



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Consciousness and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/concog

Empathy and the responsiveness to social affordances

Julian Kiverstein

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation, University of Amsterdam, Oude Turfmarkt 141, 1012GC Amsterdam, Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 January 2015

Revised 5 May 2015

Accepted 7 May 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Empathy

Direct perception theory

Shared affect

Affordances

Body subject

Intersubjectivity

Autism spectrum disorder

ABSTRACT

The direct perception theory of empathy claims that we can immediately experience a person's state of mind. I can see for instance that my neighbour is angry with me in his bodily countenance. I develop a version of the direct perception theory of empathy which takes this perceptual capacity to depend upon recognising in what way the other person is responsive to the affordances the environment provides. By recognising which possibilities for action are relevant to a person, I can thereby understand something about the meaning they give to the world. I come to share something of their perspective on the world, and this allows me to grasp based on my perception of them something about their current state of mind. I argue that shared affect plays a central role in this perceptual capacity. Shared affect allows me to orient my attention to possibilities for action that matter to the other person. I end by briefly discussing the implications of this view of empathy for the disturbances in so-called "cognitive empathy" that are found in people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The past decade has seen an explosion of interest in empathy with a 300% growth in the articles on PUBMED with the word "empathy" appearing in the title (Decety & Cowell, 2014: 337). Empathy has made appearances in politician's speeches, in studies of autism, psychopathy, ideology, morality, justice, gender, the media and art (Coplan, 2011). Empathy seems to be pretty fundamental in our social life, but what is it?

Decety and Cowell (2014) capture well the meaning the term ordinarily has for most people in relating empathy to "understanding others' feelings and subjective psychological states" and to a process that motivates "prosocial behaviours" such as "sharing, comforting and helping", and in general "caring for others". However beyond these generalities, there is little agreement about how best to define empathy.¹ There is also widespread disagreement about the role of empathy in the life of pro-social animals. On the one side, we find theories that take empathy to be a trait humans share with many other species. These theories point to the many striking examples in the animal world of species that exhibit a robust tendency to help conspecifics in distress often at great personal risk and cost. According to one influential model – the "perception–action model" of empathy – this is because individuals of many species "feel" distress when an animal of the same species is in distress. They will automatically engage in prosocial helping behaviour that brings the distress of other animal to an end (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Social animals tend to help those in distress because they feel something of the other's suffering. This feeling of distress on behalf of the other motivates them to act so as to end the other's suffering.

E-mail address: j.d.kiverstein@uva.nl

¹ The divergent conceptualisations of empathy in the empirical and philosophical literature is a point John Michael has also fruitfully explored (see Michael, 2013).

The perception–action model of empathy has been extensively criticised for failing to adequately conceptualise the difference between automatic processes of emotional contagion and motor mimicry, and cognitively controlled processes of empathy. In emotional contagion, an emotion spreads from one person to others in a group: you feel sad, I see your sadness, and I also feel sad. Motor mimicry is the involuntary and nonconscious copying of the mannerisms, postures, facial expressions and other behaviours of a person with whom one is interacting. Both of these processes happen unconsciously, automatically, effortlessly, and involuntarily. In emotional contagion, the perception of an emotion in you unconsciously primes me to feel something similar. In motor mimicry, the perception of your behaviour unconsciously primes me to behave similarly. There are good conceptual and empirical reasons for distinguishing empathy from contagion and mimicry. Many theorists take empathy to be a cognitively controlled imaginative process (e.g. Coplan, 2011). Empathy, according to these theorists, requires me to effortfully, and voluntarily set-aside my own perspective on the world so as to imagine what it would be like to be in the situation of the other person. Thus it involves a clear self-other differentiation. I have my point of view on the world which I set aside in order to imagine how the world might seem from your point of view. In emotional contagion and motor mimicry, by contrast, the distinction between self and other becomes blurred. I share in your sadness so that there is no longer a clear difference between your sadness and mine.

