



Cultural Empathy in International Contexts: Successes and Pitfalls

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Abstract

This Paper studies the importance of the development of cultural empathy to gain the knowledge about other cultures to eliminate Self-reference Criterion. When a person fails to appreciate other culture, we encounter what we call the Self-reference Criterion (SRC), a phenomenon in which an individual or collective group impose one's own cultural values or fail to empathize with other cultures.. Making decisions without sufficient knowledge about other cultures may result in SRC. Many experts claim that Cultural Empathy prevents the impassiveness in other cultures as well as cultural ignorance. Psychological researchers found that empathy varies not only among people but widely among countries and cultures. Research demonstrates higher empathy scores are associated with more giving, helping, and sharing behaviour. higher empathy countries had higher rates of volunteering and helping. However, the paper also considers the perspective of many other researchers that state there are numerous pitfalls to empathy. We need to consider the biases that empathy may be subject to and consciously counteract them so that we can make wiser decisions. Learning emotional self-control, learning how to read others' emotions, examining bias in ourselves may help us to exercise our empathic behaviour in a less biased manner.

Keywords: Internationalisation, empathy, curriculum, education, society, Intercultural Communication, Emotional Intelligence, self-reference criterium

1. Introduction

Most studies on empathy conceive it as a one-way phenomenon in which an observer "catches" the emotions of another. But in real life, it is more of an interactive process in which information flows in two directions. Empathy is defined as the ability to recognise, understand and share the thoughts and feelings of another person. The development of empathy is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately. It involves experiencing another person's point of view, rather than just one's own, and enables prosocial behaviours that come from within rather than being forced.

Researchers claim that most of the capacity of empathy is learned in childhood when parents reflect back to their children. It is part of the human experience to put someone else's feelings before your own. But not consistently. In successful adult relationships the flow of empathy is reciprocal, if not resentment is likely to build and the opposite feeling to empathy will appear.

However, empathy is not only dependant on upbringing or personal traits as found out by psychological research. It seems that it also varies widely among countries and cultures where the scores of empathy is significantly different. Some surveys indicate that empathy is on decline, therefore parents, schools and communities are creating and supporting programmes to help people of all ages to enhance and maintain their ability to understand other's perspectives and feelings.

1.1 Cultural Empathy

As stated before it appears that empathy has got a cultural factor as well. According to a research published in 2010 The higher empathy countries had the higher rates of volunteering and helping. Ecuador came as top ten followed by Saudi Arabia, Peru, United Arab Emirates, Korea, US, Taiwan, Costa Rica and Kuwait to close the list. The researchers used data from high quality surveys such as the Gallop World Poll, which showed a clear pattern clustering countries from the Middle East, South America and East Asia.

The research suggested the certain types of social structures can make people empathisers, the more collectivistic a country is the more empathic behaviour since collectivist cultures see themselves as



being part of a larger, interconnected group familial and other close relationships, with a priority on nurturing harmony.

On the other hand, the research claims that more individualistic cultures scored lower on empathy. Individualism involves seeing oneself as distinct and separate from others with a priority on one's uniqueness and self-expression. This fact could perhaps deter to show in the research the commonalities that they share, which could obscure the willingness or ability to show empathy and compassion.

The countries that appeared as lower in empathy were Finland a Northern European country as Denmark and Venezuela a South American country. This results do not fit with the pattern shown by the surveys.

This brings us to a dilemma since the results were to say the least surprising. It might have been that when answering the surveys the respondents were biased; in some cultures it is important to show how compassionate the individual is whereas in others it is more important to answer with the real nature of oneself. The survey was in English, therefore some respondents could have misunderstood the questions. Furthermore the concept of empathy is often too abstract for some respondents and could lead to responses that are unintended by the respondents.

It is undeniable that culture has got an influence in the way we express empathy. However, most of the research on empathy has been conducted in Western Educated Countries, which is a problem since it leaves a lagune regarding cultures that have different assumptions about the world, view of self, norms and values. Most studies focus on the differences between the Western countries and East Asian Countries with very limited research on Eastern Europe, South America, and the Middle East.

