



# Empathy in phenomenological research: Employing Edith Stein's account of empathy as a practical and ethical guide

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## ABSTRACT

An 'affective turn' has come about in philosophy of mind debates and the notion of empathy is increasingly influential. This could usefully extend into psychological research, particularly in counselling and psychotherapy. Edith Stein's account of empathy bridges gaps between individual psychological experience, embodied interpersonal emotionality, and our collective social moral order. Her philosophy provides ethical and practical guidance for researchers who seek to understand the meaning of what their participants experience in the flow of intersubjectivity and situated living. Researchers can thereby avoid positioning them as 'different,' 'deviant,' or 'dysfunctional.' Methodologies are recommended, based on Stein's account.

## 1. Introduction

Debates in contemporary philosophy of mind increasingly attended to the role that emotions play in our ability to understand other people. Greater emphasis was previously placed on cognition and analytical comparisons, as in the 'Theory of Mind' and 'Simulation Theory'. Theory of Mind models suggested that we can attribute given mental states to other people through observation, while employing a mentalizing mechanism in the use of rule-based inferences; while Simulation Theories suggest that we use an internal simulation of the mental state of the other (Dullstein, 2013; Gallagher, 2012). An 'Interaction Theory' has recently come to the fore, in which it is proposed instead that social cognition involves an emotional connection; that there will be experiences of reciprocity, exchange, and mutuality (Daly, 2014; De Bruin, van Elk & Newman, 2012; Gallagher, 2012; Ratcliffe, 2012; Svenaeus, 2018; Szanto, 2015; Vendrell Ferran, 2015). The role that emotions play in understanding others has also come to the fore where some psychological research has taken an 'affective turn' (Cromby, 2012).

In an affective turn (Cromby, 2012) current interest in the emotional nature of our understanding of others can be informed by Edith Stein's account of empathy (Stein, 1921/1989), which was published one hundred years ago (Dullstein, 2013; Haydn Gurmin, 2007; Jardine, 2014; Meneses and Larkin, 2012; Svenaeus, 2018; Szanto, 2015; Vendrell Ferran, 2015). Stein's account of empathy is built on an

understanding of people in community with each other. Empathy in this understanding is a purposeful perceptive ability that we employ as we navigate our way into the future in cooperation with each other. Emotions are not viewed as static states, contained within an individual. They are dynamic communicative flows which mediate joint action. This article explores how qualitative researchers might use Stein's account of empathy as a practical and ethical guide.

Our emotional understanding of others might have been neglected for a while, as a theoretical construct in philosophy and psychology, but that construct does appear to be enduring and consistent. In contrast, cognitive models do not seem to be as stable or complete. Cognitive modeling started with the assumption that perception is a kind of input, while actions are the output, with each of these being connected within an individual and isolated processing system. The flow of information is then charted in neurological processes in one person's brain, where perceptions are filtered and refined. Theorists have then tried to build social interaction onto this modeling of the individual human processor. Attempts are made to map out the flow of information in real time, while an individual is engaged in complex interactions with their environment, as in models of 'embodied cognition'. Unfortunately, a potentially unbridgeable gap has been constructed between people. This kind of 'bolt on' modeling has not succeeded in bringing a unified theory into operation (Wilson, 2002). This modeling also tends to frame emotion as an entirely individual experience, something that might hinder the flow

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of accurate information, rather than as a means of eliciting that information.

Counseling and psychotherapy are clearly an example of a social setting in which an emotional understanding of others is central to what is happening. It is perhaps quite remarkable then that understandings of empathy, or empathetic understandings, are not taken up more often in theoretical writing in this area. There is a turn to empathetic emotional understanding in some therapeutic approaches, such as Compassion-Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2009), or in the use of the Power, Threat, Meaning Framework (Boyle and Johnstone, 2020). However, the current trend is generally towards 'evidenced-based practice', in a use of measurement and categorization in a pseudo-positivist methodology (Dalal, 2018). In this setting, emotionality is considered more often in the way that it can undermine cognitive processes, when it takes the form of a symptom of mental illness for example. Its severity is then measured, and therapeutic interventions are evaluated on the degree to which they reduce its saliency (Dalal, 2018).

