**Comprehension: The art of not knowing.**

Dialogical and ethical perspectives on empathy as dialogue in personal and person-centred relationships.

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**Abstract.** Empathy is an innate ability of the human being that develops from the early infant stage. As opposed to cognitive social perspective taking, which always aims at specific goals in order to gain some advantage for oneself, empathy is a social bridge that comes without a particular intention but always as an expression of the personal quality of solidarity. This chapter looks at empathy from an encounter philosophical perspective. The relational dimension of empathy responds to the need of an individual in their search for being deeply understood and thus constituted as a person in their confusing position in the middle of a bewildering world, while its substantial dimension confirms a person in his or her ability to gain identity and actualises self-understanding and personal power. Thus, it is an expression of values that results in a principled non-directivity in therapy and counselling. What Carl Rogers discovered for psychotherapy is the contact-building and acknowledging quality of empathy — without any techniques, means, aims or intentions. In person-centred therapy the attempt to understand is never used ‘in order to’. From an epistemological and dialogical perspective, to be empathic means to face the unexpected, to accompany a person and to start a journey with an uncertain destination, perhaps never reached before, in an uncertain way, perhaps never travelled before. The interesting and challenging part is the unknown and not-yet-understood, the openness to wonderment, surprise and disclosure. To be empathic generally means to expose oneself to the presence of the Other: to be open to being touched existentially by another person’s reality and to touch his or her reality. Thus, there is always the readiness and the risk to change oneself.

*To give an answer before hearing
is a foolish thing and a cause of shame.*

Proverbs 18:13

Carl Rogers (1992) thought of empathy as the one of the basic conditions for personality development through psychotherapy which could be described, understood and learned most easily. Termed as ‘accurate empathic understanding’, ‘accurate empathy’, ‘understanding responses’ — in early stages of development also as ‘testing understandings’ and ‘checking perceptions’
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(Rogers 1986a) — by Rogers and other theoreticians it is, according to Rogers, an experience equalled by nothing else (Rogers and Bennis, V-1986). In this chapter the process of empathic understanding is looked at from a developmental psychological perspective and examined from a more fundamental and philosophical viewpoint as a basic capability of the human being and also as an encounter attitude, in and beyond therapy. To be empathic phenomenologically, anthropologically, epistemologically and socio-ethically describes part of what it means to be present person to person (see Schmid 2002 — in press).

BEING IMPRESSED AND EXPRESS ONESELF: EMPATHY AS AN INNATE PERSONAL QUALITY BEYOND IDENTIFICATION AND INTERPRETATION

The term ‘empathy’ and its understanding originate from aesthetics, originally denoting the understanding of works of art (Gombrich, 1953). Whilst here, empathy meant to transfer one’s own moods and feelings, e.g. into a picture or sculpture or into the artist, the socio-psychological use of the term, initiated by Max Weber (see Käser, 1995), describes a different process according to the original meaning of the Greek term. Etymologically, ‘em-pathein’ (from the Greek words ‘en’ and ‘pathos’) means to enter somebody’s pain and grief and stay there (while ‘sym-pathein’ originally means ‘to suffer together’). This denotes two essential elements of empathy: there must be a minimum of personal contact and the intention must be to accompany.

An empathic person tries to understand, as exactly as possible, the accurate meaning of what goes on inside another person in the very moment, e.g. what a person feels, thinks, wishes, fears, is motivated by, is trying to express, etc., and to communicate this to him or her. This implies that the other person is actually viewed as an Other (in the sense of personalistic or dialogical or encounter philosophy) who is, although a fellow human and thus alike, in fact different from me (see Schmid, 2001b). Empathy means to put oneself, without specific intention, into the Other’s place moment by moment, in the inner world of experiencing of the Other, in his or her inner frame of reference and to feel as if one was him or her.

This quality of ‘as if’ is crucial, because it sets empathy apart from identification on the one side, and interpretation on the other side. Identification would mean to ignore the boundaries between oneself and the other person, to feel in the same way as he or she does and therefore to dissolve or be wrapped up in his or her emotions — which would not be very helpful. The other extreme, interpretation, would mean to judge what the other person thinks, feels or expresses, to form an evaluation about him or her from an outer frame of reference.

3. At a closer look empathy is ‘personal analogising apperception’. That is, putting myself in the position of another person, which means that I still feel myself, but not here, where I am — rather there, where I am not. On the other hand, cognitive social perspective taking (see below) is functional analogising apperception.
and thus objectify him or her — the outcome being leaving the person-to-person relationship. Identification does not pay attention to, and even ignores, the otherness of the Other. Interpretation closes the eyes to his or her uniqueness. Empathy, however, means to resonate to the melody the Other plays, an accurate vibrating and sensing with the Other without playing one’s own melody. It is being touched by the world of the Other without completely dissolving in it. Empathy can be compared to the actor who temporarily slips ‘into’ a role and acts ‘out of’ this role.4

To be empathic means to try to view the Other as he or she views themselves, and more; as he or she is on the edge of viewing themselves. This means that the empathic person also senses what is coming up in the moment which may not yet be in full awareness to the other person. This does not mean to anticipate what might come up, for example out of experience — this belongs to another, fundamentally different social ability, the cognitive social perspective taking, which is described below. Therefore, an essential precondition for empathy is active listening, i.e. a concentrated attention and attentiveness, trying to pay attention to what is meant and not only what is said or shown, to understand what the other person wants to express. This includes what is on the very edge of becoming aware to him or her.

