



Living with Uncertainty

Working Paper 3

Empathy in talk: A model and some methodological considerations

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Empathy in talk: A model and some methodological considerations

This paper starts from the outcomes of the literature review on the different understandings and interpretations of 'empathy' (Working Paper 1). It describes the model of empathy being used in the project to investigate how people do empathy in talk and how they avoid empathy. The method used in empirical studies is introduced.

What (and where) can empathy be?

From the review of published literature, it is clear that empathy between Self and Other is not a simple phenomenon but that the term is used to cover multiple, sometimes interdependent, levels of activity operating at different timescales:

- Empathy can be a disposition or capacity brought to interaction, that can be increased or decreased as a result of the interaction.
- Empathy can be an intention or an attitude that influences the nature of interaction, that may need to be continually renewed or adjusted throughout the interaction.
- Empathy can be a moral or ethical choice to accept the other as a fellow human being, complex and particular, deemed worthy of being understood. As such, it may be an *a priori* or life choice, but it can be also a moment by moment choice.
- Empathy can be an act of imagining or 'entering' the world of the other.
- Empathy can be a mode of attending to the other in interaction, manifested in the nature of listening and invitations to talk or other elicitation moves.
- Empathy can be an automatic response to what is heard or observed, that may be expressed in words or action, expanded through more conscious activity, or inhibited.

Empathy appears to have been studied both as something that occurs in talk and as something that emerges from talk. This suggests that an appropriate descriptive model will be dynamic, i.e. will characterise empathy through multiple processes operating at, and interacting across, different levels and timescales.

A model of empathy centred around discourse activity

The Living with Uncertainty project is investigating empathy in discourse activity -- how people do empathy in talk, and how they avoid or block empathy. While the discourse activity may sometimes be talk between Self and Other, in many of our contexts people are talking in a group about the Other, rather than directly with the Other. A descriptive model is being developed as a tool for investigating empathy in discourse activity. The model will incorporate what is known from empirical studies of various types; it will be used to help structure the separate empirical studies; the results of studies will then fill out and refine the model.

The focus of the research centres on individuals in interaction, where the timescale runs from milliseconds to minutes. At this level and timescale, we are concerned with the senses of empathy covered in the last three bullet points above. The other senses

of the term may impact upon what happens at this level and timescale, although they themselves occur at other timescales: for example, attitudes and beliefs about others social groups that have stabilised over a period of years are likely to influence what is said in the course of a discourse event. The possibility also exists that what happens in a discourse event of less than an hour can lead to longer term changes in, for example, capacity for empathy or negative attitudes that block empathy.

Making use of ideas from complexity and dynamic systems theory as developed in Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008), Cameron's study of the development of empathy in post-conflict conversations (2011) produced an initial model of empathy.¹ A new dialogic unit, called 'a gesture of empathy', was introduced to describe empathy-related interactions found in analysis of conversations between a former IRA bomber and the daughter of one of his victims, and was positioned at the core of the descriptive model. Various 'initial conditions' contribute to the activity at this core level (preparations for the conversations, attitudes and beliefs etc)² and these were placed at what is labelled 'level 1', with the core discourse activity taking place at 'level 2'. Two further levels contain activity at longer timescales: level 3 represents the timescale of the discourse event, i.e. a scale of hours, at which patterns of talk relating to empathy may be identified as emerging from the instances of talk at level 2; level 4 represents the effect of multiple discourse events over periods of months and years, where changes in understandings of another person or group may occur or widely held cultural beliefs have stabilised. Change within levels and interaction across levels represents the discourse dynamics of empathy.

The current version of the model is shown in figure 1. The initial model derived from the reconciliation conversations can be seen in Working Paper 2. The various aspects of empathy, shown in the bullet points in the first section of this paper, are incorporated at their respective levels. The key idea of empathy as metaphorically "connecting with the Other" coming from the reconciliation study (Cameron, 2011) is adopted at level 3, along with the three categories of gestures of empathy: allowing connection; entering into the other's world; and shifts in perceived relation between self and other. A negative version of this is included at level 3 as "Avoiding connection with Other". Refining and adding to this content is one important goal of the other empirical studies currently underway.

What are the 'levels'?

Because a diagram on page or screen forces the use of two dimensions and boxes, it is important to hold in mind that everything in the model is about process, change and dynamics.

¹ This work was carried out before I became aware of the multidimensional process model of empathy of Davis (1994), described in and developed by Morrell (2010). My "initial conditions" corresponds to their "Antecedents". They have 2 other levels of operation, labelled "Processes and "Intrapersonal/interpersonal outcomes", while I use 3. Although their models are, importantly, process models, the discourse dynamics model takes the process idea further by envisaging all the processes in terms of complex dynamic systems.

² 'Initial conditions' is the term used in complex and dynamic systems theory to describe the starting point of a system. The conditions that prevail at this point can make a huge difference to how the system unfolds. The well-known 'Butterfly effect' aims to illustrate how a tiny change in initial conditions in a weather system, such as a flutter of a butterfly's wings, can lead to large and sometimes chaotic effects, such as a tornado on the other side of the world.

