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Empathy through Listening

ABSTRACT: *We often seek empathy from others by asking them to* listen *to our stories. But what exactly is the role of listening in* empathy*? One might think that it is merely a means for the empathizer to gather rich information about the empathized. We shall rather argue that listening is an embodied action, one that plays a significant role in empathic perspective-taking. We make our case via a descriptive analysis of a paradigm case of empathy mediated by listening or what we can call* empathy through listening. *On our view, empathy through listening involves three distinctive features: (1) dynamic unfolding, (2) collaboration, and (3) mutual perspective reshaping. Listening contributes to this process by initiating and sustaining a feedback loop of receptivity that occurs between empathizing and empathized agents.*

KEYWORDS: empathy, listening, collaboration, mutual perspective reshaping, bidirectional receptivity

Introduction

Empathy can be a significant need in our social lives. There are moments when we desperately need it from others. And, there are moments when a lack of empathy can cause damage to our well-being. A lack of empathy for our suffering from others can exacerbate that suffering, making us feel isolated or even abandoned. As the philosopher of illness Havi Carel notes, '[t]here are many terrible things about illness; the lack of empathy hurts the most' (2013: 45). This is, though, not unique to the context of illness. Other predicaments—such as bullying, harassment, exploitation, or abuse—can prompt an acute need for empathy. The victim's suffering can be amplified if this need is not met (Halpern and Weinstein 2004).

Empathy is often practiced in response to another person's need for it. But what exactly is involved in such a response? How do we accomplish it in practice? Here, we shall argue that this form of empathy requires an active exercise of *receptivity*, which is paradigmatically displayed in the act of listening.

In Section 1, we set the stage for our discussion by explicating the notion of *empathic perspective-taking*. We distinguish between two general approaches to this phenomenon: simulationism and interactionism. We then proceed to develop our account by focusing on another important form of empathy, one that arises in response to someone's need for empathy and is typically mediated by listening. We call this *empathy through listening*. In Section 2, we suggest that empathy through listening involves three distinct features: (1) dynamic unfolding, (2) collaboration, and (3) mutual perspective reshaping. In Section 3, we engage in an analysis of this process. Specifically, we argue that it displays a distinct dynamic, one that we call the

reciprocal circulation of receptivity. In Section 4, we contend that this enables a mutual reshaping of the perspectives of both the empathizing and the empathized agent. In Section 5, we sketch how the act of listening can help meet another's need for empathy.

1. Empathy

'Empathy' refers to several different, but closely related, phenomena discussed in various philosophical domains, including philosophy of mind, ethics, and aesthetics. It is also a topic of investigation in adjacent disciplines such as psychology and cognitive neuroscience (Coplan and Goldie 2011; Goldman 2006; Lanzoni 2018; Maibom 2020). Roughly speaking, we consider empathy to be the activity of *sharing in other people's experiences and perspectives on the world*. We shall clarify what exactly this means, but the basic idea can be conveyed by way of an example.

Suppose you learn that your friend Monica had a baby some months ago. Her partner has not been very helpful, making her the primary caregiver, and your friend reports that Monica seems tired. You can respond in several ways.

First, you might infer from what you heard that Monica is likely to be stressed, frustrated, or even depressed. In this case, you are approaching the situation as a detached bystander. You are understanding Monica's state of mind without being personally involved in any significant sense. Many call this form of interpersonal understanding 'cognitive empathy', but it is not what we mean by empathy.

Second, you might feel sorry for Monica because you recognize her frustration but do so without attending to how she understands the situation. In this case, you are more involved than in the first case because you are emotionally responsive and concerned with her state of mind. However, you are not trying to see the world from her perspective. For our purposes, this also does not count as empathy.

Third, you might feel Monica's distress by sharing in her way of experiencing the world. You might become deeply involved by seeing the situation just as she does—as distressing, frustrating, and depressing. Here, your response is not just a reaction to Monica's frustration. You are not simply responding to her current mental state but seeking a deeper understanding of what it is like to be in her situation. Your response is mediated by your understanding of *why* she is frustrated. This third response exemplifies the empathy we are concerned with in this article.

Instances like the last two are often described as *sympathy* and *empathy* in the literature. According to Lori Gruen, for example, 'sympathy for another is felt from the outside, the third-person perspective. I can feel sympathy for another's plight, even pity, but remain rather removed from that plight' (2015: 44). In contrast, 'the goal [of empathy] is to take in as much about another's situation and perspectives as possible' (2015: 45). Susan Lanzoni likewise states that 'sympathy is usually defined as a distanced feeling of pity for another, whereas empathy is a deeper-going ability to engage with a variety of feelings and to inhabit, sometimes even bodily, the other's perspective' (2018: 5–6). Following these authors, we take empathy to be the act of sharing another's experience and perspective in an *engaged* manner. This *empathic perspective-taking* is what we have in mind when we speak of 'empathy'.

