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## Current Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Debates on Empathy

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Almost anybody writing in the field would declare that there is no accepted standard definition of empathy—either among the sciences and humanities or in the specific disciplines. However, even when accepting that there can be no all-time and universally valid definition, one can still try to clarify some aspects and establish a few landmarks that will help to ensure that the phenomenon with which various researchers are dealing is the same, or has at least important features in common.

Although there is no established concept, several topics and discussions have proved to be crucial for the phenomenon that was once given this specially made-up label empathy by Edward Titchener (1909), who introduced this word into English at the beginning of the 20th century in order to translate the German term *Einfühlung*. The idea behind this special section on empathy is to present a range of the currently most lively topics and discussions to be found not only within several disciplines, but also across several disciplinary boundaries. Authors from different disciplines were asked to contribute to the field in a style that would be accessible for a broader range of interested readers. These contributions come from the following disciplines in which empathy is either an ongoing or an upcoming topic of academic interest: neuropsychology, developmental psychology, philosophy, literary studies, and anthropology. The commentators giving their views on the articles are sometimes experts on empathy from the same discipline as the authors and sometimes from adjoining ones.

### Empathy as “Feelingly Grasping”

Perhaps the central question concerning empathy is if, and if so how, it combines aspects of thinking and feeling. Indeed, the intellectual tradition of the past centuries has been marked by a dualism. Roughly speaking, there have been two pathways

when it comes to understanding each other: (a) thinking or mind reading, and (b) feeling or empathy. Nonetheless, one of the ongoing debates in psychology and philosophy concerns the question whether these two abilities, namely, understanding what the other is thinking and “understanding” what the other is feeling, are separate or not.

We enter this question with the concept of empathy in the social-cognitive neurosciences. The major growth of interest in empathy is largely due to a recent debate in this field. Previously, in the late 19th and first half to middle of the 20th centuries, it was an important term in psychology, hermeneutics, and phenomenology (see, for a recent historical outline on the concept, Coplan & Goldie, 2011, pp. x–xvii). Later on, interest in the concept spread to developmental psychology as well. But the currently ongoing debate received its initial impetus from questioning the distinction between mind reading and empathizing as different faculties, and whether or not they may be completely separable (Singer, 2006).

Basically speaking, both faculties are about understanding the other—either cognitively or emotionally. What are the intentions of the other? What are his or her wishes, beliefs, or deductions? These questions belong to the mind-reading side, whereas understanding the other’s emotional state belongs to the other side: the capacity of empathy. Nonetheless, despite these clear-cut definitions, there are also concepts that undermine the distinction, such as the affective theory of mind that is also called cognitive empathy. The rationale for this cognitive empathy is that empathy is based on understanding the affective states of others.

Most of the authors in this special section consider the cognitive and affective dimensions at work within empathy. Each author does this within and beyond their own field. Coming from the humanities, we propose the following definition for

empathy: Empathy is a social feeling that consists in feelingly grasping or retracing the present, future, or past emotional state of the other; thus, empathy is also called a vicarious emotion.

We would like to highlight two aspects of this definition in particular: (a) the peculiar position of “grasping,” which involves a cognitive dimension; and (b) the social dimensions of relating to the emotions of another.

First, when emphasizing “feelingly grasping” or “feelingly retracing,” something we would like to suggest is that the processes of feeling and of comprehending cannot always be separated clearly. And this makes empathic acts particularly interesting, because they resist the artificial dualisms in the philosophy of mind that still emboss philosophical, scientific, and everyday speech.

When it comes to the relation between empathic perspective taking and the cognitive perspective taking that is related to theory of mind (ToM), we cannot judge the discussions amongst neuropsychologists regarding whether or not these are completely different kinds of perspective taking, and whether or not these processes take place in different brain areas. However, defining the term according to an established tradition, we take empathy to be the emotional perspective taking; and mind reading (in ToM), to be the cognitive perspective taking. Nonetheless, on a purely conceptual level, one might have to admit that the two faculties cannot be separated altogether, because in cognitive perspective taking, the subject who is taking the perspective of another being has to be at least interested in the other being; and that means to care for the other in some way, to accept the other as other, even if in a competitive situation. First, you have to consider the other as an equal in a certain way—as a fellow human being, for instance—or at least as a creature able to feel. Second, you have to consider the other and the other’s actions as relevant to yourself. You have to be somehow interested in order to be either emotionally involved or curious about the other’s intentions. Therefore, both cases—empathy and ToM—begin with the same precondition: you have to consider the other as being the same as you and as being your counterpart in a particular situation; there has to be a tacit analogy between the emotional or cognitive state of the subject who is adopting the other’s perspective and the other whose perspective is being taken emotionally or cognitively.