If our ability to understand and make sense of experiences is influenced by the way we respond emotionally, then researchers would need to reflect on what happens for them in their own emotional experience. The practice of reflexivity is a means by which this is achieved in phenomenological enquiry (Finlay, 2005). Through reflexivity, the researcher reduces the possibility that their findings could be distorted by their own emotionality; they can achieve this by identifying, exploring, and managing their feelings throughout the research process (Finlay and Gough, 2003). Reflexivity can then attend to the maintenance of a boundary, a process of holding the researcher and their research participant as separate, an important task when it is a sensitive and distressing experience that we are studying (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2009).

The researcher's ability to manage their feelings is important, but emotionality could also be recognized and harnessed as the motivating force within the research process; findings could be informed by an emotional connection between the researcher and their research participant (Wharne, 2018). Unfortunately, psychological research has often failed to make that connection; it has replicated or justified discrimination in relation to gender, sexuality, race, disability, and other differences (see Abramson and Lack (2020) for example). It is only through decades of campaigning that minority groups have pushed through some changes in policies and started to dismantle barriers in our Modern Western societies. Psychological modeling and professional practice have often been a part of the barrier, or a means of assimilation, rather than an aid to inclusion (see Baughey-Gill (2011) for example).

When emotionality is approached as a dysfunctional and measurable quality of the individual, this can obscure its communicative potential. For example, the researcher's ability to understand what is happening for their participants might involve the same emotional processes as in the therapist's ability to understand what is happening for their clients. Phenomenological research can be conducted, following Stein's account of empathy, in a manner that bridges gaps between research and therapy (Wharne, 2020). When I engage in a form of reflexivity in this article, I employ a first-person voice. Through these reflections, I consider the possibility that we can use our emotions in the process of psychological research to guide us away from discriminatory and abusive forms of knowledge construction. We might then avoid positioning our research participants as 'other'; as deviant, abnormal, or dysfunctional in some way. Psychological research can then support an emancipatory movement. In my own emotionality, I am motivated to promote research practice that is more compassionate and inclusive. It is that motivation that prompts my writing of this article, in the hope of establishing an emotional connection with the reader, rather than just providing information.

This article reviews some observations made by Theodor Lipps and explores how Edith Stein reworked this material. It is observed that while most of the social sciences underwent a transformation in the latter half of the twentieth century, in a turn to language (Ricoeur,

1981), mainstream psychology remained rooted in positivism. I believe that some catching up is needed before research in psychology can progress through an 'affective turn', in a move that adequately values and includes all research participants. Empathetic connection could then constitute our being in community with others (Jani, 2018), in a shared understanding of what it means to be human.

I suggest that Edith Stein's account of empathy (Stein, 1921/1989), along with her understanding of how we are in community with each other in a social moral order (Stein, 1925/2006), provide a practical and ethical framework for conducting qualitative research. This would be a kind of research that recognizes our physical and situated presence, as is suggested in some understandings of embodied cognition (Wilson, 2002). The emotional engagement of both the researcher and the research participant would be facilitated and understood, as suggested in enactive approaches (Stilwell et al., 2020).

I locate the methodologies that I recommend here within a tradition of hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry, as described by Max van Manen (1990). However, Edith Stein's account has relevance across many qualitative methodologies, wherever the researcher is willing to step away from the assumption that a person is a static measurable object. Stein's understanding of empathy helps us approach the research participant who is someone; someone who is actively negotiating their way into potential futures in the specific social and practical context of their life. While as the researcher, we can also work with our own situated existence and facticity.

