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Empathy and Vicarious Experience. Congruence or Identical Emotion?

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Abstract: Feeling empathy is something that happens, an experience we can remember once we have had it, or an experience we would like to have. I consider empathy, from an integral point of view (i.e., cognitive and emotive aspects are part of empathy), as the capacity of putting oneself in the place of others. Although, by this time, my general characterization of empathy will not be discussed, I will focus on one question about empathy for which there is still no agreement: whether the emotion of the person experiencing empathy must be identical or not to the emotion felt by the person being empathized with. The aim of this work is, firstly, to reduce the four possibilities about the relationship between the empathizer's emotion and the emotion felt by the person who is the target of empathy to two exhaustive and exclusive views: (1) the idea of identity of emotions between the empathizer and the target and (2) the point of view of the congruence of emotions between the empathizer and the target, both being cases of personal emotional experiences. Secondly, I suggest that these possibilities may make up an exclusive disjunctive argument, showing that problems with the first part of the argument or the premise would lead us to accept the second part: to feel empathy we do not need to feel exactly the same emotion that the object of empathy feels.

Keywords: empathy; emotion; cognition; emotional contagion; personal; subpersonal; perspective taking

1. Introduction

In recent years, the study of empathy as an intersubjective and non-reciprocal capacity has become increasingly relevant. In fact, during the last decades there has been an “explosion” of empirical and interdisciplinary work in evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, social neuroscience, psychology of development, philosophy of mind, and other disciplines that strongly modify the sense and the scope of empathy [1–4].

In this paper, and using a notion of empathy that I have been developing in other papers¹ as a starting point, I will focus on one particular characteristic of empathy to consider and to itemize that for which there is still no agreement: whether the emotion of the person experiencing empathy must be identical or not to the emotion felt by the person being empathized with. This problem, among others, is central to sustaining an ontological and epistemological plausible notion of empathy.

The aim of this work is, firstly, to reduce four possibilities about the relationship between the empathizer's emotion and the emotion felt by the person who is the target of empathy to two exhaustive and exclusive views: that the idea of identity of emotions between the empathizer and the target, and that the point of view of congruence [no identity] of emotions between the empathizer and the target. Both are cases of personal emotional experiences.

¹ My view about empathy is developed in ref. [5–9].

Secondly, I suggest that these possibilities are parts of an exclusive disjunctive argument showing that problems with the first premise would lead us to accept the second one; the idea is that, for feeling empathy, we do not need to feel exactly the same emotion that the object of empathy feels.

2. The Central Core about Empathy

“Empathy” is usually defined in various ways and by different disciplines (psychoanalysis, philosophy, and social psychology, among others). Nowadays, taking into account studies in cognitive social neuroscience and philosophy of mind, it is possible to assume that there is a general agreement in considering empathy as a capacity of attaining the neuronal, affective, and cognitive levels to define it from a purely neuronal conception to an affective and/or a cognitive one. It is also conceived of as an integral view. This fact does not mean that consensus about ways of considering empathy has been reached, whether about its nature, scope, function, or criteria of differentiation, among other intersubjective capacities.

One of the unavoidable philosophical questions is to determine what kind of process the empathic experience is, particularly, what kind of emotional and cognitive experience it is. There are numerous theories to account for empathy, and there are many theories of emotion and cognition, too. However, there are very few conceptualizations about the type of theory of emotion adequate to account for empathy, as well as the type of cognition that is at stake in the empathic experience. This last fact leads us to have different ways of understanding empathy.

As previously mentioned, there are at least three different ways of conceiving the notion of empathy.

Empathy may be integrally conceived as Baron-Cohen, S. (2011) [2] or Decety, J. and Jackson, P. (2004) [3] conceptualize:

“It is the ability to identify what someone is thinking or feeling and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion”

(Baron-Cohen, S., 2011) [2]

“It consists of affective sharing between oneself and the other; it is the cognitive ability to differentiate between self/other consciousness and the mental flexibility to adopt the subjective perspective of the other.”