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How exactly does one accomplish empathic perspective-taking? We can distinguish between two general approaches to this question in the philosophical literature: *simulationism* and *interactionism*. Simulationist accounts propose that empathic perspective-taking is achieved through mental simulation, which is the cognitive act of reproducing another's mental state in one's imagination (Coplan 2011; Decety and Jackson 2004; Feagin 2011; Goldman 2011; Matravers 2017; Ravenscroft 1998; Stueber 2006; Vignemont and Singer 2006). As Amy Coplan states,

> Empathy [...] requires perspective-taking. Roughly, perspective-taking is an imaginative process through which one constructs another person's subjective experience by simulating the experience of being in the other's situation [...] I imagine that I am you in your situation, which is to say I attempt to simulate your experiences from your point of view. (2011: 9–10)

Likewise, Alvin Goldman (2011: 37) argues that, in empathy, we engage in 'a fine-grained sharing of states' with another person; this involves imagining their mental state in our own minds.

For simulationist theorists, the key to understanding empathy lies in clarifying the inner mechanisms that enable us to track the representational content of other minds. The key question is how we can construct (in our own minds) an 'accurate representation of a target's situated psychological state' (Coplan 2011: 7). Not all imagination is useful for this purpose. We are, for example, prone to 'egocentric bias' (a disposition to interpret another's state of mind as more similar to our own than it really is). For empathy to succeed, there must be some inner mechanism that allows us to suitably adjust the contents of our imagination (or mental simulations) to match that of another. In this way, simulationists identify the cognitive biases that prevent us from accurately replicating another's mental state. They then seek to specify the inner mechanisms that allow us to rectify those psychological tendencies (Goldman 2011: 44).

The second approach challenges simulationism on several fronts. Interactionists argue that mental simulation is neither necessary nor sufficient for empathy (Gallagher 2012, 2020; Hutto and Jurgens 2019; Ratcliffe 2017b; Zahavi 2017). Interactionism challenges the basic simulationist assumption that empathy happens in an individual mind. Of course, empathy involves others. But for simulationists, these others are external targets of empathy. Empathy itself is constituted by the mental simulation constructed in our own minds. Interactionists, in contrast, maintain that empathy is an interactive process. In empathy, we come to appreciate how the other sees the world by interacting with them in distinct ways.

In particular, empathy often occurs through deep, engaged conversations. When it is difficult to understand how another is experiencing the world, we can ask them if they want to talk about it. When things go well, this can lead us to better appreciate aspects of their perspective—aspects that were beyond our reach before the conversation. As Daniel Hutto and Alan Jurgens put it, '[e]mpathizing with another can be a matter of second-personal engagement—the sort of engagement

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in which one is interactively moved by the other's expressed embodied responses and/or details of their situation that are grasped by coming to understand their story' (2019: 113).

Although they rightly point out that engaged conversations can play a significant role in empathy, interactionists have not fully explored how this is meant to unfold, especially in situations where someone has a significant need for empathy. In what follows, we shall approach this question by focusing on the role of listening. Listening attentively to the other appears to be an important component of the process of empathizing through engaged conversations. Studies of empathy in clinical contexts support this observation. They demonstrate that people often seek empathy from others by asking them to *listen* (Bugatti 2021; Gosselin 2022; Halpern 2001; Hayakawa 2022; Nichols and Straus 2021; Rogers 1975; Sanders et al. 2021).

How and why does listening contribute to empathy? One might think that listening merely serves to acquire important information about the other's situation and how they view it. We shall, however, argue that one must think of listening as a specific form of *embodied action* to properly appreciate its role in empathy.

Following the interactionist approach, we think that empathy accomplished through listening is an interactive process, one that is not enclosed in an individual mind. That said, we do not attempt here to argue for interactionism over simulationism. We are also not concerned with these views' compatibility or incompatibility. We shall, instead, argue that listening has a distinctive role to play in the kind of engaged conversations that are conducive to empathy. On the one hand, interactionists will consider engaged conversations mediated by listening to be constitutive of the empathy process. On the other hand, simulationists can appreciate the significance of these conversations while maintaining that empathy's central mechanism consists in imaginative perspective-taking via mental simulation. As mentioned above, our goal in the proceeding discussion is not to adjudicate between these two theoretical interpretations.[1] We shall, instead, undertake the more basic task of providing a clear description of listening's role in empathy. If our argument succeeds, then listening goes beyond mere information gathering. Indeed, it plays a distinctive and important role in the process of responding to another's need for empathy.