## 2. Causality or saliency

Around a century ago, the research methodologies of empirical science became established in many Modern Western societies as the most appropriate means of conducting psychological research (Bitbol and Petitmengin, 2015). These methodologies require that we formulate principles and causal processes by which what it is that we experience is brought about. When we see the sun rise and travel across the sky for example, we can use our reason to deduce that the earth is a globe; that it spins on its axis in relation to the position of the sun. We move in this reasoning, from observable events that occur in our human experience, to remote and eternal truths that would enact their dynamics with or without our observation of them. Unfortunately, we can then neglect to notice that, as viewed from that remote objective perspective, the sun is constantly rising and setting simultaneously at opposite positions on the surface of our globe. A sunrise, or a sunset, is something that can only happen if there is a sentient being in a certain location at a given time; a being who possesses the necessary perceptual faculty of vision along with the associated neurological means of recognizing a phenomenon of this nature. In addition to this, we will only attend to an experience such as this if it has emotional saliency for us. When, that is, it is noteworthy in some way, and when it can then have a meaning in our community of human affairs.

If we are to experience a horizon, it is necessary that we have a point of view. Hans-Georg Gadamer observed that phenomena can only be recognized and known to exist for us if they have entered across the horizon of our social sphere (Gadamer et al., 1975). In our cultural history, the knowledge that the earth is a globe has not always fallen within our horizon. To view things from the remote abstract perspectives of objective science is to set aside the meaning of things as they become events in human affairs. While to consider events in human affairs is to loosen our firm grip on objectivity. Life is not fixed, it moves through time and when an understanding has been realized, our world has changed, we cannot go back to unknow what we now know.

Edmund Husserl explored the possibility that, by returning to the way we experience phenomena, we might capture 'that which is experienced'. We might grasp hold of it before it becomes meaningful for us within our assumed pre-existing understandings, and we can thereby maintain the possibility of objectivity (Husserl, 1911/2006). In Husserl's understanding, empathy is a form of perception. He observed that

a three-dimensional object is available for us in an incomplete manner. We see one side of it and must walk round it, to achieve a more complete experience of it. However, he argued that because our perceptual abilities are empathetic, we do not need to walk around everything that we see. Even though we see only three of the four legs of a table, from where we stand, for us it still appears to be complete.

Edith Stein refined our understandings of empathetic perception in relation to our experience of other people. She observed that we see from someone's expression and way of being that they are clearly in pain, although we cannot step around them to see that pain directly (Stein, 1921/1989: 6). Experiences such as pain are rooted in the physical world, but they can also enter our social world (Stilwell, et al., 2020). This happens when it 'dawns on us' that something is wrong in the world of this other person. Awareness travels over our horizon, but often we find that we have already expressed concern or passed by without acknowledging what it is that has been revealed. Knowledge becomes in this way through the stickiness of emotions, in engagements and concerns, in the way we are invested in our social existence with each other. There is a saliency for us in some of what we experience; it is important to us that certain things are known and attended to. Meanwhile, most knowledge has no relevance while it sits in books on the shelf, or as data in a server. It only exists if it is brought into awareness in the flow of our activities as we move into our futures in interaction with others.

### 3. Boundary situations

Edith Stein recognized that there are limits or boundaries in relation to what we can see in another person, but also, there is a limit to what we can observe in ourselves. She wrote about the potential service that we can provide in filling in the gaps in what we can see in each other (Stein, 1921/1989). Each of us is navigating our way in different social and cultural circumstances. There are specific futures that can only open as possibilities in our own life, while other futures will be closed off for us. How can we be confident that another person will get the complexity and saliency of what this means for us? How can they understand when their life has other trajectories, other possibilities, and limits?

It has been quite difficult to operationalize the complexity of our different potentials in psychological research. Most often it is the form of our experience that is described and measured, rather than our interpretation of these things in our purposeful attempts to arrive safe and intact in the future. When psychology aligns with medicine, or in psychiatry, it is the form which symptoms take that is observed and recorded, rather than the meaning of these things for the people who experience them; a distinction traced back to Karl Jaspers (Bracken and Thomas, 2005). However, Jaspers had observed the impact of 'boundary situations', such as death, suffering, struggle, guilt, and random chance (Dimkov, 2020). These are the things that open and close our possibilities and they can be a source of pain for us, just as much as any physical or psychiatric form of illness. This is explored in existential philosophy as a kind of anxiety or distress that originates in our existence, mediated by our attempts to make sense of that existence (Langdridge, 2007).