(Decety, J. and Jackson, P., 2004) [3]

However, some philosophers hold that is the cognitive aspect of what specifies empathy:

“Empathy is the cognitive consciousness of the internal state of another person [thoughts, feelings, intentions]”

(Ickes, W., 1997) [10]

“It is the cognitive consciousness of the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and intentions of the other person”

(Deigh, J., 2011) [11]

Finally, it is possible to sustain an emotive notion of empathy.

“Empathy is the vicarious affective response to another person”

(Mill, J., 1985) [12]

“Empathy is the vicarious emotion that a person experiences when reflecting on the emotion of the other.”

(Prinz, J., 2011) [13]

The way empathy is defined is very important, since it is not a trivial differentiation or just a question of labeling or a way of talking. The way empathy is described depends on the abilities and processes involved in it, and this entirely modifies its social functions.

As a consequence of the different criteria about the complex notion of empathy, boundaries about other associated intersubjective phenomena like mindreading, perspective taking, personal distress, sympathy, emotional contagion, and empathy itself, among other phenomena, are ambiguous.

An interesting analysis that coheres all the different views about empathy described above is the Preston, S. and de Waal, F., (2001) [14] model of empathy that, by means of what they call the Action-Perception Model and its evolution processes, in different species, integrates diverse basic phenomena and higher cognitive processes as different levels of empathy.

3. My View on Empathy

Feeling empathy is something that happens, an experience we can remember once we had it, or an experience we would like to have. We may have empathy for our friend who has been stolen from or for our friend who got a Ph.D. To have empathy is “to know” or to feel what seems to be happening to the other person.

From my perspective, taking into account different ways of conceiving it as I described below, empathy could be understood as an imaginary extended line, the respective ends of which correspond to a notion of an entirely affective empathy on one side and an entirely cognitive notion on the other side. This line is integrated by different instances of empathy along it.

Each instance is merged with emotional and cognitive factors in different intensities depending on the type intensity of empathy. When emphasizing the integral nature of empathy, cases—defined as purely affective or purely cognitive—would not be, in fact, empathic cases².

I agree with the view that empathy is compatible with non-human animal empathy³.

I claim that empathy is the ability to feel vicarious emotion congruent, but not identical, with the emotion that the other individual feels. To achieve empathy there are various factors at play: emotional, cognitive, contextual, and personal. While it requires several (but not all) cognitive abilities that are also used in mentalizing, it differs from mentalizing as another ability [16].

4. Empathy and Emotion

One of the important questions to be solved is what kind of emotion is involved in the empathic experience, since it seems that it is not what is called “a first-hand” emotion but, at the same time, the empathizer feels any kind of emotion.

A first-hand emotion is an emotion that happens to oneself and from oneself. However, there is another type of emotion, namely, the vicarious one. A vicarious emotion depends on another one. The vicarious emotional experience is whatever emotion a person manifests that is caused by the expression of another person’s emotion. There is a vicarious emotional experience when our emotion does not arise from a first-hand experience [17].

The hypothesis developed in this paper aims to answer the following question: what is the relationship (if there is one) between the emotive aspect of the empathizer and the emotive aspect of the individual who is the object of empathy?

² Cases of purely emotive aspects of empathy may be seen as emotional contagion, and cases of purely cognitive aspects would consider as mindreading or as theories of mind but not as empathy.

³ See ref. [6] “L’empatia animale: una caratterizzazione concettuale”. In this article, (Brunsteins, 2017), within the framework of a position that rejects the anthropocentric thesis or the thesis of human exception from humanist ideas, gives a conceptual characterization of the notion of empathy applicable to both human and nonhuman animals. Along with and for this characterization, she proposes to consider emotions as processes ref. [15]. A notion of integral empathy would provide a tool that can be used to enhance knowledge of social cognition in different species, particularly differentiating empathy from other associated intersubjective phenomena such as compassion, cooperation, altruism, sympathy, emotional contagion, personal distress imitation, mindreading, and perspective taking, i.e., phenomena that are often confused.

This question allows at least two different and exclusive answers. The first one is proposed by [17]. They say that experiencing empathy is feeling the same as the person who is the object of empathy, posing an isomorphism between the emotional experiences.