It is important to notice that the decisive point is the attempt to understand — and not the success, the process and not the achievement. Empathy does not aim at immediately guessing and exactly naming the meaning of what the other person expresses. Rather, empathy is a common searching movement, a process, an ongoing joint checking, in which one person makes him- or herself available as an alter ego for the other person. Furthermore the point is not to make something become aware to the other one, but an invitation for the other person to better understand him- or herself. Empathy has nothing to do with the idea somebody could understand a person better than them themselves and thus uncover or reveal something. As already mentioned, being and becoming empathic is a process, being aware of and sensing with the Other whatever comes up in his or her flow of experience. A person who sensitively enters the private world of the Other, without prejudices, can participate in the experiencing of this person and become a trustful and trustworthy companion.

This process of communication through symbolisation of what is being understood often happens as verbalisation, as the attempt to put it in words and convey them. But it also can happen non-verbally, e.g. through body language, artistic means, etc. Max Pagès (1974) coined the term ‘expressive pluralism’ for the different possibilities of how to express oneself and communicate authentically. He emphasises that the criterion for the choice of a communication channel is not the effect that it should have, but the quality of expression as an answer to the Other.

If empathy is communicated to the Other, it is a forceful way to support

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5. The term ‘self-empathy’, given the use of the term ‘empathy’ as described above, can only be used analogously, like ‘to encounter oneself’ in the understanding of encounter philosophy. The element of the complete otherness of the ‘partner’ in dialogue is missing in these cases.
somebody’s ‘empathy’ towards him- or herself. Communicating what was being understood is not only a sign of understanding, it is also an invitation to the Other to continue with this process to differentiate one’s understanding in him- or herself. Accurate empathy supports the other person very effectively to be more sensitive, ‘empathic’ towards him- or herself and to turn to his or her own experiencing less fearfully and more carefully, to enter self-experience and to get involved with a kind of ‘dialogue’ with him- or herself.

CONNECT WITH OR CHECK FOR: EMPATHY VERSUS COGNITIVE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Empathy is a basic quality of the person. It is often misunderstood as a method of understanding which can be used in different ways (e.g. to empathise ‘in order to’ diagnose or to tell somebody something about him- or herself or even as a capability which can be misused to harm people, e.g. in brainwashing). Thus it is necessary to clearly distinguish between empathy and cognitive social perspective taking (Binder, 1996; see Clark, 1991; Eisenberg and Strayer, 1990; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1992).

Both are central dimensions of social comprehension, necessary for survival, which sometimes look alike from the outside, but are different in origin, nature and function. Both deal with understanding of feelings, needs and aims of another person in a given situation and the resulting feelings, expectations, needs and motivations of one’s own. And they can happen at the same time. However, the crucial difference is: empathy tries to understand the inner world of another person regardless of one’s own state and view, i.e. to understand what something means to the other person; cognitive social perspective taking is concerned with finding out what the inner state and the situation of the other means to me. Therefore, empathy aims at contact, connection and closeness; cognitive social perspective taking aims at objective classification and evaluation. Empathy is immediate emotional participation; cognitive social perspective taking is intellectual consideration. Empathy has to do with trusting; cognitive social perspective taking has to do with checking. Empathy rests on a minimum of familiarity and aims at increasing it; cognitive social perspective taking rests on social and experiential knowledge and aims at better knowledge and predictability. Empathy is a holistic quality person to person (neuro-psychologically empathy belongs to the right half of the brain, where holistic and qualitative capabilities are thought to reside); cognitive social perspective taking is a rational, logical quality.

Thus, the aim of empathy is not destruction; the intention of cognitive social perspective taking can be destructive, and it can be constructive — depending on the motivation. The distinction has nothing to do with a moral evaluation: empathy takes sides and is solidarity which often is ‘unjust’; cognitive social perspective taking rests on social and experiential knowledge and aims at better knowledge and predictability. Empathy is a holistic quality person to person (neuro-psychologically empathy belongs to the right half of the brain, where holistic and qualitative capabilities are thought to reside); cognitive social perspective taking is a rational, logical quality.