2. Empathy through Listening

As we saw in the introduction, Carel contends that failing to receive empathy when one is ill can be worse than the illness itself (2013: 48). This reminds us of the simple fact that empathy often arises in response to another's need for it. When pain or suffering isolates someone from the world, they might seek empathy by looking for a listening ear (Bugatti 2021; Gosselin 2022; Halpern 2001; Nichols and Straus 2021; Rogers 1975; Sanders et al. 2021). To feel connected to the world again, they might need an empathizer who *listens to their account of their experiences and considers*

[1] We thank the anonymous reviewers for pressing us to clarify the relation between our proposal about the role of listening in empathy and the simulationist conception of empathy.

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their perspective. Indeed, Carel describes the lack of empathy from others by mentioning how they rarely *listened* to her. As she puts it, 'no one asked me how I feel about my illness' (2013: 48). Her testimony suggests that the need for empathic perspective-taking often boils down to a need to be listened to.

But how exactly does listening matter when it comes to empathy? In this section, we begin to answer this question. We do so by analyzing a hypothetical case of empathy, one arising in a clinical context and involving an engaged conversation. Consider the following vignette:

> *Pat and Nate*. Pat was admitted to a hospital following a heart attack, but the postoperative examination yielded excellent results. Her assigned nurse—Nate—tells her that she can begin rehabilitation soon. However, Pat shows no interest. Nate becomes worried and asks if anything is wrong. In response, Pat slowly starts to talk about her situation. Pat was upset that her doctor had been dismissive when she shared her worry about having another heart attack. Whenever she tried to talk about it, the doctor became visibly annoyed and dismissed her feelings as trivial. Before hearing this, Nate thought that Pat would be excited to start her rehabilitation, but now he understands that she sees the situation very differently. He promises that he will talk to her doctor. He also asks her if she would, nevertheless, consider joining the rehabilitation program soon. Pat is not entirely satisfied and remains somewhat resentful, but she admits that Nate has a point and agrees to consider his proposal.

In this example, Nate gradually shares in Pat's perspective by listening to her story. This demonstrates how empathy can be mediated by listening. This vignette serves as a springboard for understanding how listening can contribute to empathy. In this section, we identify three key features of empathy through listening in the example of *Pat and Nate*. These are (1) dynamic unfolding, (2) collaboration, and (3) mutual perspective reshaping. This analysis lays the foundation for a more in-depth exploration of the process in later sections.

2.1 Dynamical Unfolding over Time

The first feature of empathy through listening in *Pat and Nate* is that it is a dynamical process. We shall explain what we mean by 'dynamical' by drawing on dynamical systems theory in cognitive science (van Gelder and Port 1995; see also Beer 2000; Smith and Thelen 2003). We shall then show how it applies to *Pat and Nate*.

A central tenet of dynamical systems theory is that cognitive processes unfold continuously in real time. As Timothy van Gelder and Robert Port (1995: 18) explain, this has two key implications. First, cognition is not reduced to sequential information processing, which proceeds step-by-step in a discrete manner. Rather, it emerges and develops gradually over time. It cannot be broken down into a sequence of discrete components. Second, *timing* is essential for cognition. Cognitive processes are done well when they do not 'take too little or too much time' (van Gelder and Port

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1995: 19). Moreover, 'the timing of any particular operation must respect the rate at which other cognitive, bodily, and environmental processes are taking place' (van Gelder and Port 1995: 19). Cognitive processes can unfold very differently depending on their temporal profile, such as how long they take (i.e., their duration) and how quickly they change (i.e., their pace). This is the case even if they can be described as carrying out the same function at some level of abstraction.

Nate's empathy for Pat appears to have these dynamic properties. It begins when he asks about her experience and offers to listen to her story. However, he does not suddenly achieve empathy once and for all at this point (or, in fact, at any single point) during the interaction. Rather, Nate's empathy for Pat develops continuously over time. His thoughts and feelings gradually change as he interacts with her. We can see this clearly by considering a counterfactual case. If Nate left the room before Pat finished speaking, then this would fall short of a full development of empathy. Pat would also feel unheard. Nate's empathy for Pat evolves as he *continues* listening to her. Thanks to Nate's *ongoing engagement*, Pat (rightly) feels empathically heard and understood.

