

## Empathy and Viewing the Other as a Subject

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### Author Note

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### Abstract

Empathy and viewing another person as a subject rather than an object are often associated in theoretical contexts, but empirical research of the relation is scarce. The purpose of the present research was to investigate the relationship between subject view and empathy. In Study 1, participants watched film clips and indicated their empathy for specific characters in the clips, as well as the extent to which they saw these persons as subjects and objects. The subject/object view explained some, but not all, of the differences in empathy, which raised the question of what else accounts for differences in empathy. A second study was conducted to investigate whether the difficulty of the other's situation also contributes. In Study 2, another group watched the film clips and rated the difficulty of the film character's situations in addition to empathy and subject view. The results of Study 2 revealed that subject view and perceived difficulty together explain a substantial part of differences in empathy. It was concluded that empathy is evoked primarily when a person in difficulty is viewed as a subject.

Human beings are capable of viewing others as human beings with lives that truly matter (Batson, 1991), and of seeing others as objects to be used for their own gratification (Hare, 1999). A related capacity that humans also have is to enter into another individual's thoughts and feelings, empathy (Davis, 1996; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987, Hoffman, 1987). Empathy and viewing another as a subject have been associated in theoretical contexts, but empirical research on their relationship is lacking. Based on the belief that subject view and empathy have much in common, particularly the acknowledgment of the other's first-person perspective, a perception of similarity with the other and concern for that person, the present research aimed at investigating the connection between the two phenomena.

Most definitions of empathy, as pointed out by Bohart and Greenberg (1997), include the idea of "trying to sense, perceive, share, or conceptualize how another person is experiencing the world" (p. 419). For instance, Kohut (1984) saw empathy as the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person, and Hoffman (1987) conceptualized empathy as "an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own" (p. 48). Further, in our own research (Håkansson & Montgomery, in press) we have found that the experience of empathy involves a focus on the target's perspective: the empathizer understands the target's situation and emotions, the target experiences emotion, the empathizer perceives a similarity with his or her own prior experience, and the empathizer is concerned for the target's well-being. This is also how empathy is conceptualized in the present research.

In contrast with the relatively large body of research on empathy, there is considerably less empirical research on how we view others as subjects and objects. However, several philosophers have described these different views of another person (e.g., Sartre, 1943/1976; Stein, 1917/1989). For instance, Sartre (1943/1976) distinguished between seeing the other as an object and as a subject. According to Sartre, the other as object is someone that I can perceive, and the other as subject is someone who can perceive me. Sartre further argued that another human being is a being for whom I can also appear as an object.

In the present research, subject/object view is thought of as a matter of degrees where people vary along a continuum from inside to outside perspectives of other individuals. In the present account, it is also assumed that the inside perspective is necessarily connected to a positive evaluation of the other (cf. Montgomery, 1994). According to Rogers (1975), "it is impossible accurately to sense the perceptual world of another person unless you value that person and his world – unless you in some sense

care" (p. 7). Thus, indicators of a person having a subject view of another individual in a certain situation may be that the other would have perceived and described his or her situation in a similar manner, but also that the person sees the other more positively and is less judging than someone having an object view. Prior research has shown the existence of a pervasive tendency to see the self as better than others (for reviews, see Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). For instance, Lewinsohn, Mischel, Chaplin, & Barton (1980) had participants rate themselves along a number of personality dimensions, and had observers rate the participants on the same dimensions. The results showed that self-ratings were significantly more positive than observers' ratings. Alicke (1985) also showed that normal participants judged positive traits to be remarkably more characteristic of self than were negative attributes, and Kuiper and Derry (1982) demonstrated that positive personality information is for most individuals efficiently processed and recalled, while negative personality information is poorly processed and accessed. Additionally, people give themselves more credit for success and less blame for failure than they ascribe to others (Forsyth & Schlenker, 1977; Schlenker & Miller, 1977). Consistent with these tendencies, there is also considerable evidence that when identifying with another, the other will be seen in a positive manner (for a review, see Montgomery, 1994).

The conceptualization of subject view in the present paper is inspired by the above reviewed literature as well as by Rogers' (1957) idea of a therapist identifying with and having warmth, respect, and unconditional positive regard toward the client. In Rogers' belief, no matter how socially disapproved of a client is, he or she can still be accepted as a worthy human being by the therapist. Similarly, in the present two studies, subject view was defined as a view by which one takes up the other's first-person perspective, is focused on the other's experiences rather than traits, and is positive and non-judgmental toward the other's experiences (not necessarily toward the other's traits or behavior).

