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On Macaque Monkeys, Players, and Clairvoyants: Some New Ideas for a Gestalt Therapeutic Concept of Empathy¹

Frederick Perls's view was that empathy fosters confluence, that is, it blurs the distinctions ("boundaries") between the self and the other: "There can be no true contact in empathy. At its worst it becomes confluence" (1973, p. 106), he said in his rigorous way. Hence, "empathy" has been almost a dirty word for many gestalt therapists right up to the present. However, I am convinced that empathy cannot be relegated from gestalt therapeutic practice. It may be useful to think about a gestalt therapeutic understanding of empathy. Of course, on the one hand Perls's warning should be taken seriously (but not rigidly). On the other hand the danger of individualistic thinking, according to which the individual is locked in his inner world and in the end remains unreachable for the other, is to be avoided. In this paper I will offer some ideas about a notion of empathy that I think are in keeping with more recent trends in gestalt therapy (e.g., dialogue and field theory). I will also draw on sources such as phenomenology, gestalt psychology, hermeneutics, neurosciences, and others.

Key words: Empathy, confluence, inclusion, embodypathy, identification, intersubjectivity, joint situation.

The distinction between the healthy and the neurotic confluences is that the former are potentially contactful Yet obviously immense areas of relatively permanent confluence are indispensable as the underlying unaware background of the aware backgrounds of experience. (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951, p. 451)

¹ This paper is based on a lecture first given at the "Winter Residential" of the Pacific Gestalt Institute in Santa Barbara, California, in March 2005. I am indebted to Neil Harris who thoroughly edited this paper for language.

In order to survive, human beings need to understand each other to a high degree. Mothers empathize with their babies to find out if they need a new diaper, a hug, or some food; children empathize with their parents to spot the right moment to ask for a favor; and waitresses point the way to the bathroom when they see a customer getting up from his chair and looking around the room: Empathy is a basic human capacity without which social life would be impossible. Empathy forms the basis of any relational bond; it is a necessary precondition for prosocial attitudes and ways of behavior such as solidarity and compassion. “The empathic understanding of the experience of other human beings is as basic an endowment of man as his vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell” (Kohut, 1997, p. 144). People who are essentially impaired in their capacity for empathy are diagnosed as “sociopaths” or “psychopaths,” or as suffering from an “antisocial personality disorder” (DSM-IV code 301.7).

Hence it is no wonder that psychotherapy, which both rests on the human relationship between the people involved and aims at fostering the relational faculties of its clients, cannot proceed without empathy. Accordingly, clients expect their therapists to be empathetic — sometimes even in an idealizing (and at the same time paranoid) way when they assume that their therapists might (or should) be able to “look through” them. And some therapeutic orientations, such as Rogers’s (1951) client-centered therapy or Kohut’s (1971) brand of psychoanalysis, self psychology, explicitly build their approaches on their respective concepts of empathy.

I hold that, in their everyday practice with clients, not only the proponents of a “relational attitude” (see, for instance, Yontef, 2002), but *all* gestalt therapists rely on their empathetic capacities, even if they do not call it “empathy” in their usual ways of thinking and talking about it. Some of them prefer to think of it in terms of “contact,” “healthy confluence,” or, in allusion to Buber (1958), “inclusion.” Whatever the words may be, if our therapeutic work makes use of empathy in a significant sense, we need to look for appropriate ways of reflecting on it.

I want to share my preliminary thoughts with regard to the question of how we might conceive empathy within a gestalt therapy framework. As I develop my thoughts it will become evident that the title of the paper at hand might as well have been “In Defense of Confluence” or “A Contribution to the Psychology of the ‘As If.’ ”

In order to clarify my position I must, however, begin with a description and critique of what might be called the “traditional notions of empathy.”