Timing and pace are also essential for this evolving process of empathy (Hayakawa 2024). Suppose that Nate had fired multiple questions at Pat because of excessive enthusiasm when she was not ready to tell him her story. In that case, Pat might find Nate overwhelming and feel reluctant to talk to him. Even if the content of his questions were the same as in the original example, the *quality* of the interaction would be different. It would then be no surprise if Pat's need for empathy was left unmet. This shows how empathy through listening in *Pat and Nate* exemplifies a dynamic process, one in which temporal features of the interaction—including timing and pace—play a crucial role.[2]

2.2 Collaborative Process

The second feature of empathy through listening in *Pat and Nate* is that it is a collaborative process. In the literature, empathy is often characterized as happening inside individual minds, even if it concerns other minds. However, *Pat and Nate* shows that this is not always the case. To clarify what we mean by this, let us first unpack the concept of 'collaboration' and then show how it applies to the case in question.

On our view, collaboration is a form of joint action. Two (or more) agents work together to achieve a result that could not have been attained individually (or could not have been effectively achieved individually). Following standard treatments of joint action, we assume that a collaboration must involve some form of shared agency (Roth 2017; Schweikard and Schmid 2021). In particular, collaborations require that agents *actively communicate* either verbally or non-verbally (Thayer-Bacon and Pack-Brown 2000: 50). In contrast, consider factory workers, for example. They might work separately on different parts of an assembly line, each

[2] Dynamic and dialogical conceptions of empathy have also been articulated in recent anthropological studies on empathy (e.g., Holland 2012; Throop 2010). We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing these works to our attention.

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focused solely on completing their assigned tasks. This does not count as *collaborating*, even if the final product is a result of their combined efforts.

However, collaborations do not necessarily require a common goal from the outset (Thayer-Bacon and Pack-Brown 2000: 48). You might start a casual conversation with a colleague and suddenly come up with a new research idea. Here, the final idea is, arguably, the outcome of a collaboration between you and your colleague, but there was not a pre-determined, common goal. Conversations often spontaneously lead to new ideas even if none of the agents involved explicitly intend for the conversation to generate a new idea. As Margaret Stout and Robyn Keast put it, collaborations can be a more or less 'emergent and co-creative process' (2021: 25). They do not require a common goal, but they do require that the relevant agents actively communicate.

Nate's empathy for Pat counts as a collaborative process because it (a) achieves something that is not individually attainable and (b) relies on them both participating in the relevant conversation. Nate's empathic listening is made possible by his active engagement with Pat, but he could not have completed the process individually. He can share in her perspective only because she responds *cooperatively* when he offers to listen. Nate is able to engage in listening to Pat only because she chooses to make an effort to communicate her thoughts and feelings to him. Listening to another is never an individual achievement. Its possibility depends on the other's willingness to exercise their expressive or communicative agency. Thus, Pat plays an indispensable role in the process of empathic perspective-taking by actively participating in the conversation even if Nate is the one doing the empathizing. We can, then, conclude that empathy through listening is a collaborative process.

2.3 Mutual Perspective Reshaping

The third feature of empathy through listening in *Pat and Nate* is that it involves a mutual reshaping of perspectives. The collaborative process does not simply produce a joint outcome; it also affects the collaborating agents' relationship with the world. Matthew Ratcliffe argues that empathy 'not only enables one to appreciate another person's experience [but] also shapes the experience of both parties as it progresses' (2017a: 199). The notion of mutual perspective reshaping will help us further elucidate this phenomenon. To clarify what we mean by this, we define the key terms 'perspective', 'reshaping', and 'mutual' and apply them to the current example.

By 'perspective', we mean a specific way in which one experiences the world (Maibom 2022). Different agents can have different perspectives on the world, even if they relate to the same object. Different agents can, for example, (a) comprehend the same object under different conceptual lights, (b) evaluate it differently (morally, aesthetically, or instrumentally), (c) find it more or less significant, or (d) be more or less motivated to act on it. In short, we can think of a perspective (a way of experiencing the world) as a multidimensional system, one that consists of (at least) cognitive, evaluative, and motivational dimensions.

These perspectives are determined in relation to multiple factors, including (but not limited to) cognitive frameworks, embodied capacities, practical interests, and the agent's psychological situation. Suppose that you are looking at a pair of skis at a

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store. You might experience them quite differently depending on whether you know what skiing is (cognitive framework), whether you are skilled at skiing (embodied capacity), whether you are interested in using the skis or understanding how they are made (practical interest), or whether you are having a satisfying, neutral, or frustrating shopping experience (psychological situation). As Heidi Maibom puts it, '[w]e have a point of view on the world as a function of the beings that we are, our situation, our interests, and our capacities' (2022: 58).