As conceptualized in the above literature, empathy and viewing another as a subject appear to have at least three features in common. First, both seem to involve the acknowledgment of the other person's first-person perspective, which is an essential irreducible characteristic of any conscious state (Chalmers, 1998; Nagel, 1974). As Nagel (1974) put it, for any conscious organism it is something it is like to be that organism. To understand what it is like to be another person from his or her perspective, it does not help to *infer* the other's thoughts and feelings (cf. Goldman, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Gordon, 1992, 1995, 2000; Jackson, 1986; Nagel, 1974; Ravenscroft 1998). Inferring can at best only provide

knowledge of the other from an outside perspective. What is required instead is to take up the other's perspective and simulate his or her thoughts and feelings (cf. Goldman, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Gordon, 1992, 1995, 2000; Ravenscroft 1998). To acknowledge another's first-person perspective may be central to empathy as well as to viewing the other as a subject.

Second, it seems that we feel a sense of similarity and identity with the other when empathizing as well as when viewing the other as a subject. Viewing another as a subject is to perceive the other as a human being, fundamentally similar to oneself. In effect, we are reacting to the thought of ourselves in that situation. Likewise, our earlier study (Håkansson & Montgomery, in press) showed that the experience of empathy includes the empathizer's perception of a similarity between what the target is experiencing and something the empathizer has experienced previously. The earlier study also showed that the perception of similarity can occur at different levels of generality. Thus, in order to understand another person, people need not have experienced precisely the same thing as the other individual has. The other's experience may be abstracted to a level at which it resembles something the empathizer has experienced in the past and can thereby be understood (Håkansson & Montgomery, in press). Thus, perceived similarity at the most fundamental level may be, in empathy as well as in subject view, to see the other as a sentient being like oneself.

Third, empathy and subject view also seem to have in common the involvement of at least some degree of caring for others' welfare. According to Nagel (1978), altruism itself depends on the recognition of the reality of other people. People typically viewing others as objects as well as lacking empathy are psychopaths that use other people for their own purposes (Hare, 1999). Likewise, empirical research has shown that empathy is related to concern for other people (Batson, 1991, 1997b; Hoffman, 1987; Håkansson & Montgomery, in press, 2002; Krebs, 1975). For instance, in a far-reaching research program Batson and colleagues (e.g., Batson, 1991; Batson, et al., 1997) have found empirical evidence for empathy leading to altruistic motivation. Further, in an investigation of how people experience empathy situations, Håkansson and Montgomery (in press) found that empathy from the empathizer's as well as from the target's perspectives involves concern for the target's well being, and in three experiments Håkansson & Montgomery (2002) showed that concern expressed through actions is important for empathy.

At the same time as empathy and subject view have certain features in common, they may also differ in important respects. First, while empathy is typically affective by nature (cf. Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987;

Hoffman, 1987), subject/object view as conceptualized in the literature (i.e., Sartre 1943/1976; Stein, 1917/1989) seems to be relatively independent of emotional responses. Second, empathy typically concerns a specific situation that the target is experiencing (cf. Håkansson & Montgomery, in press), whereas subject view transcends particular situations. Third, in contrast to subject view, which often will possibly be reciprocal, empathy is usually asymmetric in the sense that focus is on the target rather than the empathizer (Håkansson & Montgomery, in press).

Although philosophers have discussed how we view others as subjects and objects, empirical research on subject view and the connection between subject view and empathy is scarce. Therefore, in the present paper, subject view is operationalized and measured, and the relationship to empathy empirically investigated.

### Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to investigate the relationship between subject view and empathy by letting participants answer questions about four specific persons in two different film clips. It was hypothesized that differences in subject view would explain differences in empathy to a considerable extent. The effect an instruction to take a certain person's perspective would have on empathy and on subject view was also tested. Because empathy has been successfully induced in earlier research (Batson, Early & Salvarani, 1997a; Batson et al. 1997b; Stotland, 1969, see also Davis, 1996), the expectation was that such instructions would make people consider other individuals more as subjects and thus increase empathy.