6. In a personal context ‘solidarity’ — etymologically from ‘solidus’ (‘genuine, whole’) and related to ‘salvus’ (‘intact, whole, sane, healthy’) — means the ability and attitude of a person to take (mutual) responsibility for others out of the consciousness of interconnectedness. Together with autonomy it characterizes the two essential points of the understanding of the human being as a person (see Schmid 1991, 1994, 2001a, 2001b).
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perspective taking tries to come to an objective judgement (and can be used either way). Both empathy, and cognitive social perspective taking, are innate and develop alongside each other via precursing abilities of the infant. Precursors of empathy serve to establish and maintain close relationships; the function of cognitive social perspective taking, however, is to control the environment and to exercise the fitting behaviour in a given situation. Thus, it can be shown that they are two different social abilities of the human being from the very beginning. (Binder, 1996; Bryant, 1990; Stern, 1992)

Taking this into account it is a mistake to believe empathy could be used ‘in order to’ get knowledge about somebody. If this is the goal, it is not empathy. (Thus, Kohut’s use of the term in psychoanalytical self-psychology — see below — as introspection in order to be able to gather data for later interpretation is not empathy in the sense described here but an aspect of cognitive social perspective taking.) Empathy has a process quality that rests on a minimum of acknowledgement.7 Cognitive social perspective taking is always used to gain knowledge in order to predict behaviour; but — depending on the motivation — this can also be used to support an empathic process. If it is used to assess or judge another person, it conflicts with empathy.

TOUCHING AND BEING TOUCHED IN EXISTENTIAL DIALOGUE: EMPATHY MEANS TO BECOME AWARE OF A PERSON

Empathy always is a quality directed at the person of the Other. Thus it is a personal quality. What is termed ‘empathy’ in psychotherapy is extensively discussed in personalistic philosophy from a phenomenological point of view in search of an adequate understanding of the person-to-person relationship that is called encounter.

Buber: comprehension as exposing oneself to the presence of the Other

Martin Buber (1962/1963, I; 1984) examines the phenomenon of ‘comprehension’ (‘Umfassung’) which, in his opinion, is more than empathy, because both poles are taken into consideration: the pole of being centred in the other side and the pole of being centred in one’s own existence. (He considers this to be a necessary attitude for parents, pedagogues, psychotherapists, etc.). It denotes the capability to experience the other, to ‘swing into’ (‘einschwingen’) his or her reality, and, at the same time, experience one’s own reality.

According to Buber’s terminology, comprehending is different from ‘observing’ (which means to take notes in the mind) and different from ‘looking at’ (which means being open to be impressed, as artists are). Rather, comprehending means to be existentially affected and impressed by what I see. It is a way of perception which Buber calls ‘inclusion’ (‘Innewerden’) meaning ‘to become aware of somebody’. To become aware of a person means being touched and struck by the otherness of the Other and to acknowledge him or her as a unique person, in

7. ‘Acknowledgement’ means to say ‘yes’ to the Other as a person. Acknowledgement without conditions as one of the person-centred core conditions is described in detail in Schmid, 2001b.
their wholeness and concreteness — beyond psychological or physical categories. This is only possible if I become present to the other: presence is the fundamental core of this way of relating and perceiving (see Schmid, 2001a, 2001c). Empathy is an expression of presence, because it is, in existential wonderment, related to what the Other is experiencing.

Buber (e.g. 1978, 1984) calls this way of relating ‘personale Vergegenwärtigung’. The German word ‘Vergegenwärtigung’ indicates an active form containing the substantive ‘Gegenwart’ (‘presence’), literally meaning: ‘becoming presence’ or ‘making something or somebody present’. It denotes that I perceive the other one as a person, i.e. in his or her wholeness and individuality (without reduction or abstraction), who stands before me in this moment. It means that I am open for his or her specific way of being and thus I am able to encounter him or her. According to Buber, this is an elementary way of relating and means to expose oneself to the presence of the other. Epistemologically, it is a personal way of becoming aware of, a way of ac-cept-ance instead of per-cept-ion 8, of ac-know-ledge-ment instead of knowledge 9. This is where empathy and acknowledgement coincide (see Schmid, 2001b).

It is opposed to the (pseudo-) analytical, modern, reductive way of perceiving, which disregards the view of the integrated whole and of uniqueness. To become aware of a person, their integrated whole, their uniqueness, is impossible as long as I only observe the other; it is impossible until the person-to-person relationship is entered. Thus, to become aware means touching and being touched existentially.

Another expression used by Buber is ‘Realphantasie’ (‘phantasy of the real’), which indicates what is happening is that the Other’s reality is touched. To relate to a person in this way is more than to view the person, it is to try to enter their essence and to imagine them as the person they are and can become, thus acknowledging them and ‘confirming’ him or her (in Buber’s terminology; see Schmid, 2001b). This means to accept them not only in their actual reality but, moreover, in their possibilities. Maurice Friedman (1985) interprets this as to imagine or picture as concretely as possible, what the other person wishes, feels, perceives and thinks. This leads to a process where — up to a certain degree — one wishes, feels, perceives and thinks the same. To become aware of somebody in this way is indeed a process, one which has to be learned and practised. It goes in the direction of experiencing his or her experiences, yet still being aware that they are his or hers and not mine, although I am sensing them as if they were my own.

8. ‘Accept’ and ‘perceive’ derive from Latin ‘ac-cipere’ (‘receive, admit, allow’) and ‘per-cipere’ (‘seize, obtain, collect’). The Latin root ‘capere’ means ‘take’. The prefix ‘ad’ (hence assimilated ‘ac-’) expresses motion to, direction towards; the prefix ‘per’ stands for ‘by means of; thoroughly, completely; perfectly’ (Hoad, 1986). Thus the etymological difference lies in stressing the process versus the status.

