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Ekaterina Sofronieva

Empathy and Communication

Abstract: The article discusses the issue of empathy, the ability to understand and relate to other people's emotions, and its fundamental role in human interaction. It offers a historical review on different writings and attempts to scientifically define and research the human capacity of empathy. Scientists make a distinction between the cognitive and the emotional aspect of empathy. A functional model of empathy based on social-neuroscience perspective is also presented. It plays emphasis on a third component, i.e. the ability to monitor and regulate cognitive and emotional processes. Empathy is regarded as an innate trait but at the same time it should be nourished and cultivated. Within human development, it is observed that children at the age of two normally begin to engage in empathic behaviour when they show emotional responses that are congruent with the emotional states of people around them. Relatedness is amongst the most important feelings that adults should support in their children in order to provide and cultivate satisfactory experiences in them. Empathy is also explored in the context of raised awareness of multiculturalism in the 21st century.

Keywords: Empathy, communication, intersubjectivity, emotional regulatory processes, relatedness.

Some research is dedicated to exploring the cause and effect of behaviour whereas other research is interested in interpreting and analysing behaviour. In some cases it will be inappropriate and foolish to explore what caused people to behave the way they do because the real interest will be in interpreting that behaviour. In their book "Research Methods", McBurney and White (2007) [1] discuss among others the hermeneutic approach which was borrowed from the biblical interpretation of a text's meaning. It is an approach that aims at interpreting certain behaviour rather than looking for its causes. In some instances it will be a more natural approach to take. Psychologists, for instance, may make use of this approach when trying to interpret the non-verbal behaviour of two people holding hands in public. Goffman (as cited by McBurney & White, op.cit.) said: "The attempt to explain the interaction in terms of cause and effect would be much clumsier than to interpret its meaning to the individuals as a public indication of a close relationship." [2] Some acts of human communication and interaction may provoke researchers to ask both or either questions as appropriate – why a certain pattern of behaviour is displayed and what it is an expression of. Both questions may not have simple answers and may be equally difficult to explore.

One of the most beautiful forms of communication and people's interaction is when we see two happy people holding hands and smiling, or people dancing to the tunes of a soft slow dance, sharing and mutually savouring this experience. Words, or verbal expression, of such behaviour may eventually complement this experience or detract from it if inappropriate words are uttered. Non-verbal forms of communication precede any verbal forms. "Verbal language without non-verbal language will not work; it cannot exist" [3].

To better understand human communications and language, we need to explore empathy and take a view on the wider context of the phenomenon. Empathy is the core of all human relations and lies in the foundations of human communication. It is the capability to share

people's emotions and understand the feelings and emotions of people around you. "Good relationships depend on establishing empathy" (Pedersen, 2008) [4]. Arnetoli takes the issue further, "The concept of empathy should be considered as being central to the possibility of human communication, leading me to define the relational field in terms of emphatic field and then empathic network." [5].

There are many different definitions of empathy as the concept is widely used in Eastern and Western cultures and religions and in literature on psychology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, etc. It is related to the capacity of people to experience empathic concerns, compassion and sympathy. Dalai Lama (2007) shares a piece of wisdom with the world, "Only a spontaneous feeling of empathy with others can really inspire us to act on their behalf. Nevertheless, compassion does not arise mechanically. Such a sincere feeling must grow gradually, cultivated within each individual, based on their own conviction of its worth. Adopting a kind attitude thus becomes a personal matter. How each of us behaves in daily life is, after all, the real test of compassion." [6].

The term "empathy" is derived from the Greek word for *empatheia* which means "physical affection, passion" and the German word *Einfühlen* which is translated as "feeling into". In most general terms empathy can be defined as "the drive to identify emotions and thoughts in others and to respond to these with an appropriate emotion" (Wakabayashi, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, et al., 2006) [7]. Empathy has been the focus of many writers and scientists. When discussed in literature, many look back at the writings of Adam Smith and his book "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" (1759) in which he discussed human emotions and feelings, sentiments that lie at the foundation of moral relationships [8].

