Empathy as a Personality Disposition

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MacKay's initial chapter of this book demonstrates the complexity of the empathy construct by reviewing various definitions and conceptualizations of empathy. The present chapter analyzes empathy as a personality disposition. Empathy—like any personality disposition—possesses four levels of meaning. These four levels of meaning are: (1) global, evaluative impressions about an actor perceived by an audience; (2) regularities in an actor's behavior that are responsible for these global impressions; (3) conscious desires and plans that guide an actor's behavior; and (4) latent structures responsible for an actor's desires and plans. These four layers of personality help explain, respectively, (1) how empathy affects the helping relationship; (2) which specific behaviors can be taught in empathy training programs; (3) why people act empathically or unempathically in social interaction; and (4) the natural constraints on empathy development in training programs.

CLASSICAL DEFINITIONS OF PERSONALITY

Understanding empathy as a personality disposition requires an understanding of the general nature of personality. Therefore, the first half of this chapter is devoted to clarifying the general nature of personality. This excursus may seem to take us somewhat far afield of the topic of empathy, but is absolutely necessary for understanding the nature of empathy as a personality disposition.
Just as empathy possesses numerous definitions, so does personality. In fact, Allport (1937, Chapter 2) identified 50 different definitions of personality. Fortunately, Allport reduced the 50 definitions to two central meanings of personality—that of outer appearance and that of inner (essential) nature. Most personality and social psychologists continue to use one or both of these two central definitions (Baumeister, 1986; Hogan, 1976; MacKinnon, 1944).

Viewing personality as outer appearance derives directly from the Latin term *persona*, a theatrical mask worn to signify an actor’s role in a play. Defining personality in this manner has several ramifications. First, this definition creates the dramaturgical metaphor for social interaction (Goffman, 1959), that is, it suggests that we are all actors performing to create certain impressions on our audiences. Second, it suggests that we can “change personalities” for different audiences, much as Greek actors changed masks for different roles. Third, it raises questions concerning sincerity and genuineness, because “putting on an act” is generally taken to mean pretending to be someone other than who one really is. Finally, the mask notion of personality implies the existence of a “hidden” person behind the mask.

Viewing personality as a hidden assemblage of inner personal qualities has been the mainstay of Freud and the depth psychologists. This perspective suggests alternative implications to those suggested by the mask definition. First, it suggests that we possess intrinsic personality traits that exist apart from our transactions with other people. Second, it implies the stability and relative immutability of personality (i.e., the masks may change, but the actor does not). Third, the existence of a stable self implies that sincerity is possible. Finally, it provides a specific definition of sincerity: people are sincere to the degree that their outer actions accurately reflect their inner psychological traits.

**THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PERSONALITY**

Experimental social psychology has developed its own perspective on the relationship between personality-as-outer-appearances (dramaturgical view) and personality-as-inner-psychic-qualities (depth psychology view). Experimental social psychology—essentially a form of stimulus-response behaviorism (Hendrick, 1977)—has sought to identify specific, concrete, observable actor behaviors that serve as stimuli affecting the perceptual responses of the audience. Thus we get from experimental social psychology a fine-grained analysis of actor characteristics that influence personality-qua-appearance.

The experimental approach has successfully revealed how specific actor characteristics (facial features, eye contact, speech mannerisms, body posture, etc.) influence an audience’s perception of the actor’s friendliness, likeability, dominance, trustworthiness, and so forth (Buck, Miller, & Caul, 1974; Ekman, 1965; Exline & Fehr, 1978; Kleinke, 1975; Kraut & Johnston, 1979; Secord, 1958). For example, people appear to be friendly when they exhibit “friendly behaviors”—smiling, making appropriate eye contact, and so forth.

The consensus of the research cited above is that an audience forms its initial impressions of an actor’s personality by rapidly synthesizing bits of verbal and nonverbal information into an overall personality portrait. Like all perceptual reactions, the process of forming first impressions is automatic; that is to say, the synthesis of sensory stimuli into an overall personality impression is involuntary and occurs below the observer’s level of awareness. The actor’s sincerity or honesty is determined in part by comparing verbal and nonverbal messages, particularly involuntary nonverbal messages (Ekman & Friesen, 1974; Kraut, 1978). Much of impression formation therefore can be said to be governed by principles beyond the rational, voluntary control of either actor or observer.

