Reflecting On Empathy

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Abstract
Acknowledging the difficulty of saying what empathy is, this chapter reflects on empathy in three distinct, though interrelated, parts. The first section offers some observations about the important role of empathy in teaching, one of the areas in which I think strong empathic ability makes a significant difference. The second section articulates three ‘problems’ that arise because of ways empathy is sometimes construed: the mistake of thinking of empathy as simply being about imagining how one might feel oneself in another person’s shoes, as a way of coming to know another’s experience; the way in which empathy is sometimes confused or conflated with sympathy, and the adoption of a what I refer to as a ‘cosy’ view of empathy, in which empathy is thought always to be a good thing. Finally, the third section turns to a critical reflection of the British psychopathologist Baron-Cohen and his writings about empathy, as a way of allowing me to share some of what I think about this most valuable and yet most dangerous of human abilities. This chapter draws on the papers I presented at Inter-Disciplinary.Net’s First and Second Global Conferences on Empathy.1

Key Words: Empathy, sympathy, bullying, torture, sexual abuse, Baron-Cohen, ethicality, problems with empathy, cosy views of empathy, moral neutrality of empathy.

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1. Introduction
Empathy, the ability to gain some understanding of what another person is experiencing – what they are feeling and thinking, is an attribute that anyone who relates to other people arguably possesses to at least some extent, because being able to apprehend these things at some level, is necessary for the everyday business of living in relationship with others. This is probably what Larocco is referring to when he writes, in this book, that ‘Empathy is at the core of life together’2. I agree wholeheartedly with him, but I agree, also, with what he says next, that empathy:

…functions in complex ways: oscillating between facilitating interpersonal bonds by the sharing of feelings and minds, but also providing much of the cognitive/affective infrastructure for the manipulation of others according to their recognized dispositional vulnerabilities, as in the grooming of a child for sexual abuse…3

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It might seem odd, in a chapter about empathy, which is (rightly in my view) widely recognised as one of the more positive human capacities, to applaud a statement that draws attention to some of its less savoury uses. That I have done so gives a clue to what is to come, because centrally important to this chapter is my rejection of the ‘cosy’ and overly positive views of empathy that are currently popular.

Empathy is of interest to practitioners and researchers working in a great many fields. For example, over the course of its first two conferences, the steering group for Inter-Disciplinary.Net’s *Empathy* project, of which this book is a product, received abstracts from participants working in:

History; Theology; Law; Computer Studies; Anthropology; Sociology; Psychology; Drama; Film Studies; Media Studies; Philosophy; Ethnography; Cultural Studies; Neuroscience; Literature, including Poetry; Education; Buddhism; Health and social care, including Nursing, Mental Health, Dementia Care, Social Work, Psychotherapy, Counselling, Disability and Psychoanalysis; Art and Design, including Photography, Fine Art and Industrial Design; Television; Human Rights; Teaching; Conflict Resolution; Peacemaking; Music; Dance; Theatre; Cinema; Journalism; Social Media and Computer Gaming.

Interest in empathy – in what it is, how it arises, why it is important and how it can be developed, has grown enormously since I first became aware of it in the 1970s. Nelems reports that ‘…more academic articles were published on empathy in 2014 alone (31,200) than were published cumulatively between 1900 and 1970 on the topic (28,840)’. And whereas, when I first heard of it through the person-centred psychology of Carl Rogers, empathy was mainly of interest to professionals involved in therapy, counselling and other ‘people professions’, it is now, as the list above suggests, of interest to a wide range of practitioners and researchers in other areas. Not only that, but it is now integrated into the mainstream of life, as may be surmised from Nelems’ report that ‘The number of “empathy” google search results in the first five months of 2015 (5,860,000) alone…total more than 15 times more than those that appeared in 2010, and 65 times more than those that appeared in 2005’. Despite its increasing popularity, however, empathy is difficult to pin down and in this chapter I want both to discuss what it is and why it is important, and to raise some issues that arise from the different ways in which it is construed.

As is obvious to anyone who stops to think about it, the term ‘empathy’ is used in many different ways and in writing this chapter I have struggled with how to refer to the phenomenon and human practice that it is used to label – as, for example, ‘an ability or skill’; ‘a talent’; ‘a concept’; ‘an aptitude’, or as ‘a way of