

Empathy, Folk Psychology, and Explaining Behaviour

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Karsten Stueber's *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* is an intriguing, systematic, and careful analysis of empathy: putting ourselves in another person's shoes. Over the past two decades, empathy as received considerable philosophical attention thanks to the contemporary interdisciplinary debate regarding the development of folk psychology, specifically between theory–theory and simulation theory. And it's within this context that Stueber passionately argues that empathy, not theories, play a central role in understanding humans from both a folk psychological and social scientific point of view. Although *Rediscovering Empathy* offers a wide ranging discussion of empathy, its main thesis states that “empathy must be regarded as the epistemically central, default method for understanding other agents within the folk–psychological framework” (p. 5). In short, it's by putting ourselves in another's shoes that we come to understand human behaviour.

In the introduction to his book, Stueber outlines a number of objections against empathy. First, from a Cartesian point of view, there is little reason to suppose empathy will give us accurate knowledge of other person's mental states if we cannot use knowledge of our own mind to gain knowledge of other minds. Second, empathy is an imperfect method of knowing other mind, especially when radical cultural differences between agents could prevent them from putting themselves into another person's shoes. And, third, empathy provides little epistemic justification for other person's actions unless supplemented with general explanatory principles or theories. The result, as Stueber explains, is that “most philosophers of social science would regard betting on empathy as central to gaining knowledge of other minds as the equivalent of betting on a dead horse” (p. 16). Stueber's ambitious thesis also runs counter to those philosophers and psychologists supporting folk psychology as either theoretical (Churchland

1981, 1991; Fodor 1992; Gopnick 1990, 1996a, 1996b; Gopnick and Wellman, 1992) or some kind of simulation/theory hybrid (Heal 1995, 1996).

In support of his thesis, Stueber offers readers a clear, cogent, and passionate defence of empathy. Although I deeply sympathetic to the underlying thesis in *Rediscovering Empathy*, my strategy will be to focus on points of divergence. My major contention with Stueber's book, and simulation generally, is that it does not offer an accurate account of how humans explain behaviour and how folk psychology develops in children. For future reference, I will hereafter use empathy and simulation synonymously. First, however, a brief outline of the book.

Outline of the Book

The six chapters of *Rediscovering Empathy* can be broken down into three distinct sections. The first two chapters are devoted to defending the view that rationality is central to folk psychology. For Stueber, empathy rests on the idea that humans see each other as rational agents motivated by reasons. More specifically, he argues for an *engaged*, rather than a theoretical (detached), perspective of folk psychology. We don't see others from a third-person point of view but understand them as agents like ourselves acting for reasons. Stueber then outlines some of the empirical evidence that demonstrates our rational shortcoming. In response, following Donald Davidson (1980, 1984), he defends the principle of charity as a constraining feature of the interpretive process. Actions must be understood as reasons within contexts and thus may not conform to normative standards of rationality.

Chapters three and four make up the central thesis of *Rediscovering Empathy* and are the most original and interesting. In chapter three, he outlines the theory of mind debate which is broken, generally speaking, into two camps: simulation and theory-theory. Stueber outlines the main tenants of the both theories along with some of the psychological literature that supposedly backs up each claim. The debate is centered about the developmental period between the ages of three to five years of age when children begin to recognize that others can have

different mental states than themselves. Stueber articulates the main theories nicely and recants the complex development research in a brilliantly clear manner. Following in the footsteps of other notable philosophers, such as Gordon (1986, 1992, 1996), and Goldman (1992, 1995), Stueber favours, of course, simulation. But, unlike his predecessors, he avoids getting bogged down into empirical arguments about underlying causal mechanisms in support of simulation; instead, focusing on *a priori* considerations.