When psychologists start to attend to the meaning of events in human affairs, how or why things are significant for us, they must let go of the possibility of a pure objectivity (van Manen, 2006). Their findings will, to some degree, have become just another opinion in a social world full of ungrounded ideas and assumptions. This does not mean, Max van Manen suggests, that they should give up on their attempts to be rigorous, methodical, and disciplined in their research. However, it does imply that they need to use reflexivity so that their own position, motivation, and orientation are clear for their readers (Finlay, 2005; van Manen, 1990). It also implies that they need to negotiate a shared understanding of what their findings mean through academic supervision and peer review. I observe that there are benefits for psychological researchers who 'take a position' in human affairs. Their research can then have an emancipatory, moral, and political significance. It is possible then that people will read their research with interest because what is

reveals matters to them.

Hans-Georg Gadamer observed that since we start our enquiries with a pre-existing range of assumptions, our progress depends on a process of incrementally identifying, challenging and, if necessary, setting aside, that prior knowledge. In this way we might get nearer to a truth, but we will never arrive at it (Gadamer et al., 1975). There will always be some aspects of the world that fall outside of the horizon of our collective social understanding. A successful research study, I suggest, brings some understanding over that horizon, and exposes it to collective awareness and debate. We might assume, for example, that there is no reason why a sunset or sunrise might have meaning for us. There is no reason why we would stop and look at these phenomena; what benefit could be gained from that? A psychological measure could reveal, however, that people experience emotional saliency when they stop to look, but this does not explain why. An awareness would have crossed our horizon, but more work is needed if we are to understand what is happening.

### 4. Interactive emotional process

If we are to understand our fellow human beings as agents acting in social contexts, navigating a way forward through time, we will need to attend to the meaning of the phenomena we observe, a combination of description and hermeneutics (van Manen, 1990). The researcher can then reveal what it is like as a human to have an experience. For example, in Jahoda (2005: 158) Gustav Jahoda translates an excerpt from a book written by Theodor Lipps:

*"I see ... a person looking, not proudly but arrogantly. I experience within myself the arrogance contained in that look. It is not just that I imagine this inner conduct or inner condition; it is not just that I know about it; rather, it obtrudes, forces itself into my experience. But within myself I work against it. My inner being objects; I feel in the arrogant look a life-denial or life-inhibition affecting me, a denial of my personality. Because of that, and only because of that, the arrogance can hurt me. My feeling of discomfort rests on that negative."* (Lipps, 1903, pp. 139–140).

I suggest that although the experience that Theodor Lipps describes happened over a hundred years ago in a different cultural setting, we can understand it. No doubt we have all experienced the uncomfortable and intrusive emotional sensation of being diminished in the eyes of another. We know the meaning and cost of this kind of encounter for us. Lipps was developing an understanding of empathy as a positive feeling of sympathy towards the other in which a separation is maintained, with the example quoted above as an exception; a kind of negative empathy (Jahoda, 2005; Stein, 1921/1989: 15).

From a phenomenological perspective, it is useful to notice that the experience of discomfort, described by Theodor Lipps, happens in a social context. It is unlikely that participants in these contexts have chosen their social position in relation to each other. Their way of being is performative in the sense that they are achieving a way of being that is experienced as meaningful within established social practices and roles (Butler, 1999). In their intersubjectivity, however, they are potentially both active and passive as they negotiate that meaning. This intersubjectivity was observed and set out by Edith Stein in her account of empathy (Stein, 1921/1989). In that account, she proposes that we are not just passively observing or sympathizing with the other's experience, we are encountering that person.

