Running Head: Current Debates on Empathy

Current Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Debates on Empathy

Eva-Maria Engelen* & Birgitt Röttger-Rössler

University of Konstanz, Department of Philosophy & Freie Universität Berlin, Social and

Cultural Anthropology

*Corresponding Author

Eva-Maria Engelen

Universität Konstanz

Fachgruppe Philosophie

78457 Konstanz

Germany

Email: eva-maria.engelen@uni-konstanz.de

Current Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Debates on Empathy[1]

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 Titchner 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 issue 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. This makes it interdisciplinary. 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. We tried as far as possible to introduce crossovers, but these did not always fit.

Points of Discussion and Open Questions

Roughly speaking, there are two pathways when it comes to understanding each other: thinking or mind reading and 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. 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. 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)? 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 issue.

A Starting Point for (the) Discussion(s)

We start off 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 nineteenth and first half to middle of the twentieth century, it was an important term in psychology, hermeneutics, and phenomenology (see, for a recent historical outline on the concept, Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie 2011, X–XVII). Later on, interest in the concept spread to developmental psychology as well. But the currently ongoing debate received its initial impetus from the question how far mind reading and empathizing are different faculties and how far they may not 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 such as the *affective theory of mind* that is also called *cognitive empathy*. The rationale for this distinction is that empathy is based on understanding the affective states of others.

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. 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, 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.

Empathy as Embodied Capacity for Social Orientation

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*. 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 the same 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.

We want to make sure that we do not take empathy to mean the same as *sympathy* or *pity*. Both are, in our opinion, special forms of empathy that cover only a certain aspect of empathic processes. 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 (de Waal, 2009, 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 it 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. This may be directed toward ingroup members and be prosocial and supporting, or toward outgroup members and be destructive and harming.

We make a point of affectively grasping the emotional state of another, but that does not mean to draw a definite line between cognitive understanding and emotional grasping. There are good reasons to stick to a narrower notion when it comes to defining empathy as a "feelingly grasping" if one wants to make sense of notions such as vicarious emotion or of the history of the notion that started with *Einfühlung* (feeling into). However, the specific conceptual perspective one takes depends very strongly on one's research traditions and research interest.

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. 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*—start with the same

precondition: You have to consider the other as being the same as you and of being your counterpart in a particular situation; there has to be a tacit analogy between the subject adopting the other's perspective and the other whose perspective is being taken—be it emotional or cognitive.

When specifying what we meant by empathy, we wrote of feelingly grasping or feelingly retracing something; this already suggests 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.

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 what 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).

Outline of the Contributions

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 one 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, 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 Frans 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. They 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 some such thing 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."

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 re-enactment of the thoughts and reasonings of another human being as a rational agent (*re-enactive 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 re-enactment 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 Embededness 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 *re-enactive 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, Douglas Hollan demonstrates not only how far 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 blending 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 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, he 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 above 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 considers 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.

Literary 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, 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 (2008) 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 *hypersociability*, and a two-person model might be too narrow to encompass this. The *side-taking process* is deliberate: A person decides who's side to take. 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" 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 ambition of this special issue with its six articles from several disciplines is to give an overview on recent research on empathy. The twelve commentaries not only contribute greatly to achieving this aim but also help significantly to identify the hotspots in ongoing disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates.

References

Batson, C. D. and Coke, J. S. (1981). Empathy: A source of altruistic motivation for helping? In Rushton, J. P. and Sorrentino, R. M. (Eds.). *Altruism and Helping Behavior* (167–187). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Bischof-Köhler, D. (2012). Empathy and self-recognition in phylogenetic and ontogenetic perspective. In *Emotion Review* 4 (1).

Breithaupt, F. (2012). The blocking of empathy, narrative empathy, and a three-person model of empathy. In *Emotion Review* 4 (1).

De Waal, F. (2009). *The Age of Empathy*: *Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*. New York: Harmony Books.

Coplan, A. (2004). Empathic engagement with narrative fictions. In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (141–152).

Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (2011). Introduction. In Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (Eds.). *Empathy*: *Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (IX–XLVII). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hogan, R. (1969). Development of an empathy scale. In *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 33 (307–316).

Hollan, D. (2012). Emerging issues in the cross-cultural study of empathy. In *Emotion Review* 4 (1).

Iacobini, M. (2008). Mesial frontal cortex and super mirror neurons. In *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 31 (30).

Iacobini, M. (2008, 2009). *Mirroring People*: *The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*. New York: Farrar, Strauss ad Giroux.

Ickes, W. (Ed.). (1997). *Empathic Accuracy*. New York: Guilford Press.

Preston, S. and de Waal, F. (2002). Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases. In *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25 (1–72).

Preston, S. and Hofelich, A. (2012). The many faces of empathy: Parsing empathic phenomena through a proximate, dynamic-systems view of representing the other in the self. In *Emotion Review* 4 (1).

Singer, T. (2006). The neuronal basis and ontogeny of empathy and mind reading: Review of literature and implications for future research. In *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 30 (855-863).

Stueber, K. (2006). *Rediscovering Empathy*: *Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Stueber, K. (2012). Varieties of empathy, neuroscience and the narrativist challenge to the contemporary theory of mind debate In *Emotion Review* 4 (1).

Walter, H. (2012). Social cognitive neuroscience of empathy: Concepts, circuits, and genes. In *Emotion Review* 4 (1).