Stueber defends empathy by first making a distinction between *basic* and *reenactive empathy*. Basic empathy is “a quasi–perceptual mechanism that allows us to directly recognize what another person is doing or feeling” (p. 147). Supported by research on mirror neurons¹ (Gallese and Goldman 1998; Gallese 2001, 2003), basic empathy allows us to recognize other people as same minded. I recognize others to be *like me* but also recognize myself as being *like you*. Moreover, without basic empathy, we cannot meet the *univocal constraint* of folk psychological concepts; namely “that the same mental states are used in first–person reports and third–person ascriptions” (p. 132). The discussion of folk psychological concepts here is confusing and insufficiently argued, but empathy is supposedly necessary to achieve first person competence of a wide range of concepts. But, as Stueber recognises, the problem with basic empathy is that it cannot explain our ability to predict behaviour in complex situations. To do this, we need *reenactive empathy*, which is supported by two arguments: *essential contextuality* and *indexicality of thoughts as reasons*.

The first argument from *essential contextuality* states that understanding others requires we recognise situational specifics as relevant to the agent. And in order to do this “I have to put myself in their shoes and practically evaluate what aspects of the situation have to be regarded as relevant using my own rational capacity for making such judgements” (p. 160). Thoughts as reasons are sensitive to relevant ‘background information’ to the agent and empathy allows us to interpret these reasons in context in order to make successful folk psychological predictions and explanations. For Stueber, theoretical considerations fail because

they are inflexible, unless riddled with *ceterus parabus* clauses, to the context of the agent.

The second argument from the *indexicality of thoughts as reasons* is based on two claims. The first is a trivially true, and philosophically unhelpful, claim that says, in order to recognize a thought as a reason for another's actions, we must also recognize the thought of the other person as their own. That is, we must understand that other people recognize their own thoughts as reasons for their own actions. The second, and philosophically important claim for Stueber's thesis, says in order to understand how a person's belief could be a reason for her action we have to imaginatively entertain the belief ourselves taking into account all relevant differences and imaginatively identify the thought as our own. Stueber gives the following example to clarify his ideas. In order to understand how Linda's belief that President Clinton had an affair could be a reason for why she voted for Bush instead of Gore, "we have to imaginatively entertain the belief ourselves—taking care of all the relevant differences—and imaginatively identify the thought as our own" (p. 162). In other words, in simulating Linda we are to identify with her mental states as her own, integrate them into our own cognitive system (coming to see the world through their eyes, so to speak), thereby coming to understanding her reasons for acting, given her beliefs and desires, relevant to specific situations and circumstances.

For Stueber, the arguments from *essential contextuality* and *indexicality of thoughts as reasons*, "suggest that reenactive empathy is central to our understanding of others as rational agents because we have to be able to understand that we would have acted or drawn certain inferences for the same reasons if we were in their situation" (p. 165). It's reenactive empathy, says Stueber, which allows us to take into consideration other person's differences and understand them as rational agents within specific context. Moreover, from a developmental point of view, the increased conceptual sophistication between the ages of three and four years of age should be seen as a process, via empathy, whereby children proceed "from a conception of agents as objectively rational or goal-directed agents...to a conception of persons as subjectively rational agents"

(p. 171) and, thereby, will come to see others as having different psychological aspects from themselves.

In the final two chapters, Stueber discusses the epistemological question of whether empathy is a properly sanctioned method of knowledge acquisition within the social sciences. In chapter five, he takes issue with critics that argue for a methodology based on theoretical information and psychological generalizations. Stueber is happy to concede some implicit generalizations are at play but rejects any notion of empathy's outright dismissal. Empathy, says Stueber, plays an important "epistemic role in the evaluation of explanatory proposals within the folk-psychological context" (p. 194).

In chapter six, Stueber raises a number of objections and limitations of empathy. The most serious of which is that cultural differences may make simulation problematic, if not impossible, if the interpretee's beliefs and desires are radically different than our own. Stueber states, "the practical difficulty of reenacting the thoughts of another agent would increase exponentially the greater the cultural differences between the interpreter and interpretee and the smaller set of centrally held beliefs and background assumptions they share" (p. 207). The potential for failure, given cultural differences, is a limitation of empathy we have to accept. Some beliefs, like the Azande belief in witchcraft, will meet *imaginative resistance*. As Stueber states, "reenacting the thoughts of an Azande...would entail holding a whole book of anthropological research in my head in order to make sure that my views of the world are appropriately quarantined and will not unduly influence my deliberation within the simulation phase" (p. 207). Azande beliefs in witchcraft are beyond our empathetic abilities and, therefore, in such cases, may require some theoretical knowledge to underpin our understanding. But unlike the theory-theory, such a theoretically informed perspective is not the default of folk psychology, but instead is only a supplemental strategy. However, this admission, says Stueber, does not diminish the centrality of empathy to folk psychology since, "reenactment is essential for understanding intentional agency because it is only in this manner that we are

