

Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of History and Philosophy

EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION

Thesis Summary

PhD: Maria Diaconescu

Coordinator: Prof. Dr. Aurel Codoban

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Keywords: dialogue, otherness, inter subjective experience, epistemic curiosity, interpersonal authenticity, accuracy and verbalization of empathic understanding, conscious and unconscious projections, epistemological errors in communication, empathy, sympathy, identification, face to face and online textual interaction, online anonymity, human presence, secondary oral condition of dialogue.

Summary of work:

The present survey has both theoretical and applied aspects. In its preliminary phase, the research started in December 2003 when I was invited to speak at a seminar on Family Ethics at the Faculty of Theology family about domestic violence. I was invited to this seminar as a counselor who worked in the Artemis project to assist psychosocial program for girls and women against sexual abuse and violence in the period of 1998-2000. We invited students to achieve an exercise focused on how we relate to situations of violence. 27 students, mostly girls from the Social Theology and some boys from Pastoral Theology, were asked to remember an experience of violence that has been reported to them by a close person (from neighbors, colleagues, relatives, friends, acquaintances). Then I asked them to record the victim's gender, form of violence reported, and what they personally felt and thought while listening to people disclosing their experience of violence.

Research in 2003 continued in 2004 in the context of the seminars on Techniques and Methods in Social Work focusing on skill communication in the social work process¹. After several workshops focused on identifying messages of empathy and communication barriers, in one of the workshops students were invited to participate in achieving a role play. 68 students (65 girls and 3 boys) have gone through the role of the client and almost all by through the role of the social worker and of the observer. The observer had the task of recording in writing the messages expressed by the first two, both those on the verbal and nonverbal and the relationship of these messages. The stories of the so-called clients were started by the evocation of real accounts of the events. Students had been indirect witness by listening to the real accounts, the stories of experiences of violence (rape, attempted rape, physical abuse, emotional abuse). Since the beginning of the exercises the students were asked in these accounts to avoid disclosure of information that would permit identification of the victims, the persons known to them, and asked that any personal experiences of victimization by violence would not be disclosed in this context. The purpose of these exercises was teaching, this

¹ Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work

it means that disclosure and therapeutic work on personal traumatic experience in this context were not appropriate even if, as we have designed, these exercises may have certain therapeutic potential. Students playing the role of the clients were invited to get inside the known person and seek help from the social worker. In the following two seminars, we analyzed the responses of the social workers in terms of what the clients felt and thought while being listened to, bringing the attention of the students to the effects that different types of messages may have on different clients. In this way I encouraged the students to listen to the vocal tones, to grasp the mimics and gestures, and verbal feedbacks of the clients as responses to the open or closed questions, barriers of communication and empathic responses expressed by the social workers.

Illustration of barriers of communication that reflect social structural difficulties²:

- *How could you go to him at night, even if you were friends? You are a naive!*
- *What led him to rape you? Why did not you cry for help?*
- *Can you tell me why did your husband hit you?, Is he an alcoholic?, Is he jobless?, Did you ceased to be attractive for him so he offended you?, And you have not tried to make him give up alcohol?, Did he have reason to be jealous on you?*

Statements or closed questions, the above illustrated barriers of communication reflect the most common attitudes towards violence in society: judging, criticizing, blaming, labeling the victim, use of inappropriate questions, minimizing the traumatic experience, the justification for violence etc. Whatever a child, a woman, or another person does or says, nobody has the right to use violence to solve conflicts. These barriers of communication are themselves a form of violence known in psychotherapy and social work as emotional or psychological abuse. Arun Gandhi called passive violence this form of abuse³. Peace, says Arun Gandhi, can be created and can grow only

² Attitudes towards violence: barriers of communication that reflects myths related to violence and structural difficulties in efforts to understanding and empathic expression towards people who have suffered experiences of violence, Maria Diaconescu (2004). *Atitudini față de violență și violența structurală/ Attitudes towards violence and structural violence*. În: *România Socială, Drumul Schimbării și al Integrării Europene/ In: Social Romania: Road of Change and European Integration..* Ed. Eikon, Cluj-N, p.136-. Ed Eikon, Cluj-N, p. 136-144

³ Arun Gandhi (2004). *Nonviolence in the 21th Century. Challenges and Choices*. În: *Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 5. Accesat în 25.08.2009, la <http://them.polylog.org>.

if we interact with each other. On the other hand, he claims, various forms of physical violence can be overcome only if each of us becomes aware of passive violence within us and fights against such violence. To live free of violence, supports Arun Gandhi, is a practical necessity and this is the relevance of nonviolence in the 21st century.

