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

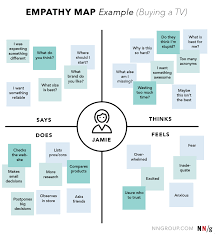
Introduction  
 It is a commonplace to point out that while research on empathy is burgeoning, there is  
little agreement amongst empathy researchers about what it is (Batson 2009; Goldman  
2011). Candidates, crudely described, include our automatic and often non-conscious  
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imitation 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 adap-  
tation, (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

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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 psycho-  
logical 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.

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