Traditional Notions of Empathy

Looking Back

“Empathy” was among the words included in Frederick Perls’s black list — along with “interpretation” (see Staemmler, 2004; 2006a) and others. For him, “empathy [was] a kind of identification with the patient which excludes the therapist himself from the field and thus excludes half the field.² In empathy, the therapist’s interest is centered exclusively around the patient and his reactions” (Perls, 1973, p. 104). “If the therapist withholds himself, in empathy, he deprives the field of its main instrument, his intuition and sensitivity to the patient’s on-going processes” (ibid., p. 105).

Although I doubt that “a kind of identification,” which is so far-reaching that the therapist “excludes himself from the field,” is possible at all, I agree that the therapist’s identification (if the word is used in a strict sense) with the client is not desirable, since the client needs a recognizable other person to be with. But I think that Perls’s equalization of identification with empathy is overhasty. Not in a single sentence does he discuss the possibility that if there are two different signifiers (empathy and identification) there may also be two different signified phenomena.

The opinion that empathy is not a useful concept or not a useful therapeutic attitude has been maintained by many gestalt therapists who just like Perls have emphasized differences and clear boundaries, for instance the late Jim Simkin (Yontef, personal communication, 1993) and, recently, Peter Philippson (2001, p. 39³). Proponents of the relational approach to gestalt therapy, although also attentive to the differences between individuals, are not as confluence-phobic as Perls. Yontef, for instance, clearly attributes positive value to empathy: “As the therapist attends to the experience of the

² Which field was Perls talking about? His statement only makes sense to me if I assume that he is referring to the *phenomenal* field of the *therapist* (see Staemmler, 2006b). The therapist, who identifies with the client, may not be aware of himself anymore; but that certainly does not necessarily mean that his client is not aware of the therapist anymore.

³ For a critique see Jacobs (2003).

patient with empathy and caring, the relationship will develop” (1993, p. 447). For him, empathy “means as much as one can to see the world as the patient does, while simultaneously keeping aware of one’s own separateness and remembering that it is projection — one cannot truly experience another person’s experience” (1993, p. 275). And Lynne Jacobs simply defines empathy as “an attempt to comprehend, from the patient’s perspective, the patient’s experiential world” (2003, p. 145).

Looking Sideways

Buber

In the literature of gestalt therapy sometimes Buber’s term “inclusion” (or “confirmation”) is used as a replacement of “empathy.” However, both terms do not refer to exactly the same phenomenon. According to Friedman, “Buber distinguishes between inclusion and empathy. Empathy literally means to feel into the other. It means you leave your ground and you go over to the other” (1990, p. 22). And he goes on:

True confirmation, in contrast, has to be bipolar: it has to be both sides simultaneously. . . . The therapist has to be there and here at the same time. Inclusion is this bold swinging, through an intense stirring of one’s whole being, through which one can, to some extent, concretely imagine what the other is thinking, feeling and willing. (Friedman, 1990, p. 23)

In another publication he softens this contradistinction again when he writes:

We have also seen in Rogers’ discussion of empathic understanding in his later essays that he stresses accurately seeing into the client’s private world *as if* it were his own without ever losing that *as if* quality. This, too, is very close to Buber’s definition of “inclusion.” (Friedman, 1985, p. 199 — italics in original)

Maybe Lynne Jacobs hit the bull’s eye when in a recent paper she wrote that

the act of inclusion means entering into the experiential world of the other without judgment, while still knowing one’s own being. It is a full-bodied turning-towards-the-other that includes empathy, but is more visceral than the way we usually describe empathy. (Jacobs, in press)

In summary, one may discuss whether there is in fact a difference between inclusion and empathy; I am not sure. In any case, if, as Jacobs says,

inclusion includes empathy, it is useful to clarify that aspect, even if one opts for Buber's concept.

Rogers and Modern Psychoanalysis

We have already touched upon Rogers's notion of empathy in Friedman's statement. Now let us listen to Rogers himself. For him:

The state of empathy or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition. Thus it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it, and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is *as if* I were hurt or pleased, etc. If this "as if" quality is lost, then the state is one of identification. (1959, p. 210f. — italics in original.)

