

# EMPATHY - THIS MOMENT IN EVOLUTION NOW

## Methodical Empathy perspective

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This article is written during the second International Empathy Conference in Oxford University, organised by the International Interdisciplinary Network. People from 14 countries and every continent came together for three days to share their researches and insights on empathy. It is a beautiful meeting of people with open heart and mind at the cutting edge of cultural evolution.

After two days of hearing many presentations from many points of view by researchers from all corners of the world I came to two conclusions: 1- something very real and strong is pulling us together here to focus on the new phenomena of empathy; 2- there is no one definition amongst us as to what empathy is. We all say broadly the same thing, that Empathy is the ability to understand the reality of other people from their own point of view, but we are obviously still forming what empathy is. It is being formed now, by all of us.

By far *the most controversial statement for most people here (and everywhere) is that empathy is new.* Understanding how new Empathy is presents a serious threshold for most people. On the one hand, the importance of empathy in all walks of life and work is widespread and growing. It is progressively considered the most important competency in personal relationships; the second most important competency in business leadership after Strategic Perspectives (Forbs, US 26-6-2015); and the second most important competency in political leadership in the UK after truthfulness (Survation, UK 31-8-2015). In his landmark speech in the presidential campaign, in January 2008, Barak Obama spoke of the 'Empathy Deficit' in America being much more significant than the budget deficit. Presidential candidates in the USA and prime ministerial candidates in the UK in current campaigns are being evaluated in terms of their ability to empathise with ordinary people, and recent European election campaigns show the same trend. Angela Merkel's recent change of heart regarding welcoming thousands of refugees into Germany and the popular positive response to this drastic change towards refugees is an expression of empathy on a global scale.

And all the while empathy as a skill is not being taught methodically in professional training courses in business, law, politics, medicine, humanities, science, arts, or hardly even in social work and therapies. We don't teach empathy in spite of its growing importance because of two reasons: 1) we believe it has always been there and it cannot be taught like being nice or not; 2) because we don't know how to teach it.

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But we all have to learn how to teach it and how to learn it fast, because the Empathy Deficit is rising. It is a crisis for which the solution is a new step in conscious evolution: Methodical cultivation of Empathy.

Empathy *is* new. For those of you who are not yet aware of it: the word empathy was invented by the British/American psychologist Titchener in 1909 as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung* that was invented by the German aesthetic philosopher Robert Vischer in 1873. It stayed for half a century in very narrow academic circles without any public usage. It became a publicly known/used word in 1951 through Carl Rogers's publication of: 'Person Centred Therapy' which revolutionised counselling and psychotherapy for the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only then has Empathy entered the dictionaries. Within a few years it became an international word, adopted by every country and language. The word Empathy has not replaced the word *Einfühlung*, which was coined to describe the art of artistic appreciation. Instead it became the universal term for a new growing human capacity- the new ability to perceive and to understand the experience of another human being, from that other human being's own point of view. So in 2015, empathy is 64 years old!

Most of my colleagues in this conference, as well as colleagues in the field of psychotherapy find this fact hard to believe. They have all grown and been educated in a world in which the word empathy was widespread, designating a deep seated human faculty which is considered essential for all human communication and interaction. It is assumed that like the words *sympathy*, *antipathy*, *apathy* and *psychopathy*; words that were articulated in ancient Greek and for the past 3,000 years. But Empathy is not a Greek word and every Greek speaking person would confirm it. It only sounds Greek. It is a product of the mid 50s in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, annoyingly to some, it was created in America..

When people I meet have to realise as a matter of fact that the word empathy simply did not exist as a coin of language before 1951 – the next objection to the above thesis is that it is just the word, not the phenomena that is new. Well, no. The phenomena itself is new. There is no evidence of empathy as a social phenomenon being there before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People understood each other instinctively within the group-soul of their tribes, not individually, and not in relation to people of other tribes. Those who make that claim are making four typical mistakes:

1) We do not create words unless we need them. The word 'steam engine' did not exist before the steam engine existed and the same applies to the terms Jet, Socialism, Nazism, Data, Computer and Software. We don't just suddenly invent a word for phenomena that existed for thousands of years. A new word is created to name a new phenomenon.