9. Similar as described in footnote 8: Latin ‘(g)noscere’ (hence ‘cognoscere’) means ‘notice, perceive, seize; acknowledge, recognize, allow; know’. The different meaning is given by the prefix ‘ad’ refers to the process, the suffix ‘-ment’ here stresses the action involved. By the way, the Indo-European root ‘gn’ (cf. Latin ‘cognoscere’ and Greek ‘gignoskein’) is reflected in both, ‘know’ and ‘can’ (German: ‘kneißen’ and ‘können’) and points to their inner connection. (Hoad, 1986)
In spite of commonality between two persons, it is crucial to keep the necessary distance as an astonishment, a respect and reverence towards the other person. Bernhard Welte (1966, p. 19), German theologian and philosopher, emphasises the necessity of ‘the respect of listening to the incomparability of the Thou’.

To become aware of a person means to become part of him or her, to participate in the reality of the other. Thus, it is an affirmative way of relating which has a confirming effect on the person of the other one. Being aware of a person in this way nurtures him- or herself to become more and more aware of him- or herself; it is an affirmation, facilitates growth and nourishes the development of the person. Buber is convinced that personality development depends on relationships where other persons become aware of and confirm the essence of a person, thus supporting his or her development. One can easily notice that these descriptions come very close to how Carl Rogers expressed his understanding of empathy.

For some (Friedman, 1985), the difference between Rogers’ and Buber’s comprehension of this attitude and activity lies in the fact that Rogers thinks it necessary to put one’s own understanding completely apart if one wants to enter the world of another person empathically. Buber, on the hand, emphasises the mutuality of the process: I need to give something of myself to the other person; without bringing myself into play as a person, it would not be possible to acknowledge what is empathically understood. This differentiation seems to be artificial, because empathy must not be misunderstood as a state rather than a process, and the inner relation of the core conditions must be taken into account: there is no empathy without authenticity — and to be authentic always means to bring oneself into play (Schmid, 2001a). Therefore, to be really empathic is always a risk. In other words, empathy is a relational variable or condition (referring to the relation between persons) not only a therapist variable (referring to the individual) — as is acknowledgement, as is authenticity.

To become aware of a person requires me to be both fully open to entering the relationship and to not lose the necessary distance to distinguish between the Other’s and my own experiences, feelings and symbolisations. This is a qualitatively different mode of relating and understanding than identification or interpretation. It requires me to be im-pressed by the other person and to express myself as a person, i.e. my own experiences, feelings and symbolisations. Both poles, to be touched and amazed by the otherness of the Other and yet to be oneself, to utter and communicate one’s self, are essential for personal encounter. There is no empathy without acknowledgement, as well as authenticity. There is no dialogue without commonality and difference.

**Levinas: comprehension and presence as the risk of tenderness**

To further understand the intrinsic dialogical nature of empathy, another encounter philosopher can be of great help. Emmanuel Levinas — born in Lithuania and professor at the Sorbonne in Paris with very radical positions, in

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10. This maintains his or her ‘being counter’ as the etymology of ‘en-counter’ implies. See Schmid, 2001a for detailed etymology of ‘en-counter’.
some ways executing a similar paradigm change as Rogers — profoundly carries forward the idea of the priority of the Other. He stresses that the other person is to be seen as a call and a pro-vocation: as an appeal to respond (see Schmid, 2001a, 2001b). Out of phenomenological considerations Levinas (1959) is convinced that the ‘beginning’ of each relationship lies in the Other. It is not the I searching the other, instead it is the Other who is there first (e.g. regarded from a developmental psychological perspective, we are born into relationships). The Other is a call (and cry for help) to whom I have to respond, and whence, therefore, responsibility and solidarity derive. My movement towards the Other is an answer to the appeal by him or her. Thus, it is an ethical movement. Accordingly, Levinas thinks of ethics as the ‘first philosophy’ and points to the phenomenological foundations of ethics in the experience of relationships. If we do not want to continue with ‘egology’, according to Levinas, we have to radically take the Other’s perspective — what Levinas regards as the ethical challenge.11

Using metaphors from the field of eroticism and love, Levinas describes this movement, which originates in the presence of the Other, as an ongoing movement and a continuous challenge — as everyone can experience in true love. There is no ‘escape’ from it, once the fact is accepted that the Other is there first.

The relationship (which now correctly has to be characterized as a ‘Thou-I’ relationship; not the other way round!) is always asymmetrical because the Other is not at all an alter ego, but truly another person. Thus, he or she pro-vokes, calls to come out; the Other wakes a desire. Desire (‘désir’) always has its source in the Other, as opposed to need (‘besoin’), which originates in the subject. To meet or satisfy a need is a move towards myself, while the movement to follow a desire comes from the outside. The Other is the aim of my desire, but he or she can never be reached like a goal (‘finis’, ‘fin’) could be reached: he or she is in-finite. This ‘infinity’ breaks up my ‘totality’, the captivity in myself. For Levinas, real desire goes towards the infinite, it is the idea of the infinite in us.

There is no satisfaction of this desire, because the closer the subject comes to the Other, the more the desire grows. The desired does not satisfy the desire, but increases it: ‘it nourishes with fresh hunger’. True desire continuously finds new sources and challenges generosity (Levinas, 1963).