In short, "to sense the client's private world as if it was your own, but without losing the 'as if' quality — this is empathy" (Rogers, 1961, p. 284). Please note Rogers's repeated use of the "as if"; we need to keep it in mind, since we will encounter it again later.

This "as if" can also be found hidden in Kohut's (1977) brief characterization of empathy as "vicarious introspection," and it shows up in Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood's definition of empathy too, which to them "refers to the attempt to understand a person's expressions from a perspective within, rather than outside, that person's own subjective frame of reference" (1987, p. 15).

If we look at all the aforementioned traditional notions of empathy, we find that they all refer to the therapist's reconstruction of the client's given experiential world on the basis of the client's verbal and nonverbal communications. Empathy, we may say, is the therapist's imagination of how it is to perceive and experience the world in the way the client does.

This is close to that which in the philosophy of mind (see, for instance, O'Hear, 1998) is called the *theory theory*, that is, the theory that holds that people form theories about other people in order to understand them.

Critique of the Traditional Notion of Empathy

There is a common denominator in the traditional notions of empathy that can be subdivided into three aspects.

Empathy as a One-Way Street

In a way, clients are only seen as providers of information and addressees of empathetic responses by the therapists. This idea of empathy strikes me as a relic of a one-person psychology that only looks at the psyche of the client; the therapists themselves seem to remain unknown or — as they used to say in earlier psychoanalysis — “anonymous” to their client. Moreover, it reflects an elitist mentality of the therapists who seem to think of themselves as being the only empathetic human beings in the room.

This notion very much resembles the situation in a confessional; maybe it is a reflection of the pastoral discourse of power (see Foucault, 1982) in which psychotherapy is still involved to a certain degree today. And maybe it is this misconception of empathy that made it appear necessary for Buber to invent “inclusion.”

However, I am certain that clients do need a lot of empathy in order to understand their therapists — just like everybody does in any conversation. Moreover, the uniqueness and peculiarity of the therapeutic situation is demanding of an extraordinary sensitivity of clients. How else would they be able to make sense of some therapeutic techniques — for instance those involving certain types of furniture such as couches and empty chairs — that at first may strike them as strange procedures?

Disembodiment

In the traditional notions of empathy there is primarily a person’s *mind* that reconstructs the *mind* of another person. It is a representationalist, mentalist, or cognitivist notion, in which the fundamental fact of human embodiment is more or less left out of the picture — even if it takes into account the emotions of the person. But emotions are rather seen as *irrational cognitions* than as a *physically “felt sense”* (to use Gendlin’s term).

Individualism

According to Wheeler,

the fundamental propositions of . . . [the individualistic] paradigm . . . are: 1) that the individual is prior to relationship, and exists in some essential way apart from relational context and connection, and 2) that relationships themselves are therefore secondary, and in some sense less real than the individuals who enter into them The fundamental separation of

one individual's experience from that of another. . . follows directly from these assumptions. (2000, p. 53).

This anthropology can also be found in the way empathy is usually seen: An individual existing in fundamental separation from the other's experience tries hard to bridge the interhuman gap by reconstructing the other's subjectivity in his own isolated mind. "This kind of subject is the master inside its own home (e. g., soul, consciousness, private inner world), but does not know how to get out of it" (Schmitz, 2003, p. 493).

This subject does not even appear to be involved in a certain situation that encompassed herself and the other person. There is no joint context, nothing that connects the one to the other; there are only scanty attempts at coping with the pervasive isolation surrounding the lonely individual.

Steps to a New Concept of Empathy

In what follows I will outline some preliminary ideas as to how these shortcomings might be overcome. This is not to say that the traditional notion of empathy is entirely misguided or even wrong. It is only to say that it represents a pretty narrow and truncated idea of what empathy can be.

Mutuality of Empathy: Social Referencing

In my experience, my clients are frequently empathetic towards me just as I am towards them. Some of them are even so empathetic that they are afraid of burdening me with their problems when they realize my compassion for their sufferings. Fortunately, in most cases they are at least empathetic enough to recognize my empathizing with them. "It takes one to know one," as the proverb has it, and if that were not so, my clients would not be able to benefit from my empathy.

