

REVIEWS

Empathy in Psychotherapy. How Therapists and Clients Understand Each Other, by Frank-M. Staemmler. Elizabeth J. Hamilton and Deirdre Winter (Trans.) New York: Springer, 2012.

In his introduction, Frank-M. Staemmler informs the reader of the basic dilemma of his subject matter: Will the subjective experience of another human being ever be anything but an enigma, or can it be unveiled? If the mystery of the other can indeed be uncloaked, to what extent is this possible, and how do we know we have achieved our goal, bearing in mind that human existence oscillates between the poles of distancing oneself and entering into relation with another person? Many of the psychotherapists among the readers will agree with Staemmler that one of their motivations for entering into this profession was the fascination with the experiential worlds of other human beings. Most psychotherapists consider themselves to be quite empathetic, but what about the other way around? If therapy is a dialogical, mutual interchange, then the patients' ability to empathize must be explored as well. When a person completely lacks empathy toward others, or must overcome tremendous hurdles in order to be empathic, this may be a manifestation of severe mental disturbance. However, it "can also be strongly dependent on the prevailing situational, cultural, and historico-political conditions in which 'good people turn evil'" (Zimbardo, 2007, in Staemmler, 2012, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Several questions best describe Staemmler's aim in writing this book. How can emotional processes be better understood, and how can psychotherapy influence them? How can we understand other human beings, given the fact that we are all so different and unique? How does the science of psychotherapy explain these processes, and how are the connections between theory and practice influenced by this knowledge?

Staemmler (2012) launches a three-pronged attack on the conventional understanding of empathy in psychotherapy, criticizing the characteristics of one-sidedness, disembodiment, and individualism: "The traditional understanding of empathy in psychotherapy is a mode of attending to the client whereby the therapist strives to capture the client's experiential world as accurately as possible without losing awareness of the boundary between self and other" (p. 23). The author proposes an extended concept of empathy in which empathic behavior is not a one-sided affair. Not only the therapists, but the patients as well are anthropologically outfitted, so to speak, with the potential for empathy. This potential is as basic as our five senses: seeing,

hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling.

The second part of Staemmler's critique of the traditional understanding of empathy refers to his view that empathy cannot be understood by the Cartesian separation of body and mind. Empathy is not merely a mental activity, a product of the therapist's imagination. The disembodiment inherent in Descartes' dualistic concept must be overcome, and to this end Staemmler draws on phenomenology and the concept of the "lived body," which deals with the living body in the ways it is experienced. He emphasizes the here-and-now character of processual activation, the creation of a "safe emergency" which is conducive to effective psychotherapeutic change: "It is not enough for the therapist and client simply to *talk* together *about* a problem of the client; the problem that needs working on must be 'actualized,' i.e., it must be rendered *directly experienceable* for the client as if it were actually happening in the present, using suitable therapeutic techniques such as 'experiments'" (see Staemmler, 1999b, in Staemmler [2012], p. 43, emphasis in original).

The third part of Staemmler's critique of the traditional concept of empathy focuses on the one-sidedness of individualism, a path that leads to isolation. Drawing on Harry Stack Sullivan and George Herbert Mead, as well as on the theory of intersubjectivity, he argues that empathy is an intersubjective process within a certain sociocultural context. The encounters we have with one another, from which mutual empathy results, take place in our cocreated present situations, in our social world. At the heart of the critique of the individualistic perspective in the traditional concept of empathy is the paradigm shift from an intrapsychic to a field perspective, from a one-person psychology to intersubjectivity. Although Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) spoke of the undivided organism-environment field and the "id" of the situation, putting these concepts into the practice of Gestalt therapy has encountered obstacles. The interested reader is referred to the works of Wheeler (2000), Wollants (2008/2012), and Robine (2011) for contemporary Gestalt perspectives.

Staemmler focuses on Rogers, Perls, and Kohut's understanding of empathy, pointing out the weaknesses of their theories, and expounding on his own extended theory of empathy. The heart of this effort comprises the chapter on bodily empathy, "encorporation." Here he describes results of contemporary studies in the fields of psychology, phenomenology, and neuroscience. All three disciplines confirm the tenet that empathy is first and foremost a bodily process. Moreover, the potential for empathy has been shown through modern research to belong to the basic equipment of all human beings. Staemmler presents the reader with results from infant and adult research, depicting how mutually empathic processes between infants and their significant others develop; and describing the complex social, emotional, and cognitive

aspects of the attunement processes, also referred to as “social referencing.” Accordingly, social referencing “is a process whereby an individual seeks out emotional information in order to make sense of an event that is otherwise ambiguous or beyond that individual’s own intrinsic appraisal capabilities” (Sorce, Emde, Campos, and Klinnert, 1985, p. 199, in Staemmler [2012], p. 61). Mutually empathic processes may be communicated verbally or nonverbally, and they may be above or below the threshold of consciousness.