Levinas (1963, 1983) points out that speech is immediate sensuality. To approach the Other does not mean to pursue what is already present nor to seek what has already been found, rather, it means not to be able to get away from the Other — like caressing. Caressing is always approaching as well as nearness. In tenderness and caress, one becomes aware that with nearness there is also always the experience of absence. Thus, nearness is not motionlessness, not calmness, but commotion, restlessness. It is a hunger which derives from the insatiable desire, the love and responsibility for the Other. Alain Finkielkraut (1984) similarly characterises ‘eros’ itself as the moment where desire discovers the indomitable nearness of the Other. The height of desire is not to have power over something or somebody, but incessantly approaching something that can never be reached, to court, to seek an invincible body.

11. This is described in detail in Schmid, 2001a.
In this view, to speak happens out of transcendence and not out of self-confirmation, which is contrary to usual sense. Self-confidence has its foundation in the encounter of dialogue. To speak with somebody does not happen in order to prove rightness, to confirm oneself or to prevail against somebody. On the contrary, it is dialogical. This means whatever is spoken, however clear, is spoken shyly, in readiness to be surprised, in readiness for correction otherwise it would be nothing than a fight of monologues. Thus — out of a dialogical understanding — to speak is to speak for somebody, is intercession and response. It is open for an unknown future, a movement without return, like Abraham’s journey in contrast to Odysseus’ (see Schmid, 2001b). It is a movement which seeks the Other and not oneself, which is enriched by the Other instead of caught up in the totality of the same, of the self. It is acting out of love, ready for the disclosure and revelation of the Other (Levinas, 1949, 1963, 1974).

These considerations, although sometimes hard to understand due to their special language, are very near to the descriptions of what happens in empathy and give a phenomenological, anthropological and ethical foundation to what goes on in empathic relationships, psychotherapy included. As stated above, to be empathic means to start a journey with an uncertain destination, perhaps never reached before, in an uncertain way, perhaps never travelled before. The interesting and challenging part is the unknown and not-yet-understood. Empathy is the art of not-knowing. It is the art of being curious, being open to being surprised, ‘being kept awake by an enigma’ (Levinas, 1983, p. 120). It is tenderness. Thus empathy is an expression of love, because it ‘centres’ in the other person: it is an outstanding expression of person-centredness.

AUTONOMY AND SOLIDARITY: EMPATHY MEANS BUILDING A BRIDGE TO AN UNKNOWN LAND

To ‘be aware of’ derives from the Germanic adjective ‘wara’, which stands for ‘attentive, cautious, careful, gentle’. Empathy means to respectfully enter the inner world of a person and to approach the person from his or her inner self — carefully and gently, becoming more and more aware, not only of what he or she senses, feels, thinks, wishes and fears, but also of his or her essence, of him or her as a person, in his or her uniqueness — without overlooking the difference, and the mystery, that one never can fully be aware of another person. The movement is from the other person to me, not the other way round. Therefore, empathy, like acknowledgement (Schmid, 2001b), is to be understood as a response to the other person’s call, to the other person’s disclosure, to his or her revelation (Schmid, 2001b).

The crucial thing about empathy is that it always tries, but is never able, to fully reach the other person. There will always remain a difference, something that cannot be empathised with, cannot be understood. As human beings we share a lot in common, we are fellow humans and this enables us to understand each other. As human beings we are also different persons whose individual ways

12. ‘Tenderness’ is also the term used by Thorne (1985) to describe an attitude and condition he sees parallel to Rogers’ ‘presence’ (cf. Schmid, 2001c).
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of living and experiencing remain mysteries to the last and can never be fully understood. This enables us to respectfully encounter each other.

The dynamics of empathic understanding is driven by the following difference: the more somebody understands, the more he or she realises how little his or her understanding is; the more somebody tries to understand another person, the more this person becomes aware of the little differences between the understanding of the other and his or her self-understanding. This stimulates the attempt to better understand oneself—an infinite process.

Empathy is a bridge. It bridges the gap between differences, between persons—without removing the gap, without ignoring the differences; it does not pretend identity of the two, nor does it give up at the sight of diversity; it does not mix up what is different nor does it surrender in view of the depths of otherness—it bridges.

In the person-centred conception, the primacy of experience in the construction of theories and in research leads to the primacy of empathy, a fact that is also of great significance in philosophy, in particular epistemology. In theory and in practice, the Person-Centred Approach has performed a shift of paradigms from the object to the person, from observation to encounter, and from interpretation to empathy (see Schmid, 1998).

Empathy confirms a person. According to occidental philosophical tradition, to be a person dialectically means both to be based upon oneself (‘sub-stare’, whence ‘substance’) and to exist through others (‘ek-sistere’, whence ‘existence’). To be and to become a person means to be autonomous and to be dependent on relationships. The substantial dimension of empathy confirms a person in his or her ability to gain identity, to ‘become what she is’ and actualises self-understanding and personal power. Its relational dimension responds to the need of an individual in his or her search for being deeply understood and thus constituted as a person in their confusing position in the middle of a bewildering world.