The first contribution, then, of experimental social psychology, has been to explain how immediate outer appearances are generated automatically by specific behaviors. A second contribution of social psychology is an explication of how an audience infers stable, inner personality dispositions from continued observations of behavioral acts. This area, known as *attribution theory*, suggests that judgments of inner personality dispositions are rarely arrived at in a calculated manner (Heider, 1958). More often, people infer general personality traits unconsciously according to certain tacit rules.

A third and final contribution offered by experimental social psychology has been to demonstrate individual differences in the ability to form accurate personality impressions from behavioral observations. Among the characteristics of “good judges” of personality is, interestingly, empathy (Mills & Hogan, 1973; Borman, 1979). More will be said about empathy and accuracy in person perception later.
In summary, the social–psychological perspective on the relationship between inner personality and outer appearances gives us three valuable insights. First, first impressions of personality are formed rapidly, automatically, and below the level of awareness of both actor and audience. Second, inferences about inner personality from behavioral data are also made spontaneously and unconsciously. Third, some people judge personality from behavioral observations more accurately than others, and one of the characteristics of a good judge is empathy.

FROM TRAIT DESCRIPTIONS TO STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS

Social psychologists have successfully explained why people consistently create specific impressions on each other. Apparently, each of us is consistent in his/her mannerisms (particularly nonverbal mannerisms), and these mannerisms are automatically perceived in specific ways, leading to consistent personality impressions.

What behavioristically oriented social psychologists cannot explain, however, are our consistent behavioral mannerisms. If external stimuli totally controlled our behavior, then our external environment would have to remain perfectly constant to produce consistent behavior. The fact that people exhibit consistent behavioral mannerisms across different environmental contexts repudiates the behavioristic, social-psychological view.

Where, then, are we to look for an explanation of the consistent behavioral mannerisms that lead to consistent personality impressions? Alston (1975) suggests looking to the inner structure of the actor. More specifically, he claims that regularities in behavior (which he calls trait dispositions or "T-concepts") can be explained with purposive-cognitive ("PC")-concepts. PC-concepts include three basic types of inner psychological determinants: desires (feelings of longing for particular goals), beliefs (cognitive schemata outlining the most promising ways to achieve desired goals), and abilities (the capacity to perform behaviors required in the desire–belief plan). Thus, Mary may behave empathically because she desires cooperation from others, believes that empathic behavior is the best way to obtain cooperation, and has the ability to behave empathically.

Alston admits that his explanation of intentional behavior in terms of desires, beliefs, and abilities is quite common-sensical ("in its gross outlines is familiar to all of us since childhood" are his exact words—1975, p. 24). A more complete, "scientific" view of inner personality requires an explanation of the relationship between conscious desires and plans and the deep causal structures that ultimately guide conscious activity. One conceptualization of this deep structure is the talent construct (cf. Newman & Newman, 1980).

Talents can be regarded as the neurophysiological potential or capacity for executing specific behavior patterns. The presence of a talent for a specific behavior means that, given the opportunity, the talented person will (a) learn the behavior quickly and effortlessly, (b) eventually execute the behavior gracefully and skillfully at high levels of performance, and (c) receive intrinsic pleasure from engaging in the behavior. Drawing an analogy between "personality talent" and athletic talent will further clarify how personality develops.

Let us use the development of basketball talent as an example. Some basketball players learn skills quickly and effortlessly and develop these skills to a high level. Others struggle when learning and never perform very well. What coaches call a "born" basketball player apparently possesses a certain amount of innate (genetically determined) talent that facilitates learning and allows for high levels of performance.

Basketball skills, although influenced by genes, do not appear full-blown in children; they develop through practice—repeated practice. Coaches drill players until the basic moves in the sport become unconscious habits. Skilled athletes (or musicians) will tell you that consciously thinking about their motor movements disrupts the grace and accuracy of their performances. Initially, players must think about every newly learned set of movements, but eventually these conscious plans become unconscious cognitive programs. When a basketball player tells himself "turn-around jump shot," an automatic sequence of movements occurs (cf. Lenneberg's, 1967, concept of language automatisms).

