Optimizing Empathic Understanding in Human Inquiry, a

Dialogical-Hermeneutical Approach

1. Conceptualizing Empathic Understanding

Brian Fay, philosopher of science, says that empathic understanding is insufficient as well as unnecessary for understanding another person.¹ I disagree. The main reason is that Fay conceives empathic understanding too narrowly and one-sidedly as being one or as psychic identification. Conceived in a broader sense empathic understanding has been indicated by several philosophers, scientists, therapists and counselors as indispensable for human understanding. For instance, the indispensability of empathic understanding in ordinary life is shown in developmental psychology.² Empathic understanding has to develop on the basis of a kind of proto-empathy, a type of emotional immersion, a bodily felt resonance with the mother. Neuroscience has shown that a neurophysiological mechanism is necessary for the development of the capacity of empathic understanding: the system of the ‘mirror-neurons’. Malfunctioning of these ‘mirror-neurons’ may have autism as a consequence.³

Which conception should we choose? If empathic understanding is not psychic identification, then what is it? I propose the following definition of ‘empathy’, which is appropriate for adults:
Empathy is the ability of placing oneself imaginatively in another’s experiential world while feeling and thinking into her or his experiences (points of view, thoughts, ideas, cognitions, desires, intentions to act, and, especially, motivations, feelings and emotions).

The following important elements or implications of this definition should be kept in mind:

(1) empathy does not mean psychic identification or being one; it has an ‘as if’ quality\(^4\) without becoming a sort of ‘sham-empathy’\(^5\);
(2) empathy is not just projecting what we would feel in a situation similar to the situation of another; it is a trial and error, long-term, ‘tasting’ and checking process;
(3) empathy does not mean ‘feeling with’ (‘Mitfühlung’, fellow feeling or sympathy), but it means ‘feeling into’ (‘Einfühlung’, ‘Nachfühlung’ or ‘Nacherleben’) the experiences of another; nevertheless, a sort of emotional resonance is basic;
(4) the experiential world of the other is seen as having cognitive, affective, emotional and motivational dimensions;
(5) empathy as such is an attitudinal (affective and cognitive) ability and not yet communicative (verbal or non-verbal) behavior; however, in the process of empathic understanding empathy may get a communicative character, which may improve empathic understanding; Frans de Waal has shown that primates also have the capacity of combining affective empathy, cognitive empathy and empathic behavior (for instance, chimpanzees and other great apes can demonstrate consolation behavior)\(^6\);
(6) empathy does not necessarily imply subscription to what is expressed; the empathizer may disagree with the empathizee;

(7) empathy neither implies ethical goodness; empathy may be used to exercise power, to manipulate and to hurt another;

(8) the empathic ability has to be developed through one’s personal life; its quality is age-related; so, the development of empathy may have certain stages.

Having defined ‘empathy’ we can define ‘empathic understanding’ as follows:

Empathic understanding is understanding another person on the basis of empathy; this understanding is directed at comprehending or explaining the experiences, mental states and behavior of that person, also in their interrelationships.

Or, more shortly:

Empathic understanding is placing oneself imaginatively in another’s experiential world by feeling and thinking into this world with the aim of comprehending these experiences.

Comprehension does not imply sympathy or approval; it is a type of interpretive
explanation. Neither empathy nor empathic understanding imply actually experiencing the mental state of the other or showing the behavior of the other. Although empathic understanding will still be insufficient for complete understanding of another person in all respects, it will be necessary and feasible. Admittedly, this conception expresses why understanding another is difficult and may fail, but it also expresses that empathic understanding is not a hopeless endeavor. Empathic understanding is possible. It is not a mystery. It is not white magic. As a matter of fact, empathic understanding is a necessary condition for understanding others in ordinary life, for keeping personal mental health and for maintaining human societies. Moreover, during a lifetime or during learning processes empathic understanding can be improved within communicative processes. Because optimizing the development of empathic understanding needs communication, a conceptualization of optimal empathic understanding must include a socially behavioral dimension in addition to the dimension of attitudinal or mental ability.

