Empathizs & discover

Abstract

The concept of empathy has received much attention from philosophers and also from both cognitive and social psychologists. It has, however, been given widely conflicting definitions, with some taking it primarily as an epistemological notion and others as a social one. Recently, empathy has been closely associated with the simulationist approach to social cognition and, as such, it might be thought that the concept's utility stands or falls with that of simulation itself. I suggest that this is a mistake. Approaching the question of what empathy is via the question of what it is for, I claim that empathy plays a distinctive epistemological role: it alone allows us to know how others feel. This is independent of the plausibility of simulationism more generally. With this in view I propose an inclusive definition of empathy, one likely consequence of which is that empathy is not a natural kind. It follows that, pace a number of empathy researchers, certain experimental paradigms tell us not about the nature of empathy but about certain ways in which empathy can be achieved. I end by briefly speculating that empathy, so conceived, may also play a distinctive social role, enabling what I term 'transparent fellow-feeling'.
Keywords Empathy · Fellow-feeling · Knowing what it's like

Introduction

It is a commonplace to point out that while research on empathy is burgeoning, there is little agreement amongst empathy researchers about what it is (Batson 2009; Goldman 2011). Candidates, crudely described, include our automatic and often non-conscious
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imitation of others' facial expressions, vocal expressions and posture (Van Baaren et al. 2009); our 'catching' of, 'mirroring', or 'resonating' with, other people's affective states—emotional contagion—that is sometimes claimed to ensue from such imitation (Rapson et al. 1994; Hatfield et al. 2009); our knowledge of the source of such imitation or contagion in another subject (De Vignemont and Singer 2006); our imagining another subject's situation, either as ourselves or as them (imagine-self vs. imagine-other perspective-taking) (Batson et al. 1997; Goldie 2011); or our feeling as the other does as a result of such an imaginative project (Coplan 2011). In addition, there are a number of accounts that build in some element of concern for the other (Batson 2011). One may be forgiven for supposing that such debates about the nature of empathy are merely verbal—about the best way to use the term 'empathy'. The danger of this might seem especially acute given that the term 'empathy' was coined as recently as the early Twentieth Century (Coplan and Goldie 2011). Of course, one is free to define the term as one pleases. I hope, however, to offer an account that combines the merits of being reasonably close to common usage of the term, of making explicit a good deal of what various theorists have wanted to say about empathy and its role in our lives, and of resisting the temptation to suppose that the term just picks out a number of phenomena whose sole uniting principle is the fact that they have been dubbed 'empathy'. Such a broad position would deprive the notion of empathy of much of its value. On the other hand, overly narrow accounts run the risk of simply ignoring a significant part of our everyday ways of speaking of empathy. The account I propose avoids both of these vices. More positively, the fact that the concept of empathy is a relative newcomer suggests that, if it is to be retained, it must pay its way. That is, 'empathy' ought to pick out some phenomenon not picked out by some other well-understood term. And this in turn suggests a method: an account of empathy will ideally be one that shows it to make a distinctive contribution to our lives. Empathy makes a distinctive contribution if there is something that it and only it allows us to

do. As I shall argue, empathy does make such a distinctive contribution and seeing what this is teaches us something both about our emotional lives and about the future direction of empathy research.

As the above suggests, I propose an account of what empathy is that is motivated by an answer to the question of what empathy is for. Questions about what some psychological phenomenon is for can be approached from at least two directions, an evolutionary perspective and what might be called a 'role' perspective. Here I follow de Vignemont and Singer,

> What is empathy for? Here, it is important to distinguish between two questions: (i) why has evolution selected empathy? and (ii) what is the role of empathy now that it has emerged? The former question refers to the adaptive function of empathy, and the answer lies in studies of empathy in other species. The latter question refers to its functional role in everyday life (De Vignemont and Singer 2006, p. 439).

From an evolutionary perspective, one asks whether some phenomenon is an adaptation, (or an exaptation or a spandrel) and, if so, what it is an adaptation to. This evolutionary question will not be my focus since, with respect to empathy, it is far from clear that there is currently evidence sufficient to support one hypothesis over

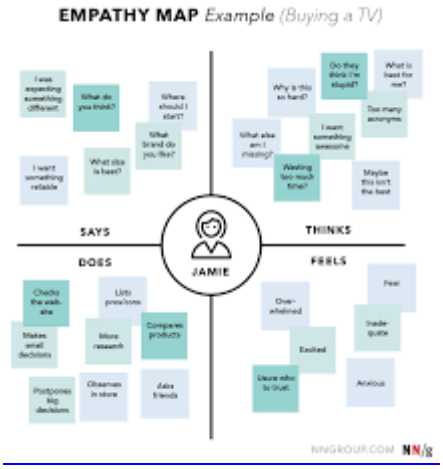
another (De Vignemont and Singer 2006) and, perhaps more importantly, as I will argue, there is reason to suppose that empathy is an epistemic rather than a psychological phenomenon and so not straightforwardly open to evolutionary explanation. From a role perspective, one may ask whether the phenomenon makes a distinctive contribution to our lives—a contribution that only it makes. If it does, one may ask whether that contribution is primarily cognitive or social (cf. Batson's (2009, pp. 3–4) two questions).

I will approach the question in terms of the distinctive role that empathy currently plays in our lives, whatever its evolutionary status. That role, I will argue in Sect. 2, is primarily epistemological. In Sect. 3 I propose an account of empathy designed to serve this epistemological function. Views that identify empathy with one or other of the phenomena mentioned above are, in that respect, narrow. However, there are also broad conceptions of empathy that allow that it may take any number of these forms (Preston and De Waal 2002; Thompson 2007, Chap. 13). The view of empathy that I outline walks a line between narrow and broad definitions. On the one hand, on this account empathy is not a loosely associated group but a unitary phenomenon. On the other, many of the phenomena mentioned above may feed into empathy in a number of ways. This provides us with a helpful way of understanding the oft-mentioned relation between empathy and simulation. Whilst empathy is not the same as simulation, simulation may ground empathy in some cases. Plausibly, a further consequence of the view I propose is that empathy is not a natural kind. This has implications for how we should interpret certain experimental paradigms. They show us not about the nature of empathy itself, but about the different ways in which empathy can be achieved. I end, in Sect. 4, with the suggestion that empathy's distinctive epistemological achievement may serve a broader social purpose, enabling what I term 'transparent fellow feeling'.

The epistemic role of empathy

Sharing

The project of defining empathy in the light of an account of what it is for obviously requires us to begin with an intuitive grasp of the phenomenon. On any construal that seeks to preserve something of the contemporary common-sense notion, empathy has to do with, in some sense, sharing in or, in Deonna's (2007) words, 'feeling in tune with', another person's affective state. This much is strongly suggested by the list of candidates in the previous section (imitating, mirroring, imagining, etc.). Exactly what sense of sharing is relevant is to be determined.


EMPATHY MAP Example (Buying a TV)
SAYS
THINKS
DOES
FEELS
JAMIE
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