Second, as a social feeling, empathy is always shaped through cultural codes, which differently emphasize, modulate, and train the capacity to “feel into” another person’s emotions. The main function of this feelingly grasping is, we assume, orientation in social contexts. This can mean taking part in the precise emotional state that the other is in at a certain moment, namely, being happy when she is happy, scared when she is scared, and so forth. But this does not have to be the case. Grasping the other’s emotional state, that is, adopting the other’s emotional perspective, could also produce a different feeling or emotion in me than the one currently being experienced in the other. And even when the empathic adoption of the other’s perspective produces in me a similar emotion as the other is having (or is fictively experiencing) at that very moment, it would not be the same emotion, because the self–other differentiation has not been overcome.

## Empathy as Embodied Capacity for Social Orientation

We want to make sure that we do not take empathy to mean the same as sympathy or pity. Whereas pity is the mode of feeling sorry for the other, sympathy is the mode of being in favor of the other. Both these feelings are ways of adopting an emotional perspective (as empathy is), but they cover only a special form of emotional perspective taking that is structured by the social bond or relation between the persons involved. Thus in social life, pity and sympathy are most likely to occur toward persons one is related to or who belong to one’s own ingroup, but less often toward outgroup members who are mostly perceived as being totally different, strange, or even malevolent—in short, as persons one can scarcely identify with.

Pity and compassion as particular kinds of empathy are deeply connected to social attachment. Frans de Waal (2009) conceives empathy as an evolved concern for others that is triggered through identification with these others. “Empathy’s chief portal is identification,” he argues, meaning that close social bonds increase—in a quasi-automatic way—the emotional responsiveness to others and thus the readiness to help and support fellow beings (2009, p. 213). Continuing his line of argument, he stresses that empathy also needs a “turn-off switch,” a mechanism to override and regulate automatic empathic responses. He considers that what constitutes this turn-off switch of empathic processes is a lack of identification. What becomes evident here is that de Waal is implicitly equating pity and compassion with empathy, or he is conceiving them as the evolutionary basis of empathy. If fellow beings harm or violate each other—as is often the case in social reality—they must, according to de Waal’s model, have switched off their empathic capacity. We deliberately take another position here: We conceive empathy as an evolutionarily grounded capacity to adopt an emotional perspective, to implicitly “feel into” the other, regardless of the behavioral outcome. One such behavioral outcome could be competitive action against the other. This may be directed toward ingroup members and be prosocial and supporting, or toward outgroup members and be destructive and harming.

## Further Points of Discussion and Open Questions

As indicated, a central question of this special section is how cognitive and affective dimensions do or do not cooperate in empathy. Other debates refer to the best theoretical model for empathy and ask whether it makes sense to assume just one kind of empathy or whether one should differentiate between at least two kinds: cognitive and affective. Batson lists eight concepts of empathy that are currently in use (Batson, 2009).

Further questions are: Does a living being have to be able to make a self–other distinction in order to be empathic? How far do emotional contagion or sympathy and pity differ from empathy? Is empathy necessarily an affective ability and does it have to be conscious? Does it occur in face-to-face relationships between two persons or more? And can it also occur between a reader and a fictive character in a novel? (Coplan, 2004).

Another question that one might consider before reading the assembled articles on empathy is whether empathy has to be a process leading to a conscious state. These are just some of the questions currently being discussed. But before addressing them in detail in the following six articles and twelve commentaries, we shall survey the different definitions of empathy presented and defended in this special section.

We advise the reader to bring to mind the definition of empathy in his or her own research perspective before reading the articles presented here. Whether one agrees or disagrees with many of the arguments exchanged and discussed in the following articles and commentaries will depend on which definition of empathy one already has in mind. Hence, a reflection on one's own implicit or explicit definition might lead one to reconsider one's initial assumptions. Whatever the case, it will certainly help one to understand how different disciplines take divergent approaches to the subject.