Martin Hoffman (2000) is one of the first people who attempted to scientifically research the human capacity of empathy [9]. As Wolff states, "As he himself acknowledges, the philosophers of the enlightenment, David Hume and Adam Smith, had recognised the importance of the emotions for moral behaviour, and Freud, Anna Freud, and Piaget referred to the importance of empathy in moral development. But Hoffman was the first to see this as an intrinsic, internally based moral motive" [10]. For Hoffman "empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible" [11]. It is indeed a beautiful description of human emphatic concerns and a metaphor which vividly describes the necessary prerequisite of communication. Without this "glue" real communication and social life will be impossible.

Researchers distinguish between the cognitive and the emotional aspect of empathy. Some see them as two different components and take more interest in one or the other. "Hoffman (1981) views empathy as a largely involuntary vicarious response to affective cues from another person, while Batson et al. (1997) emphasise people's intentional role-taking ability, which taps mainly into cognitive resources" (Decety & Jackson, 2006) [12]. This differentiation made by scientists has been reviewed by Davis (1980) [13] as well. He notes that just like Smith (1759) [14], a hundred years later Spencer (1870) [15] made a similar distinction between the instinctive and intellectual, or cognitive and emotional, components of empathy. This distinction has been a topic of discussion to the present day. Earlier interest was mainly in the emotional component and the sharing of feelings, whereas later studies like Mead (1934) [16] and Piaget (1932) [17] contributed to the shift to more cognitive aspects of empathy (Davis, 1980) [18]. Later, once again, there has been a revived and increased interest in the emotional aspect of empathy and attempts to integrate these two traditions have emerged. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis (1980) [19] offers a multidimensional approach to measuring empathy and the instrument is widely used in empirical research and studies.

Finlay (2005) [20] dwells on some phenomenological philosophers who explored the issue of empathy like Stein (1916/1989) who believed that "When one combines embodied sense perception and cognitive inference, one experiences another person as a unified whole through empathy" [21] and Husserl, whose ideas on empathy are derived from his studies of intersubjectivity. He "saw empathy as constitutive of the other and as the condition of possible knowledge of an existing outer world (1952/1989)." [22]. Thompson (2005) and Depraz (2001) (as cited by Finlay, op.cit.) [23] distinguished four kinds of empathy which are not viewed as separate but as co-occurring in a face-to-face intersubjective experience, namely:

1. The involuntary coupling or pairing of my living body with your living body in perception and action
2. The imaginary movement or transportation of myself into your place.
3. The interaction of you as an Other to me and me as an Other to you.
4. The ethical and moral perception of you as a person."

Neurosciences have given us valuable insights of empathy, intersubjectivity and emotional regulatory processes. Understanding their findings is necessary for understanding the practical implication of the ideas in communicative acts and human interactions. Decety and Jackson (2006) [24] provide interesting data in their research on a functional model of empathy based on the social-neuroscience perspective. They analyse the three major components of empathy – the affective responses and sharing between self and others; the capacity to adopt the perspective of another person and the emotional regulation and self agency. They call the first two components "the opposite sides of the same coin."They refer to the automatic tendency to mimic the expressions of the others as a "bottom-up processing" and to the capacity of people "for the imaginative transposing of oneself into the feelings and thinking of another" as a "top-down processing" [25].

The affective aspect of empathising and sharing between oneself and the others has been explored by many scientists. Recently functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has been used to investigate the functional anatomy of empathy. Studies give empirical support for the observation that when one is watching emotional states expressed by different facial expressions of others, certain brain areas are activated that are involved in the processing of the same states in the observer. There is a direct link between perception and action. People who watch other people's facial expressions seem to make similar facial expressions in the process. "This covert mimicry process is responsible for shared affects and feelings between self and other" (Decety & Jackson) [26]. The cognitive aspect of empathy, the ability of people to take the perspective of other people, is viewed upon as a capacity which requires that "one mentally stimulate the other's perspective using one's own neural machinery" [27]. "Whether one witnesses another individual's emotional state or consciously adopts that person's psychological view, similar neural circuits are activated in the self" [28]. But as the authors point out, individuals should also be capable to distinguish between their own feelings and the feelings of the others. There are areas in the brain which are "reliably involved" in the two perspectives. "These areas contribute to the sense of agency and self-awareness by comparing self-generated signals to signals from the environment. We argue that this neurocognitive mechanism plays a pivotal role in empathy" [29]. Thus, according to the authors, "self-agency and emotional-regulatory mechanisms" are the third, most important component of empathy for keeping clear the boundary between oneself and the others.