In a different vein, ref. [3] and ref. [18] propose that, in order to have the experience of empathy, the emotion of the observer must be congruent with the emotion of the observed individual.

Each of these different answers supports two possibilities each: either identity between the emotional experiences is subpersonal, or either identity between the emotional experiences is at a personal level. The same occurs with the congruence between the emotional experiences; the congruence between the emotional experiences is and may be explained at a subpersonal level or at a personal one.

5. The Emotional Experience at a Subpersonal Level

As I expressed above, I will dedicate this part of the work to eradicate, as a possibility of empathic emotive experience, cases of identity or congruence of emotions between the empathizer and the person who is the object of empathy at a subpersonal level. In other words, I will disesteem the first and third possibilities, which posed that the identity between the emotional experiences is subpersonal or the congruence between the emotional experiences is subpersonal for empathy. In those cases, I suggest that the phenomenon referred to is not empathy but another intersubjective capacity, namely, emotional contagion.

Emotional contagion is a subpersonal process that happens when people tend to automatically imitate facial expressions or postures, and people feel a pale reflection of the emotions of others. The process of emotional contagion could be dissected in three stages: (1) mimicry, (2) feedback, and (3) contagion [19].

By means of mimicry, people tend to automatically imitate facial expressions, vocal, postures, and certain instrumental behaviors around them. They also have a tendency to feel a pale reflection of the emotions of others as a result of such feedback. The final result of the former is that people tend to capture the emotions of others.

Emotional contagion is closely related to empathy, although they are different phenomena.

The main difference between empathy and emotional contagion is that emotional contagion is an automatic and non-regulated capacity, while empathy may begin (in some cases, but not in all cases) with emotional contagion, particularly in cases in which empathy originated from direct perception. Thus, empathy may begin with emotional contagion, but other personal capacities are needed to have empathy, see ref. [1].

There are at least two main reasons to consider that empathy is more than emotional contagion and the emotion provoked in us. Firstly, there is empirical evidence that suggests that empathy can be modulated by other factors that are different from neuronal activation: the direct, automatic, and unconscious perception of another person's feelings. Empathy can be modulated through the intervention of external elements [20]. Empathic modulation may be conceived of as voluntary through experience and practice (i.e., doctors, monks) using the control that each has on their emotions, or it may be modulated through implicit evaluative processes [20]. In the case of implicit evaluative processes, there are certain factors that modify the intensity of empathy and, in that sense, the very same empathy. The features of emotions (e.g., intensity, valence, and salience), the relationship between the empathizer and the person who is the object of empathy, characteristics of the empathizer (e.g., gender, age, past experiences), and contextual information modify the intensity and may even activate or obstruct empathy. For instance, there is empirical evidence that suggests that the intensity of empathy produced by others in pain decreases if the pain infringed is a means to cure, unlike pain infringed without justification [21]. The intensity of empathy of the observer also varies if the observer perceives the situation that the person in pain is involved in as fair or unfair. There is more intensity of empathy in cases of unfair situations [22]. In all these cases, it appears that, to empathize with someone, something more than affective correspondence is required, because, if that were the case, there should not be differences between cases of only affective correspondence between the empathizer

and the target and those cases in which there was some additional information from the empathizer's side. In these cases, additional information has modified the very sense of empathy.

Secondly, from the conceptual point of view and taking into account the perspective of developmental psychology, it is important to highlight that conceiving of empathy as just mirroring at a subpersonal level would not fully explain differences due to maturation, nor would it explain the sophistication of complex forms of emotion and cognition during child development until maturity see ref. [23].

Thus, there are some cognitive abilities that I consider necessary in the empathic process, and they integrate the notion of empathy itself. If this is the case, emotional contagion would be the way of acquiring empathy but, to reach it, different capacities are also needed.

