

Empathy in an uncertain world: How people talk about other social groups

Lynne Cameron and Robert Maslen
The Open University

The “Living with Uncertainty” Project



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



E·S·R·C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL



The Open University



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.

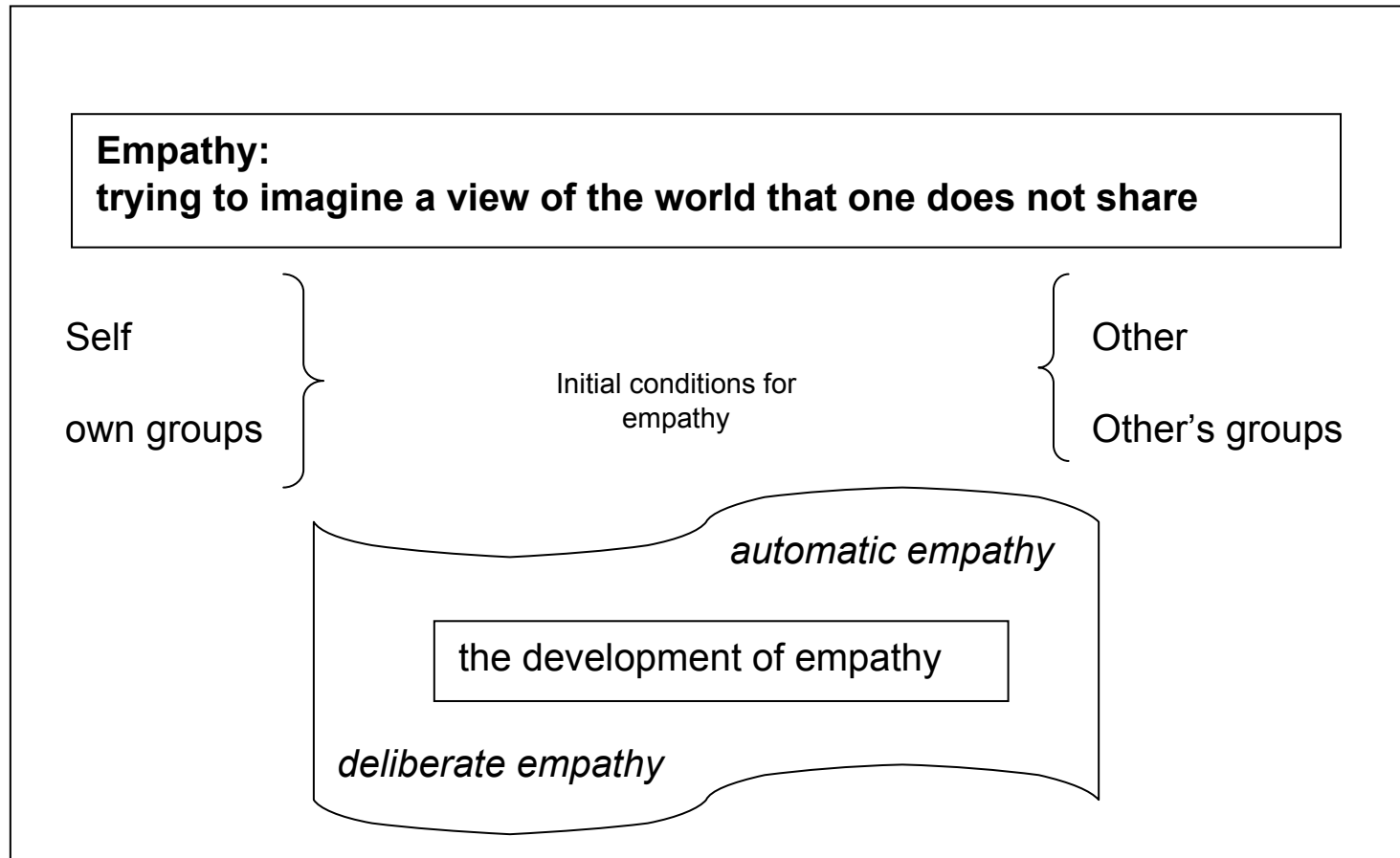
1747. an-
1748. not all the,
1749. the er bombers are,
1750. erm,
1751. ...(1.0) **from Palestine**,
1752. but I think a lot of grief,
1753. .. and a lot of anger's,
1754. stemmed from that area.
1755. and,
1756. [SIREN OUTSIDE]
1757. [probably a lot of recruitment,
1758. has come,
1759. from,
1760. **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

The starting point for a model





Discourse dynamics of empathy

Empathy emerges from

- interacting timescales of discourse activity
 - the moment of talk = local action
 - the conversation = discourse event
 - the longer term series of conversations
- interacting levels of social organisation
 - the individual
 - the dyad
 - social groups: family, religious, political etc
 - cultural level



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 Muslims*
 - 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.