Personality talents—including empathy—are very similar to basketball skills in this regard. Naturally empathic persons gravitate toward fields such as counseling because they learn counseling skills easily and enjoy counseling activities. After counselors have become skilled through hundreds of hours of practice, they can tell
themselves "do Rogerian counseling," and a smooth pattern of reflective listening and empathic responding is executed. If the counselor for some reason were to suddenly become self-conscious, the flow is disrupted and the performance becomes unnatural, unconvincing, and ungenuine. Likewise, an untrained therapist who lacks a knack (talent) for counseling will probably be seen as less caring than a trained, skilled counselor.

Understanding talents as the origin of "natural" behavior sheds new light on the perception of "authenticity" or "sincerity." When we are "being ourselves" we are executing talent-based, well-practiced behavior patterns. Such performances are fluid and smooth, and are therefore automatically assumed to be authentic (i.e., in correspondence with inner personality) by audiences. In unrehearsed, unpracticed performances we appear awkward, unnatural, uncoordinated, and ungenuine. Our verbal and nonverbal messages don’t jibe, and our real dispositions may leak through (Lippa, 1978).

In addition to quick, effortless learning and high levels of performance, athletic skills and personality talents have in common a pleasant affect that accompanies the performance of the behavior. Athletes play not just to win, but for the sheer kinesthetic pleasure of the sport. A genuine basketball player will feel an urge to dribble and shoot the ball all year, not just during the season. Likewise, people feel an urgency to seek out opportunities to execute the behaviors that satisfy their cardinal inner personality dispositions—their personality talents. Conscious desires are activated (in part) by these deeper underlying talents.

The notion of personality talents therefore explains ultimately why people exhibit consistent behavior patterns (which, in turn, lead to consistent personality impressions). Predisposing, innate structures in the nervous system (talents) make certain activities intrinsically easy to execute, and the pleasure derived from executing the activities reinforces the person to repeat and practice the activity until it becomes an unconscious habit.

Although personality talents possess both motor skill and cognitive qualities, they are identical to neither athletic skills nor purely intellectual skills. Personality talents always develop within a social context and are intimately linked to outer personality impressions. Personality talents are essentially raw materials without form. Young children learn to shape these raw materials into the form of roles by imitating admired role models. Empathy—the ability to take the perspective of another person—is a crucial part of learning to play roles. For successful role learning, the young actor must be able to evaluate, from the perspective of the audience, the impression he or she is making upon that audience.

**SUMMARY OF THE GENERAL NATURE OF PERSONALITY**

In summary, personality dispositions can be analyzed into four tiers according to the perspective of the observer. The general public or audience reacts to their impressions of actors. Social psychologists have identified specific behaviors that create these impressions. The actors themselves explain their behaviors in terms of desires, beliefs, and abilities (e.g., "I paint because I enjoy it, I think it’s the best way to express myself, and I’m good at it.") Finally, the personality theorists make hypotheses about predisposing genetic and neuronal structures that facilitate the social learning experiences that lead to the actors’ desires, beliefs, and abilities.

This perspective therefore explains audience impressions in terms of behaviors, behaviors in terms of actors’ desires, beliefs, and abilities, and these actors’ qualities in terms of underlying physiology and developmental patterns. This perspective also stresses the interaction of outer and inner factors in personality development. The roles that actors learn to play are formed jointly by predisposing talents and the influence of role models. Finally, an actor’s success at role-playing is a function of unself-conscious authenticity, which audiences evaluate constantly by the act’s degree of effortlessness and coherence of verbal and nonverbal components. These general principles will now be applied to an analysis of empathy.

