

Exploring and Understanding Victim Empathy

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Agenda

- 1. What is empathy?**
2. Empathy in context
3. Consequences for research and practice
4. Measuring the effects of victim empathy / awareness training
5. Conclusion

What is empathy?

Several disciplines deal with empathy, namely philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and neuro-science.

- Historically empathy was understood as a "psychological resonance phenomenon" triggering inner processes (Lipps 1907) -> empathy as an "inner imitation".
- Scheler (1913: 22) defined empathy as the "vicarious sharing of an affect ... empathy does not necessarily require that the subject and target feel the same emotions." -> affective empathy
- According to contemporary neuro-scientific findings so called mirror neurons show that certain areas of the brain are stimulated the time the subject experiences an action and the time the subject observes the target executing the same action. (see Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2008).

What is empathy? Continuation ...

- In conclusion empathy is a correlation of cognitive and affective processes in which the “affective responses are due to the fact that the perception of another person activates similar neurons in the subject and the target”. (Stueber 2013)
- Pepinsky (2008: 188) states that “empathy is the emotional glue that binds people together in respect and dignity” in contrast to narcissism which results in separation and war-making.
- Empathy grows during the course of life and is influenced by socialization experiences.
- A continuum from the loved ones over other humans to animals?
- Victim empathy is focused on one’s own victim (victims may include indirect victims and family and friends of the perpetrator)
- Empathy is not a “defining character trait of individuals or organizations” (Pepinsky 2008: 196)

Decety & Moriguchi identify four major functional components of empathy (2007: 4)

“Shared neural representations, self-other awareness, mental flexibility and emotion regulation constitute the basic macro-components of empathy, which are mediated by specific and interacting neural systems.

- Affective sharing between the self and the other, based on the automatic perception-action coupling and resulting shared representations.
- Self-awareness. Even when there is some temporary identification between the observer and its target, there is no confusion between self and other.
- Mental flexibility to adopt the subjective perspective of the other.
- Regulatory processes that modulate the subjective feelings associated with emotion.“

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Raising children in today's society

We have not taught young people to understand the interconnectedness of all things and the need to always understand the impact of our actions on others. [see Eissele 2009, O.H.] ... We have raised an entire generation without the prerequisites for developing empathy. ...

The development of empathy requires:

- 1.regular feedback about how our actions are affecting others, respectfully communicated
- 2.relationships in which we are valued and our worth is validated
- 3.experience of sympathy from others when we are in pain

Quotation from Pranis (2000)

Suppressing empathic feelings?

Some people are not capable, others are not willing to let empathy emerge:

- People suffering from autism, dementia or dissocial personality disorders (see ICD 10) may not express empathy to the same extent as others. Especially psychopaths (see Hare 1991) may not be affected (see de Waal 2008) by other's suffering.
- However, also persons who are not suffering from any of these disorders may neutralize their potential empathic reactions (see Sykes & Matza (1957) and Bandura et al. (1996) for "moral disengagement"): terrorists or contract killers, but see also Lerner's (1980) theory of just world belief and the reluctance to support victims.

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Consequences for research and practice

- (Lack of) Empathy plays a crucial role in offending.
- If it is true that victim empathy impedes or even prevents offending, than it may be possible to avoid victimization or at least decrease the level of suffering by eliciting the ability to empathize and increasing the level of empathy and awareness.
- At least offenders who are able to empathize and who are aware of the consequences of their own actions could avoid future infliction of pain and suffering by being trained.
- Therefore, in prisons and in probation programmes like victim empathy / awareness training, Sycamore Tree, dialogues between groups of unrelated victims and offenders have been developed and correspondent modules integrated in more specific programmes as SOTP and the like (e. g. David et al. 2005), respectively.
- At least partly these programmes have been evaluated.

International References and Models

- The Sycamore Tree Programme (Prison Fellowship International)
- Since 1999 REMEDI offers one-to-one counseling on empathy for probationers and victim awareness courses in prisons and on probation since 2005
- Our victim awareness training in Kiel prison and Schleswig juvenile prison is based on my own work developed 1996 in Hamburg (see Hagemann 2003)
- I relied among others on Thompson's (2001) work in Australia
- Muijkens & Smeets' (2008) group work with victims "Beyond the offender" ("Uit de schaduw van de dader") includes meeting unrelated offenders

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Measuring the effects of victim empathy / awareness training

- CRIME_PICS II is an attitude to offending measure (used before and after participation in STP)
There are 3 items constituting the subscale V (victim empathy)
- Alternatively Mehrabian's (1996) Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale can be used, which also serves as a risk of violence indicator for assessment of a particular person.
- Bell (n.d.) critically stated, that instruments to measure empathy statistically suffer from weaknesses. Particularly females score higher (less favourably) meaning they are less empathetic than males.
- Especially the large English samples of several thousand offenders using CRIME_PICS II confirm this criticism. Why has empathy improved between 2005 and 2009 compared with the period before?
And why should females be less empathetic than males?

Assessing the impact of Sycamore Tree Program by CRIME_PICS II or BEES

United Kingdom

Two big studies 2005 + 2009

- Sheffield Hallam University
- Feasey, S. and Williams, P.

New Zealand

Small studies

- L. Bakker not dated 2008?
- Marshall 2005
- N. Bell not dated 2000?

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Conclusion

- Empathy seems to play a crucial role in offending. Thus, improving awareness for the consequences of one's own acting - the ability to empathize - contributes to prevent victimizations.
- Problem of measurement: Although victim-empathy-training addresses relevant issues its impact on empathy change is unclear.
- Although concepts differ in length, participants and even as a group or one-to-one exercise there seems to be not much difference in outcome.
- Most of the evaluations which were accessible for me came to very encouraging results: improvement of empathy and related issues.
- The challenge is to make empathy accessible all the time and everywhere! Thus timing of the training and transfer from the training situation to everyday life need to be focused on.

Thank you!

The way towards Restorative Justice
announced at an Austrian Trainstation



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