Among practitioners that sexual abuse, transgress sexual boundaries in professional relationships, empathy training may have the advantage of reducing the exploitative behavior and improving professional skills⁴. Training empathy is important not only in the professional helping work as social, psychotherapeutic, medical assistance, etc.), it is equally important in life, to face interpersonal conflicts without violence in family relationships, with colleagues, friends etc. In a qualitative study conducted in Canada, 75% of men who physically abused their life partners and were motivated to participate in a program for anger management and developing free of violence conflict resolution strategies have experienced remarkable changes. Reports of interviews with their counselors and life partners reveal the following changes: developing empathy for their partners who were victimized by them in the past, increased accountability for violence committed by them in the past, reducing dependence on their partners and developing communication skills⁵.

Illustration of empathic responses made by students:

- *It was a situation so brutal, unexpected and shocking to you that made you feel defenseless and powerless. Do you not believe what has happened to you and you feel disoriented (rape)*

- *You think that your parents will blame you and you are afraid to tell them that you were raped. You feel disorientation and uncertainty because you feel you lost confidence in yourself and others. You think it was your fault that it has happened to you and you feel guilty (rape)*

- *You feel hopeless and helpless because you see yourself forced to cope with all the affairs of the house and children without any help. Besides not getting the support you*

⁴ Cheryl Regehr și Glancy Graham (2001). Empathy and its influence on sexual misconduct. În: *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, vol.2, no.2, p.142-154. Accessed in 26.04.2009, la: <http://tva.sagepub.com/cgr>

⁵ Katreena L. Scott și David A. Wolfe (2000). Change among Batterers: Examining Men's Success Stories. În: *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 15/827-842 Accessed in 26.04.2009, la: <http://jiv.sagepub.com/cgi>

need, that your husband hits you makes you feel even more burdened (physical and emotional abuse in the family)

- The fear for your life, and despair at the thought that your children might remain without mother, you have found the strength to run away from his path and the courage to run away with your children without taking into account the threats of and the cold outside (physical and emotional abuse in the family)

For the first time the child finds out otherness it is when he realizes that the pain of another's child is not his own pain; step by step he rediscovers otherness in his further evolution when he learns that even when the pain of others is *as if* it were his own pain, the pain of others is not his own pain. Emotional contagion may turn into wonder and a first glimmer of empathy only if the child stops crying when he sees another child crying. The same goes with all the other emotions: joy, sadness, insecurity, anger, uncertainty, wonder etc. Often confused with either contagion or sense of unity, with either sympathy or empathic identification, by contrast, empathy is the foundation without which the sense of unity in diversity ceases to grow and love is overshadowed by ghosts⁶. When the unity ceases to grow, the rate of oppression increase and peace is also shadowed⁷.

What are the *ontological and epistemological adventures of empathy in episteme of communication* is the question I proposed to answer in this paper. What are the meanings of the concept of *empathy* and its evolution *in different fields of knowledge and contexts of communication*? One of the fundamental issues that have concerned philosophical thinking over time and remains a concern is the perception of others and of their experiences. What philosophical grounded answers can be thought and which are the limits from which philosophy can only express wonder, deepen further questions, and explore this issue in other fields of theoretical and practical application?

The main thesis of present research sustains that we can influence others in their efforts of empathic understanding that relates to our own actions and experiences, whenever we mention the misunderstandings they inevitably do. The reverse is valid: we

⁶ Fictions, non-acceptance of otherness by imposing own views and attitudes, prejudices, etc.

⁷ Both the inner and outer, peace between people, between people and nature, between social groups, schools and professions, nations, etc.

let us be influenced in our empathic understanding efforts whenever we allow dialogue partner to notify us misunderstandings that we inevitably do. Verbalization of understanding here and now, in relation to the other which gives us the experience to which we empathize with, allows us to verify the empathic understanding we have acquired in that we allow the other to immediately correct the misunderstandings that we inevitably make. Without an immediate verification, without verbalization of understanding, any act of empathy or intuition - as an act of profound empathy - may become a fantasy, attribution, simulation or analogy.

With the verbalization of acquired understanding that proceeds interpretation and objectification of the experience which we empathize with, we uninstall from the comfortable episteme of knowledge and position us in the uncomfortable and fluid episteme of communication. Even if the interaction mediated by computer and Internet adds a comfort in communication, it risks a loss in self-knowledge and knowledge of the otherness. *Decreased non-verbal signals in computer and Internet mediated interaction reduces the accuracy of empathic understanding that does not prevent adolescents continue to disclose themselves and develop sympathy online* is one of the hypotheses generated by qualitative research, one of the conclusions and a secondary thesis of the present research that clarify also the difference between empathy and sympathy.

