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Reply to Bollen's "Towards a Clear and Fair Conceptualization of Empathy"

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Caroline Bollen’s “Towards a Clear and Fair Conceptualization of Empathy” (2023) raises important questions about whether current academic approaches to empathy wrongly imply that neurodivergent people (especially those with autism) are morally inferior. Bollen offers a novel understanding of empathy that is meant to avoid those pitfalls and traces out some of its implications for key issues in studies of empathy.

As someone who has approached empathy from a broadly historical, metaethical perspective, I found Bollen’s article challenging and illuminating. I am very sympathetic with her claim that we should regard empathy as an ideal that both neurotypical and neurodivergent people must work hard to realize. And I was unnerved by her plausible suggestion that society gives neurotypical people a pass on empathizing with neurodivergent people, but not vice-versa. Her suggested phrase for this and other related problems, “neurotypical gatekeeping,” seems like one that should be widely adopted. Finally, I think her map of ways that empathy-like activities can go wrong (via various forms of proxism and distantism) is useful in illustrating why empathy is so hard to get right, morally speaking.

For the sake of discussion, I’d like to raise four challenges for Bollen. Since discussions of empathy can easily fall victim to proxism and distantism, I want to emphasize that I offer these challenges as potential opportunities for developing her work going forward. I should also apologize in advance for any misunderstandings of her project (and it’s quite likely there are some, given the different angle from which I’m approaching the topic).

Challenge 1: Moralizing “Empathy” in Academia

The first challenge concerns Bollen’s recommendation that “academics... use a conceptualization of empathy that matches its connotation in society” (644), where, Bollen indicates, that connotation is morally positive. The idea behind her recommendation is a forceful one: in many contexts, the term “empathy” is taken to refer to some kind of moral virtue, so if an academic claims that one group has less empathy than another, many people outside of academia will understand that claim as a moral comparison. This can happen even if the academic (for example, the psychologist Paul Bloom, author of *Against Empathy*) did not have mean to convey any sort of moral claim in talking of empathy. All of this constitutes a conceptual misalignment, one that can be quite damaging.

If, however, academics took Bollen’s recommendation to heart, this kind of problem could be avoided, because academics looking to avoid moral claims would then not use the term “empathy.” In principle, we could ask non-academics to de-moralize their understanding of empathy. But given the raw numbers of academics vs. non-academics, Bollen’s recommendation is surely more realistic, that is, inviting academics to re-moralize their understanding of empathy to align with the more widespread understanding found outside of the academy.

However, it seems to me that there is a significant obstacle to implementing Bollen’s suggestion. The academics she is most concerned with seem to be psychologists (who far outnumber philosophers). In theory, at least, psychology is meant to be a descriptive

discipline, not a prescriptive one. As a descriptive discipline, however, psychologists are supposed to avoid using moralized concepts, thereby leaving us philosophers something to do. Hence, the very nature of their discipline stands in the way of psychologists using a moralized conception of empathy such as the one Bollen proposes, and I don't see any obvious ways around this problem.

That said, there is another, related option: psychologists could stop using "empathy" altogether, and instead restrict themselves to transparently non-moral terms like "simulation" and "emotional contagion." Discipline-level or academy-wide shifts in terminology are rare, but they do sometimes happen, especially when: (a) it becomes clear that some term has unwanted connotations; and, (b) attractive alternative terminology is available. Moreover, given all the existing confusions surrounding the ambiguous/polysemous term "empathy," some more less ambiguous terminological changes could reduce misunderstandings even within academic discussions. So, a recommendation along these lines does strike me as worth seriously considering.

Challenge 2: How Much of a Change is Bollen's Definition?

Bollen proposes that we understand empathy as "appropriately attending to experiential similarities and differences" (645). This definition, she claims:

acknowledges and accommodates ... immense diversity. There are no requirements on output (what empathy should look like), input (what is needed to enable empathy in another) or whether it should or should not require effort. As a result, this notion of empathy is free of the exclusive, privileged and discriminatory (implicit) characteristics and effects of most other conceptualizations (679).

For example, Bollen's definition does not build in a requirement that empathy involves, say, recognizing another person's facial expression, or that it be spontaneous—both requirements that could lead to autistic people being unjustly excluded.

