Circle of Empathy
Archetipoancestrale

Domingo Ferrandis. ESA

Happiness

Carl Rogers, psychologist: research." "Empathy is like accompanying another person on their journey of exploration and

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Storiografia dell'empatia

Einfühlung, a technical term of nineteenth-century German aesthetics, designates the process by which a person involuntarily and pre-reflectively projects their own sensomotor and affective experiences onto an artistic or inanimate object, thereby generating a lived aesthetic experience. Its core lies in the affective interweaving of perceptual consciousness and the contemplated form, distinct from interpersonal compassion. Etymologically, ein —“into”—and Fühlung, derived from fühlen (“to feel”), point to an “inner feeling.”

The concept was coined in 1873 by Robert Vischer (1847–1933), philosopher and aesthetician, in his dissertation Über das optische Formgefühl (On the Optical Sense of Form), within a debate with Konrad Fiedler on artistic perception as opposed to intellectualist abstraction. For Vischer, Einfühlung is a pre-reflective perceptual faculty that projects kinesthetic and affective experiences onto inanimate forms: the tension of an architectural arch, the gravity of a landscape, or the melancholy of a line

Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), philosopher and psychologist, systematized the concept between 1903 and 1906. He published Leitfaden der Psychologie (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1903) and Ästhetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst (Hamburg/Leipzig: Leopold Voss; vol. 1 in 1903, vol. 2 in 1906), as well as the article “Einfühlung, Innere Nachahmung und Organempfindung” in Archiv für gesamte Psychologie (1903). Lipps regarded Einfühlung as the foundation of aesthetic appreciation: contemplating a load-bearing column activates bodily tension and projects strength, slenderness, or harmony, thereby transferring the internal experience onto the object.

Its influence was enormous: between 1897 and 1914, no German intellectual could use Einfühlung without referring to Lipps. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), physician and psychoanalyst, admired Lipps for forty years. In 1898 he wrote to Fliess: “I have found the substance of my intuitions clearly expressed in Lipps, perhaps more clearly than I would have wished.” In Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten (Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, 1905), he acknowledged that Lipps’s Komik und Humor (1898) had given him courage and a theoretical foundation. Freud applied Einfühlung to the understanding of intentions in clinical practice: “When I perceive this movement, I behave exactly as if I were putting myself in the place of the person I am observing.” Lipps and Freud shared the idea of a psychic energy capable of altering thought and behavior when inhibited: the law of psychic congestion.

Edith Stein (1891–1942), philosopher and Carmelite nun, addressed empathy in her doctoral dissertation, Das Einfühlungsproblem in seiner historischen Entwicklung und in phänomenologischer Betrachtung (1916). She defined it as an “experiential act sui generis”—the awareness of another’s experience—without directly assuming or appropriating the other’s mental life. For Stein, suffering is perceived directly in the face, forming a “natural unity” between the physical phenomenon and the inner experience.

Max Scheler (1874–1928), philosopher, developed the notion of Nachfühlung—“feeling-after”—emphasizing vicarious experience and the need for moral recognition as a condition for authentic ethical feelings. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), philosopher and historian, sought to ground the “human sciences” in empathy and imitation. This conceptual framework resonates with contemporary findings in psychology and social neuroscience—emotional contagion, perception–action coupling, embodied simulation, and affective projection—demonstrating the continuity between aesthetic theory, phenomenology, and current models of empathy.

Empathy, crystallized within twentieth-century psychology, underwent a neurobiological revolution in the late 1990s. In 1992, Giacomo Rizzolatti (b. 1937) and his team at the University of Parma discovered, in macaques, neurons that fired both when the animals performed an action and when they observed the same action being performed (di Pellegrino et al., 1992). These were termed “mirror neurons.” The discovery was extrapolated to humans using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), suggesting that such neurons might enable a precognitive understanding of others’ actions, intentions, and emotions (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006), evoking Lipps’s Einfühlung as an automatic mechanism of motor projection that “puts oneself in the other’s shoes.”

