Persuasive Communications

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May 13, 2024

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Assignment #3 – First Draft 1. Write a 5-page argumentative essay on your selected topic. 2. Paper Outline a. Begin with an introductory paragraph that clearly states your topic, its importance, and your position has a succinct thesis statement. a. Address the topic of the paper with critical thought. Include logical arguments and literature references to support the main points and sub-points of your position. Include counterarguments, along with logical reasons for rejecting them. b. Add section headers to your paper that match your outline. b. End with a conclusion that reaffirms your thesis. c. Use a minimum of eleven scholarly research sources (two books and the remaining scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles).

The Christian social researcher often contends with social research that draws conclusions incompatible with a Christian worldview. This may lead the Christian researcher to question the sociological tradition the research is embedded within given how sinful corruption may limit the tradition’s ability to understand truth comprehensively. The Christian researcher might consider if traditionally understood research biases such as confirmation bias, question-order bias, or leading question bias have impacted the study. It is this latter question that we shall examine. This paper argues for recognizing “hyperempathic bias”, a researcher bias which can distort research results and lead to interpretations that conflict with God's revealed truth in His Holy Word because of excessive empathic connection.

Empathy is assumed to facilitate social understanding, relationship building, and social research. Evolutionists claim empathy evolved to compel social bonding to facilitate survival. (Lucchesi, 2023) Boyer (2018) a cognitive anthropologist, writes that human beings have specialized cognitive capacities and dispositions to form alliances and enhance the welfare of the member’s group. (p. 46) Philosopher Heidi Maibom argues for empathy as a valuable tool facilitating social understanding. (Suttie, 2022, para. 3) She argues since we are naturally inclined to our own self-interest, and protection, intentional “perspective taking” is considered to be a positive counter in seeking to understand the significance of a situation to another person. (para. 29) Ambike (2020) argues that empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathy may feel similar feelings to what another person feels, but empathy also understands the problem of the other person and seeks to offer solutions making empathy an important tool for solving society’s problems. (para. 5) For Ambike, empathy is all about the other person. It is not selfish. (para. 3)

These former observations provide a sample of the positive view of empathy and its assumed importance for social research and problem-solving. This paper will demonstrate that empathy may also be a significant problem in objective research and may hinder problem-solving. While empathy is often assumed to be a positive resource for social research and problem-solving, “hyperempathic bias” significantly clouds a researcher’s interpretations and conclusions leading to less objective and accurate findings.

# Empathy is an Emotionally Laden Cognitive Process

Emotions are understood to be “…a distinctive feeling and thought, a biological and psychological state and a set of tendencies to act. Emotions are impulses for action. Usually, emotions are reactions to stimuli from outside and within the individual.” (Adburokhim, et al., 2022, p.5) Empathy is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2024) as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.” Empathy is a form of emotional connection where one takes the other’s perspectives, developing insight into their thoughts and feelings moving us toward compassion and concern for others. (Hasson et al., 2022, p.1) Bailey (2022) says, “Empathy is a form of emotionally charged imaginative perspective-taking. (p. 50) Some researchers break empathy down into cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy refers to taking another’s perspective inferring their mental state. Affective empathy refers to being sensitive to the emotional states of others and experiencing their emotions for oneself. (Vaskinn, et al., 2023, p2) For this paper, empathy shall be defined as a connective state which involves understanding and potentially sharing the feelings of another leading us to connect emotionally to another person’s experience and perspective. Hyperempathic bias refers to empathic enmeshment that crowds out objective information leading to inaccurate findings.

Human thinking involves both emotional and cognitive processing containing interpretations of both facts and emotions. (Peters, 2021, pp. 16-45) Emotional processing takes place in our limbic brain. The limbic system is a complex set of structures in the brain that deals with emotions, memories, and arousal. When identifying friend or foe, the limbic brain sends out chemical messages that shape our feelings on who we can and who we cannot trust. (Glaser, 2014, p. 50) Our experiences are always interpreted emotionally even when the limbic brain does not react in ways conscious to us. (Steinke, 2019, pp. 13-14) Our cognitive processes constantly interpret internal and external stimulations using our past experiences and remembered interpretations to give meaning to our current experiences. (Dreisback, 2023, pp. 494-495) Emotions generate interpretive states of arousal or pleasure. (p. 489) These emotions fall into four basic categories: mad, sad, scared, glad. (Nurick, 2021) Responding to a stimulus, our limbic brain searches our memory to identify and classify the stimulus as a threat or non-threat and generates interpretations. If a threat is interpreted as best overcome by direct action, we become mad, best overcome by avoidance, we become afraid. When the stimulus reminds us of a previous loss, we feel sad. When a stimulus is perceived as good for us, we feel happy. Thus, our emotions interpret if our experience is additive or depletive to our lives. Empathic connection may involve any and all four of these emotional processes as the experience of others is drawn into our emotionally interpretive processing.