**IMPRESSIONS OF EMPATHIC PERSONS**

Do empathic persons create similar impressions on different audiences? Hogan (1969) addressed this question by selecting 50 items whose content was directly relevant to empathy from the 100-item California Q-set, an instrument designed to provide a comprehensive description of personality impressions (Block, 1961). Hogan
then asked a group of nonpsychologists and a group of psychology graduate students to sort the Q-set items to describe a "highly empathic man," using the following dictionary definition of empathy, "the intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind without actually experiencing that person's feelings." The estimated reliabilities of the composite Q-sorts in the groups were .94 and .90, and the corrected correlation between group Q-sort composites was .93. This indicates a high level of agreement within groups and between lay and psychological audiences on the impressions generated by an empathic person.

Encouraged by these results, Hogan (1969) requested a group of professional psychologists and advanced graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley to describe a highly empathic man with the full 100-item Q-set. Again, a highly reliable (.94) composite was found. The five items from the composite Q-sort selected by the group as most characteristic of an empathic man were as follows:

1. Is skilled in social techniques of imaginative play, pretending, and humor.
2. Seems to be aware of the impression he makes on others.
3. Evaluates the motivation of others in interpreting situations.
4. Has insight into own motives and behavior.
5. Is socially perceptive of a wide range of interpersonal cues.

In summary, empathic people impress us, first of all, as perceptive or insightful. The eight items from the composite Q-sort selected as quite characteristic of an empathic man were as follows (Hogan, 1967):

1. Appears to have a high degree of intellectual capacity.
2. Is introspective and concerned with self as an object.
4. Is turned to for advice and reassurance.
5. Has warmth; has the capacity for close relationships, compassionate.
6. Responds to humor.
7. Able to see to the heart of important problems.
8. Emphasizes communication through action and non-verbal behavior.

Several of these items (1, 2, 7) again reflect perceptiveness and insightfulness, but a new theme is found in items 3, 4, 5, and 6. These items indicate that empathic people impress us as sympathetic, helpful, warm, compassionate, and good-natured.

Hogan's results were replicated by La Monica (1980), who solicited descriptions of a highly empathic person from female psychology graduate students, nurses, and university professors. Both the perceptiveness and compassion themes can be seen in the five descriptions showing the highest loadings in a factor analysis of descriptions she gathered:

1. Seems to understand another person's state of being.
2. Helps a person work through his situation and his problems/concerns.
3. Understands the "human" situation.
4. Shows consideration for a person's feelings and reactions.
5. Understands the problems of others by putting herself in their place.

The personality impressions listed above were generated by professionals in the fields of psychology and nursing. Hogan (1969) also provides data on the impressions of nonpsychologists of the empathic person. From the personality archives at Berkeley, Hogan selected 64 self-report inventory items that tended to be endorsed by subjects whose Q-sort profiles resembled the Q-sort of the "highly empathic man." This 64-item, true/false Empathy Scale was administered to 103 fraternity men, who also rated each other on the 300-word Adjective Check List (ACL) (Gough & Heilbrun, 1965). The ten words most descriptive of high scorers on the Empathy Scale were: pleasant, charming, friendly, dreamy, cheerful, sociable, sentimental, imaginative, discreet, and tactful. The ten words most descriptive of low scorers were: cruel, cold, quarrelsome, hostile, bitter, unemotional, unkind, hard-hearted, argumentative, and opinionated. These ACL ratings seem to confirm both the perceptive and compassionate aspects of empathy, although the compassionate aspect is better represented.

That empathic persons impress others as perceptive and compassionate explains how empathy generates trust, confidence, and openness in the patient–caretaker relationship. A patient who sees
his caretaker as perceptive and compassionate is likely to say, "This person understands me and is sensitive to my condition. She can help me because she can really tell what's going on with me and care enough for me to make me feel better. I can be frank with this person, and I trust her judgment enough to go along with what she says."

Caretaker perceptiveness therefore generates in the patient confidence in the caretaker's ability to do the right thing, which increases the likelihood of patient compliance. Caretaker compassion reduces apprehension in the patient, which generates a willingness in the patient to reveal openly sensitive material. Note, however, that neither perceptiveness nor compassion alone is sufficient to facilitate compliance and communication; both are essential. A caretaker who is perceptive but cold will seem invasive and cause the patient to clam up. A caretaker who is compassionate but imperceptive will appear inept and unworthy of compliance. Furthermore, verbal and nonverbal caretaker messages must be congruent to generate positive impressions in the helping relationship (Graves & Robinson, 1976).