In a certain sense toddlers at the age of seven to eight months already show a certain kind of empathy. The famous "visual cliff" experiment demonstrates this in an impressive manner. In this experiment the baby is placed onto one end (the "shallow" side) of a table; the mother stands at the opposite end of the table.

The cliff table is made of clear, very hard glass and is divided into two sides. On one side (the shallow side) there is a checkered pattern immediately under the surface of the glass. On the other side, a similar checkered pattern is spaced some variable distance beneath the glass to create the illu-

sion of a drop-off, which the solid glass prevents. (Klinnert, Campos, Sorce, Emde, and Svejda, 1983, p. 67)

As the baby begins to crawl towards the mother it approaches the visual cliff at which it hesitates and stops since it finds itself confronted with an ambiguous situation. Can it trust in the tactile information suggesting that the table-top continues at the same level? Or should it believe more in what it sees, that is, a dangerous drop-off? In other words, does it want to move on or stop? The baby typically stops, looks at its mother's face, and then makes its decision depending on what kind of feeling her face displays: "none of the infants crossed over the deep side of the cliff when the mother displayed a fearful facial expression, but 74% crossed when she smiled" (Sorce, Emde, Campos, and Klinnert, 1985, p. 197).

Obviously, both the mother and the child are empathizing with each other. Without the baby's empathy with the emotional expression of the mother and without the mother's empathy with the ambiguous situation of the baby, this process of mutual attunement could not take place. And already at that age the infant accomplishes at least three important social, affective, and cognitive tasks:

First of all, she must understand the content of the message. Thus, if the mother provides a fearful message about the visual cliff, the infant must recognize these facial, vocal, and kinesthetic cues as reflective of fear, rather than of joy or interest. . . .

Second, infants need to be in an appraisal and evaluation mode when they are processing information about environmental events. In other words, they must be constructing the reality of the situation, and not just responding to it in a prewired fashion. . . .

Third, the infant must be able to identify the particular referent that is the topic of the referee's communication. (Feinman, Roberts, Hsieh, Sawyer, and Swanson, 1992, p. 31)

The subtle communicative process that includes all of these achievements is an example of what developmental and social psychologists call "social referencing." It is defined

as a process in which one person utilizes another person's interpretation of the situation to formulate her own interpretation of it. . . . In referencing,

one person serves as a base of information for another and, in so doing, facilitates the other's efforts to construct reality. (Feinman, 1992, p. 4)

Similar processes can be observed between therapists and their adult clients. Gendlin describes them wonderfully:

My sense of you, the listener, affects my experiencing as I speak, and your response partly determines my experiencing a moment later. What occurs to me, and how I live as we speak and interact, is vitally affected by every word and motion you make, and by every facial expression and attitude you show. . . . Thus it is not the case that I tell you about me, and then we figure out how I should change, and then somehow I do it. Rather, I am changing as I talk and think and feel, for your responses are every moment part of my experiencing, and partly affect, produce, symbolize, and interact with it. (1962, p. 38f.)

And this, of course, applies to *each* partner in the interaction.

Embodiment

There is something happening to the empathizer himself right there and then; it is not just that she is thinking hard, or trying to figure something out. She is *physically* involved. I will demonstrate this from three points of view, academic psychology, phenomenological philosophy, and neuroscience.

Academic Psychology

For many years empirical researchers have investigated a phenomenon that most people know well from their everyday experience: How contagious can yawning be! You only need to watch somebody yawning and very soon you tend to yawn yourself. The same with laughter; you can easily be seduced to laugh by somebody else's laughter. Observing body postures and gestures can have a similar effect. It frequently happens that if two people sit together (not only in a therapy session) they tend to align their postures or mirror each other's gestures. If one crosses his legs, the other one will very likely soon do the same.