#### *Method*

Participants watched film clips and, afterward, freely described how they perceived certain characters in the clips. These descriptions were then rated by psychologists at Stockholm University with respect to degree of subject/object view of the film characters. Participants' self-rated empathy with the film characters was also measured. While empathy in previous research has been reliably measured through self-ratings (e.g., Batson et al. 1996; Batson, Early, & Salvaroni, 1997a), it was reasoned that direct ratings of this concept, or factors related to it, would be biased by motivational factors, such as the social desirability of viewing people as subjects. Instead, an indirect procedure was used where independent judges rated components of subject/object view in free descriptions of the film characters given by the participants.

*Participants.* Participants were 81 high school students in Visby, Sweden. They were 29 men and 52 women aged 16-20 ( $M = 17.93$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). High school students were included because the classroom setting was assumed to be appropriate for showing videotapes and suitable for allowing participants to answer questions in a standardized manner. Further, the high school students were assumed to be old enough, in contrast with younger children, to understand and carry out the task. In exchange for their participation, the participants were given the opportunity to attend a lecture about empathy. They were guaranteed anonymity and their answers were individually unidentifiable. Later, when the study was completed, participants received a summary of the group level results.

*Design and procedure.* Two film clips were shown to seven classes of high school students. Each participant was seated at a desk in front of a television and a VCR. The researcher explained that the aim of the experiment was to study empathy and included viewing two short film clips and answering some questions about the clips. The experimenter asked if the participants had any questions about the study, then started the videotape. After each film clip, the experimenter turned off the video and TV equipment and the participants filled out the questionnaire, which consisted of an open-ended question and some closed-ended questions concerning each of the two film characters. The purpose of the open-ended question was to obtain free descriptions of the film characters. These descriptions were later rated by the researcher and two additional coders.

For the first film clip, no participants received instructions to take any particular film character's perspective. In contrast, for the second film clip, perspective-taking instructions were randomly given to some of the classes (57 participants) before watching film clip 2. They were to imagine that they were either the woman or the man in the film while watching the clip. Some of the classes received no imagine-instruction.

*Stimulus film clips.* From a collection of film stimuli, one excerpt from a Swedish film and one excerpt from a Swedish TV series were selected (in Swedish, so that the participants could understand the language perfectly). These two excerpts were chosen on the basis of language, length, intelligibility, and content of the scenes. The idea was to include one film clip whose episode was relatively ambiguous and one whose was not, in case this may have an impact on the results. The two films were *Skärgårdsdoktorn (The Archipelago Doctor)* (Marnell, Petri, & Petrelius, 2000) and *Den Goda Viljan (Best Intentions)* (Dahlberg & August, 1992). Participants watched an approximately 1-minute clip of *Skärgårdsdoktorn* and an approximately 5-minute clip of *Best Intentions*. Because the clip from *Skärgårdsdoktorn* was very short, participants watched it twice.

*The Archipelago Doctor* is a Swedish TV series set on an island in the Stockholm archipelago. In the film clip, there are four characters: the girl Wilma (about 13 years old), her mother, father, and grandfather (about 75 years old). Although there were four characters in the film excerpt, the participants were asked questions about only Wilma and her grandfather. In this scene, Wilma, her mother, and her father are in their kitchen when Wilma's grandfather enters the room bringing with him an old nightshirt, which they have used in the past. He now wishes either his daughter or Wilma to use it again. He seems disappointed when no one is interested in the old nightshirt. The questions in the questionnaire address how the participants perceive Wilma and her grandfather during this scene, respectively, and how much empathy they have for each. This film clip was selected for its relative obviousness that someone was experiencing a negative affect (disappointment), since negative affect is typically what the target of empathy is experiencing (Håkansson & Montgomery, in press).

*Best Intentions* is Ingmar Bergman's story about his own parents. In this film clip, there are only two characters: Henrik is a young, poor, and idealistic priest student who meets Anna, a unconventional young woman. They fall in love, and when this scene takes place, they are having a quarrel about their approaching wedding. The questionnaire concerns how the participants perceive these two persons during this dispute and how much empathy the participants have for them. This film clip was chosen for its relative ambiguousness about who "was right" in the quarrel. In a pre-study, the film clip was shown to a group of graduate students and approximately half sympathized with the woman and half with the man.