Throughout the entire work I assert that empathic understanding and its communication, i.e. verbalization of this understanding, is one of the most effective and sustainable epistemic tools in order to overcome interpersonal and intercultural conflicts. Furthermore, transforming conflict into opportunities for innovation and development is unimaginable without this kind of understanding and its verbalization. Equally important is the early development of empathy for the prevention of emotional violence that occurs both in face to face and online interaction. And not least, it may be one way to avoid the trap or seduction of gossip, to nurture genuine relationships between people.

Empathy is an interdisciplinary issue, so I resorted to an interdisciplinary approach, even trans-disciplinary. Theories and methods are invited to interact on the positions that I have not put them hierarchically or joined by juxtaposition; they are placed face to face as in a dialogue. In the theoretical part of the present research, which is found in every chapter, I resorted to hermeneutics and comparative analysis of textual

discourses of philosophy, especially phenomenology, ontology and philosophy of dialogue relations, social anthropology, social work and psychotherapy. I have brought into question, described and put into dialogue, in mutual relationship, the necessary and sufficient conditions of the acts of empathy, social barriers and epistemological errors occurring in the condition of empathic understanding and verbalization of empathic understanding in different contexts communication. In the last chapter, I also resorted to qualitative research methods of social sciences (individual interview and focus group), and methods of analysis that are inspired from phenomenology, particularly methods of work that are applied in existential psychotherapy and social work that are centered on person. Step by step, I brought into question and analyzed condition of empathy in several contexts of communication: intercultural relations and gender (Chapter 1 and 2), the helping relationship in Hasidism (Chapter 4), helping relationship in psychotherapy and social work that are centered on the person (Chapter 3 and 4) and finally Internet-mediated interaction among adolescents (Chapter 5).

Chapter 1: Actual Challenge of Interpersonal Relations: Unity in Diversity focuses on differences that are linguistically, conceptually and ideologically constructed, and undermine empathic understanding and unity in diversity in intercultural and gender relationships. Here are discussed the phenomena of attribution, categorization and labeling in defining own identity and identity of others throughout history; perceptions, stereotypes, cultural and gendered based prejudices that turn unity in uniformity. In these conditions the beauty of the differences between people is crippled; differences turn into oppressive or one-sided conflict resolution strategies between people. Ethnonyms that are present in all languages, folklore materials, and popular art as proverbs, jokes and sayings reflect and demonstrate the full process of fragmentation and alteration of otherness, the dehumanization of the differences between people that start at the linguistic level of interaction and everyday speech. Here are two of the conditions of dialogue and inter human differentiations that are discussed: authenticity and social justice, focusing more on the latter condition. Authenticity nurtures trust between people, constitutes the foundation for empathic understanding, credits the human potentialities and the high nature of the becoming person, facilitates acceptance of otherness and appreciation of inter human diversity. Social justice has the potential to protect dialogue and inter human

becoming from the errors of understanding that are inevitably introduced into the everyday interactions whenever pride, struggle for power and supremacy, indifference or alienation slips in dialogue between people, groups and communities. This protection of dialogue is not guaranteed. Currently, social justice is problematic; consequently both empathic understanding and intercultural dialogue are problematic.

Chapter 2: Empathy and Interpersonal Communication, bring into discussion meta communication as it is described in the pragmatics of human communication, links acceptance of meta communication with verbalization of empathic understanding, rejection of meta communication with barriers of communication. Meta communication "so I see myself in relationship with you in this situation," expressed either verbal or most commonly nonverbal, appears for clarification, defining or redefining the relationship with otherness and therefore of own identity. Ability to meta communicate is somewhat similar to assertiveness that is so important in social work and psychotherapy. Assertiveness refers to the ability to name and express honestly feelings and meanings of experiences in relation with partner of dialogue without any trace of violence or seduction. Ability to communicate about communication develops when empathic understanding and verbalization of this understanding is present in the relationships. Therefore, verbalization of empathic understanding helps to promote a higher form of consciousness of self and others. Empathic attitude is illustrated and discussed; the rejection of otherness is clarified. I found that confirmation and acceptance of otherness in the philosophy of dialogue is the philosophical foundation for the honest acceptance of the person. Finally, I analyzed the relationship between the messages of non-acceptance of otherness, the barriers of communication and emotional violence, the escalating barriers, amplification of discrepancies in punctuation sequences of interaction and worsening conflicts between individuals, groups and different communities. Vicious circles of communication can be broken only if communication itself becomes the subject of communication, partners of dialogue defocus from their own and develop the ability to communicate about their own communication.