2) There was no empathy before the mid 50s – just look at the way the nations of Europe slaughtered each other sixty years ago. They are all united in the EU now. The international Bill of Rights of the United Nations Organisation and the UN itself could not have existed before; the equality, rights, legislation of women, racial minorities, Australian, New Zealand, South Africa, and Asian people; equality, rights, legislation for gay people, dissidents, Amnesty International, myriad of civil liberties international associations; animal rights legislation, environmental laws. And now, the expression of empathy with the

plight of refugees - all these are expressions of the growing new normality of empathy. None of these were in existence before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Suddenly, everyone's business *is* everyone else's business. The more people become individualised, the less the old orders, traditions, religion and collective controls hold them together, and the more they have to invent a new sense of social cohesion and community building. That new sense is Empathy.

3) Humanity as a whole is in a process of evolution, like a growing child. We are not the same people we were 100 years ago, let alone 1,000 years ago. Evolution of consciousness is a reality. We regard ourselves, others, parenthood, intimate relationship, society, economy, and politics, differently than our grandparents. Empathy is the recent bud of a new dimension of the evolution of consciousness, born out of mature individuation.

4) The expectation, demand and widening awareness of the need for empathy is spreading exponentially. Everyone is suddenly expecting it from everyone else, personally, socially and professionally, as if it was a basic human value. But where is the new skill of empathy supposed to come from?

This is a positive message. If empathy is inborn and totally incidental like the colour of one's eyes, there is not much you can do about it. But if Empathy is a new human phenomenon and we are all starters in empathy, then like a new language and new musical instrument, everyone can learn it consciously.

Yet, in spite of the universal widening 'empathy deficit' between the demand for it and the capacity to give it, empathy is not being taught methodically in universities. Why? My answer is: 1) because it is considered an intrinsic attribute of personality which, as I said before, is either there or not, and a human capacity that has been there from times immemorial; 2) academic disciplines based on intellectual reflection and technical skills cannot be extended to teaching empathy, which is neither an intellectual nor a technical competency. For empathy is the outcome of personal development.

In the 25 years of developing Methodical Empathy professionally in 6 countries it was discovered that developing empathy requires practical self awareness, personal transformation, a step in real personal development, and what can be called 'Self-Empathy', as the pre-requisite for sustainable empathy with others. Empathy marks the limit of what can be achieved by intellectual and technical adult education as it lives on the other side of these limitations. It is a new capacity of perception requiring an organ of perception, just like an eye is required to see colours or an ear is required to hear sounds. You cannot give a sense of sight to a blind man by talking about it. A new functioning organ of perception is required and likewise a new organ of perception is required for the shift from 'blindness' to 'seeing' the reality of another person from his/her own point of view. A conscious effort is required, with initiative and training for potential to become an operational new capacity.

For the whole of humanity empathy is a new capacity, requiring a new organ of perception: to *See* another human being with an inner eye, to *Hear* another human being with an inner ear, and to *Know* another human being with an *inner knowing*. In Psychophonetics, the first one is called *Perceptive Imagination*, the second *Perceptive Inspiration*, and the third *Perceptive Intuition*. In the professional training of Methodical

Empathy and the cultivation of all three new capacities form the foundation of the curriculum for the training courses in Psychophonetics. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) the Austrian philosopher and educator predicted in 1919 that the above trend in this direction will emerge from the depths of people's souls starting in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ('Ideas for New Europe'). He was an early prophet of empathy before the word really existed. Goethe, Martin Buber and Husserl came before him and Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Carl Rogers and Nelson Mandela came after him. Now it is up to each one of us.

There is a potential future of a 'Culture of Empathy' waiting for all of us, but a step in this direction can only be taken freely by one person at a time. One day everyone's joy will be everyone else's joy and everyone's suffering will be everyone else's suffering. The recent human response from hundreds of thousands of people around the world towards the plight of the Syrian and other Middle Eastern refugees show that we are moving in this direction. Of late even some political leaders seem to join this evolutionary trend toward empathy in spite of so much in them that prevents it. There is still hope for our time.

Human future evolution towards a truly humane civilization now depends on what you and I do today toward a new culture of empathy.