The Other: similar to me and yet different, neighbour and opponent, friend and enemy, mirror and enigma. Empathy is the ability, the challenge and the attempt to enter a solidary relationship to the Other, acknowledging diversity and yet trying to understand and to become aware of him or her.

DEVELOPING ONE’S SELF: EMPATHY AS THE ANSWER TO THE NEED OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Both aspects of personhood, the substantial and the relational, are also the foundation of understanding the development of a child. The actualising tendency aims at the development of the possibilities and needs of the organism. Appropriate relationships enable and foster this growth. Thus, the person-centred core conditions of authenticity, acknowledgement and empathic comprehension are crucial in their function as developmental conditions in the relationship of the child towards his or her significant others. In his or her striving for positive experiences, the child needs to be accompanied empathically by an authentic

person, who shows unconditional positive regard towards, and in the interactions with the child. In short: a person who is unconditionally present. This process of becoming a person can also be examined from the point of view of empathy as the need for being understood.

A mother or father, who authentically and unconditionally accept their child, understand the need for self-actualisation of the child as a need to be fully understood, a need for empathy. Only empathic ways of attention express loving care that is not tied to any conditions. If the need for empathy is not met, the child develops new ways of expressing itself and communicating this need, i.e. by offering its experiencing to be understood. This is done by the child (and later by the adult as well) over and over again, until he or she is satisfyingly understood. Out of these interactions the gestalt of the self of the child is developed. Experiencing which is not empathically understood cannot be integrated into the self and remains alien. This experiencing does not disappear. On the contrary, in order to become congruent self-experience, it continues to exist and goes on to try to satisfy its need for empathic understanding. Consequently, the values developed by the child are his or her ideas of what the conditions of his or her experiencing would need to be in order to be understood empathically and this makes up an important part of his or her personality. Generally, humans want to understand themselves, acknowledge themselves and to experience their lives authentically. Life is striving for being comprehended and for comprehending oneself — which is a dialectical process. To make this happen we need relationships in which we can experience this by others towards ourselves. Experiencing which does not fulfil these conditions can be understood as a symptom of lack of empathy, a form and communication of the wish and need for empathy: experiencing which urges to be understood.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED: EMPATHY AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF PERSON-CENTRED THERAPY

Where there is a deficit or where there is distorted, conditional, unempathic self-understanding, new experiences in relationships can help. Therapy is one of them. Person-centred psychotherapy is ‘personality development through understanding’ in the encounter philosophical sense described above. The

14. Rogers and others emphasised the aspect of the need of unconditional positive regard in this developmental process (Rogers, 1959; Rogers and Wood, 1974; Rogers and Tillich, 1966).
15. The newer research on infants (Dornes, 1993) and the binding theory (Spangler and Zimmermann, 1997) show interesting parallels to the theories of person-centred developmental psychology.
18. In this sense, empathy by an expert therapist never can understand more about the client than the client understands him- or herself nor can it go beyond the client by intuition or by using knowledge about disorders or the like. The person-centred way of understanding always means the understanding of the meaning of the other person’s communication in a way that helps this person to understand him- or herself better than before. Congruent not-yet-understanding by the therapist can help to foster this process. In this respect . . . (cont. over)
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therapist offers ‘sensitive companionship’ (Merry, 1988, p. 22) by ‘undivided empathy’ (Raskin and Rogers, 1989, p. 182). Later, as Carl Rogers further grew older and the more he learned about it, the more he stressed the encounter quality of empathy, particularly in his writings about the importance of what he understood as ‘presence’ in the therapeutic dialogue (see Rogers, 1986b; Schmid 2001c).

As stated above, empathy, from an encounter philosophical point of view, can never be understood as a state or fixed condition; it is always a process, a way of being, as Rogers emphasised, more correctly ‘a way of being with’ (Rogers, 1975a, p. 4; Schmid, 1994, p. 271). Interpretations of empathy as plain mirroring, as the technique of reflection of feelings, as saying-back or as ‘verbalisation of emotional experiencings (VEE)’ — as in a behaviouristic misunderstanding of empathy held for quite a long period of time, (e.g. in Germany — ‘Gesprächspsychotherapie’) — qualify themselves as absurd and as a technical misunderstanding and missing of the dialogical quality of person-centred therapy.

‘It is an art. I am uncomfortable with reductionistic interpretation of empathy just calling it “listening technique” because it really does involve a whole person. It is like playing a harp’ (Prouty).

It is essential to be aware of the danger that listening can become sheer routine. ‘Open listening means to be ready for the unexpected, for dissonances; it does not monopolise another person and does not try to foresee the unexpected before it occurs’ (Pagès, 1974, p. 314). The relationship person to person consists of the continuously alternating, oscillating movement between acknowledging and empathically being-with-the-other and congruently being-with-oneself (thus being ‘empathic’ towards oneself).

When empathy is at its best, the two individuals are participating in a process which may be compared to that of a couple dancing, the client leading, the therapist following: the smooth, spontaneous back-and-forth flow of energy in the interaction has its own aesthetic rhythm (Raskin and Rogers, 1989, p. 157).