One might also bear in mind that the notions of understanding and empathy to be found in the long-lasting philosophical hermeneutic tradition have been used to differentiate between the sciences and the humanities. Explaining was considered to be the method of the sciences, whereas understanding and empathy were the methods of the humanities (for a more detailed account, see Stueber, 2006, pp. 16–19). This involves the assumption of a deep dualism, and one should be cautious about claiming a particular term for one or the other discipline and tradition without thoughtful reflection if one wishes to avoid stepping into the footprints of such dualisms.

## Outline of the Contributions

To recap briefly, empathy, as the embodied (or bodily grounded) capacity to feel one's way into others, to take part in the other's affective situation, and adopt the other's perspective, is a fundamentally social capacity. It allows one to grasp the other's intentions and thus to engage in meaningful social interaction. Empathy is a crucial means of social communication. It is not just an emotional contagiousness in which one remains concentrated on oneself. However, this definition of empathy fails to specify whether this comprehension involves a kind of simulation or imitation of the minds of others. In many of the following contributions, we shall see the important role simulation plays in the debates on a theoretical model of empathy (for a thorough philosophical discussion of simulation theory and its rival theory theory, see Stueber, 2006).

The following six articles are written by distinguished scholars on empathy who come from five different disciplines. Each contribution presents recent research findings and theoretical reflections about the phenomenon of empathy within the respective discipline, and simultaneously gives an insight into some currently ongoing debates on the subject within, as well as across, disciplinary boundaries. The following outline might already give a first impression about this.

### *Social Cognitive Neuroscience: Cognitive and Affective Empathy*

The neuropsychologist Henrik Walter (2012) places his accent on understanding the emotional or affective states of another human being. Furthermore, he views understanding as a purely cognitive concept in this context that suggests making deductions and reasoning. Because Walter concentrates on this approach to understanding the affective states of others, conceptions such as affective theory of mind or cognitive empathy are also highly relevant for his ideas on the capacities for understanding other human beings. Whether this empathy is due to a cognitive faculty or an affective one is not the focus of this distinction. Empathy is, in this case, defined only by the understanding of the emotional state of the other and not by whether the process of understanding is either an affective or a cognitive one. If it is a cognitive one, it is called cognitive empathy or affective theory of mind; if it is an affective one, it is called affective empathy.

Walter presents this conceptual analysis before linking it both to findings in empirical research investigating the neural basis of empathy and to data on the possible neurogenetic basis of empathy. The tradition followed by Walter when differentiating between ToM, cognitive empathy, and affective empathy is one developed in psychology since the late 1950s. It defined empathy as an emotional or affective phenomenon, and introduced the notion of cognitive empathy as a cognitive faculty or "intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind" (Hogan, 1969, p. 308). The main topic within this research tradition is the accuracy of our ability to conceive the other's condition. Cognitive empathy is not defined in terms of shared emotions but in terms of knowing another's state of mind by inferential processing (Ickes, 1997).

### *Social Cognitive Neuroscience Again: Neural Overlap and Self-Other Overlap*

Stephanie Preston and Alicia Hofelich's contribution (2012) comes from one of the most rapidly growing research fields on empathy, namely, the social neuroscience of empathy. Preston and de Waal (2002) are well known in this field for having developed the perception–action model of empathy. This proposes that observing an emotion in someone else generates that emotion in the observer. Preston and Hofelich use this model to argue in favor of a neural overlap in the early stages of processing all cases of social understanding such as cognitive empathy, empathic accuracy, emotion contagion, sympathy, and helping behavior. The self–other overlap in empathy occurs only at a later state of processing. Preston and Hofelich offer some criteria for differentiating between neural overlap, subjective resonance, and personal distress. Because the self–other overlap is crucial for the definition of empathy, this represents an important attempt to seek empirical support for a theoretical differentiation. In addition, it offers a taxonomy of the different cases of social understanding that are supposed to be highlighted by a biological view of empathy.

The academic challenge of this undertaking lies not least in the attempt to show that there is something such as a self–other overlap on the neural level, and that it is not just to be found on the subjective level on which the conceptual capacities of a human being are already “at work.”

In order to engage in an empathic process, the empathic subject has to be able to differentiate between his or her own affective states and those of the being he or she is being empathic with—be this a conscious process, as is quite often the case on the subjective level, or a subconscious process on the neural level. This is also a necessary precondition for cognitive empathy and sympathy, but not for emotional contagion. Scientific research on the subjective overlap, that is, the sharing of an emotion, is the task of psychology. But in order to grasp this point on a biological level, one has to avoid the subjective perspective. This is done by defining the self–other overlap via the notion of the activation of a personal representation in order to experience an observed state or action, and not via the notion of the activation of a personal representation when acting oneself or being in the state oneself. The overlap in representation on the neural level has to be reflected by a spatial overlap of brain activation between imitation and observation of facial emotional expression (on the subjective level, one is speaking about sharing another’s emotional or intentional state).