able to conceive of agents as situated in certain environments and as responding in a rational manner to the demands of this environment (p. 216).

Critique of Empathy

Empathy has a lot of intuitive appeal. Movies, for example, often make people cry, laugh, or scream. Why? Because on some emotional level people can relate to the actor's distress, lost love, shattered dreams, and so forth. That is, we can put ourselves in the character's shoes and by doing so simulate their beliefs, desires, and emotions. Now, perhaps we don't have to empathize with all of the actor's mental states, but a good portion would have to be in order for them to strike an emotional cord. This ability to adjust for individual differences is certainly one of the strengths of empathy. But although I am sympathetic to Stueber's thesis, it's questionable whether empathy is foundation of our explanatory and predictive strategies.

First, Stueber's claim that mirror neurons support basic empathy is suspect. Mirror neurons can easily be interpreted, not as a kind of empathy, but as part of the neuronal process that underlines perception. Even Stueber admits that mirror neurons are the "fundamental perceptual mechanism that allows us to directly relate to other human being as like-minded" (p. 170). But it's a mistake to think that empathy occurs at the neuronal level, since to step inside another person's shoes requires higher cognitive functions beyond the activation of subpersonal systems. At the subpersonal level, neurons are either on or off; neurons either fire or not fire, they do not create or model pretend states (Gallagher 2007, p. 73). If correct, the activation of mirror neurons is irrelevant to the idea of empathy because we do not have conscious access to subpersonal systems of our brain. However, Stueber's idea of basic empathy is on the right track. Humans can often directly perceive others 'straight off' as being joyful, happy, sad, fearful, and so on; however, this need not be empathy or simulation but, perhaps, root biological mechanisms. In fact, our ability to see others directly as intentional being is supported by developmental research. Children have a basic or primary non-conceptual understanding of the behaviour of others

through perceived intentions (Baldwin and Baird 2001), emotional interchange (Hobson 2002), and eye-gaze (Johnson, et al. 1998), to name a few. Two-year old children, for example, can easily understand that ‘Daddy is going to work’ without having to empathize mental states as reasons for getting dressed, picking up a briefcase, and leaving the house. Children, generally speaking, understand the intentions of others long before they are in a position to empathize. Moreover, if mirror neurons allow me to directly relate to others as like-minded, then empathy is superfluous (Gallagher 2007, p. 71). It’s unclear why empathy is necessary to perceive directly what another person is thinking or feeling. Stueber, therefore, needs to either abandon the idea of basic empathy or explain the step-by-step process of how mirror neurons leads to basic empathy, which he fails to do.

Second, Stueber’s *indexicality of thoughts as reasons* is also questionable. As I understand it, in order to simulate a thought as a reason for another’s actions, we must recognize their thought as their own. That is, we must understand that other people recognize their own thoughts as reasons for their own actions. But it’s questionable whether, in the first person case, we attribute beliefs and desires to ourselves as reasons for our own action. If Linda is asked why she voted for Bush instead of Gore she might say, ‘infidelity is immoral,’ ‘infidelity undermines the fiduciary roles of the president,’ or ‘Clinton’s affair demonstrates his lack of moral integrity.’ But these don’t appear to be the citation of mental states as reason for her actions but norms held by American society and, in particular, the president’s office. In the first-person case, Linda’s reasons for acting are embedded within cultural, moral, and narrative contexts which make it unnecessary for her attribute beliefs and desires as reasons to account for her own actions.