Perspective taking is related to a certain cognitive flexibility to be able to adopt the perspective of the other. This ability matures late, since it depends on the maturity of executive abilities that continue to develop until adolescence [24]. Together with perspective taking, the regulation of emotions is needed to be able to empathize. The latter states the similarity and differentiation between me and the other person. It consists of the ability to reply to the demands of the experience with a bearable emotional scope and to be flexible enough to allow or delay/inhibit spontaneous reactions. This ability allows empathizing without having personal distress, and it can lead to sympathy. According to Decety, J. and Lamm, C. [24], in addition to the cognitive abilities already mentioned with regards to empathizing with someone else, certain top-down process information is required; the executive functions implemented in certain areas of the cerebral cortex regulate cognition and emotion through selective attention and auto-regulation. They are capacities of focusing the context facilitating the intersubjective relationship and updating in terms of bottom-up information. It is a re-evaluation process. Finally, as the authors assume, bottom-up process information is required. In that process the "shared" emotion automatically activated in the observer through the direct perceptual inputs is accounted for. It refers to motor control and sensorial-affective domains.

Thus, given these four possibilities: (1) identity between the emotional experiences is subpersonal; (2) identity between the emotional experiences is personal; (3) congruence between the emotional experiences is subpersonal; and (4) congruence between the emotional experiences is personal, my suggestion leads us to eliminate cases 1 and 3 from the list of empathic experiences.

Emotional contagion is a punctually self-centered automatic capacity that may or may not be integrated into a more sophisticated notion, such as empathy. When experiencing empathy, reference to a capacity centered on the other occurs.

6. Identity between the Emotional Experiences is Personal

Having disesteemed the subpersonal emotive experiences as cases of empathy, let us consider the first part of the disjunctive premise of the principal argument.

Remember that the aim of this work is to reduce four possibilities about the relationship between the empathizer emotion and the emotion felt by the person who is the target of empathy to two exhaustive and exclusive views: the idea of identity of emotions between the empathizer and the target, and the point of view of congruence [no identity] of emotions between the empathizer and the target, both being cases of personal emotional experiences. Finally, I want to suggest these possibilities as parts of an exclusive disjunctive argument showing that problems with the first premise would lead us to accept the second one; the idea is that for feeling empathy, we do not need to feel exactly the same emotion that the person that is object of empathy feels.

The first part of the premise sustains that to have an empathic emotional experience is to feel the same emotion, in an identical way, that the person who is object of empathy is feeling. Wondra J.D. and Ellsworth, P.C. ref. [17] present the following example to develop this idea:

"Imagine that your friend got sick following an international vacation that the two of you took together. You are waiting with your friend in the hospital to hear the results of a test for malaria. Both you and your friend think that a positive test result would be awful and that

your friend was extremely unlucky. Your friend feels fairly sure that the test will come back positive and feels sad. If you also feel confident that the test will be positive, then you will feel sad with your friend. We would call this empathy because you feel what your friend feels. If, however, you feel that you have no idea what the test result will be, then you will feel scared for your friend. We would call this a nonmatching vicarious emotion because it is not what your friend feels. The only difference is whether you have appraised the situation in the same way as your friend or not". [17] (p. 418)

7. Why Should We Suspect about Identity?

Firstly, I think that it would be problematic to accept the premise in hand, because it is difficult to determine whether, when Wondra, J.D. and Ellsworth, P.C. argue ref. [17] that empathy is the case, we actually have the same emotion as the person who is being empathized with; how can we know that an individual feels exactly (i.e., makes the same appraisals) what the other individual feels without entering into a subsequent intersubjective relationship to compare and adjust their own emotions or appraisals? If this is possible, what would be the justification criteria in this regard?

Secondly, it would be problematic to accept the premise at hand. Their proposal would place a great limitation on the empathic experience, since we could not have empathy with someone who experiences an emotion that we have not previously felt in the same sense as the individual feels it, unless we can achieve the same feeling through imagination and/or other cognitive functions. However, in that case, would it be effectively identical? Can we assume in that case that we have had the same appraisal? Thus, in order to admit the case of identity of emotions, it is necessary to give more reasons to overcome these problems.

It is also important to highlight that, in case of assuming congruence, it is impossible to explain why there is no identity between the empathizer's emotion and that of the target for the same reasons.