1.2 Empathy Pitfalls

The capacity to place oneself in another's position allows interpersonal connection, bonding and a sense of belonging, and it is the essential ingredient for strong mental health. However, Empathy, has pitfalls, one of them is what sociologists call "emotion monitoring". It is the tendency to continually monitor the emotional states of others, while neglecting one's own emotional states. The difference between empathy and emotion monitoring is that empathy requires a clear external stimulus, it is a reaction to someone else's situation. Emotion monitoring, on the other hand, is a constant often subconsciously scanning or monitoring of others' emotional states in order to anticipate any negative feelings they might experience. There is a sense of anticipation, and because this sense is constant, one's own state is neglected.

Emotion monitoring is also not to be confused with the psychological construct "theory of mind" (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). The theory of mind is valuable in that it allows one to think about both one's own mental state and that of others.

When interacting and socialising with other in international settings emotion monitoring becomes an exhausting experience since it is more difficult to monitor the emotions of an individual of another culture. Every interpersonal interaction can feel entirely depleting, and therefore lead to poor mental health. In those cases it is important to develop a mechanism to refocus one's energies inward to provide space to cultivate own emotions.

Bloom, P (2016) seems to agree with the fact that empathy has got more pitfalls than benefits. Although he acknowledges some benefits of empathy, Bloom disagrees in the general idea that many problems of modern society are caused by the lack of empathy. He argues that reasoned compassion is more reliable than empathy to achieve proper moral decision-making. He bases his reasoning on the fact that there is a lack of empirical and reliable scrutiny on empathy. In his eyes, this lack of empirical data fails to answer basic questions about the origin, in evolution and individual development, of compassion and kindness and neglects the critical importance of empathy in child development, which is essential in childhood to as an adult engage in successful interpersonal relationships throughout life. Bloom argues that sympathetic and empathic approach to interpersonal interactions is a wishful attempt to sense another's otherness without supporting appropriate or own their existential uniqueness. He claims that our differences are to be respected and are what make us interesting, and believes that rather than claiming emotional identification we should be cultivating our ability to stand back in order to provide a more rationally effective programme of care. Research shows the people who regularly put the feelings and perspectives of others above their own may experience feelings of emptiness or alienation and develop general anxiety or low-level of depression. First responders, humanitarian workers, doctors, therapists, journalists and others whose work involves opening themselves up to others' pain could suffer from empathy exhaustion. On the



other hand, psychopaths are capable of empathic accuracy, or correctly inferring thoughts and feelings, but may have no experiential referent for it, a true psychopath does not feel empathy.

Conclusion

It appears that there is an ongoing discussion about the benefits of being empathetic since has got some downfalls such as empathy exhaustion, and emotion monitoring. Some researchers suggest instead other approaches such as reasoned compassion which it does not imply to neglect your uniqueness; what makes us interesting and supports our otherness.

However, Huisman, J (2022) would argue that the development of empathetic skills could help to understand the very essence of diversity as an interaction between a variation of life experiences, perspectives, cultures, origins and identities that only when being and combined and recognised as differences, can potentially produce results that are far greater than on your own. Furthermore, she claims that by developing empathetic skills and acknowledging the difference, inclusion is reinforced. Emotional intelligence, hence empathy, always requires being empathic with yourself, and that paradoxically allows you to be even more present for those around you. The ancients knew that empathy, compassion and kindness need special protection. By easing up your emotion monitoring, social interactions can become more spontaneous. They can also become more authentic as the individual starts to react to others with their own feelings rather than first scanning the other's feelings. Interpersonal reactions become less depleting, and therefore increase the individual motivation to be active in social interaction

It seems that more effective research tools need to be developed to understand the role that culture plays on empathy. Culturally sensitive measures that are designed by multi-cultural geographical regions researchers to better understand what empathy means for them and the impact it has on their interaction with others, and distinguish different recipients of empathy..

In the words of Goleman, D (2013) Empathic concern, which is closely related to emotional empathy, enables an individual to sense not just how people feel but what they need from you. That is why empathy is important in professional and private life.

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