

**Running Head:** Current Debates on Empathy

**Current Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Debates on Empathy**

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## Current Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Debates on Empathy<sup>1</sup>

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

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