The life work of Paul Ekman (1972) is described here in detail, bringing back memories of my first encounter with his research during graduate school in New York City in the early 1970s. Ekman (2003) conducted research in several divergent cultures and concluded that there are pan-culturally existent facial expressions for the emotions of happiness, anger, surprise, fear, disgust, sadness, and contempt. Likewise, if someone is able to express facially one of these universal emotions in a way that can be described as inartificial, unconstrained, and spontaneous, then another human being will be able to recognize this emotion correctly even though they may belong to two diverse cultures. The elicitors and the display rules reflecting the intensity and type of the emotions may vary according to cultural context, as do the consequences of showing these emotions.

The most powerful research result appears to be that the potential for empathy is a fundamental human endowment. This potential can ultimately be controlled by inhibiting or suppressing this spontaneous response (i.e., “compassion fatigue”). Crass deficits in the ability to empathize may be found in autistic individuals and in those exhibiting sociopathic behavior. Staemmler (2012) turns to infant research to explain the primary form of empathy in a baby’s development: imitation and synchronization of body movement (p. 96). He cites, among others, the impressive research on mouth movements and cross-modal correspondences by Meltzoff and Moore (1997; 1983), Braten’s alterocentered participation (1998), Stern’s implicit knowledge (2003) and, to illustrate mimetic synchronization, Schefflen’s congruent body postures (1964).

Implications of such concepts as perspectivity and encorporation, developed by phenomenologists, are also discussed at length, among them Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and an early publication by Edith Stein on empathy. Staemmler (2012) offers an in-depth perspective on the findings of neuroscience, yet he maintains a critical distance from the reductionism in the natural sciences “which is of questionable epistemological legitimacy” (p. 157). He reminds us that the findings of psychotherapists, developmental and social psychologists, and philosophers with regard to embodiment and intersubjectivity have been acknowledged by neuroscience, and that neuroscientific findings must “prove their validity in future interdisciplinary discourse” (p. 157). The complexity of human interactions and relations cannot be reduced to the existence of

mirror neurons.

The concept of the joint situation refutes the notion that the human psyche can exist in isolation. When two persons engage with each other, they are part of a joint situation in which it may be possible to know something of one another because they are each essential parts of the same shared, larger, and encompassing whole. Information about the other involved person is "carried" by this encompassing whole: "The empathy that takes place principally involves sensing what it is like to move and be moved *jointly* with the other person in this joint situation. It is only then that something of the current individual situation (the role) of the other 'dance' partner is revealed" (Staemmler, 2012, p. 212). Concisely stated, Staemmler's expanded understanding of empathy is a "form of social referencing that is based on intersubjectivity, takes place on a bodily level and is mutual. It takes place between two (or several) persons – a referencing of both the experiential world of the other person(s) and also of the joint situation and its emergent characteristics" (p. 214).

The chapter on empathy and altered states of consciousness, particularly parapsychology and meditation, challenged the limits of my empathy. Staemmler makes a convincing case for the impact that joint situations may have on intersubjective consciousness, an impact that may well outlive the actual situation or be triggered at a later date. Such correlations might explain what is often called, in the vernacular, mental telepathy. I felt estranged and unrelated to the material, however, when I read about meditative empathy: "In addition to their empathic dimension, intersubjective states of consciousness that arise in joint situations and are related to religious or spiritual situational circles also gain a quality of intense compassion, which can open up an ethical or spiritual dimension" (Staemmler, 2012, p. 237). According to this perspective, moral values can thus be linked to spiritual experiences via empathy. My perspective on Gestalt therapy is not compatible with one in which spiritual and mystical aspects play important roles. "Compassionate empathy can tend to assume a temporary form that is sometimes referred to as 'mystical experience'" (p. 234) is a sentence that sets off my alarm signals regarding transpersonal, esoteric, and mystical attitudes toward the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy. I would be relieved to learn that I misunderstood Staemmler here, and would welcome an extensive professional discussion of these issues within the political context of Gestalt therapy.

Using as a point of departure Vygotsky's (1988) principle of interiorization, which puts forth that persons shall relate to the self as others relate to them, Staemmler describes why empathy in psychotherapy is indeed healing. If the therapeutic encounter should succeed in effecting joint situations in which

empathy can be experienced, then the first step has been taken. Patients can develop an empathic bond to themselves in situations beyond the therapeutic here-and-now, even when they are alone and have no one with whom to establish a joint situation. Empathic understanding constantly repairs this bond when it has been damaged by empathic failures, which are inevitable in human interactions. Developing the skills to deal with breakdowns in empathic understanding makes human beings more resilient to crises and better able to cope with stress.

The vivid case illustrations, the informative textboxes, and the summaries following each chapter guide the reader through the details of this complex material, which Staemmler documents so well. For psychotherapy in general and Gestalt therapy in particular, this book is a valuable, welcome contribution to the literature in that it revisits and revises old concepts and offers, with a view to the relational stance on psychopathology, more appropriate, contemporary ones. It can be used both in teaching psychotherapy and in providing our patients with helpful reading material. Of course, it is impossible to review all of the scientific precursors to a modern concept of empathy, so I would like to add to the comprehensive reference list two psychoanalytic contributions that came to mind as I read *Empathy in Psychotherapy: coenesthetic perception* (René A. Spitz in collaboration with W. Godfrey Cobliner, 1965), and resonance identification (Eduardo Weiss, 1960).

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