The focus of the affective response is also different in empathy and contagion. In empathy, the emotion I undergo is understood as being about the situation of other person with whom I am empathising. In contagion this is not the case, and the emotion I undergo is about my own situation. I may experience personal distress because you are distressed, but personal distress is a self-oriented aversive emotional response. Moreover, such an aversive response has been shown to interfere with empathic concern (Batson et al., 1997; Decety & Jackson, 2004; Lamm, Batson, & Decety, 2007). Finally, empathy has also been shown to be modulated by contextual factors and by appraisal processes (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Jacob, 2011). These findings have been taken to be grounds for denying that empathy is automatic, as seems to be the case with contagion and mimicry.²

Many philosophers and psychologists have taken this conceptual distinction between empathy, contagion and mimicry to have the consequence that empathy plays only a highly restricted, and narrow role in human social life. De Vignemont and Jacob (2012) for instance have taken great care in their recent work to distinguish empathy from sympathy, contagion and perspective-taking.³ The consequence of this definition is a view of empathy as a cognitive process people very rarely use in their everyday social lives.

I will take issue with the claim that empathy occupies only a very special and remote corner of human social life.⁴ The direct perception theory (DPT) of social cognition⁵ which I defend and develop in this paper takes empathy to instead occupy a foundational place in the social life of humans. The rest of my paper will have the aim of explaining how it is possible for empathy to play this foundational role.

1. The direct perception theory

The direct perception theory of social cognition is typically presented as a rival to the currently dominant theory of mind approaches that take social cognition to be a matter of mindreading. Mindreading is the ability people have (and probably other social animals also in some stripped down form) to identify the mental states of others, the other person's beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions and experiences. As is well known, there are a number of ongoing debates about the nature of this ability. Some have taken mindreading to be (at least in part) an ability to put ourselves in the shoes of others, and to imaginatively reconstruct the perspective of the other person on the world (Gordon, 1995; Goldman, 2006). I must first work out what I would believe, desire, intend, or feel if I were in your situation. Only in this way can I understand what you believe, desire, intend or feel. Others take mindreading to be a matter of theory-driven inference. Mindreading capacities draw on a rich body of knowledge about human psychology either acquired through learning, or as an innate endowment. This knowledge is employed to infer what mental states the person is most likely to have on the basis of how they have behaved (Gopnik & Wellman, 1992; Leslie, 1994). There are of course also mixed positions that combine something from both these views (Nichols & Stich, 2003; Goldman, 2006).

Theory of mind views (be they of the ST, TT or blended varieties) all share in common an assumption that we understand other people only through mindreading. The direct perception (DP) theory claims that *before* we engage in mindreading, we already have immediate experiential access to the minds of others. Another person's subjective mental life is not an unobservable hidden cause of their behaviour; it is *expressed* in the way in which they comport themselves in the world. In ordinary social interactions, people assume and never think to question that they are dealing with another person with his or her own subjective point of view on the world. This is something each person recognizes immediately the moment they enter into a social interaction, and we very rarely, if ever, find ourselves questioning this everyday certainty. In ordinary everyday circumstances it never occurs to us to consider the possibility, for example, that this other person might in fact be a cleverly disguised robot.

² See Van Baaren, Janssen, Chartrand, and Dijksterhuis (2009), Stel et al. (2010) and Kavanagh, Suhler, Churchland, and Winkielman (2011) for evidence that motor mimicry is also modulated by such factors as group identity, affiliation, goals and by how much we like a person.

³ Similarly restrictive philosophical analyses of empathy can be found in the work of Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Coplan, 2011; Goldie, 2000).

⁴ I will not have anything further to say about empathy in other non-human animals in this paper.

⁵ Gallagher (2001, 2008), Ratcliffe (2007), Zahavi (2008, 2011, 2014) and Krueger and Overgaard (2012).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7288978>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7288978>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)