The process of observing or imagining someone else in a situation might therefore be crucial for determining whether a neural representation of an emotion is the representation of the emotion in somebody else, and therefore an empathic reaction, or whether it is the neural representation of one’s own emotional process.

### *Developmental Psychology: The Self–Other Distinction*

The developmental psychologist Doris Bischof-Köhler (2012) concentrates on the subjective level of empathy. She defines empathy as understanding and sharing the emotional state of another person. This definition implies not only that an empathic capacity is linked strongly to cognitive capacities, but also that the self–other distinction is crucial for the notion of empathy. Bischof-Köhler’s investigations on empathy are therefore related to her research on the symbolic representation of the self in imagination (self-recognition). Her findings reveal that only children who are able to recognize themselves exhibit empathic behavior. This does not imply that self-recognition leads to empathic behavior, but that it is a necessary precondition for empathy. And as her data show, this mode of self-recognition does not have to be a kind of metarepresentation or conscious self-reflection that the theory of mind predicts to first emerge only in 4-year-olds. This can explain not only why empathy is already observable in 2-year-old children, but also why the mere recognition of a mark on one’s cheek while looking in a mirror is a transitional state to self-recognition that is not linked to empathy. Her conclusion from these results is that “the capacity to empathize is an effect of maturation rather than socialization” (Bischof-Köhler, 2012, p. 46).

### *Philosophy: Empathy and Simulation Theory*

The philosopher Karsten Stueber (2012) presents a model of the cognitive and affective understanding and knowledge of another human being’s mind, and demonstrates the importance of empathy for social cognition. He is well known as a representative of simulation theory—an approach that fits quite well with empirically based theories on empathy. In this article, he extends this basic approach by replying to some narrativist criticism. His main focus is on the cognitive mechanisms that allow us to gain knowledge of other minds, and therefore on social cognition and on our understanding of individual agency. One challenge for such an approach is to give a theoretical account of resonance phenomena and projection mechanisms that does not presuppose some kind of Cartesian subject who remains in a solitary state of skepticism about the existence of other minds. While insisting on the importance of our sensitivity to differences between ourselves and other human beings, he introduces the importance of the other on the two levels distinguished in the simulation approach. The first level is the basic level of neuronal resonance phenomena. It is activated automatically by observation of the bodily activities and the accompanying bodily and facial expressions of other beings (basic empathy). The second level is the more developed stage, namely, the reenactment of the thoughts and reasonings of another human being as a rational agent (reenactive empathy). On this level, Stueber admits that in order to understand the actions of another person, we do not necessarily have to appeal to his or her beliefs and desires, but that the knowledge of the other’s character traits or the other’s role in various social contexts could be equally important. By accepting this possibility, he opens up his model not only to some narrativist proposals for understanding the actions of others, but also to the social, historical, or cultural contexts that one might have to consider in order to understand the actions of another human being. He insists, however, that this information would make neither the reenactment nor the simulation superfluous, because pretend-beliefs and pretend-desires are at the core of the imaginative perspective taking that is necessary for empathy.

### *Anthropology: The Cultural Embeddedness of Empathy*

The opening up of simulation theory toward an integration of personal, historical, and cultural information makes a philosophical approach like Stueber’s attractive for a cultural and social anthropologist such as Douglas Hollan (2012). He takes up the distinction between basic empathy and reenactive empathy, although calling the latter complex empathy instead. This allows him not only to accept embodied forms of imitation and attunement as biologically evolved capacities, but also to concentrate on the more language-bound evaluations and adjustments that have evolved culturally and historically. Hollan emphasizes that one has to be acquainted with the latter and with the personal background of a person in order to understand why he or she is in a certain emotional state. And, as he points

out, this is necessary in order to be able to be empathic, because one has to understand not only that a person is in a certain emotional state, but also why. In other words, one needs to have a certain amount of knowledge about the normative and moral standards of a culture or society before one can evaluate the meaning of social situations and forms of behavior and comprehend another's feeling state within the context of social circumstances. In short, empathic processes cannot be detached from the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. One way to narrow down the range of the meaning of the definition of empathy is to delete the need to understand why the person is in the state from the definition, leaving only the understanding that a person is in a certain emotional state.