Anton van Strien differentiates between five phases or facets of the process of empathic understanding of another person:

- *affective empathy* or *empathic resonance*; the empathizer participates, in an ‘as if’ mode, in the experiential world of another person; simulation or imitation may be the case on this level;
- *cognitive empathy*; the empathizer analyses and interprets the perceived affective experiences and behaviors of another; using a primitive theory of mind may be the case;
- *expressed empathy*; the empathizer expresses his or her experienced empathy,
verbally or nonverbally; in an interview situation empathic understanding should be shown to the interviewee to have an effect; and also in a situation of giving (health) care to express empathy may be an essential contribution to the effectiveness of care giving;
- received empathy; the empathizee has to accept the expressed empathy; this responsivity is necessary to get good rapport between the researcher and the researched; so, we could also speak of responsive empathy; in a situation of qualitative interviewing or giving health care responsivity may improve the effectiveness;
- interactional empathy; the empathizer and the empathizee interact; they react appropriately to each other, especially concerning the aspect of empathic understanding; in the interactive process empathic understanding is expressed, received, accepted, affirmed and stimulated.

We observe that the affective and cognitive types of empathy are of a mental or attitudinal nature and the other three types are of a socially behavioral or communicative nature.

2. Optimizing Empathic Understanding

I want to modify and extend this series (or spiral) from Van Strien in three respects. First, I add a third, hermeneutical-interpretive type (in short interpretive empathy) to the mental types:

- interpretive empathy; a hermeneutical approach to empathic understanding implies that the verbal and non-verbal behavior of the interpreting empathizer has to
be understood and interpreted by means of a process characterized by the so-called hermeneutical circle; in the hermeneutical circle parts of the behavior of the researched empathizee are interpreted and re-interpreted from the whole, and the whole is interpreted and re-interpreted from the parts; this understanding and interpreting process is a checking and validating process; this interpreting process also implies self-clarification and self-understanding on the part of the interpreting empathizer because his or her for-understandings or pre-suppositions are being confronted by the behavior of the researched; in addition, societal, cultural and historical aspects are included in the interpretive process. In addition, the other is also interpreting his or her own behavior, thoughts, feelings, etc. So, understanding another empathically implies a ‘double hermeneutics’; besides, the social dimension of empathic understanding also stimulates the empathizer’s self-clarification, self-understanding and self-development.

**Figure 1**

A 3x4 structural conceptualization of empathic understanding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Mental</th>
<th>not expressed</th>
<th>expressed</th>
<th>received</th>
<th>interactional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affective</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognitive</td>
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<tr>
<td>interpretive</td>
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dialogical-hermeneutical empathic understanding
Secondly, in our opinion, the set of mental types of empathy (affective, cognitive, interpretive empathy) and the set of social types of empathy (expressed, received, interactional empathy) can be combined, because these two sets can be seen as independent dimensions; we can construct a cross product of these sets or dimensions (see Figure 1). The mental types may exist without a social dimension, but they need a social dimension as indicated to be optimized as well as to be made more effective or worthwhile in professional situations such as doing interviews and giving health care. However, the social types cannot exist without a mental dimension. Therefore, the social dimension has also a value ‘not expressed’, a kind of zero-value. In situations of professional care giving, counseling, education, research-interviewing and participative inquiry the mental as well as the social dimension of empathic understanding should be optimized. Explicit training courses will be indicative. Hence, the 3x4 cross table in Figure 1 represents a typology of twelve types of empathic understanding of which the dialogical-hermeneutical type is the most optimal one.

Thirdly, the affective phase or facet of the mental dimension of empathy (empathic resonance), which is based on emotional and bodily-felt experiences, but which is not proto-empathy anymore, may be expressed verbally as well as non-verbally. The expressed embodiment of affective empathy may be received and responded to in body language.