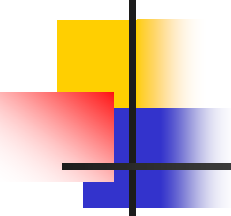
(Leeds AB Men)

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

3638 it really is double standards.
3639 you know,
3640 **the Americans** don't like **anybody**,
3641 to do anything against them,
3642 that they see as unjust.
3643 they'll go into other countries,
3644 to sort them out,
3645 because they're doing things that are unjust.
3646 but **they** don't care,
3647 when **they** do things that are unjust.

(Leeds AB Women)



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.

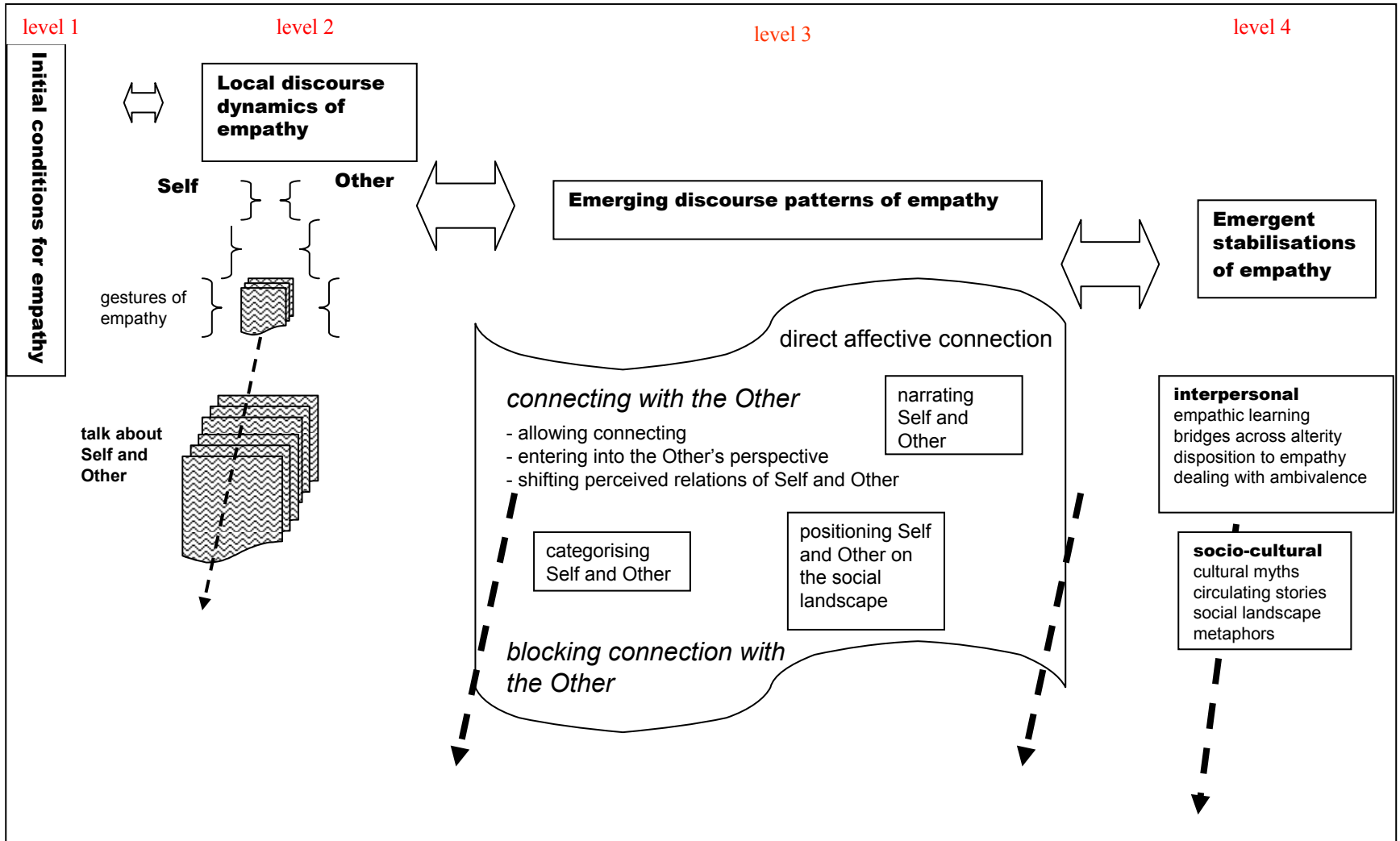
(London AB Men)



Circulating stories

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

the current model of empathy





Empathy is constructed 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;
- using narratives to talk about individuals.



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;
- making analogies with other situations;
- encouraging imaginative connection e.g. through creating hypothetical scenarios and stories with detailed experiential cues and affective language.



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;
- conceptualising the Self as physically distanced from the Other through social landscape metaphors;
- appeal to circulating stories which calcify distancing attributions.