Emotional interpretations are not just a product of an innate biological process but are impacted and learned through social interaction. (Dreisback, p. 495) (Mezirow, 2000, p. 128) Emotional interpretations are shaped by cultural rules. (Sinden and Devall-Martin, 2024, pp. 1-6) Mezirow suggests that empathy is susceptible to social influence and manipulation. (p. 128) Dreisbach argues our cognitive processing always involves our affective state or emotional state which impacts not only what we think but what we remember and perceive. (p. 490) As such, emotional processing leads us to attend to some information and ignore other information based on goal relevancy. (Viviani et al., 2022, p. 2045) Empathy as a conduit of emotional connection is susceptible to these limiting factors.

# Empathy is Recognized as Potentially Biased Toward Exclusion

Empathy is understood to be the connecting process, the emotional process that facilitates inclusion. But empathy can be mistaken. Bloom argues empathic understanding comes from comparing our memories of similar experiences with the perceived experiences of others with the assumption they will feel a similar experience in the same way we do. (p. 66) But is this necessarily the case that all people feel similar experiences in the same way? Beyond being potentially mistaken, empathy shares a more sinister connection with our memory and emotional processing, it can lead us to ingroup bias creating distance rather than connection.

Social identity theorists posit that we form our individual and ingroup identities by comparison with others who are not like us, with outgroups. (Voss, 2022, p. 41) Cognitive scientists recognize human cognition processes and computes information concerning other groups. We interpret if they are a threat, and if so if it is in one’s best interest to accommodate or attack them. (Boyer, p. 49) Social scientists have observed that we naturally feel more empathy toward those who resemble us or who are attractive to us. (Vickers, 2017, para. 7) We feel more empathy toward those who treat us well and cooperate with us than toward those who treat us badly and compete against us. (Bloom, p. 68)

Our ingroup may exert a strong influence over our empathy. We empathize more with our ingroup, those who are for and with us than those who outside and against us. Ingroup influence extends beyond this. For instance, fear of embarrassment will lead us to protect our self-image or self-esteem leading us to conform to our ingroup’s expectations. (Hu and Hsin-Lin, 2024, p. 12) Desiring the respect of our ingroup may also lead a researcher to empathize with a researched group whose identity and values are revered within one’s ingroup of fellow researchers or by the institution in which the researcher is embedded.

# Empathic Inclusion May Be Potentially Biased

Empathy is recognized as potentially impacted by ingroup bias, resulting in negating, or excluding others or their viewpoints. Conversely, empathy can also lead to a positive bias, generating emotional entanglement and promoting non-objective interpretations and conclusions. Human beings are naturally self-inclined. Heidi Maibom, an empathy advocate, acknowledges that we organize and interpret experience so we may act upon it in terms of our own needs. (Suttie, para. 8) This is echoed by Goodhew and Edward (2022) who found we pay more attention to things that have high emotional significance for our self-interest.) Bloom argues empathy is never dominantly other focused but remains self-regarding as we seek to alleviate the emotional injury, we are feeling by alleviating the suffering of the other. (p. 73) Bloom goes as far as to argue that empathy does not generate a positive or open predisposition toward another but rather proceeds from a preexisting positive predisposition. (p. 76)

This positive predisposition can be formed from any number of external influences. For instance, empathy is manipulated by televised media when the antihero series influences us to empathize with morally questionable characters such as murderers or drug dealers by highlighting aspects of their lives, we share in common leading us to feel positive toward and justify their criminal behavior. (Vaage, 2023, pp. 116-118) Empathic emotional processing can so entangle us with the felt needs of others that we are not able to make reasonable judgments regarding them. Bloom gives the example of parents so focused on alleviating their child’s suffering or increasing their happiness, that they make decisions at the expense of what is actually good for the child. (p. 98) Empathy is like a magnet with both repulsive and attractive poles. It can lead us to over-identify with our ingroup increasing distance toward outgroups. It may also lead us to over-entangle ourselves with others. Either may cloud objective judgment.

The dangers of enmeshment have long been recognized within health care. Compassion fatigue is understood to result from over-connecting emotionally with patients and feeling such intense emotions that cognitive processing and coping mechanisms are overloaded. (Lucchesi, 2023, paras. 10-11) A similar over-entanglement could certainly lead to a loss of objectivity in social research impeding fair and truthful interpretation.