Third, similar arguments can be put forward against third-person attributions of mental states. In coming to understand Linda’s reasons for voting for Gore it’s unlikely we have to simulate her beliefs and desires as reasons for her behaviour. The problem is that folk psychology often “confuses psychological states with features of a person’s situation” (Ratcliffe 2007, p. 236).

Reasons for acting are incorporated into a shared understanding of the social world, including presidents, interns, moral integrity, and so forth, which makes simulation unnecessary. As Ratcliff explains, we often have an understanding of the kinds of actions appropriate to specific situations which “does much of the interpretative work required to understand what a particular person has done, is doing and will do” (2007, p. 236). We don’t need to simulate Linda believes because most folk psychological explanations and predictions are against a shared social world in which both parties are competent. We usually don’t understand other people by attributing internal mental states as reasons but do so “by placing [behaviour] in the contexts of familiar kinds of structured social situation[s]” (Ratcliffe 2007, p. 234). If correct, this presumption is enough to explain why Linda voted for Bush without the need of empathy. The interpretee and interpreter, generally speaking, share a common social environment with shared knowledge of its norms of behaviour such that any violation will be deemed as unacceptable, especially the actions of the president. In explaining Linda’s behaviour we don’t need to appeal to her beliefs and desires because our common background presupposes her reasons.² In this sense, given human interaction is based on a shared understanding of social practices and institutional norms, empathy is, therefore, unnecessary to understand Linda’s reasons for her behaviour. Moreover, if correct, empathy will be unnecessary for meeting the *essential contextuality* constraint. Our reasons for behaviour are sensitive to specific contexts, not because we put ourselves in another’s shoes, but due to shared background norms. As Radcliff states, “Interpreting others...requires a largely practical understanding of social institutions, rather than [folk psychology]” (2006, p. 44). Stueber’s claims that empathy is central to our folk psychological practices looks, therefore, suspect.

Fourth, if I am right about social practices being important for explaining and predicting behaviour, then they will be equally important in the development of folk psychology. As I understand Stueber, empathy is not only implemented on a neurobiological level but also provides the foundation for a child’s increased conceptual sophistication, between the ages of three and four years of age, as a

necessary condition for understanding others as acting for reasons different from their own. Stueber, as does the theory–theory, seriously mischaracterizes the development of folk psychology. A child’s ability to pass the false–belief task is not the result of simulation or theory but is socially constructed through cultural interaction and learning folk psychological narrative practices (Ohreen 2004; Hutto 2007a, 2007b; Hutto and Gallagher, in press).

From the start, a newborn infant is immersed in a world of language. Children are talked to, talked at, and talked about. Because folk psychology is so ingrained in the English language, parents can’t help but talk to their infants about various wants, thoughts, and feelings. Moreover, the child will be audience to hundreds or thousands of conversations imbued with folk psychological terms. As the child grows and learns language, she will gradually come to see herself as being in such states that can then be applied to others. Folk psychology, on my account, will be largely determined by how important the mind is to that culture. The more important folk psychology is to a culture, the more the child is encouraged to actively participate in its normative folk psychological ways, and learn its folk psychological language. On this view, children don’t acquire a theory of mind on their own; instead, through participating in the culture, they come to share the culture’s ways of using and talking about mental states. After all, Stueber is correct in arguing that we see other people from an engaged perspective; that is, as intentional agents within the context of situations and circumstances. But he fails to appreciate the power of such situational contexts in the development of folk psychology without the need of simulation or theory. Moreover, children are often asked about their own reasons for acting and we often explicitly tell children the reasons why, for example, daddy is angry or why Thomas is scared. Folk psychology, so to speak, is learned as part of our linguistic landscape and linguistic practices. Gallagher and Hutto draw similar conclusions stating:

We suggest that the pervasive presence of narrative in our daily lives, and the development of narrative competence, can provide a more parsimonious alternative to

theory or simulation, and a better way to account for the more nuanced understandings (and misunderstandings) we have of others. Competency with different kinds of narratives enables us to understand others in a variety of ways” (in press, p. 6).