However, scholars such as Gregory Hickok (2014) and Christian Keysers (2011) have emphasized that these neurons lack sufficient specificity and cannot, on their own, explain the inference of intentions, while neglecting Theory of Mind (ToM), which Simon Baron-Cohen (b. 1958) defined as the capacity to attribute and understand one’s own mental states and those of others.

Today, empathy is understood as a multicomponent process:

- Affective or shared: linked to limbic resonance and emotional contagion.
- Cognitive or perspective-taking: related to the ToM network and the intellectual understanding of others’ mental states.
- Regulatory: which modulates affective responses via the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, enabling prosocial behavior without emotional exhaustion.

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Historiography of Empathy

This framework explains empathy in art and narrative, the original domains of Einfühlung. Crying with a character or feeling fear in a thriller activates embodied simulation and the adoption of a narrative perspective: action scenes stimulate the premotor cortex, while close-ups of others' emotions activate one's own somatosensory representations (Keysers et al., 2004). The limbic system responds to the stimuli, while the prefrontal cortex maintains narrative structure, allowing enjoyment without real-world risk (Oatley, 2011). Art thus functions as a laboratory for projection, simulation, and controlled emotional inference.

Social neuroscience recognizes that empathy does not reside in a single center but rather emerges from the interaction of motor, limbic, cognitive, and regulatory systems. Mirror neurons are relevant, but only one component; empathy is a multilayered mental architecture that accounts for both interpersonal connection and emotional responses to fiction (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012).

Genesis of Aesthetics and Criticism

When Einfühlung is approached from a critical perspective, it is often reproached for excessive subjectivism. Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965), art critic and historian of aesthetics, challenged it in Abstraktion und Einfühlung (1908), opposing it to the abstract impulse—a psychic tendency to withdraw from vital identification with the organic and to seek repose in forms detached from life. Subsequently, Gestalt psychology and phenomenology reformulated the problem by situating aesthetic experience in the articulation between the lived body and the perceived configuration, shifting attention from affective projection to the structural co-presence of perception and form, as developed by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) in Phénoménologie de la perception (1945).

The term "empathy" was coined in 1909 by the psychologist Edward B. Titchener (1867–1927) as a direct translation of Lipps's concept. Titchener combined the Greek terms en- ("in, into") and pathos ("feeling") to create a linguistic calque that captured the idea of "inner projection." It is crucial to note that the concept migrated from aesthetics—projection onto forms—to the psychology of perception, and only decades later acquired its now-dominant meaning of understanding others' mental states.

Motivation

"Being listened to without judgment or attempts to shape you is an incredible feeling." Johan Galtung (1930–2024), founder of Peace and Conflict Studies, Norwegian sociologist and mathematician, argued that "conflicts can be worked through via empathic listening." Marshall B. Rosenberg (1934–2015), clinical psychologist and creator of Nonviolent Communication, emphasized that "people transcend psychological suffering when they feel empathically heard." Gloria Steinem (b. 1934), American feminist activist and writer, stated that "empathy is the most revolutionary emotion." Jane Fonda (b. 1937), American actress and activist, commented: "I've learned that empathy is revolutionary, especially in a global culture based on power and hierarchies."
These voices underpin the practice of the Empathy Circle, which consists in accompanying others by listening with full attention, allowing them to tell—and receive—stories without judgment.

The Ancestral Archetype and Neurobiology

Sitting in a circle to share stories is not merely a convention but a transcultural archetype with psychological, social, and neurological functions. The circle, a primordial configuration of community, suspends hierarchies and establishes a provisional equality. It maximizes eye contact and mutual visibility, optimizing interpersonal synchrony and activation of the medial prefrontal cortex, which supports joint attention and Theory of Mind (Redcay et al., 2010).

The anthropologist Robin Dunbar (b. 1947) proposes that storytelling functions as a form of "vocal grooming": it releases endorphins, reduces cortisol, and synchronizes emotions (Dunbar, 2014). Testimony is cathartic for the narrator and a means of transmitting norms and collective memory to the group, where active listening becomes a social obligation. Uri Hasson, a neuroscientist, has shown that neural synchronization exists between storyteller and listener—a form of "brain-to-brain coupling"—which is optimized in such circular settings (Hasson et al., 2012).