In communication there are always two perspectives: that of oneself, and that of the others. In each communicative act we make a difference between these two perspectives but at the same time we are capable of sharing emotions and feelings. Naturally the degree of awareness

of other people's feelings will differ among different people and this is manifested as different degrees of people's empathy and their capability to experience empathic concerns. It is not a rare occasion to have people in communication who experience very different emotional states and display very different behaviours. People often say that they simply do not like the other person as an excuse for their own inappropriate behaviour. "Listening with empathy is a skill that comes more easily to some people than others" (Alexander, 2006) [30]. That is a recognised fact but on the other hand, people should make a conscious attempt at widening their awareness of their own emotions and feelings and those of the others. One useful implication of the study of Decety and Jackson (2006) [31] is the importance of people's awareness of their emotions and the need for people to regulate their feelings. "It has been demonstrated that individuals who can regulate their emotions are more likely to experience empathy and to act in morally desirable ways with others (Eisenberg, Smith, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2004)." [32].

Empathy is believed to be an innate trait but at the same time it should be also nourished and cultivated. Within human development it is observed that children around the age of two normally begin to engage in empathic behaviour when they show emotional responses that are congruent with the emotional states of people around them. Their capacity to understand and differentiate between their own feelings and the feelings of the others develops over time. "Hoffman has hypothesised that early in development the child cannot differentiate well between the self and others. Thus, when observing another in distress, the child typically experiences it as his/her own distress. With time, however, this "empathic distress" gives way to what is termed "sympatric concerns" – feelings of compassion and sympathy for the person in trouble. One important factor contributing to this shift is said to be the development of role-taking skills in the child; as the ability to apprehend others' perspectives develops, the self-centred empathic distress is transformed into other-oriented concern" (Davis, op.cit., 1980) [33]. There are different inventories for measuring empathy in children. Feshbach and Roe's measure (as cited by Davis, op.cit., 1980) [34], measures empathy as one whole component that comprises the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy. Both components are thus integrated in one to produce a single empathy score. Children look at different pictures of a child in different situations and then they are asked to say how they feel. By doing so, they give account not only for their cognitive, intellectual ability to recognize emotions but also for their own feelings and reactions in response to the observed in the pictures experience. When reviewing the psychological needs of children Laghi, D'Alessio, Pallin and Baiocco (2008) [35] point out that relatedness is among the most important feelings that adults should support in their children in order to provide and cultivate satisfactory experiences in them. The authors state that "Sensitive parents are those who respond in ways that promote a person's experienced satisfaction of these basic psychological needs. They support *Autonomy* when they encourage feelings of volition, agency and initiative (Bretherton 1987; Sroufe and Waters 1977). They support *Competence* when they enhance feelings of curiosity, challenge, and efficacy (Ainsworth and Bell 1974; Winfield et al. 1997). They promote *Relatedness* when they are connected with, and care for their children in a warm, loving, and nurturing way (Bowlby 1979; Ryan 1993; Sroufe 1996)." [36].

There is also abundant literature on issues of disrupted communication and lack of empathy and relatedness. Various clinical conditions may be present when lack of, or very limited capacity of, individuals to experience feelings of relatedness to others and empathy is registered. In such cases, individuals display inability to relate to and understand other people's emotions, or in some cases, their own emotions. Some clinical studies observe severe lack of emotional empathy in patients. When empathy is used as a broader definition it is not

used as analogous to sympathy and compassion. Although cultivating feelings of empathy do naturally lead to experiencing such feelings, that is not the case with some cases of psychopathic behaviour when people may sense other people's emotions but do not relate to them and do not express or experience feelings of sympathy and compassion.

The contemporary contribution of Baron-Cohen from the University of Cambridge in the UK and his colleagues into measuring empathy has long been recognised. They have invented a series of measurement instruments which find common and clinical application. One of these scales is the Empathy Quotient – Adults or the Cambridge Behaviour Scale (Baron-Cohen, S., Wheelwright, S., 2004) [37]. The instrument is designed to measure the global concept of empathy and has been translated into 15 languages so far and more than 20 versions are available at the web-site of the Autism Research Centre based at the University of Cambridge in the UK. For the Bulgarian version of the instrument (Sofronieva, Shopov, & Tanushev, 2010), see the official website http://www.autismresearchcentre.com/arc_tests [38].