As Edith Stein explains, when we see sadness in the face of another person, we might try to understand what is happening for them. However, this involves a move in which we turn away from them to face whatever it is that is happening for them, what it is that is making them feel sad. In this move, Stein explains, we are considering the question of how we would feel if we had that experience. If we are to understand what that experience means for the other person however, we must turn again to face them, to see if we recognize what the experience means for them (Stein, 1921/1989). In these processes we take ourselves out of our

primordial moment to consider the non-primordial past and future events that impinge on the present for this other person. In this move we have referred to our own past and future, which, as Stein suggests, includes an empathy we have for other versions of our self; forms of empathy that are likely to overlap with what we feel for the other person. Because of this, we might become more concerned for their future wellbeing than we are for our own, or vice versa. In a collective sense it is more important that at least one person gets into the future, than which of us happens to be that person.

There are then in Edith Stein's understanding of empathy three levels, or modalities, of accomplishment. Although she also observes that our understanding of another does not always unfold through all these dimensions. A person who is being arrogant might actively avoid any exploration of the other's situation. Stein refers to an immediate emotional connection at an embodied level, as the disposition and circumstances of the other reaches us through our perceptual awareness. She refers to our turning to explore what might be driving the emotional state of the other, the content of what is happening for them, by reference to our own experience and understanding. Then there is the separation and turning again to face the other in an understanding of whatever this experience means for them (Stein, 1921/1989: 10).

Edith Stein fills out some of the details of what might be happening in the flow of a person's emotional state, and how this is always in relation to our being with others. In the case of deception, for example, she observes how we have attributed our own experience of being trustworthy to the other person. We are failing to empathize with that other person when we remain unaware of their actual disposition, in the way that they intend to take advantage of us (Stein, 1921/1989: 86). In a reciprocal manner, if we are the one who deceives, we might be hindered in our objective if we were to fully consider how our deception will hurt the other.

## 5. The metaphor of light

Edith Stein writes about feelings and moods using the metaphor of light, observing how these experiences penetrate our being, illuminating aspects of our experience (Stein, 1921/1989). As is the case with Theodor Lipps's example of feeling intruded on by the arrogance of another, Stein sets out reactive emotional processes:

*"Starting from a peripheral level, a slight resentment can fill me 'entirely', but it can also happen upon a deep joy that prevents it from pushing further forward to the center. Now, in turn, this joy progresses victoriously from center to the periphery and fills out all the layers above it. In terms of our previous metaphor, feelings are like different sources of light on whose position and luminosity the resulting illumination depends."* (Stein, 1921/1989: 104).

In her employment of this 'emotion as a form of light' metaphor, Edith Stein anticipates Martin Heidegger's example of the 'clearing in the forest' (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Our whole life, past and future, can feel worthwhile one moment and then pointless the next, as it is illuminated by hopeful or depressive moods. Our world is like the forest in which it is too dark for us to see. By clearing some trees, we let in the light and we illuminate a given area, while if we had cleared different trees, we would see something else. We never see the forest in its entirety and Stein referred to a "... 'dark light' which belongs to faith ..."; a light in which we can hold contrasting emotional states and imagine a more complete picture (Stein, 1929/1993: 130).

When we cannot see everything that is before us, we can attain a kind of balance by maintaining an empathetic connection with our contrasting and diverse emotional states. We would need to encompass within that balanced state, the different potential selves that we might become, as we chart our way into the unknown future. We would be aware, for example, from our experience of past states of naïve hopefulness and cynical negativity, that we might in the future fall again into

one or other of those polemic positions. When we hold all possible ways of being as potential states that we might experience, it is more likely that we will grasp what it is that another person experiences, as they consider their possibilities. However, we still need to check with them to see if we have a firm hold on what it is that they experience.