The heuristic differentiation between basic empathy and complex empathy is in line with the ability to determine that another person is in a certain emotional state and to understand the experience of the other. By reporting important research results on empathy in social anthropology, Hollan (2012) demonstrates not only how much some of the main features of empathy seem to be, by some means, universal, but also how far the studies on empathy need to be refined in light of some findings from anthropological research.

Intercultural findings on empathy reveal that the blend of feelingly perspective taking and cognitive perspective taking is one of the constant features of empathy, whereas the differentiation into "me" and "the other" seems to be less distinct in empathic-like responses in many non-Western societies. Another finding of Hollan's (2012) research is that in the Pacific region, empathy is not a neutral engagement in the understanding of the emotional state of the other, but more like a sympathy that is linked very frequently to a positive attunement with that other person. And this positive attunement is expressed as an active doing rather than a passive experience.

Alongside these research results, Hollan has noticed another, rather opposite tendency: a widespread fear that an empathic-like knowledge could be used to harm others. This is why in many parts of the world—from the Indo-Pacific to Latin America or Northern Canada—people try to mask their faces, that is, to not express their inner feelings and thoughts but always show a "bright" face and not disclose their vulnerabilities. This phenomenon points to the fact discussed earlier that empathy is not linked automatically to compassion and helping attitudes, but might also be used by enemies or individual psychopaths as a way to find out how to harm the other.

Among the most challenging research desiderata that result from anthropological findings is the call for more studies on the complex interrelationship between the culture-specific moral and situational contexts mediating the expression of empathy on the one side, and the dispositions (or traits) that individuals develop to experience and display empathy, on the other. Put succinctly, all cultures have some people who are likely to empathize more and others who are likely to empathize less. Hollan (2012) considers that one of the most demanding tasks facing future research is to investigate how far personality traits interact with the culturally different modes of conceptualizing empathy.

### *Cultural Studies: A Three-Step Model of Human Empathy*

The findings on empathy filters introduced by the ethologist and primatologist Frans de Waal might well have been one of the starting points for the theory on empathy proposed by Fritz Breithaupt (2012), a scholar of German studies. As already mentioned, de Waal (2009, p. 213) has argued that "empathy needs both a filter that makes us select what we react to, and a turn-off switch." Breithaupt shares the hidden agenda for this approach, namely, that human beings are hyperempathic, without equating pity and compassion with empathy. He has developed a three-step model of human empathy that should account for the individual and cultural variety in empathy that also interests Douglas Hollan. According to Breithaupt's theory, individual and cultural differences are due to the control functions of blocking and channeling empathy.

These blocking mechanisms are important for a hyperempathic being (Step 1) because of the costs accompanying such a social hyperactivity. As well as requiring energy, the danger of self-loss might be another cost of empathy in this approach. This possibly ongoing activity therefore needs to be blocked (Step 2). Neurobiologists such as Marco Iacobini (2009) have therefore proposed some kind of "super mirror neurons" that control the mirror neurons. But, because Breithaupt is dealing with more conscious processes, he is hinting at cultural techniques and learning without excluding the possible existence of evolutionarily evolved mechanisms as well. Once the blocking mechanisms are in action, a third step is needed in order to be able to experience empathy at all (Step 3). This step consists in the techniques to circumvent the blocking mechanisms.

The technique to unblock the empathy inhibition on which Breithaupt is concentrating is side-taking in a three-person setting of empathy. The reason why he turns to a three-person instead of a two-person model is linked to the observation that hyperempathy in human beings goes hand in hand with hyper-sociality, and a two-person model might be too narrow to encompass this. The side-taking process has a deliberate side: A person decides whose side to take, perhaps spontaneously and without reflection. After making this decision, empathy emerges (or returns), and it maintains and strengthens the initial choice, because empathy allows emotions to be released that confirm the decision. Breithaupt points out explicitly that the side-taking is not involved in empathy itself (as it is in sympathy), but that it is rather "external" and perhaps prior to it. The advantage of this model lies in the ability to combine cognitive elements in perspective taking with a caring attitude that might evolve when the side-taking decision is followed by empathy.

The aim of this special section with its six articles from several disciplines is to give an overview of recent research on empathy. The 12 commentaries not only contribute greatly to achieving this aim but also help significantly to identify the hotspots in ongoing disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates.

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