It seems clear to me that Bollen's definition does indeed avoid some exclusionary pitfalls. My question is how many existing definitions were subject to the pitfalls. I suspect that a fair number of prominent extant definitions of "empathy" actually have the same, or perhaps even more, neutrality than Bollen's. I'll consider two examples.

The first is from Paul Bloom's best-selling, *Against Empathy*: "Empathy is the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does", which he takes to be a widely held definition, effectively the same as e.g., Adam Smith's definition of "sympathy" (Bloom 2016, 16–17). Bloom's definition makes no requirements about inputs, outputs, or effortfulness. In addition, Bloom's (non-moralized) definition also does not invoke attention. Hence, it is arguable even more psychologically permissive than Bollen's. Someone who was unable to direct their attention could still have Bloomian empathy but not, it would seem, Bollenian empathy.

The second example I'll consider (which I'll return to below) comes from a well-cited paper by Frédérique de Vignemont and Pierre Jacob, "From What Is It like to Feel Another's

Pain?” (de Vignemont and Jacob 2012). De Vignemont and Jacob define empathy in terms of an affective state that is both similar to and caused by another person’s affective state, where the empathizing subject takes her state to be so caused. In addition, de Vignemont and Jacob require that the empathizing subject *care* about the other subject’s affective life. Like Bloom’s definition, de Vignemont and Jacob’s set no specific requirements for attention, inputs, or effortfulness. Their condition of care may mean that certain outputs (such as helping behavior) are likely but does not require them. Hence, this definition does not seem obviously more prone to promote injustice than Bollen’s, and its lack of condition requiring attention may make it more inclusive than Bollen’s.

My guess is that the real action is not so much in how empathy is understood or defined, but instead in how it is *measured*. Bollen gives ample reason to worry on this front, with disturbing examples of biases about neurotypicality being baked into the methodology used by researchers. So, if anything, I think the focus on her alternative understanding of empathy could draw readers away from one of the most important lessons in her article. The lesson is that it’s not enough to have an unbiased understanding of empathy itself—that understanding, together with knowledge of potential pitfalls, needs to properly shape the experimental methods used in empirical contexts. As a (potentially fraught) analogy: anti-discriminatory laws by themselves do little for justice unless they are combined with appropriate enforcement.

Challenge 3: Why not Just Similarity?

Bollen claims that morally valuable empathy requires attending to both similarities and differences between subjects’ experiences. Even though building in a requirement of attention may make this understanding slightly more restrictive than other understandings of empathy, Bollen’s proposal still seems plausible to me. Imagine someone who just has empathy-like reactions on the periphery of their awareness but doesn’t at all seek to evaluate their relation to the object of empathy. To me, it seems that such a person doesn’t have full-blown empathy. Moreover, the morally admirable evaluation comparing one’s state with another person’s should ideally aim to consider both similarities and differences. We can go wrong by taking others’ experiences to be less or more like our own than they really are.

I wondered, though, whether Bollen’s appeal to “both similarities and differences” might be more complex than needed. Recall the de Vignemont and Jacob definition of empathy. They require similarity and attribution, but not attention to *differences*. Presumably, this is because taking oneself to have a state that is similar to another person’s state already implies a concern with differences. In general, if x and y differ in some respect, there are thereby dissimilar, so a claim of similarity already implies a lack of (relevant) differences. Hence, it seems to me that Bollen’s understanding of empathy could be simplified, just demanding attention to similarities. This might put it in line with de Vignemont and Jacob’s similarity condition, as well as with Bloom’s understanding in terms of experiencing the world “as you think someone else does.” This is also roughly the approach I took in my main contribution on this issue (Marshall 2018), where I proposed a condition of matching or revelation on successful empathy (though I used the term “compassion”).

That said, I wonder if Bollen's understanding of empathy perhaps is intended to accomplish something much more radical. The reason why her proposal might be radical is that a person could *attend* to differences and similarities in experiences without *having* an experience that is at all similar to another person's. For example, perhaps I have good reason to believe that an octopus's experience is completely different than my own. If so, I could attend to that difference, being hyper-aware of avoiding ego-projection. I don't think we would normally call that kind of state "empathy." But perhaps including such states is part of the revision to our understanding of empathy that Bollen is proposing. If so, then I think that revision (dropping any criterion of there being real or believed similarity/matching) would be worth putting front and center.