'Reshaping' a perspective relates to changes in these dimensions that make a perspective what it is. It refers to cases where we come to see the world differently by, for example, comprehending it under different conceptual lights, evaluating it differently, assigning significance differently, or being motivated to respond differently. If you learned that a used pair of skis in front of you previously belonged to an Olympian, then you might become acutely interested in them and begin considering them as valuable. This is a case where your perspective has been reshaped through acquiring new knowledge. It is, however, important to note that merely acquiring new knowledge does not always result in perspective reshaping. If you were not interested in the Olympic Games, then you might not be particularly affected by the knowledge that the previous owner was an Olympian. In that case, you gained new information about the skis, but your perspective on them has not been reshaped.

By the 'mutual' reshaping of perspectives, we are referring to cases where two agents reshape their perspectives at approximately the same time and those reshapings are causally related. Thus, if two agents undergo perspective reshaping at around the same time in the same vicinity, but this is an accident (there is no causal interaction between them), then it is not an instance of *mutual* perspective reshaping. For mutual reshaping to take place, the two agents must be engaged in some interaction that is causally relevant to the occurrence of the perspectival changes in each of them.

In light of this, we can conclude that Nate reshapes his perspective as he listens to Pat. Nate's initial interest (as shaped by his professional role) is to guide Pat toward joining the rehabilitation program. Based on this interest, he primarily views Pat as a patient who should be treated and managed according to a pre-designed plan. However, Nate comes to approach the situation differently as he listens to Pat. He learns new facts about her experience. But, importantly, he also comes to identify more significance in Pat's narrative and thereby her experience. He makes it a priority to understand these aspects better and eventually address her frustration and concern. He also comes to feel more connected with her. Consequently, his overall experience of the situation (including of Pat) changes in cognitive, evaluative, motivational, and emotional terms. We can, then, see how Nate has reshaped his perspective via his interaction with Pat.

We can, likewise, argue that Pat also reshapes her perspective via her conversation with Nate. Pat initially had an aversion to joining the rehabilitation program. Her distrust led her to resist the medical staff's suggestions. She was not in a position to find their suggestions significant or motivating. However, Nate's offer to listen prompts her to reflect on her situation differently. Instead of being immersed in her emotional situation—especially her frustration with the doctor—she comes to

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realize that her experience was affected by this negative emotion. That said, her frustration does not suddenly disappear. She is still upset about her previous interaction with the doctor, but it no longer dominates her attention. Instead, she comes to realize that it is important for her to think about recovery and consider joining the rehabilitation program. As before, the important point is that Pat does not simply learn something new about the world. Instead, the way she experiences her situation changes in cognitive, motivational, and emotional terms. She reshapes her perspective when Nate *hears* her.

In sum, empathy through listening leads to a reshaping of both Nate's and Pat's perspectives. For this to count as a case of *mutual* perspective reshaping, we also need to establish that there is some causal connection between these two reshapings. We address this in Section 3.2. For now, we underscore that the view we are presenting contrasts with the way empathy is commonly envisioned in the literature—as a unidirectional phenomenon, one that is directed from the empathizer at the empathized. *Pat and Nate* shows how empathy can be a bidirectional process in which both the empathizing and the empathized agents reshape and share their perspectives on the world.

3. How Empathy Unfolds through Listening

We have suggested that empathy through listening can take place as a dynamic process, one that is enabled by collaboration and involves the mutual reshaping of perspectives. In this context, empathic perspective-taking is not an *individual* achievement of the empathizer. Instead, it requires an ongoing *collaboration* between the empathizing and the empathized agent. The discussion to follow aims to further elucidate this process so that we can better understand the role of listening therein. In the previous section, we focused on providing a basic framework for characterizing *what* empathy through listening is. We shall now focus on illuminating *how* this type of empathy unfolds in time, specifically how both empathizing and empathized agents contribute to this process. We intend to show how their interaction enables and shapes both the relevant sort of *collaboration* (Section 3.1) and their *mutual perspective reshaping* (Section 3.2).

3.1 How Collaboration Emerges in Interaction

How does collaboration happen? We contend that collaborations in empathy-through-listening depend on the exercise of *receptivity*. They happen when the agents in question become receptive to each other. They do not simply exercise their receptivity separately. Instead, the collaboration that is integral to this type of empathy relies on a reciprocal circulation of receptivity between the two parties.

