Empathy in Western Philosophy, Psychotherapy and Psychology

Emotion has been long been viewed as deficit within Western scientific and philosophical thought (Oatley, Keltner, & Jenkins, 2006); and has been inaccurately portrayed as irrational, subjective, primitive and against reason (Damasio, 1994). Despite this, empathy is a significant, much debated, and diversely defined phenomenon that has generated a vast amount of conceptual and empirical literature as illustrated by Eisenburg & Strayer (1987b), Gladstein (1987), Jahoda (2005), Verducci (2000), and Wispé (1987). This section presents an overview of the history of the term empathy and describes key conceptualisations and studies in the fields of philosophy and psychology.

As well as describing, outlining and unpacking the literature, it is vital to make evaluations to demonstrate your critical judgment on key issues, approaches, or schools of thought. Note how this sentence makes an overall judgment about the field.

This section illustrates the lack of consistency in defining and labelling empathy within and between several related disciplines and introduces a number of terms that have been used to describe the phenomenon of empathy to date. Presenting key theories and concepts related to the study of empathy, this section illustrates that empathy was considered a key concept in these fields because it brings observers closer to...
understanding the thoughts, attitudes, values, behaviour or feelings of others. However, the different philosophical and theoretical approaches to the study of empathy have resulted in various definitions and explanations of empathy which reflect the lack of consensus among researchers about what constitutes empathy and how it should be studied.

**A way of responding to objects**

From its earliest inception, empathy was central to one of the great puzzles of 20th century Western philosophical and psychological thought (Jahoda, 2005). Empathy was “key to the problem that had long concerned philosophers and later psychologists – namely, how we come to know other people’s minds” (Jahoda, 2005, p. 155). To date, the concept of empathy continues to be very influential in philosophy as well as in many areas of psychology including psychotherapy, and developmental, social and personality psychology.

Within a European framework, the English word empathy can be traced as far back as the early 20th century through the field of psychology. It is widely believed that the origin of the term lies in late 19th century German aesthetics, philosophy and psychology where it was known as einfühlung, literally, feeling with (Koss, 2006; Verducci, 2000; Wispé, 1987, 1991). This German word is generally believed to have been associated with the field of aesthetics and refers to the psychological experience of projecting one’s feelings into an object as a means of aesthetic appreciation (Jahoda, 2005; Verducci, 2000; Wispé, 1987).
Nowadays, it is commonly agreed that the term einfühlung made its transition into the English language through Edward Tichener in 1909 (Jahoda, 2005; Verducci, 2000; Wispé, 1987, 1991). Tichener drew on the Greek word empatheia (in suffering or passion) to coin the term empathy (Jahoda, 2005). Tichener (1924) used the term to describe various phenomena including, “a natural tendency to feel oneself into what we perceive or imagine”, and a “process of humanising objects, of reading or feeling ourselves into them” (p. 417).

A way of knowing other minds

The theory of empathy in which feelings are absorbed and created in relation to objects then expanded beyond a way of knowing objects, into a theory of how people know other people (Koss, 2006). The theory of empathy evolved to refer to a way of understanding people and was adopted and explored further by a number of influential psychotherapists including Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers and Roger Kohut (Gladstein, 1987; Wispé, 1987).

In psychotherapy, empathy is central to a psychoanalyst’s understanding of clients in particular and of psychological phenomena in general. Empathy enables the psychoanalyst to have an objective understanding of the client’s “inner world”. Freud (as cited in Verducci, 2000) conceived of empathy as a way of understanding or knowing others. References to empathy can be found throughout Freud’s writings (Eisenburg & Strayer, 1987a), and Freud credited empathy with being central to a therapist’s understanding of what is “inherently foreign to us in the experiences of others” (Freud, 1921 as cited in Wispé, 1987).

References