Chapter 3: The Concept of Empathy in Philosophy and Psychotherapy, explores the meanings of "empathy", its evolution in different fields of knowledge and contexts of communication, even though some of its meanings are revealed in terms other than the

well-known. The most pregnant interpretations that circle around the concept of empathy, toward which the hermeneutical approach in the present research closely relates, have grown from psychotherapy of Carl Rogers. The purpose of empathy in psychotherapy of Carl Rogers is inner unity, authenticity of human being, congruence between analogue and digital messages, between actual experience and self perception. Congruence, acceptance and empathy are explained and illustrated, and the relationship between these conditions is considered in the context of psychotherapeutic relationship. Here I analyze the differences and relations among empathy, sympathy, projection and identification in Greek philosophy, phenomenology and neuro linguistic programming (NLP). Projection of the own needs and feelings on the others, to put yourselves in the others skin to see how you feel you there, undermines the efforts for empathic understanding. The significance of the projection in psychotherapy is found also in the phenomenology of empathy worked out by Edith Stein; it is the same only in other words: surrogate, attribution by association of ideas, and analogy. Not incidentally the verbalization of understanding is so important in psychotherapy of Carl Rogers. The verbalization allows the other to notify us immediately the misunderstandings we inevitably make. The contrast involved in *I feel what you feel as if I were you* is the key to understand the concept of empathy both in phenomenology and psychotherapy of Carl Rogers. Unfortunately, this contrast and phenomenon of projection has passed almost unnoticed and poorly clarified both in programming NLP and contemporary researches in psychology and philosophy.

Chapter 4: Ethical Dilemmas and Ontology of Helping Relationship, examines the necessary and sufficient conditions to induce change in terms of qualities, characteristics of the helping relationship, skills, attitudes or interview skills in social work that is centered on person. Here is discussed the directive approach versus nondirective approach as expression of dilemma *autonomy* versus *social conformism* in social work, counseling and psychotherapy, also circularity vs. linearity and neutrality vs. involvement as expressions of dilemma *change* vs. *social control* in terms of systemic therapy. Overcoming transference reactions in social work through *here and now* empathic verbalization delimits social work approaches inspired from psychotherapy of Carl Rogers that are focused mainly on present from those approaches inspired from the

psychoanalysis that are focused mainly on the past. This chapter ends with the ontology of helping relationship and makes a parallel between the conditions of helping relationship in Hasidism as they are described by Martin Buber, in the philosophy of dialogue worked out by Buber and psychotherapy of Rogers. Before putting in relation the concepts of Rogers' psychotherapy with those of Buber' philosophy of dialogue I sought to find out in advance *what* in the helping relationship in Hasidism had served as inspiration for the philosophy of dialogue, *what* which distinguishes it from other trends in existentialism. I examined the conditions of helping relationship in Hasidism which reminds the *quality of presence* in psychotherapy, social work and philosophy of dialogue. Finally, I showed that the ontology of helping relationship is a contradiction in terms because reciprocity, which allow dialogue to become an ontological event, is limited in any helping relationship and it is absent from any professional helping relationship. The much debated crisis *between* people is authenticity; without authenticity the acceptance of otherness and inner and inter human growth are blocked. Not incidentally, the goal in existential counseling and psychotherapy is authenticity, developing the capacity to be present, open and deep yourself and in non exploitative relations with others. The crisis *between* affects also the helping relationship: dilemma change vs. control is a vivid expression of this *inter human crisis* that is also present in professional helping relationships.

Chapter 5: The Computer and Internet Mediated Interaction focuses on the desinhibition effects generated by the absence of face to face contact and by the anonymity in textual communication on the Internet (e-mail, instant messaging, etc.), and the amplification of the phenomenon of projection and therefore of misunderstandings and interpersonal conflicts. Computer and Internet-mediated interaction facilitates face to face interaction, not replace it. If it goes to replace the face to face interaction, as in some forms of psychotherapy that takes place exclusively on the Internet, the authenticity and interpersonal growth are undermined. Without human presence, dialogue as ontological event disappears. The likelihood of misunderstandings in textual communication is much greater than in face to face as shows the interview data presented in the present research. In textual interaction, dispelling misunderstandings requires many more steps for clarification than in face to face interaction. The study on *Disclosure and Protection in*