This phenomenon is called "mimetic synchrony":

Psychological research demonstrates that people have a natural tendency towards mimicking the posture, gestures, expressions or movement of the people they are looking at. . . . Mimetic synchrony is a natural and

automatic response to the experience of being with another, as opposed to a conscious and deliberate attempt at imitation. (Cooper, 2001, p. 224)

Another example can be found in Paul Ekman's research on the way emotions show in the human face. There are seven "basic" emotions that are expressed in the human face in the same way in any culture. There appear to be certain innate patterns of innervation of the muscles in the face for each of these emotions, which are sadness, anger, surprise, fear, enjoyment, disgust, and contempt. Of course there are huge intercultural differences with respect to the occasions when each of these emotions will be experienced as well as with regard to the so called "rules of display" that determine when and how one is "permitted" to express certain feelings.

However, if one of the basic emotions is experienced and its expression remains uninhibited, it will be expressed universally in the same way. That also means that people across cultures will be able to recognize each of these emotions intuitively (see Ekman, 2003).⁴

Phenomenological Philosophy

Many phenomenological philosophers have written about intersubjectivity and its various aspects. For them, empathy does not simply and only consist of the capability to grasp the feeling state of another person, but also — and much more fundamentally — in the capability to recognize another person as a person who is basically just like me: an embodied subject who has similar experiences and her own subjectivity. "One of the unique possibilities that human empathy affords is the development of non-egocentric or self-transcendent modes of consciousness" (Thompson, 2001, p. 23).

This notion forms the background of formulations that refer to more precise aspects of the mutual understanding of humans, for instance in Merleau-Ponty's writings. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* he writes:

The communication or comprehension of gestures come about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if⁵ the other person's intention inhabited my body, and mine his. (1962, p. 185)

⁴ In an interesting paper Cole (2001) describes what it means not to have a face that can express emotions.

⁵ Please note, that here we encounter the "as if" again.

These phenomena have been subsumed under the notion of “*Einleibung*” by the German founder of “New Phenomenology,” Hermann Schmitz (1989). “*Einleibung*” is an artificial word that is derived from “*Einfühlung*,” the German word for empathy. Both words consist of three parts, (1) “*Ein-*” which means “into” just like “em-” in empathy, (2) “*-leib-*” or “*-fühl-*” which are analogous to the center part of empathy, “-path-”, and (3) “*-ung*,” which is the ending.

In other words, in order to describe the phenomena in question, Schmitz replaced the center part of *em-path-y*, “*-fühl-*” (to feel), by the German word for the “lived body,” “*-leib-*”. The resulting artificial term, *Einleibung*, can be roughly translated as “embodypathy,” the physically based perspective taking that takes place, if, for instance, you are attending a circus performance and are fascinated by the exercises of acrobats in the circus dome: You will, again and again, become aware of your muscles performing similar movements in a subtle way.

Another example is a mother who watches her naively playing child being threatened by an advancing car, but who is too far away to be able to help directly. In this situation she will feel tied to the child by her horror, probably unable to move. She will put herself in the child’s place, but not in the sense of her taking the role of the child and play naively in the street.

Pedestrians walking in a crowded shopping mall very much rely on their “embodypathy”: Without any planned coordination they attune their movements to each other with surprisingly rare failures in the form of collisions. They have a pretty clear sense of the other people’s movements and directions and constantly adjust and redirect their own movements accordingly. Mutual “embodypathy”, then, is called “*leibliche Kommunikation*,” “lived body communication.”

Mirror Neurons

Corresponding⁶ to the phenomenon of “embodypathy” there is a neurological system, consisting of so-called “mirror neurons.” Only a few years

⁶ I use the word “corresponding” here in order to make clear that I am not embarking in any kind of reductionism that maintains that empathetic behavior could be “traced back” to, or “explained” by, neurophysiology. Behavior belongs to a different, more complex system level, which has to be understood as “emer-

ago, two Italian neuroscientists, Gallese and Rizzolatti, found some interesting evidence for the existence of an observation-execution matching system in the brain of Macaque monkeys. They called the neurons involved “mirror neurons,” because their activity links the *perceptive* regions of the brain with the *motor* regions in the following way:

When a monkey watches a certain movement of a fellow monkey, the visual brain sends information to the mirror neurons that transforms it and, in turn, sends it to the motor regions so that a small degree of energy is elicited in the efferent neurons that go to the muscles. The pattern of that nervous activity is exactly identical to the pattern the brain would produce with more energy, if it were to have the muscles imitate and literally perform the observed movement.