The idea is that children hear stories in their environment from mommy, daddy, grandma, grandpa, friends, sisters, brothers, etc., about the reasons for acting in specific contexts, which allows, over time, children to become familiar with the basic structure of folk psychology and the norms governing the use of these reasons in practical situations. Children, in this sense, don’t come to pass the false-belief task because they learn to empathize or develop theories; they pass the false-belief task because “their narrative competency has sufficiently developed to the point that they can see others as occupying different character roles that do not have to be identical with their own” (Gallagher and Hutto, in press, p. 7). In this sense, explanatory and predictive success does not take the form of simulation or theory, but in mastering folk psychological narratives. These narratives act like templates “that enables us to understand how the attitudes interrelate in reason explanations [as] embedded in certain kinds of narratives” (Gallagher and Hutto, in press, p. 8). But we must be careful. Setting out the templates or norms of behaviour does not mean that children explicitly or implicitly use generalizations or theories. It’s through learning such narratives, by virtue of caregivers who engage the child interactively by telling, asking, and explaining why people behave as they do in specific contexts, that children come to pass the false-belief task.

The idea that social narratives are necessary for understanding false-beliefs is supported by a number of experiments. Dunn et al. (1991) found that family interaction and discourse were important antecedents to children getting the false-belief task right. They found that children who did better at attributing beliefs and desires to others, seven months prior, talked more about their feelings, participated in more dialogue with their mother, and co-operated more with their siblings. Research by Perner et al. (1994) also suggests a connection between doing well on the false-belief task and social interaction. Perner et al. found children with two or more siblings were twice as likely to pass the false-

belief task. Guajardo and Watson (2002) also showed a link between narrative training and mind reading ability. The use of mental terms in conversations at play (Hughes and Dunn 1998) and with mothers (Ruffman et al., 2002) is also associated with increased false-belief understanding. And a recent meta-analysis (Milligan et al., 2007) of 104 studies concludes “there is a strong relation between false-belief understanding and language ability...These findings provide support for the argument that language plays a vital role in the development of theory of mind” (2007, p. 641). Taken together, these studies reinforce my claim that social interaction is crucially important for children in developing folk psychological competence. Social intercourse increases exposure to folk psychological narratives and linguistic competence, which in turn is reflected in the ability to successfully attribute mental states to others; hence, the better results of four-year-olds on the false-belief task. In this way, children gradually begin to speak in the folk psychological ways of their culture, expressed in propositional attitudes. And by adulthood children have learned how to talk with great subtlety about their actions, and those of others, in terms of beliefs, desires, hopes, emotions, and intentions, by mastering the cultures narrative stories. The development of folk psychology is really just a gradual acquisition and coming to grip with the reasons of why people, and children themselves, behave in certain circumstances through the narrative practices of society—no empathy required.

The upshot of the following is that Stueber’s *a priori* arguments for reenactive empathy are insufficient to account for the development of folk psychology. He is wrong in thinking that the empirical research into theory of mind ought to be seen as merely, “investigating the nature of psychological mechanisms that implement our mindreading abilities” (p. 220). How folk psychology develops is clearly multidisciplinary and he ignores much of the empirical research to his own peril.³

And, finally, I agree with Stueber’s claim that reenactive empathy fails if cross-cultural beliefs radically differ. Let’s consider his example of Azande belief in witches. In African Azande culture (Evans-Pritchard 1976) accidents and misfortunes are seen as being caused by witches. According to Zande folk