**BEHAVIORAL REGULARITIES OF EMPATHIC PERSONS**

Counselors have been cataloging for many years the specific behaviors underlying empathic impressions in order to teach these behaviors to persons desiring to appear empathic in the helping relationship. Buchheimer and Balogh (1961) have categorized types of verbal leads in terms of their effect on the person being counseled. Compassion, acceptance, and support are communicated by (1) silence or statements indicating patience and receptiveness (e.g., "Take your time, there's no rush"); (2) statements of reassurance (e.g., "That's okay, I'm with you, you're not alone in this"); or (3) restatements of manifest content or feeling (e.g., "You are saying . . ." or "You say you feel . . ."). Accurate understanding is communicated by reflection—a paraphrasing of content or feeling (e.g., "In other words, you feel . . .").

Nonverbal behaviors communicating empathy have also been studied and catalogued. D'Augelli (1974) found that the frequency of helpers' head nods influenced impressions of both the helper's warmth and understanding. Tepper and Haase (1978) found that tone of voice and facial expression explained more variance in impressions of empathy than the verbal message, but qualified this conclusion by suggesting that effective messages require a proper balance between verbal and nonverbal messages. Smith-Hanen (1977) found that both arm and leg posture affected impressions of empathy, a significant finding, given that body posture tends to be subject to less voluntary control than facial expression (Ekman & Friesen, 1974).

These catalogs of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that reflect empathy can provide useful basic material for programs designed to teach empathic behavior (cf. Hughes, Carver, & Mackay, Chapter 8 of this volume). Two absolutely essential elements for making empathy training programs work are (a) role-playing practice sessions that simulate actual therapeutic encounters; and (b) opportunities to review videotapes of the role-playing sessions. The practice is necessary to make the empathic responses more fluid, natural, and spontaneous. The videotapes are necessary to help the trainees observe their nonverbal behavior and make it congruent with their verbal behavior. (Recall that "naturalness" and verbal/nonverbal congruence are the two means by which an audience judges the sincerity of the actor; mechanical, incongruent empathic behavior will not be as effective as natural, congruent empathic behavior.)

It is important to keep in mind that videotaping may temporarily disrupt the fluidity and naturalness of trainee behavior by heightening their self-consciousness. That is why continued practice is so essential for developing behavior that appears convincingly empathic. The trainee must practice empathic behavior until it is no longer necessary to monitor his or her responding. Empathy will then become an automatic response and appear to be genuine to the audience.

**MOTIVATIONS AND DESIRES OF EMPATHIC PERSONS**

Commitment to any pattern of behavior requires a certain amount of emotional involvement. If behavior is executed merely as a means to an end, it will be neither practiced often nor performed with enthusiasm. Consequently, the behavioral performance will be lackluster and unconvincing. In the case of empathic behavior,
the person must genuinely want to behave empathically in order to give sincere-sounding, genuine-appearing empathic responses.

A factor analysis of Hogan's Empathy Scale (Johnson, Cheek, & Smither, 1983) sheds some light on the motives underlying empathic behavior. Johnson et al. found four factors in Hogan's scale, which they named Social Self-Confidence, Even Temperredness, Sensitivity, and Nonconformity. Social Self-Confidence describes an intrinsic interest in interacting with other people. Empathic persons enjoy simply being with others. Even temperedness is best understood as the absence of a motive to attract attention to one's self by complaining about one's problems. Even temperedness is a particularly valuable asset for helpers in the medical and health care professions, given that the people they treat are normally self-absorbed in their problems.

Johnson et al. consider Sensitivity and Nonconformity to be the two most important facets of Hogan's Empathy Scale. Sensitivity describes an interest in feeling-tones (i.e., aesthetic reactivity) and a concern with social approval. Empathic persons are sensitive to the feelings of others; they feel bad when others hurt. Thus, the Sensitivity factor of empathy is similar to what we normally call sympathy—the tendency to feel what others feel. Note, however, that pure sympathy is self-defeating in the therapeutic helping relationship because merely experiencing a patient's negative feelings can immobilize a helper. Sensitivity must be balanced by Even Temperredness. Truly empathic people do not become overwhelmed at the pain of others. Rather, they objectively understand others' feelings in order to help relieve their suffering. Empathic persons find helping others intrinsically satisfying, and they also enjoy receiving gratitude from those they help.

