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# REMAPPING DEBATE

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Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

## What happened to kindness?

**Leads** | By Abby Ferla | Quality of life

### WHY REPORT ON KINDNESS?

Kindness — or at least statements that kindness is valued — will make a guest appearance over the holiday season. But it seems anecdotally that the actual practice of kindness has gone down over the years as self-centeredness, acquisitiveness, and “getting ahead” have become more and more celebrated.

We thought (and think) that the question of the pressures militating against the ability or willingness to express kindness deserves much more attention from journalists, so we decided to make a preliminary foray to explore whether there is substance to the impression that kindness is down and, if so, what some of the reasons may be.

— *Editor*

Dec. 21, 2011 — Donald G. Davis is pastor of Dover Baptist Church in central North Carolina. His book, entitled *The Demise of Compassion*, was published earlier this year. Davis says that he sees more hardness and less compassion in people than he used to. “I have noticed that [for] the generation of my son, it’s more about ‘me,’” he told Remapping Debate. “From [my father’s] generation to the present time, they’ve lost a sense of compassion. They’re more concerned about their careers, me-ism than they are about helping their neighbor.”

His point of reference is his recollections of his own family during the Great Depression. When hobos came through on the train, he says, his family always allowed them to stay and have dinner. “It didn’t matter what color they were...nobody ever left our house hun-

gry,” he says. “That’s just the way you were raised then.”

But is Davis merely engaged in the ages-old practice of remembering the past as better than it was and denouncing the present as worse than it is? Apparently not, according to a range of observers who study issues that relate to kindness. At least in the last few decades, according to those with whom Remapping Debate spoke, a range of factors have conspired to make us, in general, treat both family and strangers with less generosity of spirit than we once did. A relative lack of kindness would be disconcerting in any time, but it has special resonance at a time when dire financial circumstances are widespread and exist side-by-side with unparalleled extremes of wealth.

## Studying kindness

Strikingly, I was not able to find social scientists who are quantitatively studying kindness per se. There are, however, researchers studying social behaviors that one would expect to correlate positively with kindness (like the presence of empathy) and those that seem potentially antithetical to kindness (like extreme egotism). Sarah Konrath is an assistant research professor at the Center for Group Dynamics in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. She sees expressions of kindness as actions that require empathy — the ability to identify with the feelings of another.

In a study most recently updated in 2010, Konrath found that empathy — as measured based on the self-reporting of college freshman — has been declining over the past thirty years, with a sharp decline around the year 2000.

Konrath has also found that narcissism — or an inflated sense of self-importance and self-centeredness — has increased from the early 1980s to the present. The change, measuring between two and three points on a 40-point scale, represented a 30 percent increase over the starting level, a change that she believes is statistically significant.

While Konrath was not prepared to draw firm conclusions about the meaning of this trend, Keith Campbell, a professor of psychology at the University of South Carolina and author of *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in an Age of Entitlement*, however, believes that a change that may appear modest on average can have large effects on many individuals. “What happens,” he says, “is when you raise everyone up a little bit, on any scale — obesity is a class example of this — the number of people on the extreme end go up a whole lot.”

Campbell points to a National Institute of Health study that found that the incidence of people with narcissistic personality disorder (or an extreme preoccupation with oneself) was almost three times higher for people in their thirties than for people in their sixties.

Because some of the change appears to be generational — most pronounced in those coming to age in and around the year 2000 — Konrath suggests that looking at the social changes of that time period could provide insight into phenomenon. “People born after 1980 are more likely to score higher in narcissism and lower on empathy. It zeroes in on something going on in the early 80s.” She thinks it is significant that the period was marked by rapid changes in technology, from the increasing popularity of cable television to the invention of video games. “People [began to spend] much more time in solo interactions with technology.”

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## Television as a mirror on the culture

Randy Lewis, professor of american studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and author of [“The Compassion Manifest: Corporate Media and the Ethic of Care,”](#) was interested in the frequency with which kind or compassionate acts were portrayed on television.

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When he started looking, he found that these portrayals were few and far between. “You’re not coming across a lot that you would describe in any way of celebrating compassion or representing compassion.”

“As an American Studies scholar who looks at film and media, I feel like there has been a kind of hardening and coarsening of our culture.”

Melissa Henson, director of communications and public education at the [Parent’s Television Council](#), agrees with Lewis’s assessment. She believes that a lot of television programs today place a value on violence, name-calling, and gossip. “What we don’t see in these shows is someone tuning the other cheek...or encouraging kind behavior.”