psychology, it's believed that certain individuals possess witchcraft, which is then used to harm others by psychic means. When a misfortune occurs, such as diseased crops, poor fishing or hunting, a charging elephant, or accidental death, it's blamed on a witch. Witchcraft explains why harmful events happen but witches are never actually seen. Only the consequences of the witch's magical spells are witnessed. So to detect who is a witch they turn to poison oracles. Empathy, as I understand Stueber, breaks down when there are large relevant differences between interpreter and interpretee. So when the beliefs needed to recreate the Azande world of witches, as reasons for misfortune, are radically different from our own, simulation fails. Stueber thinks *imaginative resistance* is something we have to accept as a limitation of empathy. I agree. However, I disagree with Stueber's claim that theoretical appeals will help us explain Zande beliefs in witchcraft. We don't need to have "bookish" anthropological knowledge of the Azande in order to understand their worldview. If we did need such detailed knowledge, it's doubtful whether Evans–Pritchard would have been able to study the Azande in the first place. We understand Azande beliefs, not through theoretical knowledge, but by our common narrative practices, which has little problem accounting for Azande belief in witches. This is due to the fact that the idea of witchcraft is part of both Azande and Western narrative practices. Azande children are exposed to witch stories or narratives in their family and community environment through oracles and witch–doctors. Witch–doctors are used to counteract a witch's evil powers through the use of medicines and séances. It's through séances that children explicitly demonstrate their beliefs in witchcraft. As Evans–Pritchard states:

It must be supposed, indeed, that attendance at them has an important formative influence on the growth of witchcraft–beliefs in the minds of children, for children make a point of attending them and taking part in them as spectators and chorus. This is the first occasion on which they demonstrate their beliefs, and it is more dramatically and more publicly affirmed at these seances than in any other situation. (1976, p. 70–71)

Although séances are held for a number of reasons, they are primarily used to help cure a sick family member. It's through séances that children are first exposed to witch–narratives and thus come to explain and predict behaviour and events by such spiritual powers.

Although witchcraft is not ubiquitous in current Western society, children are still exposed to witch–stories in a variety of non–fiction genre's including fairytales (*Hansel and Gretel*, *Vasilissa the Fair*, *Repunzel*), novels⁴ (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*) and television/movies (*Bewitched*, *Wizard of Oz*), to name a few. Children learn in what context witchcraft might explain behaviour or events in our world. In other words, we learn to believe that fictitious witches have various powers to affect events or behaviours due to the stories expressed in our environment. In this sense, the presence of witch narratives enables us to development narrative competence regarding witches and thus we are able to understand the Azande without the need for theoretical knowledge, contrary to Stueber.

Stueber's *Rediscovering Empathy* makes a passionate case for empathy as being central to our folk psychological practices. Its clear prose and accessible writing style made it a joy to read. However, I am not convinced that empathy, especially in regards to the development of our mind-reading abilities, is plausible given some of the empirical evidence presented. But, for anyone interested in understanding human behaviour, *Rediscovering Empathy* is essential reading.

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Notes

¹ Mirror neurons are activated when one perceives another person engaging in intentional action; one engages in intentional action themselves; or when one imagines engaging in such activity.

² For Radcliff (2006), ordinary everyday explanations of behaviour rarely cite mental states as reasons for action. It's philosophers and psychologists, not common folk, who have made belief/desire psychology explicit and, in doing so, are misled in how we normally explain and predict behaviour. Folk psychology is, therefore, a philosophical account of interpersonal understanding, rather than a commonsense description of what we all do. To reverse this trend, says Radcliff, we must recognize that folk psychological explanations are usually not passive but found within narrative context.

³ The role of narrative practices in the development of folk psychology is also supported by cross-cultural psychology. Cultures vary widely in what is considered food, in their religious practices, clothing, and political systems, and similarly, in how they explain and predict behaviour. Research by Lillard (1998) reveals that many cultures do not share the same zest for psychological explanation, and some even

consider the mind as unimportant. Although most cultures recognize, to varying degrees, mental states, how they explain and predict behaviour does not necessarily depend on a belief/desire folk psychology so dominant in Western philosophical and psychological literature.

⁴ Dyer et al. (2000) demonstrates that English books for children between the ages of three to six–years are a valuable source of mental states information; mental states appeared once every three sentences. Moreover, cross culture evidence also supports the value of children’s books as sources of mental states narratives. Dyer et al. (2004) compared 40 preschooler children’s books from the United States and Japan and equally found coded mental state references in both countries. In particular, there was one mental state reference for two sentences in all 80 books. What these finding suggest is that books, in part, along with the narrative context in which they are read, allow children to understand the role reasons play in their own lives and in the behaviour of others.