Edith Stein anticipated the work of other existential theorists. She observed the nature of our embodied state, describing how it is that we need others to achieve a more complete understanding of ourselves, (setting the scene, for example, for Maurice Merleau-Ponty's explorations of embodied perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962)). She observed that there is one object in the world that we can never walk around; that is our own body. That object will always move with us to evade being seen by us in its entirety (Stein, 1921/1989: 41). Also, in her framing of emotions as both interactive and unfolding in time, she achieves, perhaps, a more complete theoretical account than Jean-Paul Sartre (1972). For Stein, emotional states are not 'magical' in the way that Sartre claims. However, they do open the possibility of different futures. They can be both passive responses, in an interactive process, and an active stance that we take (Slaby and Wüschner, 2014).

## 6. The metaphor of performance

Theodor Lipps used the example of watching an acrobat as evidence for his developing understanding of empathy, based on analogy or simulation (Lipps, 1903, p. 122; see also Fuchs and De Jaegher, 2009). However, if we employ the understanding of empathy that Edith Stein provides, we gain a more complete sense of what is happening. If I think about my experience of watching an acrobat as they walk on a highwire, I can recall the sense of bodily panic that is generated in me by the performance. I can notice how quickly that fear takes hold of me as I put myself, in imagination, in the position of the acrobat. Perhaps my initial emotional experience encompasses an unsettling concern for this other person. I can become aware, however, that they walk on the highwire every day, that they are skilled and capable in that position, while I am not.

While watching the acrobat on the highwire, I am concerned to see that they appear to momentarily lose their balance and they wobble about alarmingly. Again, if I make a move to connect with what the acrobat experiences, I can understand that perhaps some of this struggle to retain balance is a part of their performance; they do it each time the show is put on. I can wonder how they feel when the audience takes a gasp of breath; what it is like to hold such a large group of people in suspense. Through their performance, the acrobat is prompting and managing intense feelings which protrude into the being of others. I wonder if the acrobat feels in control and capable as they work up the concerns of their audience. In turn, however, I am thereby working on my empathetic connection, and this enables me to feel more in control, with a more complete grasp on what is happening.

When we see the acrobat walking on a highwire, perhaps we are reminded that we all walk an emotional tightrope. As we move into an unknown future, our stability hangs in the balance. We do not know moment by moment what will unfold in our lives or how we will feel about it. A form of psychological research, in which it is assumed that the person is a static object with a stable and measurable disposition, is editing that awareness out of the analysis. Also, in the routines and habits of our way of being, what we display to others can take on the form of smooth and accomplished series of performances (Hochschild, 1983). Again, psychological research is not revealing all that is happening when it fails to see intentionality within the performances we give as we negotiate our way through our interpersonal encounters.

Paul Ricoeur makes a distinction between the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of empathy (Ricoeur, 1981). The hermeneutics of suspicion involves an interpretation of the participant's words and way of being as determined by unconscious, political or cultural structures. We do not see the participant acting on their own volition, but in a manner that is caused by underlying process behind what it is



that is playing out. However, right now, dynamics are brought to the fore in what is happening, in the immediacy of the encounter. In the hermeneutics of empathy, the researcher need not remain naïve to denial and the exercise of power. They can ask what is achieved by the creative and innovative way that a participant chooses to talk about their experience. They can consider what this reveals about their motivations, in relation to the constraints and opportunities that they face. They can ask if social structures and discriminations are maintained or challenged by how the researcher and the participant choose to be in their encounter (Langdridge, 2007; Ricoeur, 1981).

The regularity with which polls fail to predict election results reminds us that research participants do not simply state the truth and often act to manage the impression that they give. We can think of psychological research as a performance, something that is accomplished to some degree, albeit within embodied and situated existence. Reflexive questions can then be asked about what it is that is accomplished. What is happening at the level of interaction when a researcher claims that their own interpretations are valid scientific observations, while those of their research participant are ‘cognitive misperceptions’, ‘misattributions’, ‘cognitive-bias’, or even ‘delusions’? Can we find arrogance, deception, and control in the performance of these interactions? If we are to engage instead in a kind of qualitative research within which we remain in community with each other, we need to avoid replicating discrimination in these ways. We need to stop defining research participants as different or dysfunctional. Rather than fixing them within understandings in which their behavior is seen as maladaptive or deviant, we could explore how these behaviors might be creative responses to intolerable life circumstances.