As for what is advertised as reality television, “You see modeled some of the worst behaviors,” she says.

Henson believes that what is shown on television “absolutely does” influence how people act. “Television helps to define people’s expectations of what human interaction does and what it should look like. If their experience doesn’t match what they see on TV, they modify their behavior. As much as people like to poke fun at ‘Leave it to Beaver’...and as much as it may not have represented reality, it did set normative expectations of what people should do and should act,” she says.

Lewis, while acknowledging that there is substantial scholarly disagreement over the extent to which patterns of behavior shown on television are actually internalized by viewers, calls attention to the fact that advertisers spend massive sums based on the belief that messages on television can affect behavior. “So why,” he says, “wouldn’t all the other stuff have some kind of stickiness in our minds?”

## Multiple factors

Experts caution against oversimplifying the question of causation. “The way that I have been thinking about this,” offers Konrath, “is to think about it on multiple levels: family, neighborhood and community, and larger levels like society and culture, including the media. Each of those different levels can contribute to a trend.”

Often, changes occur simultaneously on all levels. “There are several factors, and when you talk about any cultural change, everything feeds back on itself, so you get a change in one area and that cues changes in other areas, and it works to make it hard to [pinpoint] a cause,” Campbell says.

Both Campbell and Konrath, for example, note that the decrease in empathy and increase in narcissism has coincided with a greater number of single-child families, but neither would suggest that this change is somehow the critical or master factor.

### More wealth yielding less kindness? Part 1

Paul Piff is a doctoral student and researcher at the University of California Berkeley. Working in the Institute of Personality and Social Research, he has been studying social behaviors like helpfulness, altruism, and empathy in relation to socioeconomic factors such as income, background, and individual perception of financial status. He and his colleagues have found that, controlling for factors like political beliefs and religiosity, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more willing to be giving of what they have (be that time or money) than their wealthier counterparts.

In one experiment, researchers would invite a participant into the lab individually and gave that participant \$10. The researchers then showed the participant a “partner” participant whom the participant would never meet. The participant was offered the option of giving some of the \$10 to the partner. “People who made on average, say, over \$150,000 a year would give away two or three dollars. People who made on average \$15,000 or \$16,000 gave away six or seven.”

“People who are less well off have had more experience in their surroundings with people who are in more need. They live in a more interdependent social environment where they rely on people, and people rely on them, to get by. So they’ve had more practice,” Piff hypothesized. Their more privileged counterparts, he continued, have lived in environments that do not encourage them to practice these kinds of pro-social behaviors.

Piff says that in another study, he and his colleagues put subjects into an environment with a “trained confederate,” (a person hired to act in a specific way in the experiment). This confederate’s role was to arrive late to the study, and act distressed. The confederate was then sent to another room. The leader of the experiment would ask a participant if he would be willing to take on some extra research tasks to help his distressed partner so that this person will not have to stay an extra hour. As with the previous experiment, “less wealthy people were willing to take on much more time” than their wealthier counterparts.

However, when all participants were asked to watch a video about childhood poverty before the experiment, Piff adds, the deviations in behavior between those with differing class backgrounds almost completely disappeared.

## Too much self-esteem and self-expression?

Questions are being raised about the impact of the self-esteem movement in schools that started in the 1970s and 1980s and that is still happening today. Campbell says that the increase in narcissism could be related to this “change in parenting and educational system that focuses on self-esteem.” “They did self-esteem in terms of specialness with a lot of focus on kid’s uniqueness,” he says, “awards, grade inflation, making people feel good about themselves all the time.”

“People get a lot of praise,” Konrath says, “that isn’t warranted for the behavior,” adding, “Everyone gets a medal.” She says that while the practice might at least appear to be motivated by kindness, it likely contributes to a disconnect between individuals’ abilities and their perceptions of these abilities.

Schools and the media also encouraged children to express themselves. Campbell says that the flip side of self-expression is incivility. “Social rudeness,” she says, is part of the movement towards self-expression that started in 60s and 70s. We tell people ‘you gotta express yourself,’ ‘you gotta be honest,’ ‘you gotta be real.’ If you’re in a relationship with someone you have to say how you feel. You have to be yourself. You have to live out loud.” An unintended consequence of this is that people don’t restrain themselves from expressing angry, frustrated, selfish, or even malicious sentiments.

### More wealth yielding less kindness? Part 2

In studies conducted elsewhere, Piff says, people of higher social strata have been shown to be less empathetically accurate — which is to say that are less likely to accurately interpret the feelings of other people.

