What is Empathy?
The Word “Empathy”

1. From the Greek: *em*- into and *pathia* - to suffer, to feel

2. In art theory: *ein* in and *fühlung* to feel. Used in esthetics by Lipps (1903) to signify the projection of human feelings into works of art and objects

3. Translated to English as *empathy* by Titchner (1909) and also Freud's translator (1921)

4. In psychology: Freud (1921) Mead (1934), Piaget (1932), and most importantly Rogers (1942) as a cognitive and communicative tool in psychotherapy
Empathy Before the Word

Humans are basically good

Mencius
BC 372-289

Wang Yangming
1472-1529

Dai Zhen
1724-1777

David Hume
1711-1776

John Gregory
1724-1773

What unites them is their belief that morality and doing good is based in the sentiments and feelings, which can be cultivated, in the background of human goodness rather than following rules and principles.
Current Proponents of Empathy

Michael Slote PhD

Jodi Halpern MD
What Empathy is Not

It is not an emotion
It is not altruism
It is not sympathy
It is not compassion
It is not caring

But is the mechanism that could lead or explain the appearance of any one of them.
Empathy vs Sympathy

*Empathy:* feeling *with* the other.

*Sympathy:* feeling *for* the other.

*Caring and Compassion:* desire to help arising from empathy.

*Pity:* feeling sorry *for* another (condescending).
Definition of Empathy

The psychological mechanism that makes us have feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation than one’s own.

Martin Hoffman 2000
Modes of Empathic Development and Arousal
M. Hoffman 2002

Primitive, immediate and involuntary
Mimicry, ‘emotional contagion’ etc...

Cognitive, requiring ‘language’, memory and imagination

Role-Taking
Other-focused
Self-focused

DISTRESS
The Modes of Empathic Development and Arousal

1. **Primitive, immediate and involuntary**
   1. Mimicry, ‘emotional contagion’
   2. Classical Conditioning
   3. Direct Association

2. **Requires ‘language’, memory and imagination**
   1. Mediated association
   2. Role-Taking

   **Other-focused**
   **Self-focused**

M. Hoffman 2002
Modes of Empathic Development and Arousal
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Primitive, immediate and involuntary
1. **Mimicry, ‘emotional contagion’**
2. Classical Conditioning
3. Direct Association

Cognitive, requires ‘language’, memory and imagination
1. Mediated association
2. **Role or Perspective Taking**
   - Other-focused
   - **Self-focused**
Empathic Distress

• In the presence of suffering or pain and through the mechanism of empathy, we develop similar feelings and emotions as present in the sufferer and become distressed ourselves.

• But, in most circumstances, are aware that the distress is not ours but the theirs.

• This is the pro-social motive that leads to altruism the desire to help the other for their sake; its foundation is the mechanism of empathy.

the question then is do we help to relieve our distress Self-focused or just to help the other person Other-focused
Empathic Distress

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The question then is:

- do we help to relieve our distress (**Self-focused**)
- or just to help the other person (**Other-focused**)
Empathic Distress and Altruism

• In the presence of suffering or pain and through the mechanism of empathy we develop similar feelings and emotions as present in the sufferer and become distressed ourselves.

• “Selfless help” or altruistic motivation is more likely if we remain focused on others, i.e., we remain conscious that the distress is not ours but theirs.

• But, if we become focused on ourselves and intensively distressed, we could, in order to diminish our distress, either detach from the sufferer or their need for help. However, the motivation to help could still be egoistic because we may help in order not to later feel guilty.

• In any case, empathic distress seems the pro-social motive that leads to the desire to help. In other words: it is through the empathic mechanism that the motivation to help arises.

Empathy

1. Empathy is part of the human condition, present to a lesser degree in some animals (Frans de Waal)
2. Begins in infancy and is essential for full moral development (Induction)
3. Is the mechanism that glues us together
4. Is present in all of us—except in psychopaths
5. Occurs automatically—as an involuntary breach of individual separateness, but can be affected cognitively.

THE WIRING
Empathy Research in Neuroscience and “The Shared Neural Network Hypothesis”

“We understand the actions, sensations, and emotions of others by the activation, in ourselves, of neural representations corresponding to those states”


Mirror Neurons

Autonomic Physiologic Responses
PET Scans
fMRI Scans
Trans Cranial Magnetic Stimulation
Event Related Potentials
Objectification and the Wires of Empathy

Can we ‘see’ and measure feelings, emotions?

Early physiological studies of the patient and physician during psychotherapy showed concordance in affect as measured by:

• Heart rate
• Skin conductance

“In addition to physiological correlates of empathy, significant overlap exists between neural structures that control skin conductance fluctuations and the neuroanatomical structures implicated in neuroimaging studies of empathy”

func MRI

*func MRI* is an imaging technique that measures brain activity. It does this by measuring changes in blood oxygenation and flow.

This is done using a powerful magnet that, when applied to the brain, identifies the amount of circulating oxygenated hemoglobin. This correlates with the metabolic activity and blood flow of a particular brain area.

The computerized interpretation of this physiological change is visualized with different colors allowing intra-cerebral and interpersonal comparison of the function of different areas of the brain.
Empathy

Tania Singer’s Pain Experiments with Couples

*Science, 2004, 303, 1157-1161*
Empathy

Tania Singer’s Pain Experiments with Couples
Empathy with Someone’s Pain
Blaming the Other

Decety et al, Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience
May 2010, Vol. 22, No. 5, Pages 985-997
Physician’s Empathy and Perception of Pain

Physician’s Empathy and Perception of Pain

Neuroscience’s Operational Definition of Empathy

1. An affective state
2. isomorphic to another person's affective state
3. which was elicited by observing or imagining another person’s affective state
4. when we know that the other person’s affective state is the source of our own affective state
What is Empathy?

• Empathy is a basic psychological human mechanism recognized by different thinkers throughout time that explain our ability to connect and care for each other.

• This mechanism, shared by all humans, has a recognized spatial location in the brain--the complexity of which is just recently being appreciated.

• It is present in infants and children, its basic components are mimicry, emotional contagion and conditioning and as we age becomes more sophisticated including mediated association and role taking but the basic components of sharing feelings and emotions continue throughout life.
Habits of Highly Empathetic People
Try them with strangers, family, friends and colleagues

• Talk with strangers, be curious
• Be an interested inquirer
• Listen hard—and open up, be receptive
• Try another person’s life, from their point of view
• Suspend judgment, try not to profile
• Challenge prejudices, discover commonalities
• Develop an ambitious imagination
• Inspire mass action and social change

Roman Krznaric
Questions?

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