First, let us outline the nature of receptivity. Nel Noddings (1984) has notably called attention to the importance of receptivity for empathy (see also Slote 2007, 2013). She suggests that empathy is a matter of reception rather than projection: 'I do not project; I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other' (Noddings 1984: 30; see also Noddings 2010). Noddings calls the relevant phenomenon 'feeling-with' (1984: 31). This is to avoid the collapse of empathy

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into a projection of one's own feelings onto the other. Importantly, Noddings juxtaposes a 'receptive mode' of being and a 'manipulative mode' in which we try to control the other's behavior in accordance with our wishes (1984: 32). In the receptive mode, we let go of control. '[O]ur manipulative efforts are at rest' (1984: 30) thanks to our 'recognition of [the other's] freedom as subject' (1984: 72). We meet the other 'as subject—not as object to be manipulated' (1984: 92); we 'respect [the other's] freedom' (1984: 72).

In the context of empathy through listening, this amounts to respecting the other as an expressive-communicative subject. Consider *Pat and Nate* again. As a medical worker, Nate has an incentive to 'manipulate' Pat into joining the rehabilitation program. However, he chooses to listen to her; he considers her feelings to be significant and deserving of both attention and response. Rather than treat her as a patient to be controlled by the medical institution, he engages with her as a communicative agent, giving her space to freely express herself. Indeed, we can characterize the receptive stance of empathic listening in terms of *communicative respect* for another agent (cf. Magrì 2019).

How does this sort of receptivity yield collaboration? We think that collaboration arises when receptivity is reciprocally circulated between the two parties. In focusing on the empathizer's receptivity, Noddings seems to assume that receptivity is unidirectional. We argue, however, that receptivity also runs in the opposite direction. The receptivity of the empathizing agent induces receptivity in the other, which means that a *bidirectional* receptivity gradually evolves. This renders their communication effectively sustained, thereby paving the way for a collaborative practice to emerge.

To see this more clearly, let us look at how receptivity manifests itself at the micro-level of empathic listening (something that receives little attention in Noddings' account). Recent studies have found that a variety of small-scale communicative activities accompany attentive listening (Hamington 2017; Nichols and Straus 2021; Pasupathi and Billitteri 2015). These include (a) verbal actions such as paraphrasing, asking questions, requesting elaboration, and providing feedback that signals attention ('yeah' or 'um-hm'), (b) nonverbal actions such as nodding, gesturing, making eye contact, and displaying facial expressions, and (c) paraverbal activities such as adjusting the tone and pace of one's speech (Bavelas et al. 2000). This means that the receptivity in question is not mere passivity. Instead, it amounts to being 'active but not manipulative' (Noddings 1984: 146; see also Slote 2013: 212). The small-scale actions that accompany attentive listening make receptivity *performative* (cf. Hayakawa 2015).

These small-scale activities also serve two important functions: First, they indicate receptivity to and respect for the other as an expressive-communicative agent. Second, they induce a receptive stance on the part of the (would-be) empathized agent.

Nate's receptive attitude comes into play from the first moment when he humbly asks Pat to describe her concerns. His communicative activities exhibit a receptive pattern; they show a sensitive regard for Pat as an expressive subject. He speaks slowly, uses a soft tone of voice, makes eye contact without being intrusive, and uses finely tuned facial expressions and gestures. Nate's listening must also involve

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temporal attunement if it is to count as fully empathic (Hayakawa 2024). A slow pace of questioning avoids rushing Pat into elaborating on her experiences before she is emotionally ready to do so. In this way, Nate can demonstrate his due regard for what Pat is trying to express and convey his respect for her as an expressive subject even before she recounts her experience at the hospital. This makes it easier for Pat to initiate a conversation with Nate, which, in turn, fosters the potential for collaboration. Note that we are not suggesting that all these elements are necessary for collaboration to occur. Nonetheless, if most of the receptive pattern is lost, then an engaged conversation is less likely to emerge. This will eventually leave Pat's need for empathy unmet.