The presence or absence of empathy or other “pro-social” behaviors, does appear to be fixed and immutable. According to Piff, there is some evidence, for example, that, “If you take relatively less privileged people and make them feel in the lab as though they are better off [than other participants], they show the same patterns as [more privileged] individuals do.”

The more that a model of individualistic success is prized over all other values, Piff says, there will “almost necessarily” be “decreased other-oriented patterns. It attunes people to their own well-being.”

He says that an increased contact between people — between neighbors and between those of different social strata and cultures — is necessary to increase empathy and kindness. “The essential difference is not that people are not kind, but that people are almost inherently kinder to people of their own kind.” The more contact between people, he posits, the less likely people are to think of others as different and separate and not worthy of acts of kindness.

## Social isolation and the decline of community

In his now famous work *Bowling Alone*, sociologist and political scientist Robert Putnam argued that over the last few decades, Americans have been spending less and less time engaging in social activities. He ties this to a decline in community and civic engagement. With Putnam in mind, Campbell observes, “There is a shrinking sense of community...We have large [but] shallow networks like Facebook and fewer close networks.”

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Randy Lewis thinks that one reason for a loss of community is that, “We as a democratic culture began to lose faith in the institutions in our democracy,” he says.

Lewis traces this decrease in faith to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when survey data began to reveal that American’s trust in their government was eroding alongside events like the the release of the Pentagon papers. “We stopped believing what we were hearing from the elites in the media and politics,” he says.

Before that, according to Lewis, the system felt like a “real democracy,” where “people have real conversations and our elections result in something we have produced.” After that change, the system resembles a “formal” democracy — “more like something that lobbyists and special interests and billionaires have produced.”

He adds that this fact is not lost on the majority of Americans. “People who are average people, who might not have the language to articulate this the way that scholars do, they are fully aware of this phenomenon.”

Many say that the more that people view themselves as individuals and less as part of communities, the less likely it is that they will have empathy for each other and interact with kindness.

According to Lewis, an important element spurring this process over the last few decades has been the increasing dominance of neo-liberal ideology. This set of views, which he characterizes as emphasizing the need to compete to survive in an increasingly cutthroat globalized marketplace, encourages people to see themselves in isolation and needing to rely only on their own resources.

Donald G. Davis agrees that there has been an increase in self-oriented behavior, and suggests that this has caused an erosion of the sense of community. Moreover, he says, greater materialism has yielded more harshness between people as they compete to show who has the most things: “We have to have a little better home and automobile than the next man...even if it takes stepping on our neighbor to do it.”

## Tougher economic circumstances pushing people apart?

One critical factor that may be pushing people away from a sense of community is increasing economic stress. Remapping Debate has previously reported on [how much more difficult it is to achieve or maintain a middle class lifestyle today as compared with 40 years ago](#).

Rudy Fenwick and Mark Tausig, professors of sociology at the University of Akron, have been researching changes in occupational structure in the United States and the effects that these changes have had on health and stress of individuals.

Along with increasing economic inequality, they find, more workers are being hired only on a part-time or temporary basis. These “contingent” workers are, by definition, in insecure financial situations; moreover, they generally don’t receive benefits such as health care or pensions.

Workers who still have regular and theoretically long-term jobs have seen their wages stagnate and, frequently, seen their pension and health care benefits cut or threatened.

Fenwick and Tausig say that the pervasive threat of layoffs in the current economic environment adds to an even greater sense of insecurity to all workers.

“Mentally, it creates a lot of stress,” says Fenwick. He argues that both employed and unemployed workers offer suffer from long-term chronic stress due to the instability of their financial situations. “We do know that some of these changes have resulted in increases in depression and just general distress,” Tausig adds.

Remapping Debate asked Heather Boushey, senior economist at the Center for American Progress, whether she believed that the existence of more challenging economic conditions might militate against the frequency and depth people’s expressions of kindness.

“Family income has been squeezed. You have seen [over the past few decades] more and more families having more workers in the workforce and putting in more hours and having a lot less time,” Boushey said.

“I think that is very consistent with themes you are getting at,” she added.

Davis also believes that having less time is a factor in declining compassion. “We are spreading ourselves so thin that we don’t have quality family time anymore.” He says that this means that parents

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do not have the resources to teach their children values such as compassion or kindness. “We lost the family somewhere in the midst of [these changes],” he says.

According to Campbell, having less time and more stress can decrease kindness for other reasons. “It’s easier to be rude than to be nice; being nice requires self-control. The more stress you put on people, the more likely it is that they will be unkind at the end of the day. We have a society right now where it takes more energy and makes it harder to be nice.”

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