There is now strong evidence that in humans too

several brain regions, including the premotor cortex, the posterior parietal cortex and the cerebellum, are activated during action generation and while observing and simulating others’ actions. . . . Particularly interesting is the demonstration that action observation activates the premotor cortex in a somatotopic manner — simply watching mouth, hand and foot movements activates the same functionally specific regions of the premotor cortex as performing those movements. (Blakemore & Decety, 2001, p. 566)

“Although we do not overtly reproduce the observed action, nevertheless our motor system becomes active *as if* we were executing that very same action that we are observing.” (Gallese, 2003, p. 174 — italics in original). To put it in different words, action observation implies action simulation. — Do you remember Rogers’s “as if”? It now acquires an entirely different meaning.

Interestingly, evolution appears to have designed mirror neurons not only for the purpose of imitation, but rather for the purpose of *understanding*.

In a PET study, Grèzes et al. asked humans to observe meaningful arm actions, either to understand their purpose or to imitate them. They found significantly stronger activation of premotor areas when the subjects had to understand the motor actions than when they had to imitate them. (Rizzolatti et al., 2001, p. 667).

gent” from less complex, for instance physiological, system levels (see Anderson, 1972; Bunge, 1977).

By the way: Recent studies suggest that autistic children may suffer from an impaired development of mirror neuron areas in their brains. But normally, to a certain extent we are *wired for confluence* in order to understand each other. I will give you an everyday example:

My wife, Barbara, and I are sitting at the breakfast table. We have already finished eating and are engaged in a conversation while having another cup of tea. My cup is empty. I grab the teapot to get some more tea. There is not much left. As I am going to put the teapot back on the teapot-warmer I realize that the tea candle is still burning. Since the tea-warmer is about a yard away from me I spontaneously inhale a bit deeper in order to get enough air to be able to blow out the candle. Doing this I become aware that most likely my breath will not suffice to extinguish the candle. The movement of my hand, that has already been “on the way” to put the teapot back on the tea-warmer, slows down for a second. — From the moment I had finished pouring the tea and begun to put the teapot back, the time taken was maybe five seconds.

Barbara who during my dealing with the teapot had been continuing to talk to me vividly about an important experience she had had a few days before, immediately interrupts her talking, inhales and blows out the tea-candle that is much closer to her than to me . . . and goes on talking. I accelerate the previously slower movement of my arm and replace the teapot on the tea-warmer.

When I discussed the process with Barbara she reported that she “somehow” saw the slowing down of my arm movement, but did not become aware of my deeper inhalation.

This is obviously an example of confluence; however, as Perls et al. say: “The distinction between the healthy and the neurotic confluences is that the former are potentially contactful. . . . Yet obviously immense areas of relatively permanent confluence are indispensable as the underlying unaware background of the aware backgrounds of experience” (1951, p. 451).

From what I have written so far, I conclude that a certain degree of confluence appears to be a necessary precondition for empathy. This casts a light on confluence that makes it look even less “neurotic” than one may have thought after reading Perls et al. Moreover, I dare to posit, that being confluence-phobic means being empathy-phobic. And if it is true that empa-

thy is an important ingredient of intersubjectivity then being empathy-phobic also means being relationship-phobic.

Confluence phobia, of course, is one of the typical phobias of the individualistic self — a self that suspiciously tries to maintain the impermeability of its boundaries (see Staemmler, in press).

Embodiment of Empathy and Theory of Mind

The observations of the psychologists, phenomenologists, and neuroscientists — mimetic synchrony, “embodopathy,” and mirror neurons — form a challenge to the theory theory. Obviously we do not always need a theory about others, if we want to understand them. So theory theory has been supplemented or, by some philosophers, even replaced with *simulation theory*.

