The man who would banish evil

Taking the idea of evil out of western culture won't be easy. Simon Baron-Cohen, best known for his autism research, reckons he can do it using empathy as a substitute. Liz Else quizzed him on the challenges ahead.

What got you interested in the idea of understanding evil and cruelty?

As a child growing up in a Jewish family, my father told me that the Nazis had turned Jews into lampshades, and about what had happened to the mother of one of his former girlfriends. When my father met Mrs Goldblatt he was shocked to see that her hands were reversed. The Nazis had severed her hands and reattached them so that if she put her hands out palm down, her thumbs were on the outside and her little fingers on the inside. So for someone who is Jewish, there is a major puzzle as to how the Holocaust happened, and how in Nazi Germany it could ever have been acceptable to turn people into objects.
Do you think you have any new clues?

My latest theory is all to do with empathy - something I have effectively been studying for years through my research into psychiatric conditions such as autism and Asperger's syndrome. In my new book, Zero Degrees of Empathy, I wanted to address the question, does low empathy necessarily lead to acts of cruelty? My main goal is to understand human cruelty, replacing the term "evil" with the more scientific one of "lack of empathy".

What exactly do you mean by empathy?

I see empathy as an umbrella term. I don't think it's a single process; it covers a multitude of components. At the very least, you can break it down into cognitive empathy and affective empathy: the cognitive bit deals with understanding other people's states of mind, and the affective component is your emotional reaction to somebody else's state of mind. I think that empathy covers a spectrum, like a bell curve of individual differences, and we can look at how it correlates with brain activity. There is a consensus in neuroscience that it is not the whole brain that is involved but at least 10 interconnected regions, forming what I call an "empathy circuit".

Why do you think we should talk of a total lack of empathy rather than evil?

I want people not to be satisfied with the term evil. When we look at examples of people doing horrible things to others, we need to go beyond accounts like "he did it because he was evil" and look instead at behaviour as an expression of individual differences in empathy. Empathy is more explanatory, not just because you can trace it to particular brain regions, but because you can look at what influences how much empathy a person has, so it's measurable in a way that evil isn't.

You can also look at what modulates brain activity in the empathy circuit and identify the risk factors that influence whether someone might have more or less activity in those regions - either environmental risk factors or genetic ones. Using empathy takes things out of the religious framework and puts them squarely in a scientific one.

Yet the US edition of your book is called The Science of Evil?

That was the American publishers' choice, and it will be interesting to see what the reaction is. On the one hand, Americans seem to be more wedded to the use of the word evil than people in the UK, but on the other hand, once they open the cover of the book, they will see that I'm arguing it's time to drop that word. There might be some value in challenging them.

In the book, you relabel some old psychiatric conditions as "zero positives" and "zero negatives". What do these labels mean?

People who are at zero degrees of empathy score very low on different tests of empathy, and without intervention, that tends to be where they stay. The psychiatric categories I call "zero negatives" have absolutely nothing to recommend them - hence the name. There are at least three well-defined routes to this end-point: the person with borderline personality disorder, the narcissist, and the psychopath. But the label is not necessarily fixed in the sense that these conditions are
untreatable: people with borderline personality disorder, for example, can respond to psychological interventions.

What about those you label as zero positives?

I call people with autism zero positive. In their case, although they have very low empathy it is often accompanied by areas of strength or talent. And, crucially, there is a lack of intent to cause harm to another human or animal. So I wouldn't want to say that, for example, a child with autism who punches another child to stop them from screaming was being cruel - the child was simply trying to bring about a different environmental outcome.

Is this new way of thinking about empathy challenging us intellectually and societally?

I think so. I'm expecting some reaction to a number of things. Take genes. In the book, I talk about how we have been testing genes associated with empathy, and I imagine some readers might misrepresent my position as saying that empathy is all down to genes, it's all biology. I study genes and hormones, particularly testosterone in the womb, but I also emphasise that the environment is just as important as some of the biological factors. I spell out that I'm not advocating an extreme form of biological determinism, but it may not stop people from misreading the thesis. This may say more about how we like to read these things, to have it in rather stale black-and-white terms. And the science is saying that there are gene-environment interactions, and that's a messier story.

How do we raise empathic children?

The aim is to produce children who trust that the world is a safe place, not children who grow up unable to trust adults because they have been beaten or because there is no predictability about when they are next going to see their parent. Those children who experience lack of safety and lack of routine in their early environment are the ones who may end up with life-long issues around trust in relationships, and an inability to get close to other people. Some of them will end up zero negative, damaged and potentially dangerous.

There has been much research into how easy it is to manipulate humans. Where does that leave empathy - does it make it a fragile thing?

I think it is very fragile. There are situational factors that can affect whether your empathy is reduced. For example, you can describe the other group as the enemy and that changes the way you treat them. One of the benefits of British people now thinking of themselves as Europeans is that rather than seeing group divisions we see commonalities. So changes in beliefs can affect empathy, and they are reversible. A genetic predisposition to low empathy, however, is much harder to reverse.

If you had a society where there were many highly empathic people, would it be tricky for the gear to be thrown in the other direction?
If an individual starts off low in empathy, it might not take much to push them even lower. But if you start off with high levels of empathy, even if your society is sanctioning certain kinds of behaviour, it might mean you are less prone to committing acts of cruelty.

Yet you cite horror stories of the Austrian paedophile Josef Fritzl, of a Kenyan woman mutilated for her wedding ring, of Armenians "ethnically cleansed" in Turkey. Why?

These are global examples of what I call "empathy erosion". I include them in the book to help eliminate one absurd view, namely that the Nazis were uniquely cruel. They weren't. We need reminding of that.

Profile
Simon Baron-Cohen is professor of developmental psychopathology and director of the Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge. His book Zero Degrees of Empathy is out this week in the UK (Allen Lane). The US edition, titled The Science of Evil, is out in June (Basic Books)