Empathy pays attention to all channels of communication and it is not at all limited to verbal statements of feelings. Rogers (1959, pp. 213, 216) had written that empathic understanding is only ‘to some degree expressed verbally’ and that clients gradually become free to express their feelings ‘through verbal and/or motor channels’. Person-centred therapy, as the name implies, is centred on the person, not on feelings or on words. Thus, his or her body and the respective

(continued from previous page) . . . empathy is always hermeneutic empathy — hermeneutics seen as the art of understanding. But this does not mean that the therapist in understanding is ahead of the client in terms of knowing better what's going on than the client him- or herself (as some authors seem to think; cf. Keil, 1996; Finke, 1994); the therapist is always 'behind'.


20. Barrett-Lennard (1981, 1993) described the interactional nature of empathy as an 'empathy cycle', a multi-step process occurring in a distinct sequence of phases. Following the crucial inner resonation phase is the step of communicative expression of this aroused awareness of the other's felt experiencing. A complete cycle requires the further phase of the other becoming aware that the listener is indeed with him (or her), in immediate experiential, understanding (Barrett-Lennard, 1998, p. 81).
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‘sensory awareness’ is included in the wholeness of an empathic dialogue. This means with all the physical aspects and dimensions of empathy: gestures, postures, movements, mimics, timbre, intonation, etc. To empathise into another person is a bodily metaphor. It means to enter the world of the other person, to see with his or her eyes, to taste with his or her senses. This is done with one's bodily capacities, with ears and eyes and other sensory organs. It can be expressed with all the bodily abilities not just the voice and words, but also with one's own gestures, postures, movements and one's touching (if appropriate). This is not at all meant to reduce the importance of words, which are also ‘touching’ — if they are appropriate. But to state it clearly, empathic expression is symbolising, not only verbalising.

Empathy as an important element in therapy is not only claimed by the person-centred orientation. Analytical self-psychology, e.g. Heinz Kohut (1984), finds it necessary to use empathy in order to gain knowledge about and for the patient. Rogers saw the difference between the use of empathy by Kohut and himself in the intent. Kohut wanted to gather data in order to be able to interpret the patient's behaviour, whilst Rogers ‘only’ wanted to be a sensitive companion to the client and to encourage him or her to go on with their journey of discovering themselves. The difference, according to Rogers, lies in the self-confidence and (in)dependency of the client from the therapist (Rogers and Sanford, 1985). Taking into account the difference between empathy and cognitive social perspective taking, the difference becomes even clearer. What Kohut is talking about is not empathy in the strict sense. As already stated, empathy, can never be used ‘in order to’. By definition, it is unintentional. In person-centred therapy the task is to empathise with the client and therefore being touched by what can be sensed, rather than checking, with cognitive social perspective taking, which response of the therapist will lead to which reaction of the client. To experience empathy is a confirming experience per se. ‘Empathic therapies’ and ‘cognitive social perspective taking therapies’ are two different worlds.

‘SOCIAL EMPATHY’: THE MULTIPLE LEVELS OF EMPATHY IN ENCOUNTER GROUPS

An additional perspective of empathy as comprehension presents itself when thinking of groups. Here, it is important to keep in mind that a group is more than its individuals and thus there also is, analogously speaking, ‘empathy into the group’. In group work, the facilitator’s empathy is directed towards the individuals as well as the group as a whole and towards parts of the group and the interactions in it. The relieving and enriching difference from one-to-one therapy is the fact that other group members also offer their empathy.

Wood (1988, p. 114) points out that the facilitator of a group tries to help the participants to formulate the right expression for their inner experiencing in the present moment by empathic listening. Thus, Wood is convinced that empathy allows the person to feel hidden feelings, but does not provoke these feelings.

22. Ute Binder (1996) stresses the importance to distinguish between empathy and cognitive social perspective taking for psychotherapy.
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Empathy is not used ‘in order to’ teach the group members to show feelings and listen to them — which would simply mean to impose rules on them. Empathy has nothing to demonstrate (to an individual or a group) — this belongs to cognitive social perspective taking. Empathy is a creative way of discovering new individual and common aspects of experiencing and communicating in the group (and between groups).

In groups, it can often be helpful for a person to verbalise or symbolise on a trial basis, i.e. to make his or her impressions available to the group. In these circumstances, it can often be discovered that different persons with different inner lives (and thus different things to empathise with) need not necessarily represent a contradictory position, but can be controversial or ambivalent, and not excluding of other positions (in the group, inside the persons and between persons). Thus, the group can help to better understand the individual and vice versa. Individuals often ‘speak for the group’ and express a group feeling earlier than it becomes obvious to others. One outcome of this is that in such groups people can learn to get a feeling for feelings.

Groups often picture ‘the outside reality’ better than the relatively self-contained pair in one-to-one therapy and, hence, are often more suited to deal with problems of a person facing this outside reality. A group is particularly helpful to discover and develop what Mann (1975) called ‘social empathy’ which implies the social being included in society, visible in the different roles people find themselves in.