*Independent variables.* For the first film clip, *The Archipelago Doctor*, no participants received instructions to take any specific film character's perspective, but were instead told only to watch the film clip carefully. In contrast, for the second film clip, from *Best Intentions*, where according to the pilot study it was unclear as to who was in the most difficult situation, it was tested whether perspective-taking instructions would increase empathy and subject view for either Anna or Henrik, or both. Thus, perspective-taking instructions were assigned randomly to some of the classes before they watched film clip 2. They were to imagine that they were either Anna (10 men and 17 women) or Henrik (8 men and 22 women) while watching the film clip. Some of the classes received no imagine-instruction (11 men and 13 women).

The imagine-instruction for Anna was formulated "Enter into the woman's experience while watching. Really try to see what happens through her eyes. It is important that you constantly imagine that you are the woman while watching the film clip", and for Henrik, "Enter into the

man's experience while watching. Really try to see what happens through his eyes. It is important that you constantly imagine that you are the man while watching the film clip".

*Dependent measures.* For the purpose of measuring how the participants viewed the film characters, after having watched a film clip participants answered the open-ended question *How did you perceive the person in the film clip?* about each of the film characters they were going to describe. These free descriptions of the film characters were later coded by the researcher and two additional raters.

After having completed the closed-ended questions, participants proceeded to the empathy questions, which were intended to measure participants' self-rated empathy with each of the two characters in each film clip. The questions were, in translation from the Swedish, *Can you understand the person's situation? (Not at all – Extremely well)*, *Can you understand the person's feelings? (Not at all – Extremely well)*, *Can you see a similarity between what the person is experiencing and something you have previously experienced yourself? (Not at all – Extremely well)*, *How important would it be for you to do something for the person if you could? (Not at all – Extremely important)*, and *How much compassion did you feel for the person in the film clip? (Not at all - Very much)*. They were rated along a 7-point scale with anchors at (1) and (7). To complete the questionnaire for one film clip generally took approximately 10 minutes.

Finally, in order to investigate how the perspective-taking task was perceived, those who were instructed to take Anna's or Henrik's perspectives answered the additional question *How was it to enter into the woman's experience while watching?* or *How was it to enter into the man's experience while watching?*, respectively. They answered this question along a 7-point scale with anchors at *Very easy* (1) and *Very difficult* (7).

*Scoring of the open-ended question.* Before rating, the handwritten descriptions of the film characters were typed to prevent any potential effects of the participants' handwriting and to further guarantee the participants' anonymity. Five dimensions that were intended to reflect the construct "subject view" were defined by the author. The five dimensions were (1) *the film character could have said this about him or herself*, (2) *the participant has a positive view of the film character*, (3) *the participant does not judge the film character*, (4) *the participant talks about the film character's states*, and (5) *the participant does not talk about the film character's traits or social background*. The raters' task was to read the participants' descriptions of the film characters and determine how well each of the five dimensions reflected each of the descriptions along a 7-point scale with anchors at *Not at all* (1) and *Extremely well* (7).

The author rated all the descriptions on the five dimensions. The two other raters each rated half of the descriptions on the five dimensions. The results were then computed by averaging the author's and the others' ratings.

For the purpose of estimating the inter-rater reliability, stability of assessments across raters was computed for the five dimensions. The correlation between raters ranged from .61 to .80, with a mean of .72.

### Results

*Empathy measure.* Participants' empathy was measured through self-ratings on five items. For each participant, a score was computed for the four film characters taken together for each of the five items. However, although the estimate of internal consistency (alpha) was .75, which seems to be a satisfactory level, these five items did not reflect empathy in a consistent way. More specifically, the only items that correlated significantly with each other for all four film characters were *understanding situation* with *understanding feelings* (Wilma  $r = .59, p < .001$ , the grandfather  $r = .56, p < .001$ , Anna  $r = .65, p < .001$ , Henrik  $.62, p < .001$ ) and *feelings of concern* with *feelings of compassion* (Wilma  $r = .40, p < .001$ , the grandfather  $r = .58, p < .001$ , Anna  $r = .58, p < .001$ , Henrik  $.68, p < .001$ ). In order to obtain a more consistent measure than that provided by all five items, it was decided to keep only one of these pairs of items as a measure of empathy. Because empathy in earlier research has been measured reliably through self-ratings of empathic feelings such as compassion, sympathy and the like (e.g., Batson et al. 1996; Batson, Early, & Salvaroni, 1997a), it seemed reasonable to keep the two items *feelings of concern* and *feelings of compassion* as a measure of empathy. In contrast, it did not seem that the items *understanding situation* and *understanding feelings* were appropriately formulated for self-ratings of empathy. The intended meaning of "understanding" was experiential/emotional understanding, and was expected to be close to feelings of concern and compassion. However, because of the low correlations between *understanding of situation/understanding of feelings* and *feelings of concern/feelings of compassion*, it is likely that the participants regarded "understanding" as intellectual instead of experiential/emotional. Thus, based on the correlations among the five items together with these theoretical considerations, it was decided to keep only the two items *feelings of concern* and *feelings of compassion* as a measure of empathy.