interactions on Internet among teenagers generates two hypotheses that are discussed and illustrated with the responses of adolescents: 1. decreased non-verbal signals that allow corporal disengagement online, limits the accuracy of online empathic understanding that does not prevent adolescents continuing to disclose and develop sympathy online. Testing this hypothesis by statistical means could clarify the limits of empathy online and could dispel the confusion between sympathy, empathy and projection. 2. Controllability via instant messenger has the potential to facilitate development of assertiveness and confidence online and offline (online controllability does not only increase the risk of attacks, gossip, passive or dissimulation that are present in the face to face everyday life), hypothesis, also proposed to be tested in future studies, with statistical means. Both resulting hypotheses calls for a kind of research that will be preceded by action and suggests the development of programs designated to prevent victimization and violence online and offline through exercise and development of assertiveness and empathy, the ability to communicate about communication; this development can be assisted by video and audio means, online and offline, both among children, adolescents, parents and teachers.

The paradox of Internet is that the absence of face to face contact that put in brackets the physical appearance acts as a kind of shelter, like a shield of protection against harshness of face to face interactions. The absence of face to face contact on Internet reveals aspects which are ignored and invisible in face to face interaction and dialogue. After more than two thousand years, we can re-think self-knowledge as a discovery of potentialities, as a "reminder" of hidden, of infinite pearls of wisdom that are latent in each of us, relationship and dialogue partners. Empathy, as maieutica, looks after and takes care to support the efforts for searching and intuitive knowledge of the potentialities that are hidden in every human experience, no matter how profane it would be. Otherness is not only rediscovered, on internet it is connected to the temporal and sonority presence of the otherness, to the secondary oral condition of dialogue.

Meanwhile children and adolescents of our time learn to take care of each other using the means of written, textual culture at hand for them: computer, internet etc. It is much easier to express in writing what they feel and think, as some young people report in interviews. On the Internet they interact with more courage and confidence than face to

face. This ease of expression in writing and greater confidence in their networking resources on the Internet allows them to move out from isolation or to counteract any tendency of isolation, exclusion or loneliness due to timidity visible in dealing face to face. The absence of face to face contact, this advantage of Internet mediated interaction that generates des-inhibition and intimacy can be also a disadvantage: *if the meetings on mess are not accompanied by meeting face to face there is a risk of isolation*, tells an adolescent; *the risk to be hurt, of prolonging an insult or a joke until it irritates because you can not see and hear the immediate reaction of the other*, reports another adolescent. Indeed, the absence of immediate response "in the flesh", due to the corporal disengagement online, does not allow us to verify our empathic understanding, therefore fictions, stereotypes and prejudices can multiply and increase unabated.

In each chapter I have sought to identify the paradigmatic assumptions of order 3, significant prerequisites for human existence, i.e. the ontological philosophical assumptions that are problematic respectively the philosophical assumptions that facilitate dialogue as ontological event, empathic understanding of otherness and self-knowledge. Existential and humanistic theories and practices rooted in phenomenology and oriental philosophies credit the human being as becoming being, have confidence in the potentialities of its development, facilitate empathy understanding and interpersonal communication. On the other hand, philosophies and contemporary practices, "skilled in the suspicion and projection", perpetuate epistemological errors identified and described in the phenomenology of empathy, psychotherapy and social work centered on person. Epistemological errors based on attribution, simulation and analogy erode interpersonal understanding, intercultural dialogue and confidence in the high nature of human (in whatever form it is expressed and identified).

The described and illustrated errors, which are based on the phenomenon of projection, shatter human quality of presence and dialogue as ontological event. However, the image of human being as a person, conscious and autonomous subject, does not dissolve; it evolves after a well-known saying: nothing is lost, everything changes. This development, intimately related to developments of inter-human, as we have already seen in Chapter 3 and 5, is not exempt from fiction and mock, situation in which the dialogue as ontological event and human growth are also eclipsed. Dialogue, as I argued

above in Chapter 1 and 2, is not exempt from stereotypes, prejudices and barriers of communication.

About a century ago phenomenology anticipated the contemporary developments in which we find more and more pregnant discrepancy between ontological and epistemological, between epistemological and interpersonal communication. These discrepancies reflect the yet undisclosed potential for congruency between our experiences as we live and what we think about them. Congruency is named in existentialism as *authenticity*, the primordial condition of our actions that constitutes us as people. It remains to be explored in future research to what extent the concept of authenticity in existentialism overlaps with the primordially in the phenomenology of empathy. One thing is certain; man is ontologically constituted through acts of care, i.e. we are constituted as persons by spiritual acts.

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