The point here is that Nate's receptive attitude needs to elicit some degree of receptivity from Pat for the collaboration (that is necessary for empathy through listening) to occur. In other words, a feedback loop of receptivity is necessary. Affected by Nate's receptive attitude, Pat refrains from treating his request with disrespect. This reciprocity is important because recurrent exposure to negative feelings from Pat might exhaust or deplete her listener (Bugatti 2021: 28). After all, we are vulnerable not only as speakers but also as listeners. A would-be empathizer is dependent on the receptivity of the person with whom they are trying to empathize. Accordingly, Pat's response would also need to manifest receptivity through actions like nodding, making gentle eye contact, and so forth. These actions show respect for Nate's communicative agency. In doing so, Pat also treats Nate's suggestions as worthy of attention and response. If this pattern is followed, then we can expect both Nate and Pat to become progressively more receptive. They will then become more respectful of each other as expressive-communicative subjects (albeit to different degrees). The collaborative process required for empathy-through-listening is unlikely to occur without the reciprocation of receptivity.

We can see that receptivity does not simply occur at a single moment. It is, instead, an ongoing cycle. Pat's induced receptivity to Nate enhances his receptivity to her. He will then continue to listen receptively and respectfully. In short, Pat's receptivity contributes to Nate's receptivity. This feedback loop continues as Nate's enhanced receptivity is conveyed to Pat (through the pattern of activities described above), thereby signaling respect for Pat's speech. This serves to facilitate an engaged conversation. A lack of such feedback could undermine the collaboration necessary for empathy-through-listening. If Nate became visibly impatient (like Pat's doctor), then Pat might go on the defensive and be discouraged from further disclosing her feelings. This is the sense in which the collaboration in question depends on the reciprocal circulation of receptivity.

The receptivity of the empathizing and empathized agent is, nonetheless, asymmetrical. In our case, Nate plays the leading role in generating the cycle of receptivity. Bidirectional receptivity would be much less likely to happen if Nate was unreceptive. If Nate became visibly frustrated with Pat's reluctance to start rehabilitation, then Pat might shut down and remain unreceptive toward him. For receptivity to be successful, Nate, in contrast, would need to try his best to remain receptive to Pat even if she reacted negatively to his efforts. He would need to already be motivated to understand her better. In short, Nate would need to be more

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proactive than Pat in adopting a receptive attitude. We might call his receptivity 'primary receptivity' and hers 'secondary receptivity'. Thus, empathic listening involves an *asymmetrical collaboration* rather than a symmetrical one.

However, this asymmetry should not obscure the significance of the reciprocal circulation of receptivity. Admittedly, an exceptionally empathic therapist might be capable of maintaining a receptive stance even in the face of an aggressive or hostile response from the patient. They will treat the other's expressed hostility as significant and worthy of engagement rather than dismiss it as misdirected or pointless (Bugatti 2021). But, even in such a situation, the collaboration in question would presuppose that the patient is sufficiently receptive to accept the therapist's invitation to speak. Once again, empathy-through-listening cannot obtain unless the (would-be) speaker's receptivity is induced.

3.2 How Collaboration Develops into Mutual Perspective Reshaping

We now address how a collaboration can develop into *mutual perspective reshaping*. In Section 2, we saw that empathy through listening led to a reshaping of both Nate's and Pat's perspectives. For this to count as a case of *mutual* perspective reshaping, there must be some causal connection between the two perspectival changes. In this section, we argue that the circulation of receptivity—which underlies the collaboration—also enables mutual perspective reshaping.

Here, a sense of safety plays a key role. David Howe (2013) has underscored the relationship between empathic communication and a feeling of safety. He notes that we feel safe to fully explore our feelings and thoughts when we receive empathic feedback from others. As he puts it, 'feeling understood by the other represents a moment of relief, a time of connection' (Howe 2013: 124). In this way, 'we can find a calmer place in which it feels safe to reflect, ponder, and think about feelings' (2013: 126). When heard by an empathic other, people in emotional distress come to feel 'regulated and contained', and they 'can turn their mental energies to exploration' (2013: 130).

Building on Howe's thesis, we further suggest that the feeling of safety is not simply an individual affair when it comes to empathy through listening. Instead, when agents are involved in the reciprocal feedback of receptivity, they can develop a *shared sense of safety*, one that occurs between them. We can formulate this process as follows: First, a listener *L* expresses receptivity when communicating with *S* (as described in the previous section). This creates a sense of relief and safety in *S*, making her less defensive toward *L*. *S* then becomes more open and receptive to *L*'s invitation to share her feelings and concerns. *S*'s receptive attitude, in turn, makes *L* relieved and able to remain receptive to *S*'s point of view without being defensive. The point here is that empathized agents are not the only ones who feel relief. Empathizing listeners also feel at ease (although to a different degree) when recognizing that others are receptive to their invitation.