Challenge 4: Does Attention Imply Motivation?

Bollen's morally loaded understanding of empathy is meant to capture something "intrinsically valuable," as a way of "respecting another's dignity" (649). Empathy (like sympathy, compassion, and care) is often sharply distinguished from respect for dignity, with the former being associated with the sentimentalist ethical tradition, and the latter with the rationalist tradition. But I agree with Bollen that there is some sort of link here (Benjamin Vilhauer's recent work on sympathy in Kant might be worth considering—e.g., Vilhauer 2021).

In order for empathy (or respect for dignity) to have a positive moral valence, however, it would seem to need some connection to motivation. Empathy might not always lead to action, but if it is morally valuable, we would think it should at least *push towards* helping behavior. To bring this out, consider the (perhaps over-used) example of the mind-simulating sadist, who is perfectly imagining the suffering he is inflicting on others, and is delighting in that very imaginative understanding ("yeah, that hurts, doesn't it?"). That kind of character is, in my view, *prima facie* morally worse than someone who harms others without any imaginative grasp of the suffering he is inflicting. The mind-simulating sadist is attentive to differences and similarities in experience, and yet isn't motivated by this attention in the right way, that is, isn't motivated to alleviate or stop inflicting suffering.

So, the final challenge I'll offer is this: on what grounds can Bollen exclude the sadist from possessing morally valuable empathy? This isn't just a question about hypothetical characters—those characters are meant to help us isolate what's valuable about empathy in ordinary, morally-admirable people.

My guess is that Bollen means to exclude such sadistic mind-simulating from empathy by use of the term "appropriate" (in the phrase "appropriate attention to similarities and differences"). Since she's explicitly aiming to moralize our understanding of empathy, there's nothing objectionable about this. However, I think it could use more elaboration if it's what she has in mind. For it doesn't sound quite right to say that the sadist's *attention* is somehow inappropriate. Inappropriate attention normally seems to be a matter of attending to the wrong things, such as staring at someone's nose hair while they're sharing their deepest personal insecurities. But the sadist is attending to the *right* things—the other person's suffering does demand attention. The problem is how the sadist responds to those things after attending to them.

It's quite possible that, in presenting this challenge, I'm using too thin a notion of attention. Perhaps Bollen takes attention itself to involve certain (defeasible) motivations to act on the world, which would then imply that appropriate attention to suffering brings with it some motivation to alleviate that suffering. Though I'm far from an expert on any of this, my understanding is that this kind of understanding of attention has been proposed by some figures (including Iris Murdoch). Most psychologists, however, do not take attention to itself include motivation to act on the world, especially not in ways that would exclude mind-simulating sadists from having appropriate attention to others' suffering. So if Bollen is proposed a revised understanding of attention alongside her revised understanding of empathy, that would also be worth perhaps making more explicit (while recognizing that Challenge 1 would probably also apply to this other revision).

Concluding Thoughts

I have raised four challenges for Bollen all of which are meant as occasions for further developing her argument or, perhaps, for cutting off misunderstandings such as those I might have illustrated. I hope it's clear that I offer these challenges as a fellow believer in the moral importance of empathy, and as someone who she has convinced to be wary of biases towards neurotypicality. I have no doubt that neurotypical gatekeeping is real and pervasive, and that discussions of empathy are ripe for well-meaning academics doing real harm.

I'll close with a theme in her article that I mentioned above, but that I think is so important as to deserve special emphasis. The theme is humility. Idealizations aside, real humans (neurotypical or not) cannot easily keep track of similarities and differences between our experiences—life is a matter of constant demands, and going beyond our own individual experiences requires a significant amount of our limited and precious attention. For that reason, it is often tempting to just assume we already fully understand each other's experiences, as assumption that lets us make quick moralized judgments about each other (e.g., dismissing each other as stupid or irrational). For that reason, constant reminders of the importance of humility are crucial and, as Bollen argues, have the potential to reduce condescension towards neurodivergent people. Humility can of course go too far since there are times when we need to take a stand. But especially within the academy, where we have strong incentives to demonstrate expertise and confidence with bold claims, it's very plausible that empathy should be more closely associated with humility, just as Bollen suggests.

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