In the 21st century empathy has also been explored in the context of the raised awareness of multiculturalism. In the field of psychology and therapy practices Pedersen (2008) [39] discusses the notion of "inclusive cultural empathy". He makes an interesting point on culturalism and how it influences our patterns of behaviour and actions. "Cultural patterns of thinking and acting were being prepared for us even before we were born, to guide our lives, shape our decisions and to put our lives in order" [40]. And the author continues: "As we learned more about ourselves and others, we learned that our own way of thinking was one of the many different ways. By that time, however, we had come to believe that our way was the best of all possible ways, and even when we found new or better ways it was not always possible to change." He discusses therapies based on non-western world views that provide examples of inclusion in understanding the context for any therapeutic intervention like Ayurvedic therapies from India, yoga; Chinese therapies; Buddhist therapy; Japanese therapies of Zen Buddhism; Native American healers; African healers; Christian mysticism; homeopathy; herbalism; and many other non-western systems of health care which exist. "However, many of the same patterns of spiritual reality, mind-body relationships, balance and subjective reality run through many if not all the non-western therapies" [41]. The author states that "Inclusive Cultural Empathy recognises that the same behaviours may have different meanings and different behaviours may have the same meaning. By establishing the shared positive expectations between and among people, the accurate interpretation of behaviours becomes possible" [42].

In conclusion, the concept of empathy can never be explored and exhausted to its depths and it may even be a wider concept than we should imagine. There are speculations that it is not only a characteristic feature "reserved" for the human beings. Some animal species like, for instance, dolphins or pet dogs have shown on many occasions that they relate to the emotional states of their owners or people out in the sea who are in trouble. Dolphins, making immediate connection with people in trouble and saving their lives, give us one of the most beautiful manifestations of empathy. Empathy is a vast ocean which is there for both people and dolphins to swim in.

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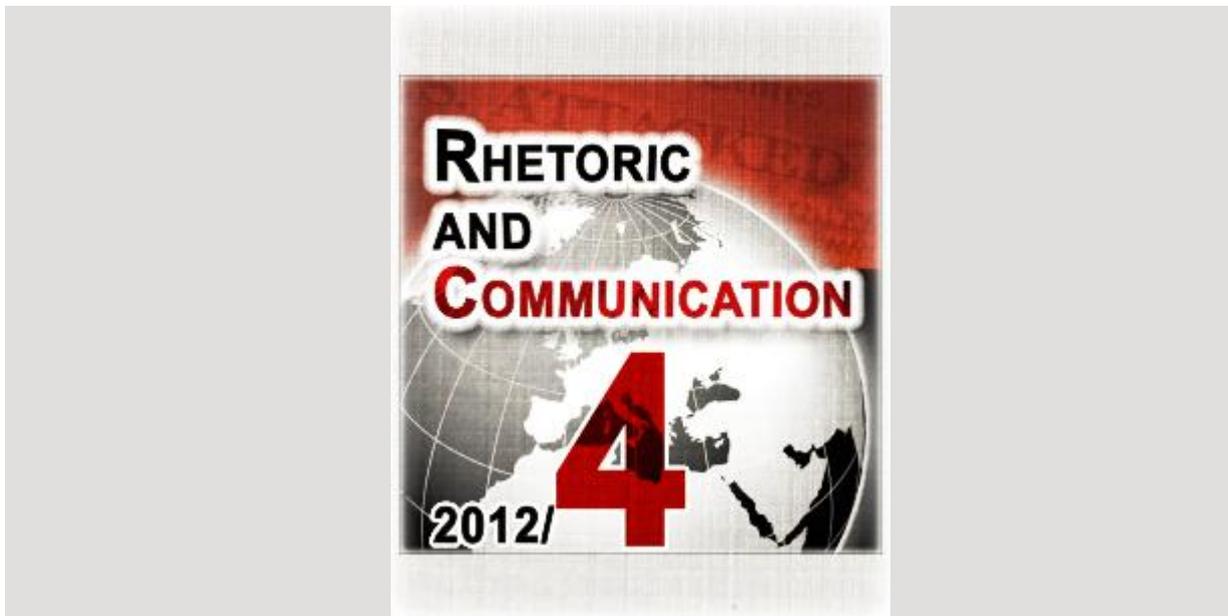
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