The mean of these two empathy items was for all participants 4.33 ( $SD = .90$ ), for men 4.08 ( $SD = 1.00$ ) and for women 4.47 ( $SD = .81$ ). A 2 (gender) X 3 (year in high school) ANOVA revealed that women scored

significantly higher than men in empathy,  $F(1, 75) = 4.85, p < .05$ . In contrast, there was no reliable main effect of year in high school,  $F(2, 75) = 2.53, ns$ , and no significant interaction effect of gender and year in high school,  $F(2, 75) = .72, ns$ .

*Subject/Object View Measure.* The participants' views of the film characters (subject/object view) were measured by letting participants freely describe the film characters, and thereafter having raters score these descriptions on five dimensions from 1-7 (reflecting a continuum from subject to object view). A score was computed for each of the participants on each of the five subject view dimensions. Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for the subject view dimensions. Estimate of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was .88 for all five subject view dimensions. However, when only keeping the three dimensions *The film character could have said this about him or herself*, *The participant has a positive view of the film character*, and *The participant does not judge the film character*, Chronbach's alpha was .93. Based on the alpha values, it was decided to keep only these three dimensions as a measure of subject view.

Typical subject views and object views are illustrated below by quoting some of the participants' free descriptions of the characters in the film clips. Each quote reflects the participant's entire description of that film character.

*Examples of subject view.* The examples of subject view are chosen for the relatively high scores on the dimensions *The film character could have said this about him or herself* and *The participant has a positive view of the film character*, and a low score on the dimension *The participant judges the film character*. For example, one female student described how she perceived the grandfather in *Skärgårdsdoktorn*:

He wants to keep his memories from the past. He just has good intentions when he offers them the shirt. Of course he is disappointed when they do not care about him.

Another female student said the following about the woman in *Best Intentions*:

She is hoping for a big wedding. Like many women do from their childhood. She wishes to experience her dream and wants nothing to go wrong.

One male student expressed his perception of the girl in *Skärgårdsdoktorn*:

She makes an effort not to hurt the elderly man's feelings. On the other hand, she doesn't want to be on his side because of fear of coming in conflict with her mother. Tries to stay out of the conflict.

*Examples of object view.* Examples of object view, characterized by low scores on the dimensions *The film character could have said this about him or herself* and *The participant has a positive view of the film character*, and a high score on the dimension *The participant judges the film character*, are illustrated below by quotes from the participants. For instance, one participant told how he perceived the woman in *Best Intentions*:

Very determined and narrow-minded, cannot see possibilities, a little conservative perhaps...comes from a well-off home, with traditions and fixed outlines. Like the man in the film clip, she has difficulties paying attention to others' viewpoints. Introverted and self-confident.

Another participant expressed his view of the man in *Best Intentions*:

Although more of a lower class, he is still certain of the man's right to decide in a relationship. Has difficulties considering others' opinions and wishes.

One male student described how he perceived the grandfather in *Skärgårdsdoktorn*:

Irresolute, conservative, confused, somewhat weak.

The mean of the three subject/object view dimensions (*judgmental reversed*) was for all participants 4.04 ( $SD = .92$ ), for men 3.76 ( $SD = .91$ ) and for women 4.20 ( $SD = .89$ ). A 2 (gender) X 3 (year in high school) ANOVA revealed that women were significantly higher in subject view than were men,  $F(1, 75) = 4.40, p < .05$ . However, there was no reliable main effect of year in high school,  $F(2, 75) = 1.75, ns$ . and no significant interaction effect of gender and year in high school,  $F(2, 75) = .011, ns$ .

*Effects of perspective taking instructions.* For the film clip from *Best Intentions*, perspective-taking instructions were given to some of the