This typology has to be understood in the following way. The affective type of empathic understanding is basic and influences the cognitive and interpretive type (in the hermeneutical sense). The interpretive type of empathic understanding is
nourished by the affective and cognitive types. Thus, besides the cognitive component the interpretive type has an affective component. This affective component may be expressed or not. It may be expressed verbally or non-verbally. The embodiment of affective empathy may also be not expressed or expressed, noticed (received) or interactively exchanged. In addition, the expressed type of empathic understanding influences the received and interactive types. The received type influences the interactive type. Hence, the interactive type of empathic understanding is nourished by expressing and receiving empathy. (Of course, there are mutual influences between two mental or two social types of empathy. These and other reciprocal relationships between types are not expressed in Figure 1 for reasons of simplicity of presentation.) Therefore, a combination of the interpretive and the interactive types of empathic understanding will deliver the most optimal variation of empathic understanding. I call this type or variation *dialogical-hermeneutical empathic understanding*. This type of understanding implies self-clarification on the part of the interpreting empathizer because his or her for-understandings or pre-suppositions are being confronted by the behavior of the researched; the dialogical character implies that the interactions show mutual respect and appreciation, a double hermeneutics, openness and a striving for communicative symmetry.⁹

The dialogical-hermeneutic type of empathic understanding also includes a narrative dimension of optimal empathic understanding. Ruthellen Josselson says: ‘The empathic stance orients us as researchers to other people’s experience and meaning-making, which is communicated to us through narrative. To understand another within the empathic stance means being able to understand their stories.’¹⁰
Thus, the conceptual structure in Figure 1 expresses that optimized empathic understanding always has both mental facets (or phases) and social facets (or phases). Conceived in this way empathic understanding does have an intrinsic device for being checked, tested, reformulated and developed further. This built-in self-validation implies a two-way device: a mental way, the hermeneutical circle, and a social way, the interactive process. These two self-validating processes should be intertwined. Within this intertwining process of validation cognitive, interpretive as well as affective moments play their part.

Empathic understanding as conceptualized above has a special significance for human research when this research has a participatory character, an emancipatory aim or a goal of empowerment. Indeed, the social dimension implies that the other, the empathizee, may develop his or her self-understanding, may develop a better understanding of his or her situation, and may have the experience of being taken seriously and being respected. Because of the built-in twofold self-validation (mentally and socially) empathic understanding can be a method for doing scientific research.

3. Imagination and Inclusiveness

We have defined empathic understanding as placing oneself imaginatively in another’s experiential world while thinking and feeling into her or his experiences with the aim of comprehending these experiences. According to the philosopher Maxine Greene “imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible”, because imagination is the cognitive capacity that permits us to give credence to alternative possibilities. It allows us to break with what we take for granted and to enter into
the alien world of another person, to discover how it looks and feels from the vantage point of that other. We need not approve or appreciate it, but we grasp it as a human possibility. We learn to look at things as if they could be otherwise; we break with what is supposedly fixed and finished from our personal point of view. Greene’s conception of imagination comes very close to that of the philosophers John Dewey and Iris Murdoch, who hold that imagination results from the consciousness of a gap between the actual and the possible, from the awareness that our reality goes beyond ‘mere fact’. According to Murdoch we can only reach reality through the strength and refinement of imagination, which she describes as “a type of reflection on people, events, etc., which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual.” From these perspectives, Hans Alma comes to the definition of imagination as an exploration of possibilities that transcend the boundaries of ‘mere fact.’ Of course, improving our imaginative capacity helps to optimize our hermeneutical and dialogical competence within empathic understanding.

Up till now, an important question has been ignored: who are the empathizees? In my opinion empathic understanding is not optimal at all if the group of empathizees is very small or selective. The more inclusive empathic understanding is, the more we are capable to understand others who differ from us regarding their ideas, beliefs, opinions, convictions, moral values, philosophy of life, worldview, cultural and social heritage, etc. Inclusiveness means pushing back frontiers, removing boundaries between ‘we’ and ‘they’. Inclusive empathic understanding is desirable in human inquiry as well as in social, cultural and political life. This is especially true in the context of a multicultural society.
Inclusiveness of empathic understanding may be developed and improved by, for instance, using imagination, collecting and digesting information, education, critical self-reflection, discovering and neutralizing prejudgments and wrong or bad interpretations with the help of hermeneutical analysis, and, of course, by having true dialogues with the others. One could say that inclusive empathic understanding means a greater competence to understand others as well as a higher level of moral maturity.¹⁴

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7 Anton P. M. van Strien, Empathy. (Amsterdam: Thela-Thesis, 1999)


11 Maxine Greene, Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995); it has to be noticed that Maxine Green thinks of empathy on higher, mature levels. ‘Imagination’ is not a prerequisite for affective empathy, emotional resonance.