The Circle: Testimony and Systemic Change

In contexts of restorative justice, social trauma, or innovation, the circle formalizes these age-old functions. When victims or patients share their stories, their narratives humanize the problem. Kay Pranis, a restorative justice trainer, emphasizes that repairing harm requires precisely this kind of listening and shared responsibility (Pranis, 2005). In human-centered design, circular sessions generate "radical empathy," inspiring solutions that are useful rather than paternalistic. Inviting key stakeholders—politicians, healthcare professionals, policymakers—encourages:

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Historiography of Empathy

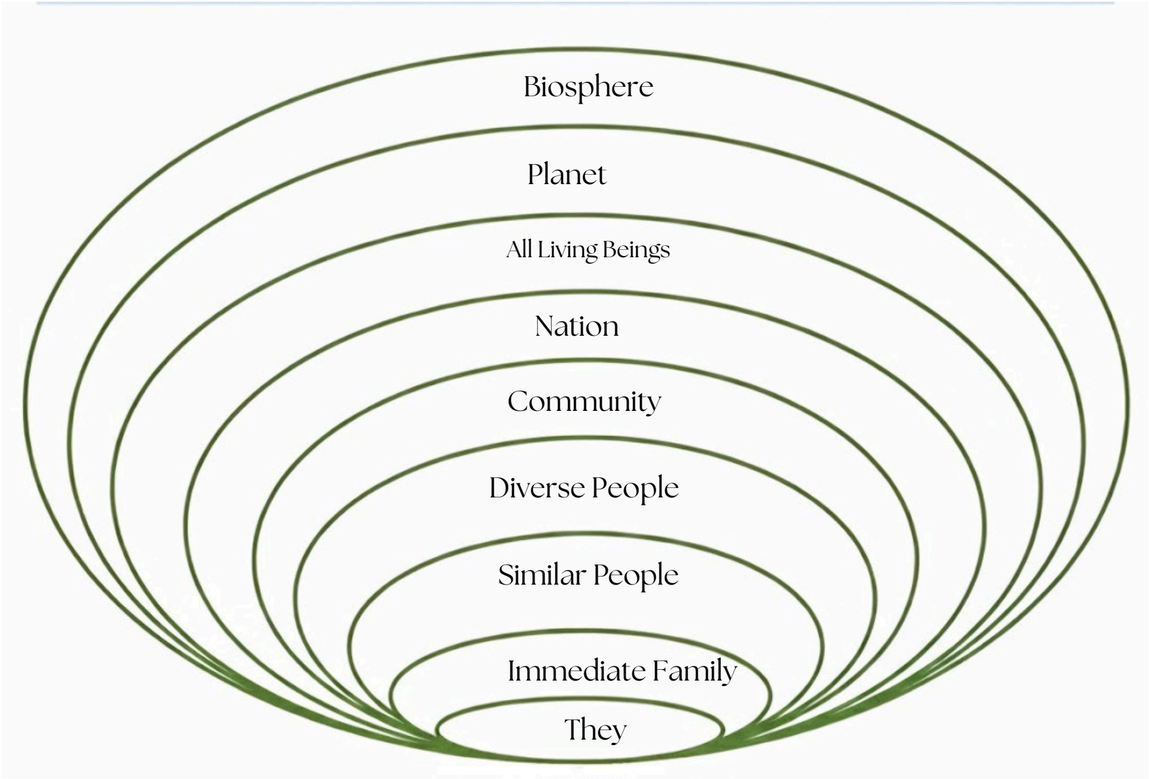
— Perspective-taking (cognitive empathy): listening without interruption compels the listener to enter the narrator's frame of reference, activating Theory of Mind.
— Affective empathy: vivid stories activate the anterior insula and the anterior cingulate cortex, generating deep somatic resonance.
— Relational responsibility: the listener is confronted with real human consequences, transforming an abstract issue into a moral urgency.
— Reduction of defensiveness: the ritual structure, facilitated by a talking piece, allows emotional information to be absorbed without immediate debate.