The very significant point is that there does not need to be some kind of identity for there to be empathy. Returning to Wondra, J.D. and Ellsworth, P.C.'s example, and reconsidering it through the light of my worries, there is empathy both feeling the same emotion of the friend or not. What really matters is to have put oneself into the other's situation, having an emotion that makes it possible to feel empathy. The emotion, no matter what that exactly emotion may be, is the vehicle for feeling empathy, with this emotion being congruent with the emotion the target feels.

Empathy is a flexible and malleable phenomenon due to a number of motivational and dispositional situations. Such situations, perspective taking, and the regulation of emotions modify the emotions we feel to go beyond emotional contagion, not suffering personal distress, and experiencing empathy.

Empathy may be generated by means of different mechanisms: through direct perception, through imagination, by perspective taking, or by means of top-down-type controls. Emotions can vary according to the rest of the intervening factors. These factors ensure that for there to be congruence between one's emotion and the other's emotion, the person takes what is relevant in the environment so that, with their own resources and through an emotional and cognitive experience, the person achieves the empathic experience. Since there are so many intervening factors when having the vicarious emotional experience, it would almost be begging the question to suppose that it will be the same type of emotional experience that is instantiated in both cases.

In addition, the way in which Wondra J.D., and Ellsworth, P.C. ref. [17] characterize emotions assumes, for example, that being afraid involves describing a series of emotional experiences that are traversed without clear boundaries because emotions are continuous. Thus, if this is the case, it is difficult to determine whether the case of vicarious emotion corresponds to the same type of emotional experience as the person who is the object of empathy, given that, for empathy, according to the authors, the subject should do the same type of evaluations that the individual who is the object of empathy has done.

A way to disentangle the problem is offered by Nanay, B. ref. [25], who makes an analogy between vicarious perception and vicarious emotion. The author assumes that it is possible, for instance, to feel

vicarious fear without attributing any emotional state, because it is a relatively simple process that does not require any higher order thoughts. Nanay, B. ref. [25] uses the expression “vicarious emotional engagement” to refer to the form of emotional engagement with others in which we perceive entities around another person as emotionally relevant to that person. In this sense, when having empathy by means of some vicarious emotional engagement, it is not necessary to suppose identity of emotions between the empathizer⁴ and the target, just a perceptual attribution of other centered-thick action properties to an object.

Moreover, it is important to take into account that, from the empirical point of view, evidence has been found suggesting a certain congruence but no identity of emotions. In fact, a study proposed by Morelli, S., Rameson, L., and Lieberman, M. ref. [26] reveals, from a quantitative and qualitative analysis, that empathy for positive and negative emotions selectively activates the regions associated with positive and negative affect, respectively. However, it is not possible to relate them to a specific emotion.

The problem is that if we define empathy in a narrow sense, we would exclude cases that I consider to reveal empathy contrary to Wondra, J.D and Ellsworth, P.C ref. [17]. That difference is not a trivial question, since it refers to psychological processes. That is, there is an ontological commitment at stake. It also reveals different epistemological commitments.

Thus, reconsidering Wondra, J.D and Ellsworth, P.C.’s example, I think we may identify the case they refuse to consider: empathy as an actual and valid case of empathy. It is that way, because, by means of feeling scared, he or she feels empathy for his or her sad friend, being successfully placed in his or her shoes. In this case, being scared is congruent, but not identical, with his sadness. It provokes empathy as well. His or her fear of not knowing the outcome of the blood analysis is a result of his friend’s sadness among other factors at play. He or she feels an emotion that is congruent, but not identical with, his or her friend, and it is sufficient to reach empathy. This result is in line with the empirical evidence just referred to. It may be possible to accept a broader sense of emotions matching, for instance, positive emotions with positive emotions or negative emotions with other negative emotions, enhancing, in that way, the notion of empathy.

8. Conclusions

Since there are space-time, body, perspective, and responsibility differences, it is necessary to explain in more detail the possibility that the emotion felt for the empathizer may be identical to that of the person who is the object of empathy.

Moreover, the rejection of the first part of the disjunctive premise leads us to a second one, that is, that the emotion of the observer must be congruent with the emotion of the observed individual.

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⁴ See ref. [25] *Between Perception and Action*, cap.6. In this chapter the author develops his idea of vicarious perception.

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