In being empathic the person-centred therapist and facilitator avoids directivity in terms of selecting the topics, interpreting the meaning of the client’s feelings and cognitions and steering the process of therapy. But isn’t empathy itself influencing the client? And if so, does this conflict with non-directivity? Isn’t active listening always directive by paying more attention to certain things and less to others, setting a focal point, and thus being directive in terms of making suggestions to the client or even conditioning the client to go in a certain direction?

It is definitely inadequate to deal with these questions on the level of techniques. As early as 1942, Rogers wrote that the difference of a ‘directive versus non-directive approach’ (pp. 108–20), is a difference in the philosophy of counselling and in the values. Therefore, the question is whether there is a right of the experienced and more capable to guide the unexperienced and less capable or a right to independence for every person. This difference between problem-centred and client-centred is, according to Rogers, an issue of social and political philosophy. From a personalistic view the client is the expert, not the therapist. What is non-directive for the therapist is self-directed for the client (Rogers, 1942, p. 87) — one might also say organism-directed — centred on the directions of the client; thus, it is ‘client-centred’.

The controversial issue of non-directivity is usually discussed in combination
with the understanding of the core conditions and their sufficiency. To avoid misunderstandings it must be clear that the subject ‘directive versus non-directive’ has nothing to do with the question whether therapy is an influencing process. Of course, there is an intent of the therapist to influence the client. In relationships there is no way not to influence; one cannot not influence. This highlights an often neglected difference; what a therapist does (or fails to do) always has an effect or impact, but this must not be confused with an intention to have a certain effect. Concerning his work in groups, Rogers stated (1971), ‘[T]here is no doubt that I am selective in my listening and hence “directive”, if people wish to accuse me of this’ (p. 276). He stresses that he is unquestionably much more interested in the meaning the experiences have for a client in the moment and the feelings which they arouse in the client, than the stories he or she tells. ‘It is these meanings and the feelings to which I try to respond.’ (ibid.). Thus, even active listening is directive in the meaning of influencing. But the crucial point is how you do that and whether you aim at a specific goal. The goal of person-centred influence is to foster the process of actualisation. The ‘means’ to do so is by being present—a way of being and behaving that is explicated by the description of the core conditions. Everything else, including any kind of directivity, is incompatible with these ‘means’ (see Patterson, 1999).

Rogers in 1975(b, p. 26), interviewed by Evans, responded to the question of whether he would say that he had qualified somewhat the notion of being non-directive during the later periods of his work: ‘No. I think perhaps I enriched it, but not really qualified it. I still feel that the person who should guide the client’s life is the client. My whole philosophy and whole approach is to try to strengthen him in that way of being, that he’s in charge of his own life and nothing I say is intended to take that capacity or that opportunity away from him.’

From an encounter perspective—becoming aware of the Other as a mystery and an enigma—there is no doubt that realising the ‘way of being with’ others called presence (see Schmid, 2001a) is non-directive in principle. Directive means are inconsistent with the goal of autonomy, responsibility and self-determination, listening and being empathic.

Thus, non-directivity is not a principle as such, nor a statement about every

23. Bozarth (1998, Chapter 6) e.g. regards non-directivity as a practice application of the therapist’s unconditional positive regard. Brodley (1990, 1999) emphasises that ‘client-centred’ and ‘experiential’ are two different therapies that turn on the issue of directivity and influence, and that non-directivity is intrinsic to Rogers’ therapeutic attitudes, a part of their essential meaning, being the protection of the client’s autonomy. Prouty (1999) argues similarly. Others do think that certain kinds of directivity are not incompatible or irreconcilable with a person-centred stance: Lietaer (1992) favours the shift from non-directivity to experience-orientation. In his opinion to be non-directive simply means that there is no therapy plan. Cain (1989, 1990) thinks to impose non-directivity on the client may hinder him or her; in his eyes the task is to learn with the client how he is learning best, otherwise the therapist would hinder himself in offering his resources. Grant (1990) positions himself against Cain who, in his view, seems to have an ‘in order to’ attitude. Grant makes a distinction between instrumental ‘non-directiveness’ (as a means for growth) and ‘principled non-directiveness’ (as an expression of respect, as an absence of the intention to make anything in particular happen, as an expression of attitude towards the world facing it as a miracle, as an object of love not will, regarding the other as a mystery). Coghlan and McIlduff (1990) discriminate between giving a structure (concerning the means of processing) and being directive (concerning the contents).
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single behaviour or action of the therapist, it is not a set of behaviours nor a technique. It is not at all passive, but an active expression of being impressed by the Other (and not by one’s own ideas, combinations and solution proposals) and being interested in him or her. To be non-directive is an attitude, a way of being with, and a consequence of the trust in the client’s actualising tendency. To be non-directive means valuing the otherness and uniqueness of the Other. It is a humble attitude towards the unknown (Grant, 1990), a precondition for encounter as well as the basic realisation of an encounter orientated attitude. It is an ethical and epistemological issue. In non-directivity the values of the therapist are expressed, not to gain external control over the client but to respect his or her organismic self-directedness and personal autonomy. Non-directivity denotes the ability to be surprised by the Other and to be open to what the Other is willing to reveal as a person (Schmid, 1999).

The art of not-knowing is a way of relating towards each other that we owe each other as persons, and we owe ourselves.

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