The Empathy Circle today functions as a social technology: for the community, it promotes cohesion and emotional regulation; for the individual participating in the experience, it offers the opportunity to express oneself without judgment or re-victimization. It allows people to verbalize and externalize their feelings, to see situations from a different perspective, and to connect with others who may be in similar circumstances but hold different viewpoints; this strengthens participants and provides new coping mechanisms. It replicates the ancestral social brain, now oriented toward healing contemporary fractures.

Facilitator's Guide: The Empathy Circle

This is a structured dialogue practice centered on empathic listening—that is, giving full attention to the speaker without interrupting, judging, or trying to correct them. As a facilitator, your role is to intentionally create a safe physical and emotional space, maintaining a relational "field of force" in which defenses soften and stories can flow freely without being challenged or attacked.

1. The Core Principles
— Voluntariness: no one is forced to speak. Silence is a valid contribution.
— Confidentiality: what is said in the circle stays in the circle.
— Equity: everyone has the same right to be heard. There are no hierarchies.
— Respect: listen to understand, not to rebut or give advice.
— Authenticity: you are invited to speak from lived experience and from the heart, not from a position or social role.



2. The Container: Space and Elements
The facilitator should intentionally set up the physical space. Aim to create a perfect circle, ideally with chairs of the same height and no tables in between. Everyone should be able to see one another. Optionally, you may create a center within the circle using symbolic objects: a cloth, a candle, stones, or natural objects.

— The Talking Piece: it guarantees the exclusive right to speak; everyone else listens. This eliminates interruptions and slows the pace of the conversation, encouraging reflection.
— Structured Rounds: you guide the dialogue through rounds with questions you propose. The topic of discussion moves around the circle in order.

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3. Your Structure: The “How,” Step by Step

PHASE 1: OPENING AND ESTABLISHING THE CONTAINER (15–20 min)

— Welcome and gratitude: welcome participants and acknowledge the space.

— Explain principles and ground rules: clearly state the purpose and function of the talking piece.

— Initial check-in round: ask a simple, personal question to help everyone “land.”

PHASE 2: EXPLORING THE CENTRAL THEME (45–60 min

— Introduce the topic: present the central testimony/theme.

— IMPORTANT: if the topic is difficult, prepare the main witnesses a few days in advance. Let them know they are not obliged to speak if they don’t feel ready.

— Empathic immersion: this process reconfigures mental patterns and transforms abstract understanding into a direct ethical response.

— Clarifying round: formulate questions designed to guide the group from the personal to the systemic, such as:

“What word, image, or sensation was stirred in you when you heard this story?”

“Which part of this experience do you find most difficult to understand?”

“Where do you see a connection between this story and your own life or work?”

— Listening without offering solutions: interrupt any attempt to give advice or debate. “For now, we are in a space of listening.”

FASE 3: CHIUSURA E IMPEGNO (20-30 min)

— Riflessione finale: "Cosa ti porti via da questo cerchio?"

— Finale: si può usare una poesia o una canzone, come ad esempio La vita è bella.

— Accordi o impegni: una serie di "micro-promesse" per agire.

— Rituale di chiusura: unione dei pollici, parola risonante e connessione finale del gruppo. **4. Le tue competenze chiave**

— Presenza neutra e calma: integrazione organica, affetto e rispetto.

— Ascolto attivo e profondo: contatto visivo e silenzio attivo.

— Gestire le emozioni intense: sii pronto a trattenere lacrime o rabbia. Convalida senza drammatizzare. Non lasciarti sopraffare da ciò che senti, anche se è terrificante e ingiusto. Sii un attento osservatore del gruppo; nota i volti, i gesti e le tensioni dei partecipanti.

— Intervento sottile: corregge delicatamente le interruzioni ricordando il quadro concordato. Evita la rivittimizzazione e il sensazionalismo.

Use / Application

Participants—whether direct witnesses or professionals and key stakeholders whom we wish to include—are always part of the inner circle, actively participating by speaking, not merely listening. If this circle is observed by a larger group, neighbors, or the community, a second circle forms around it. If this is not possible, the space may be arranged in a horseshoe; if that too is not feasible, the circle may be placed on a stage with the audience seated separately. We always adapt to the possibilities available to us.