The simulation model dispenses with the requirement that an attributor knows much about his own psychology or the psychology of others. It instead postulates an ability to *use* one’s own psychology as a sort of analogue device to parallel the psychology of the other. It allows us to assume that the attributor is quite naive in matters of mental theory and lawful generalization. (Goldman, 1993, p. 90 — italics in original)

One might say that simulation theory is the elaborated version of the “as if” that so many authors mention. However, the discussion on whether theory theory or simulation theory is the more adequate description of what happens in human understanding appears to be off the mark to me. I hold that both theories describe a part of what happens — or better: a *phase*. It seems to me that in everyday situations our first immediate approach to another person is based on intuitive simulation. In a second step we then form hypotheses and theories about the other, when we think about her or him and when we talk to our confidants about her or him. So to me a sequential *combination* of theory theory and simulation theory makes the most sense. In short, simulation comes first and is then followed by theory.

Summing up this section of my paper, I would like to put on record that there is ample evidence for the embodiment of empathy. Interestingly, as the examples from academic psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience show, this evidence also points at a non-individualistic notion of empathy. In other words: In empathy, there are (at least) *two* people involved, and they are *physically* involved. It is pretty much like *playing tennis* or like *dancing*.

This takes me to my next point.

Community: Joint Situation

In my account of social referencing I have already stated that empathy is based on *mutuality* (as opposed to one-sidedness). Nevertheless, although mutuality already transcends individualism to a certain extent, it can still be seen as the mere sum of two basically separated individuals that happen to direct their respective attention to each other.

However, the whole is more than, and different from, the sum of its parts. Therefore we need to find a notion that transcends the remaining individualism of mutuality. We can find it in play and dance.

In essence, play and dance are pretty much the same: The German word for play, “*Spiel*,” originally meant dance. Hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who was Heidegger’s most prominent student (see Staemmler, 2002), writes:

This linguistic observation seems to me an indirect indication that play is *not* to be understood as something a *person* does. As far as language is concerned, the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who, among other activities, also plays but is instead the *play it-self*. But we are so accustomed to relating phenomena such as playing to the sphere of subjectivity and the ways it acts . . . (1989, p. 104 — italics added)

Accordingly, Gadamer speaks of “the *medial* sense of the word ‘playing’ . . . It happens, as it were, by itself. . . . The structure of play absorbs the player into itself” (ibid., p. 105 — italics added). From a gestalt therapy perspective, Gadamer’s hint at the “medial sense” of the word play can be seen as an allusion to what Perls et al. call the “middle mode, neither active nor passive” (1951, p. 245; see also p. 376, footnote). And it is certainly not by accident that in the sentence that follows they write about children and their play.

Hence, for Gadamer

all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players. . . . The real subject of the game . . . is not the player but instead the game it-self. (ibid., p. 106)

This point shows the importance of defining play as a process that takes place “in between.” We have seen that play does not have its being in the player’s consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him

into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. *The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him.* (ibid., p. 109 — italics added)

This “in between” reality of the play — a reality that “surpasses the player” and that is “transpersonal” (to use the term in a rather unusual fashion) or “beyond individualism” (to quote Wheeler (2000) again) — is its *primary* reality. As Wertheimer said, “in certain situations a person is not present as an ‘I’ but as a characteristic part of a ‘we’ ” (1924/1938, p. 362).⁷ This primary reality, the greater whole, is the level of analysis that according to the gestalt theorists always has to precede the analysis of its parts, because it has its own character which cannot be recognized by an elementaristic investigation.