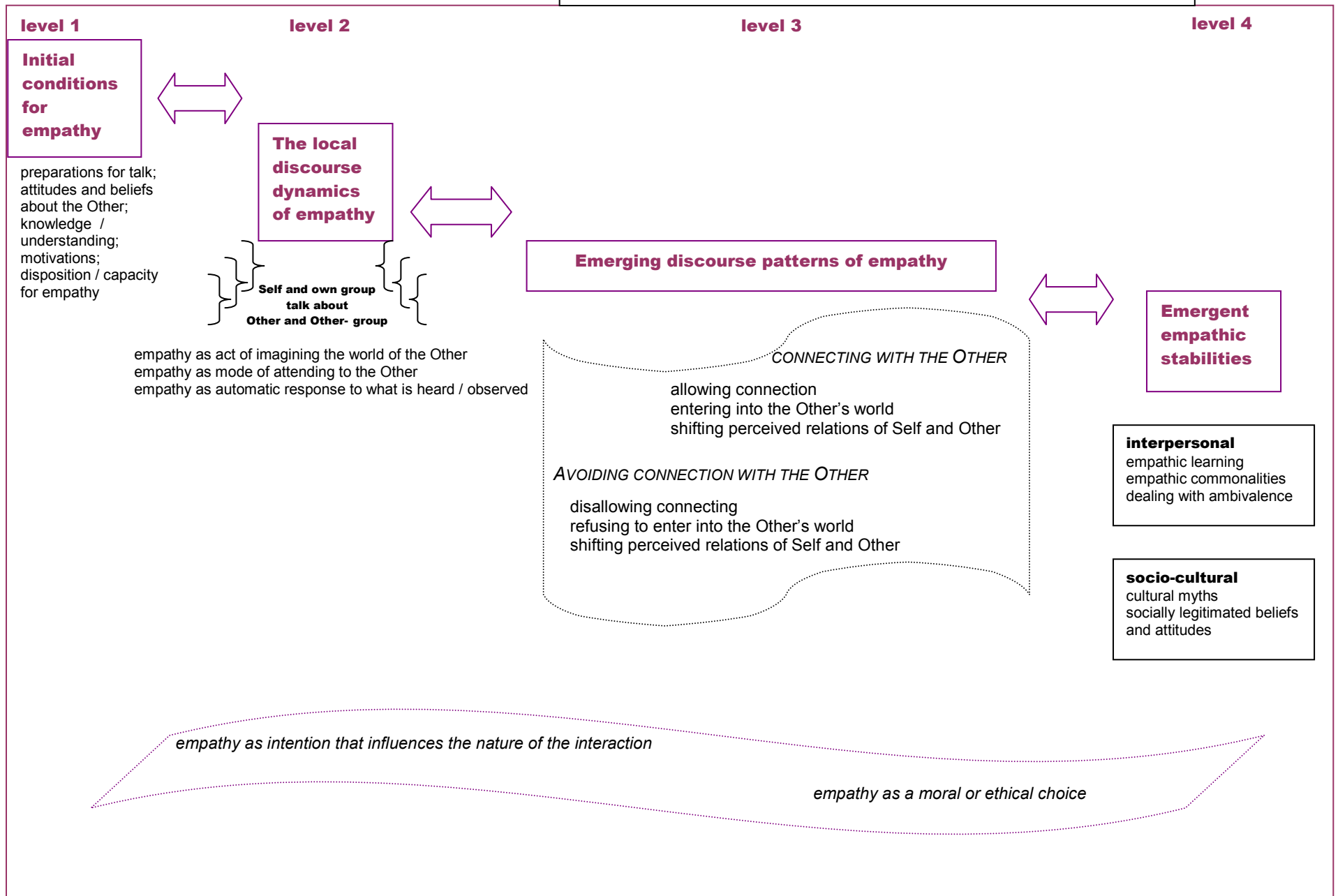
The four levels are used to capture the complexity of the empathy/discourse system. While there may be more levels that could be characterised, four appear to adequately capture current thinking about empathy. The levels used here coincide with differences in timescales, but also represent differences in the focus of the researcher, a kind of zooming in and out. The levels are not hierarchical, nor are they sequential. While there is some sense of time ordering, in that level 1 precedes level 2, the relation between levels is much more complicated; even in the simplest case, each instance of activity at level 2 has its own level 1 to be considered.

The relation between levels 2 and 3, and between 3 and 4, is about emergence, a change in some aspect of empathy that results from activity at the lower level but cannot be understood reductively as some combination of lower-level actions.

Spread along the bottom of the diagram are two aspects of empathy that seem to operate at all levels simultaneously: intention for empathy, and empathy as a moral or ethical choice. The literature shows an important role for deliberate empathy; an intention to connect with the Other, or to avoid connection, will influence everything that happens. Similarly, if connecting, or avoiding connection, with the Other is a moral or ethical choice it is likely to influence the discourse activity at each point in time. This is not to claim that intention or moral choice is fixed -- these too will be dynamic, adjusting and adapting to events -- but to see them as acting across levels as a kind of contextual 'wash' (Thelen and Smith, 1994).