This second circle remains silent. At the end, the facilitator may decide whether to invite the audience to speak, always by raising a hand and in accordance with the guidelines of the inner circle.

Do not limit yourself to rigid rules

The Empathy Circle is a living practice, not a mechanical protocol. The guidelines exist to protect safety and depth, not to constrain human presence. As a facilitator, remain attentive to the emotional field, the energy of the group, and the specific context. If a rule no longer serves listening or care in a given moment, adapt it consciously and transparently.
Flexibility, intuition, and responsiveness are part of your responsibility: trust the process, but trust the people even more.

IMPORTANT

When facilitating an Empathy Circle, testimonies must never be instrumentalized, nor should one appropriate the suffering of others. As a facilitator, you must not express judgment based on personal disagreement—for example, because you oppose certain relationships—or appropriate a story because you are emotionally affected by an account of violence; this constitutes exploitation rather than understanding.

It is essential to avoid the risks of polarization, demonization of one side, and appropriation of emotional drama, remembering that a testimony is always a narrative, shaped by selections and emphases. The process requires careful attention, as prejudices and risks of manipulation can emerge if it is not guided toward multiple “lateral directions” of reflection and listening.

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Theoretical and Critical Framework

Jamil Zaki, psychologist, and Fritz Breithaupt, Professor of German Studies and Cognitive Science, provide the theoretical framework for the Empathy Circle. Zaki shows that listening to testimonies and voluntarily taking another's perspective strengthens the cognitive, affective, and motivational components of empathy.

Breithaupt, Professor of Cognitive Science and German Studies at Indiana University, offers a critical perspective in The Dark Sides of Empathy (2019). He explains that empathy constructs a "parallel world" in the mind that mirrors another person's perspective—an inherently fallible narrative act that can be manipulated. He warns against "tribal empathy" and "empathic vampirism," noting that storytellers, politicians, or advertisers can hijack our empathy for their own purposes.

Reference Methodologies

— Edwin Rutsch: Empathy Circles with speaker–listener protocols inspired by Carl Rogers. His vision is macro-level: a social practice to counter oppressive systems.
— The Circle Way (Christina Baldwin & Ann Linnea): distinguishes between social conversation and circle conversation—considered sacred.
— Restorative Justice Circles (Kay Pranis): a model centered on repairing harm through the exploration of needs (Pranis, 2005).
— Council Practice (Center for Council): adapted by Jack Zimmerman and Gigi Coyle from Native American traditions.
— Stanford CCARE (James Doty): neuroscience of compassion and training programs for cultivating compassion.
— Harvard / MGH (Helen Riess): empathy programs with measurable outcomes in clinical healthcare.
— Nonviolent Communication (Marshall Rosenberg): a professional mediation and communication system.

Our mass may be made of atoms, but who you are is nourished by particles of stories. You are the stories you have lived, those you imagine, invent, distort, and disrupt; the ones you project and fantasize. You are stories remembered, shared, and traumatized. Within you coexist narratives of the self and narratives embedded in cultural and social worldviews—worldviews that must assume obligations, accept losses, embrace renunciations, confront challenges, and endure hardship. In the end, love, suffering, pain, and death make us equal—of skin, organs, and emotions.

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The Empathy Circle — Summary

Participants: ideally 8 to 24. For larger groups, an inner circle can be formed with a second circle around it, as shown in the photo.
Topics: personal, family, work-related, social, political, or current affairs.
Duration: maximum 2 hours.
Maximum speaking turns: approximately 4 minutes each.

The facilitator opens the circle: welcomes everyone, introduces the participants (if appropriate), and explains the process. The topic is announced. Questions are posed, and volunteers are invited to begin.

Speaker: shares their perspective, concerns, and needs.
Active listener: listens, processes, empathizes, and asks to speak.
Facilitator: organizes, keeps time, and maintains the flow.

Closing. You may conclude with a final reflection—a sentence, a word, a feeling. The circle can also close with a poem, a song, or a brief theatrical improvisation, such as playback theater. The best way to learn this practice is by actively participating.

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