In one of his compelling phenomenological analyses Hermann Schmitz (the creator of “embodypathy”) coined a term that suits this primary reality very well: the “joint situation”:

Actually, whenever people are together, a *joint situation* is established from the very beginning, that cannot be fractionalized into the parts each participant contributes to it by means of her character or perspective. This can be recognized from the fact that a person, depending on which joint situation she is involved in, can become almost a *different* person. Her *individual* situation . . . becomes a dependent variable by virtue of her participation in the *joint* situation: Self-determination and heteronomy are intermingled. (2002, p. 27 — italics added)

People who are participating in a joint situation such as being immersed in a play or dance are functioning in the middle mode: “One is engaged and carried along, not in spite of oneself, but beyond oneself” (Perls et al. 1951, p. 382). “That is, the self, aware in middle mode, bursts the compartmenting of mind, body, and external world” (ibid., p. 389).

That is, the joint situation is the *decisive* dimension. The participating individuals are *parts* of that situation. The empathizing, the social referencing that takes place, does not only take place in relation to the individual other. Rather, it takes place in the context of the whole situation, of which both the

⁷ In another paper, Wertheimer uses the metaphor of dance too: “Imagine a dance, a dance full of grace and joy. What is the situation in such a dance? Do we have a summation of physical limb movements and a psychical consciousness? No.” (1925/1938, p. 9)

I and the other person are parts. The tennis player does not only refer to the individual intentions of the other player in order to understand his behavior. She or he also refers to the “affordances” (Gibson, 1979) or the “demand character” (Lewin, 1936) of the joint situation, of the dance or the play. The player moves within the play and, at the same time, allows himself to be moved by the play.

“Dyadically Expanded State of Consciousness”

Of course, this has an effect on the respective state of consciousness of the individuals involved. If you think back to the visual cliff experiment, you will remember that the social referencing that takes place between mother and infant implies a joint understanding and an interdependent cognitive-affective regulation. In individualistic terms, we are speaking of the capacity of each of the participants in the interaction to appreciate the meaning of the affective displays of their respective partner, and to scaffold her or his partner’s actions so that they can achieve their goals. That is,

the internal and external mechanisms [of each of the participants] form a single system made up of two component systems (i.e., infant and mother or therapist and client) — a dyadic system. Moreover, these regulatory processes involve communication among different components of this dyadic system. (Tronick, 1998, p. 293)

In terms of the state of mind of the participants we can now assume that the respective other’s state of mind expands each person’s individual horizon. “Thus, this dyadic system contains more information, is more complex . . . than either the infant’s (or the mother’s) individual state of consciousness alone” (ibid., p. 296) — it is a “dyadically expanded state of consciousness” (ibid.).

In other words, when speaking of empathy we are talking about “a lived experience, which involves an intersubjective resonance that is irreducible to the consciousness of either participant taken alone” (Neimeyer, 2005, p. 81).

Feministic therapists have previously described this process in which the participants’ attention is shifting back and forth between the parts and the wholes to which they pertain. O’Hara even speculates that a dyadically expanded states of consciousness might account for phenomena such as clairvoyance or other

seemingly magical and even paranormal breakthrough events that occur in psychotherapy, such as when the therapist and client simultaneously share the same image, when the therapist makes a statement out of the blue that proves to be profoundly appropriate, or when the therapist knows in advance that the client will soon begin to share some until-now hidden story. A sociocentric view would explain this not by suggesting that the therapist is “inside the skin” of the client, but inside the skin of the relationship, of which he or she is a part. (1997, p. 306)

A dyadically expanded state of consciousness can only come into being through the joint situation. The state of being “inside the skin of the relationship,” then, can make it possible that you know something *of* (not *about*) the other person — not because she transmitted the information to you in the sense of a simple sender-receiver model of communication, but because both she and you are integral parts of the same larger whole that encompasses the two of you. And the “container” of the information, as it were, is this whole, not the individual person.

Conclusion: Proposal for a New Definition of Empathy

In conclusion, I would like to assemble the various theoretical concepts about which I have written, and integrate them into a proposal for a non-individualist definition of empathy. This new definition, then, reads as follows:

Empathy is an embodied social referencing both to the joint situation and to each other by the persons involved that takes place within the frame of that joint situation. The joint situation both includes and transcends the individual situations of the participants and provides them with a dyadically expanded state of consciousness.

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