## 7. Methodology

How can the insights that Edith Stein provides be operationalized in qualitative psychological research? Many research approaches are available to us in the form of a menu, with a series of tasks that we are required to complete. These are frameworks within which a researcher can build a descriptive account of whatever it is that they study. However, in the combination of description and meaning, in a hermeneutic phenomenological exploration, it is not enough just to enact a process (van Manen, 1990). If we simply follow a recommended methodology, in a smooth performance, we are not revealing our own motivations, circumstances, or agendas. Researchers who attempt a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis are asked to do more to refine and develop their own approach. This can mean, unfortunately, that those who are unfamiliar with this methodology just do not know what to do, or where to start. I suggested that, since Edith Stein has provided an account of how empathy works, it is possible to use this as a foundation for our developing awareness in hermeneutic phenomenological enquiries and in qualitative research in general.

There needs to be an element of free conversation in the research approach for Edith Stein’s three levels of empathetic accomplishment to unfold. This is the kind of conversation in which participants do not know what will come up, when someone takes the topic in one direction and then someone else takes it somewhere else. This is also the kind of conversation in which people ‘turn up’, in the sense that things matter to them. Their emotional disposition must have that quality of stickiness if knowledge is to be held, if it is to take root, to grow into understanding. When research results are written up, they need to be an account of what the participant experienced. The emotional experience of the researcher will have enabled the unfolding of this data, like a catalyst, but it needs to be acknowledged and separated out from the results.

The researcher can ask themselves the following questions:

- What bodily response am I having while being with this person as they describe their experiences; how does it feel?

- How is this feeling opening my awareness of what it would be like if the experiences that this person describes happened for me, or for someone who is emotionally close to me?
- How is this person different from me in the circumstances of their life and how might the experience they describe make sense within the context of that life?
- Am I fully present with this person, unfolding different aspects of their experience in a way that acknowledges our similar and different responses?
- What am I revealing or hiding about my own motivations and orientation towards the experience and how does that limit or enable what is said?
- Are we both able to take our conversation forward, to open new aspects of experience if we choose, or to take the conversation somewhere else if we prefer?
- Given what I have disclosed about myself (or, on reflection, unknowingly disclosed), will this other person trust that I will be able to grasp what this experience means for them?

These questions can be asked again at the stage of analyzing data. The researcher can find meaning by asking: what is this person doing with their account, and how does it enable them to get into a tolerable future, with an intact sense of self? It is important to notice what it is that is salient for us in our active being. The experience of another becomes a concern for us when it is something that could potentially happen for us or for someone we care about. This is the reason why psychological research gets published. The experience of others has value, when we let our awareness unfold in a reciprocal concern for each other.

Even if a participant in research has not been able to speak about the full truth of their experience, a lot is revealed in the impression that they would like us to have of them. We become aware of preferred and dispreferred ways of being and in turn this allows us to understand how potential futures are opened and closed for this person, depending on how they are understood. Our aim is to get to what the person experiences. However, the meaning of what they experience is clearly a part of that experience and it is not something we can separate out. Again, it is that which is salient and significant for a person at an emotional level, that will reveal what is happening for them. If you want to know what it is like for a person to watch the sunrise, or the sunset, to start with you need to notice that this is a meaningful event for them. You then need to sit beside them, to see what they see, but then to turn again to see them in how they are seeing it. If you are viewing these things only from the remote position of an objective scientist, you will not see with the illumination of that moment.

