

Living locally with global uncertainties: The discourse dynamics of social grouping and empathy

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The “Living with Uncertainty” Project



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Empathy

The work of empathy is precisely trying to imagine a view of the world that one does not share, and in fact may find it quite difficult to share.

Halpern & Weinstein, 2004, p. 581



What is empathy?

- a mode of understanding the Other's ideas, attitudes and values
- neutral as to what action to take
- not the same as sympathy



Self-focused empathy

1697. Amy I've got no first hand experience of it.
1698. I don't know anybody who's .. Muslim,
1699. or anything.
1700. .. but I can sympathise,
1701. .. with what they must .. be feeling,
1702. just from my own suspicion,
1703. X
1704. `cos they must think --
1705. X how they must feel.
1706. ..but that's as far as I can go,



Other-focused empathy

1732. I think,
1733. **the Palestinians** actually,
1734. have a .. good cause to be angry.
1735. and,
1736. erm,
1737. they've been persecuted,
1738. for a long long time,
1739. .. and,
1740. nobody took any notice,
1741. .. of their .. cry.
1742. and,
1743. .. what happens,
1744. when you put somebody in a
corner,
1745. they start to fight.
1746. and they're fighting dirty.

1747. an-
1748. not all the,
1749. the er bombers are,
1750. erm,
1751. ...(1.0) **from Palestine**,
1752. but I think a lot of grief,
1753. .. and a lot of anger's,
1754. stemmed from that area.
1755. and,
1756. [SIREN OUTSIDE]
1757. [probably a lot of recruitment,
1758. has come,
1759. from,
1760. **young Palestinians**,
1761. because they have no hope],
1762. and when you take away
somebody's hope,
1763. then you take away their life.



Key points about empathy

- Self – Other
- automatic vs deliberate
- 1-1 vs social empathy
- dynamic vs state
- operates at interacting levels and timescales
- Self-focused vs Other-focused
- can evoke emotional ambivalence / dissonance



RQ

- How do people construct, negotiate, and resist empathy in discourse activity?
 - Focus groups discussing the risk of terrorism in everyday life (2006)



Focus group discussions: Data

- Segments answering questions:
 - *Do you think the [post 9/11 and 7/7 terrorism] situation has affected some groups more than others?*
 - *Are you concerned about human rights in the context of terrorism?*
- 37,945 words.



shifting categorisations of the Other

1507Aasif if you're **a brown-skinned** --
1508 erm,
1509 ...(1.0) around many of the areas,
1510 ... say for example,
1511 erm,
1512 ... say Southall,
1513 for example,
1514 .. that's a majority of **Asian .. community** there,
1515 .. there's probably a majority of **Sikhs** there.
1516Sarfraz yes it is.
1517Aasif and there's **Muslims** there.
1518 ...(2.0) but the if the er,
1519 .. the **outsiders** come,
1520 ..say the **English**,
1521Khalid ...(2.0) **BNP**.
1522Aasif yeah <<@>> if they come,
1523 you know,
1524 ..<Q you're **brown** Q>,
1525xx that's it,
1526Aasif ..<Q you're a **Paki** mate Q> <<@>>. [LAUGHTER]
1527xx that's it.



Analysis of dynamic categorising

- How is the Other categorised, and how do these categories shift?
- Data coded for mentions of people groups and individuals
- and by 'social markers' e.g. *rucksacks, beards, burkas*



Categorising tactics

- Categorising shifts that relate to social empathy
 - specifying
 - *I've spoken to some myself*
 - *I met this girl in Manchester airport*
 - splitting
 - *I don't think they're normal Mulsims*
 - lumping
 - *.. people do .. generalise, and .. put a big blanket over a certain group of people.*



Social empathy patterns

1: specify and connect (57)

2: split into 'goodies' and 'baddies', to connect and distance (89)

3: lump and distance (59)

Others: analogise, attributed patterns



Social empathy pattern 1: specify and connect

1080. Edith I think it will have affected **people**,
1081 who've had **family** involved.
1082 like **this lady**,
1083 whose **family** lived in London.
1084 I mean,
1085 you you've got to .. think,
1086 about things like that,
1087 haven't you.
1088 it's got to affect you more,
1089 if your--
1090 you thought that your ...**aunt**,
1091 or **mother**,
1092 or **sister** were on the train,
1093 and this that and other,
1094 I think that would be,
1095 .. upmost in your mind.

(Leeds C1/2 Women)



Social empathy pattern 1: specify and connect

1440. Charles there's some sympathy for **some people**,
1441. who are ..really.. **fine families**,
1442. **upstanding families**,
1443. and they--
1444. they do feel,
1445. as if everyone was watching them all the time.
1446. .. and I've spoken to some myself.
1447. **parents** have been in to see me,
1448. ... and its er,
1449. it's not easy for them,
1550. I don't think,
1551. at the moment.

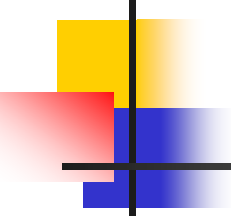
(Leeds AB Men)

Social empathy pattern 2: split into 'goodies' and 'baddies', to connect and distance

1237 Edith they're not helping their own religion.
1238 Aileen no they're not
1239 Edith are they.
1240 I don't think.
1241 Carol you see,
1242 I don't think,
1243 they are **the religious people**.
1244 I I don't think they're **normal Muslims**,
1245 that are doing this.
1246 xx no
1247 Carol because **normal Muslims** aren't like this .
1248 these are--
1249 **these** are brainwashed,
1250 Edith the- these are [what]
1251 Carol [people]
1252 to me [[that are mentally ill]]

(Leeds C1/2 Women)

Social empathy pattern 2: split into 'goodies' and 'baddies', to connect and distance



1286 Carol but it's like --
1287 it's like,
1288 **the Germans.**
1289 everybody still remembers,
1290 that **a handful of Germans,**
1291 who .. did all that they did,
1292 and everybody goes,
1293 <Q oh **the Germans the Germans** Q>,
1294 it's the same to me.
1295 Edith no they're not.
1296 they were **Nazis.**
1297 they weren't **Germans.**
1298 Carol well **Nazis** then
1299 Edith yeah.
1300 Carol it's the same thing.
1301 a small group have made it,
1302 ... bad for everybody.



Social empathy pattern 3: lump and distance

5086 Alan **these people,**
5087 .. they come here,
5088 .. with their extremist views,
5089 .. **they** come into this country,
5090 .. and then they expect to be able to,
5091 do this shit,
5092 .. and get away with it.
5093 xx X
5094 Alan I don't think it's on.
5095 .. I don't think it's on,
5096 at all.

(London AB Men)



Circulating stories

- *'The privileged immigrant / unfairly discriminating authorities'*
- *'The fake asylum seeker'*
- *'Feral youth'*



In the dynamics of talk, empathy is supported by:

- connecting with the Other at the level of the individual;
- entering into the Other's perspective, including their thoughts, feelings and interactions;
- using metaphor, affective language and appeal to recognisable experience with strong potential to evoke automatic empathy.



In the dynamics of talk, empathy is negotiated by:

- splitting the Other group into those with whom empathy is possible and those with whom it is not;
- drawing on individual experience to connect



In the dynamics of talk, empathy is resisted by:

- lumping to dismiss the whole Other group and disallow connection and shifts in relations between Self and Other;
- attributing thoughts, feelings, actions and words to the Other which set them in opposition or as a threat to the Self;
- appeal to circulating stories which calcify distancing attributions.



Living with Uncertainty project

www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/livingwithuncertainty

the current model of empathy