"Nonconformity" is an incompletely accurate label for a rather complex syndrome that includes an interest in novelty and change, liberal political attitudes, and an intracreative cognitive style (a tendency to think in terms of complex and differentiated interpersonal concepts rather than bias-ridden stereotypes). The motivational aspect of Nonconformity is the interest in novelty and openness to new information. Empathic persons resist jumping to quick conclusions about people, which increases the accuracy of their perceptions of others. Johnson et al. (1983) and Johnson and Worley (1987) suggest that the Nonconformity factor is specifically responsible for accuracy in person perception.

In summary, empathic persons (1) enjoy interacting with others, (2) are not interested in getting attention by dramatizing their own problems, (3) enjoy receiving gratitude from others for being interested in their feelings, and (4) enjoy getting to know others well. This complex of motivations generally steers the empathic person into one of the helping professions, which Holland (1985) calls Social occupations. The cardinal motif of the Social type's life is involvement in others' lives in a positive way (helping, teaching, healing, parenting, serving) because of the intrinsic pleasure of helping others and the rewards of others' appreciation.

Medical personnel sometimes find themselves in a motivational double-bind (cf. Kupfer, Drew, Curtis, & Rubinstein, 1978). Holland (1985) describes these medical occupations as a combination of Social and Investigative tendencies. That is, medical personnel can be motivated primarily by the Social desire to help others, or by the predominant desire of the Investigative type, which is to solve problems via the scientific method. Investigative types are generally concerned more with ideas than with people; thus we have some medical personnel who do well at diagnosis and labwork, but interact poorly with patients. This implies that empathy training will be most successful for health care personnel whose primary motive is Social, rather than Investigative (cf. Hughes, Carver, & Mackay, Chapter 8, this volume).

DEEP PERSONALITY STRUCTURE OF EMPATHIC PERSONS

The deepest level of empathy as a personality variable concerns the unobservable structures that enable a person to perform skillfully in an empathic manner. Gazda and Evans treat this topic more fully in the following chapter; hence only a few brief remarks will be made about the skill aspect of empathy here.

First, if empathy possesses a skill- or talent-like quality, it should have a genetic basis. Johnson, Cheek, and Smither (1983) suggest that this is indeed the case. Three of the four facets of empathy they identified (Social Self-Confidence, Even Temperredness, and Nonconformity) bear a close resemblance to three temperament dispositions reported by Buss and Plomin (1975) to have significant heritability: Sociability, Emotionality, and Impulsivity.

Second, these genetic constraints will define how easy it will be to learn empathy and will place a limit on the degree to which one
can improve one’s empathic behavior. Anyone can learn, in theory, the footwork and movements involved in dunking a basketball, but only those with a given genetic endowment will actually be able to execute the dunk. So it is with empathy. To minimize trainee frustration in an empathy training program, realistic expectations should be tailored to individuals’ potentials for empathic behavior.

A final comment concerns the age-old question of how an actor’s “act” can be sincere or genuine. This question is particularly relevant to persons in the helping professions, for genuineness is generally regarded as an important element of the helping relationship (cf. Peitchinis, 1972). I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that genuineness is a function of the match between outer impressions and inner personality dispositions. A person who is not empathically motivated and/or lacks empathic skills can put on only a self-conscious, mechanical performance, which is perceived as phony by the audience. This is particularly true when the actor is “on stage” for long periods of time under demandingly high levels of stress—conditions that describe the typical hospital environment.

This is not to say that learning to go through the motions of empathy is pointless without the appropriate level of skill. To the degree that our audience is empathic, they will at least appreciate our attempt to be understanding and caring, even if our performances are somewhat clumsy. And, if we really care about others and truly desire to become skillfully empathic, this motive will support the long hours of practice necessary for developing genuine empathic skill.

REFERENCES