The double headed arrows represent the ever-present possibility of feedback between levels. Furthermore, level 4 and level 1 are clearly connected, as empathic stabilities that emerged through previous discourse events contribute to the initial conditions for a new event. Emergent patterns of empathy at level 3 can feedback into discourse activity that level 2, influencing, for example, statements made about the Other.

The discourse dynamics of empathy



How might aspects of empathy manifest themselves in dialogue?

Research questions for the empirical studies of empathy in talk will be derived from the model. In this section, I suggest some ways in which we might expect empathy to manifest itself in talk derived from thinking through the bullet point list that opened the paper in the light of previous experience of analysing talk

- Empathy can be a disposition or capacity brought to interaction, and that can be increased or decreased as a result of the interaction.

It may be part of one's personality or may be trained to higher levels, perhaps as part of professional development. Training may show itself in traces of particular discourses in interaction. It may show itself in the degree of ease with which the interaction proceeds.

- Empathy can be an intention or an attitude that influences the nature of interaction, that may need to be continually renewed or adjusted throughout the interaction.

It may be a professional commitment e.g. taken on by psychotherapists or medical practitioners. It may show itself in the physical setting of the dialogue, in the form and content of utterances, in the management of the dialogue.

- Empathy can be a moral or ethical choice to accept to the other as a fellow human being, complex and particular, deemed worthy of being understood. As such, it may be an *a priori* or life choice, but it can be also a moment by moment choice.

It may be spoken of explicitly. It may influence the setting and expectations of the interaction. Emotional ambivalence may be apparent in hesitations or reformulations.

- Empathy can be an act of imagining or 'entering' the world of the other.

It may be indicated by phrases showing a shift to the world of the other, particular lexical choices related to the other's life, by modality reflecting the hypothesised nature of what is said, by evaluations from the other's perspective.

- Empathy can be a mode of attending to the other in interaction, manifested in the nature of listening and invitations to talk or other elicitation moves.

This should be the most obviously visible to the analyst through a range of conversational features and gestures of empathy.

- Empathy can be an automatic response to what is heard or observed, that may be expressed in words or action, expanded through more conscious activity, or inhibited.

In dialogue, affordances for automatic empathy may occur in multiple modes, including language, with the potential to activate perceptual simulations by presenting emotions, experiences, physical actions and reactions.

Implications for method

The approach used in the empirical studies of empathy is called ‘discourse dynamics’ (Cameron et al, 2009; Cameron, 2010). Discourse dynamics has many parallels with dialogism (Linell, 1998; Markova, 2000, 2007), paying extra attention to the complexity and dynamics of the interaction (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008). Discourse dynamic analysis attempts to unpack the flow of discourse activity at levels 2 and 3 in order to better understand how people think and talk about themselves and others, how they understand what they’re doing in the interaction, how what is said may be influenced by others and other voices. The approach shares many assumptions of dialogism, including speakers having multiple perspectives, both brought to the talk and arising in talk, and the impossibility of full intersubjectivity and the inevitability of alterity. Rather than separation, the approach assumes interdependence of speaker and context, and of self and other.

Discourse activity is analysed “with various analytical tools and from various angles” (Markova et al, 2007, p. 51). It begins with close analysis of discourse activity at level 2, from there identifying activity at other levels, influences on discourse activity and patterns emerging from discourse activity. While following the concern of discursive psychology and conversation analysis to examine closely the “rich surface of language and interaction” (Edwards, 2006, p.41), discourse dynamic analysis refuses to dispense with understandings of language and mind that are available from other disciplines, accepting, while trying to minimise, the risks of bringing together incompatible methods.

In line with dialogic analysis (Linell, 1998), discourse dynamic analysis attends to the sequentiality, joint construction and sense making of discourse events. The dynamic systems heritage of the approach suggests attention to continuities and perturbations, or critical points, in the discourse activity, and to the gradual or sudden emergence of stabilisations out of the dynamics of moment by moment talking-and-thinking. Content is examined for topics, themes and themata (Markova et al, 2007). In terms of interaction, turn management is analysed. At a linguistic level, choices of lexis and grammar (sometimes also phonology) in utterances are attended to. Particular attention is paid to the use of metaphorical language because of the role of metaphor in expressing affect and imagining other worlds. Metaphor analysis (Cameron and Maslen, 2010) is applied to the data in a separate process, with findings then mapped on to the discourse analysis. In examining empathy towards the Other as group, references to people and social groups become important indicators of empathy-related talk, often as part of positioning analysis (van Langenhove and Harré 1999; Harré et al., 2009). Narratives and scenarios presented or evoked by speakers are investigated for their contribution to the discourse activity and to empathy (Ritchie, 2010).

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