## 8. Conclusion

I have explored Edith Stein’s account of empathy here in the hope that I can help to ‘bring it over the horizon’, to open it up in the current debates and understandings of psychological research. I suggest that we must learn from our history and move on from our use of research practices which objectify and impose meanings on others, intruding into their being. It is often observed that history is written by the victors. Amongst the students who studied under Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger was a victor in the sense that he joined the German National Socialist Party and progressed his career. He replaced Edmund Husserl as the Rector for Freiburg University; his work was published and promoted, becoming highly influential. His fellow student Edith Stein was not a victor in the same sense. As a woman, she was refused habilitation and she could not progress her academic career. As a Jew by birth, she was murdered in a concentration camp. However, her work is now, it seems, inspiring our current generation (Dullstein, 2013; Jardine, 2014; Meneses and Larkin, 2012; Svenaeus, 2018; Szanto, 2015; Vendrell Ferran, 2015).

I suggest that, when it is the state of being human that is addressed in research, then empathy as it is revealed in Edith Stein’s account (Stein,

1921/1989), will be an aspect of that research. Her modeling helps us to understand how it is necessary to explore what is happening for us, as the researcher, at an emotional level, as well as exploring what is happening for the research participant. Connection and understanding will not develop where the researcher and the research participant only perform their roles. It is only when they turn up as people and explore what matters to them that significant meanings can be revealed.

Edith Stein's model of empathy, I suggest, is important when researchers turn to the meaning of human experience in our lived social and embodied existence. There is then no remote vantage point from which objective observations can be made. Stein observes:

*"From the viewpoint of the zero point of orientation gained in empathy, I must no longer consider my own zero point as the zero point, but as a spatial point among many. By this means, and only by this means, I learn to see my living body as a physical body like others."* (Stein, 1921/1989: 63).

It is only in community with others that we come to know ourselves, in our embodied and socially situated existence. We thereby achieve social understanding in 'reiterated empathy' (Stein, 1921/1989; Fuchs, 2017). The advantage gained by acknowledging and working with this multiple viewpoint approach is that we can include different perspectives on what it is that we are researching. The challenge is that, while we attend to how another person makes us feel, we must separate what we experience emotionally from that which this research participant is experiencing. As in the case of the acrobat on a highwire, maintaining balance in our stance is always important. We are both performing in the interaction and attending to our performance so that we can describe it, a practice which can cause us to lose our balance and wobble about if we are not accustomed to doing it. Our response must be traced and managed in the way that reciprocal emotions are prompted, when we are diminished by the arrogance of the other or pulled in and concerned by the risks that they take.

While Martin Heidegger had argued that we can only find truth in the isolation of separating ourselves from others, Stein found the potential for that authenticity in community with others (Jani, 2018; Mantell, 2013; Orr, 2014b). Her account of empathy helps us to understand how we are actively engaging in emotional processes in our encounters with research participants, always embodied, existing in time and in a social context (Stein, 1921/1989; 1925/2006); it helps us to maintain our balance and tread a path that is both ethical and methodologically rigorous.

What it is that we are attending to, when using a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach, I suggest, is the encounter we are having now with our research participant. We are not observing the non-event of a rotating sphere. We are being within the duration of a time that starts and ends, just as the sun rises and sets for us. What does it mean for this person that a day is dawning for them; considering all the possibilities, expectations, pressures and demands of that day? What does it mean for them when that day is ending; when opportunities have passed them by, needs have not been met and events have happened that cannot now be changed? It is our own experience as a living person that we are exploring, just as much as we are extending our understanding into the experiences that this other person describes. If there is some understanding coming over the horizon into a shared cultural world, we will all be able to feel the saliency and significance of this phenomena in the way that we grasp it.

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## Ethical approval

All procedures performed in the author's studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

This article does not contain or reference any studies with animals performed by the author.

## Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the author's referenced studies. Ethical approval was gained from the Middlesex University Department of Psychology Ethics Committee, along with each participant's employing organization.

## Author statement

This article was developed in the process of teaching students who are studying for a Doctorate in Counseling Psychology, or in Psychotherapy. The author supervises students in clinical practice and in research projects. The author has developed material in these activities and has drawn the article together based on this.

## Uncited References

Calcagno, 2016; Freedman, 1987; Gallagher and Hutto, 2008; Orr, 2014a; Szanto and Moran, 2015; Willis and Cromby, 2020; Zahavi, 2011.

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