Jacobson, G. C. (2016). Polarization, gridlock, and presidential campaign politics in 2016. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 667*(1), 226–246.

[3] Duchovnay, M., Moore, C., & Masullo, G. M. (2020, July). How to talk to people who disagree with you politically. Center for Media Engagement. https://mediaengagement.org/ research/divided-communities

[4] Overgaard, C.S.B., & Masullo, G. M. (August, 2020). Finding common ground: habits that may help. Center for Media Engagement. https://mediaengagement.org/research/ finding-common-ground

[5] Neff, K. D., & Pommier, E. (2013). The relationship between self-compassion and other-focused concern among college undergraduates, community adults, and practicing meditators. *Self and Identity*, *12*(2), 160–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868 .2011.649546

[6] Participants rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale their agreement or disagreement with the following: "I am confident that I have the skills to develop positive relationships with those who disagree with me politically," $M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.92$.

[7] Affective polarization was measured using a "feeling thermometer." Participants were given this prompt: "We'd like to get your feelings toward a number of people and groups. A rating of 0 means you feel extremely negative. A rating of 10 means you feel extremely positive. A rating of 5 means that you don't feel particularly positive or negative." Based on this prompt, respondents rated "Republicans" and "Democrats" on a 0-10 scale. Affective polarization was defined as the absolute value of the difference between feelings toward one's in-party and feelings toward one's out-party, $M = 4.40$, $SD = 3.36$.

[8] Perception of polarization was measured using a "feeling thermometer." Participants were given this prompt: "Using the same scale, how do you think Democrats and Republicans generally feel toward one another. Again, a rating of 0 means you think they feel extremely negative. A rating of 10 means you think they feel extremely positive. A rating of 5 means you think that they don't feel particularly positive or negative." Perception of polarization was defined as the absolute value of the difference between perceptions of the polarization of Democrats and perceptions of the polarization of Republicans, $M = 1.27$, $SD = 1.91$.

[9] Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, *2*(3), 223–250. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309027

[10] These are two subscales in the six-subscale self-compassion scale (see Neff, 2003; Neff & Pommier, 2013). We chose these two subscales because they seemed the most promising for our outcome variables of interest. For self-kindness, participants rated on a 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*) scale their feelings about the following statements: "I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like," "I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering," "When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need," "I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies," and "I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain." For sense of common humanity, participants rated their feelings on the same scale for the following statements: "When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people," "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition," "When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am," and "When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through." A principal component analysis (PCA) with promax rotation showed these statements loaded on two factors, as established by Neff (2003). Self-kindness items were averaged into a reliable index, $M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.79$, Cronbach's α = 0.86. Sense of common humanity items were averaged into a reliable index, $M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.85$, Cronbach's α = 0.83.

[11] This was the result of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis, $R^2 = 0.05$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.05$, $F = 6.04$, $p < .001$. Sense of common humanity ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = .001$) showed a significant relationship with feeling competent to form relationships with those you disagree with, but self-kindness did not ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = .32$). Income ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < .001$) also showed a significant correlation, showing those with greater income are more likely to feel competent to form relationships with those they disagree with. Age, education, gender, political beliefs, and race showed no significant relationships.

[12] This was the result of an OLS regression analysis, $R^2 = 0.20$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.20$, $F = 31.31$, $p < .001$. Self-kindness ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = .03$) showed a significant relationship with increased affective polarization, but sense of common humanity did not ($\beta = -0.01$, $p = .70$). Being a Democrat or having left-leaning views ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < .001$) and being a Republican or having right-leaning views ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < .001$) also showed a significant correlations, meaning both groups were more likely to be affectively polarized. Age, education, gender, and race showed no significant relationships.

[13] This was the result of an OLS regression analysis, $R^2 = 0.03$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.02$, $F = 3.23$, $p < .001$. Neither self-kindness ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = .06$) nor sense of common humanity($\beta = -0.04$, $p = .33$) showed significant relationships with increased perception of polarization between Democrats and Republicans. Both being a Republican or having right-leaning views ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .001$) and being a Democrat or having left-leaning views ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = .02$) showed significant correlations, meaning both groups were more likely to perceive Democrats and Republicans as politically polarized. Age, education, gender, and race showed no significant relationships.

[14] NORC, based at the University of Chicago, is one of the nation's largest independent social research organizations. It was formerly called National Opinion Research Center.

[15] AmeriSpeak uses 48 sampling strata in total, including age, race/ethnicity, education, and gender, to create a stratified probability sample where the size of the selected sample per sampling stratum is determined by the population distribution for each stratum. Also, expected differences in survey completion rates for various demographic groups are taken into account to enhance representativeness of the sample. Data are weighted to more accurately reflect the population.

[16] The completion rate is calculated by dividing the total number of people invited by the total number who completed the survey, in accordance with guidelines of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). See Baker, R., Blumberg, S.J., Brick, J.M., et al. (2010). Research Synthesis: AAPOR report on online panels. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *74*(4), 711–781. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfq048

[17] Margin of error is based on a 95% confidence interval.