Let us investigate how this applies to *Pat and Nate* and also how the shared sense of safety leads to mutual perspective reshaping. As mentioned, Nate shows a receptive pattern, which indicates a sensitive regard for Pat. This makes Pat feel welcomed and relieved. Being affected by Nate's receptive attitude, she feels safe to

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explore her feelings and thoughts. She comes to better understand her own perspective. She recognizes that her overall frustration stemmed from her interaction with the doctor and that she should not generalize her distrust to everyone in the hospital. She becomes less defensive and opens up to considering Nate's advice. She eventually recognizes the importance of rehabilitation for her well-being. By being exposed to Nate's receptivity, Pat also comes to demonstrate a receptive pattern of engagement. Nate then feels relieved that he is not rejected. Thanks to Pat's receptivity, Nate feels safe to ask her about her experience. Eventually, this allows him to learn why she was reluctant to join the rehabilitation. We can thus see how the feedback loop of reciprocal receptivity fosters a shared sense of safety, one that enables a reshaping of perspectives on the world.

We can now explain why we think that empathy through listening can involve *mutual* perspective reshaping. As mentioned, for mutual perspective reshaping to occur, two (or more) agents must reshape their perspectives at around the same time and the relevant changes in perspective must be causally related (Section 2.3). This characterization squarely applies to our example. Nate and Pat both come to reshape their perspectives on the world at around the same time and this is not by accident but precisely because they influence each other. Nate's embodied exercise of receptivity leads Pat to reshape her perspective on the situation. This not only affects her self-understanding but also her embodied attitudes and discursive acts (e.g., how she talks about her experience). These attitudes and acts then induce Nate to bring about changes in his perspective on the situation. These changes then shape his attitudes and acts in a way that sustains the interaction and further strengthens their rapport. Nate and Pat consequently adjust and update their perspectives gradually over the course of the interaction. This illustrates how the act of listening can initiate an interactive process that realizes a mutual reshaping of perspectives throughout the process.

Admittedly, this is an idealized example. Creating a shared sense of safety and realizing empathy through listening can be a much more complicated process. As Howe (2013) has suggested, survivors of abuse, for instance, often struggle to develop trust and feel safe around other people. In such cases, it will be much more challenging to develop a collaborative relationship through the act of listening. Despite a desperate need for empathy, people with a history of interpersonal trauma might be very wary of others, even in the presence of a demonstrably receptive interlocutor (Bugatti 2021).

Such concerns, however, strengthen our claim that the reciprocal circulation of receptivity occasions mutual perspective reshaping through the creation of a shared sense of safety. In complicated cases, the listener's (*L's*) initial exercise of receptivity may not induce a receptive attitude in the other (*S*). It might even arouse a suspicion in *S* that *L* is pretending to be open and respectful but actually has manipulative intentions. In which case, *S* will not develop a sense of safety and *L* will have to remain wary of the possibility of rejection. In that case, there is a slim chance that they will come to reshape and share their perspectives on the world through their interaction. *S's* need for empathy will remain unmet despite *L's* sincere efforts to listen. Their efforts will fall short of empathic perspective-taking. This case of

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empathic failure confirms how crucial the circulation of receptivity is in fostering the shared sense of safety that is necessary for realizing empathy through listening.

4. Concluding Remarks

People in need of empathy often ask for others to *listen* to them. We have examined the role of listening in this context. We first conceptually characterized a case of *empathy through listening* to identify *what* kind of process this is. We argued that empathy through listening exemplifies a dynamic process unfolding over time. It is a collaborative endeavor, one that involves mutual perspective reshaping. We then gave a detailed descriptive analysis to clarify *how* empathy unfolds over time through the act of listening. The act of listening induces a feedback loop of receptivity, which can culminate in a collaborative process of empathy. This feedback loop of receptivity creates a shared sense of safety between the agents, which enables them to reshape and share their perspectives.

We are now in a better position to answer the question of how we can respond to another's need for empathy in practice. One way is through the act of listening. Listening, in this context, is not an entirely passive process—a process whereby one absorbs whatever information reaches one's ears. It is, instead, a way of actively exercising receptivity; it is an embodied performance consisting of small-scale communicative activities.

This act of listening can make the other feel safe, reciprocate their exercise of receptivity, reflectively reshape their perspective on the world, and gradually develop a shared perspective. In such cases, the need for empathy will be met. But this might not happen. You might not be prepared to listen. And, even if you are, the other might refuse to accept your offer to listen, and their need for empathy will then remain unmet. This is always a possibility. There is no guaranteed path to satisfying someone's need for empathy. Nonetheless, the act of listening can be a powerful way to achieve this important goal.[3]

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