A social researcher needs to maintain a degree of objective distance from the subject of his research. Steinke notes that social systems are emotional systems, and they function better when there is a degree of differentiation. (p. 115) Differentiation is the ability to be in a social relationship while maintaining a separate self and not become emotionally reactive but able to maintain a degree of objectivity. (p. 9) Similarly, Vos advocates for the position of the “stranger” who stands both in and out of the group being examined and who is able to bring insights to the problems being examined from outside the group. (pp. 58-60) Bloom advocates for “…cultivating our ability to stand back in order to provide a more rationally effective programme of care.” (Vickers, para. 9) Vickers suggests empathic connection can have value as long as “…it is fortified by a prior rational moral position and appropriately judged action.” (para. 11) An effective researcher will have the emotional intelligence skills to not only understand how others are feeling but also to understand their own feelings and their impact so they may be able to make reasonable and objective judgments about the experience. (Calero, et al., 2023, p. 175) This would include attending to the possibility of hyperempathic bias.

# Arguments for Empathy Critiqued

It is assumed that empathic connection is required to truly understand other people, their experiences, and perspectives. Empathy is usually understood as a positive influence connecting us to others enabling a better understanding of others while motivating and assisting with problem solving. Peter Bazalgette proclaims that putting oneself into another’s shoes is essential for the right action. (Vickers, para. 10) However, if this results in reducing morality to an emotional calculation this could potentially lead to rejection of moral law such as that given by our Creator in the Ten Commandments. Hoffman (2014) argues that empathetic connection has historically generated positive social change. (pp. 71-96) However as we heard earlier, empathic connection can also lead to ingroup bias and distancing from others. Pluckrose (2020) argues that we must include the lived experiences and the emotional and cultural traditions of outgroups and privilege these over reason and evidence-based knowledge which is unfairly dominant. (p. 241) This postmodern critical approach would reduce social research to selective emotionality rather than interpretations based on holistic objective evaluation. Ironically, here empathy, which is supposed to be the inclusive connector, becomes another expression of exclusivity. Maibom argues that partiality toward others is required for justice as complete impartiality makes one indifferent to others and their situations. (Suttie, paras. 26-27) This is to adopt bias as a starting point and what is labeled justice becomes merely one more instance of privilege. In contrast, impartiality allows for the consistent and fair application of research methods and practices. Meier (2024) argues a lack of empathy leads us to be unfair to others and expect from them what we would not expect from ourselves, for instance when we do not recognize how difficult addiction is and judge that they should just quit. While this may be true, it is not necessarily true in every case that a person cannot be fair toward another based on objective data or propositional moral norms.

One of the strongest arguments for empathy is expressed by Vos who suggests that empathy sounds like the Golden Rule. (p. 346) “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (English Standard Version Bible, 2007, Matt 7:12) We do well here to consider two factors. First, Holy Scripture is a comprehensive whole. We do not merely interpret one passage as it stands alone but use Scripture to interpret Scripture holistically. This leads us to the second factor, to recognize the sinful corruption of our human nature. King David proclaimed, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (ESV, Psa 51:5) Sin corrupts our thoughts and desires. (ESV, Eph 2:3) To utilize the Golden Rule to justify conclusions drawn from empathic connection neglects to recognize that our emotions are just as corrupted as anything else within our human nature. Empathy taken to an extreme can lead to affirming sinful behavior. It can lead to moral relativism justifying actions that are morally wrong from a Christian perspective because these actions are experienced in a positive light by the ones we empathize with. Over-empathizing runs the risk of reducing the Gospel to a message of tolerance and affirmation of sin rather than a message of redemption from sinful and morally wrong behavior.

# Through the Lens of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionists argue that individuals actively interpret and construct the social world through their interactions with others. Two key principles in this tradition are useful in better understanding the role of empathy in social research. First, when it comes to meaning-making, symbolic interactionists understand people attach meanings to symbols, gestures, and language based on shared understandings and cultural norms. They stress the role interactions play in creating society and its institutions. (Giddens & Sutton, 2021, p. 23) They also stress the importance of socialization and role-taking in the development of social identity and behavior. Through interaction, individuals learn the norms, values, and expectations that shape their role performances and interactions with others. Role-taking involves not only playing out one’s preferred persona but also imagining how the performance is viewed by others leading the performer to adjust his performance based on other’s expectations. Viewer perspectives also have an influence on team performance encouraging empathy and cooperation. (pp. 483-486)

This suggests the social researcher actively interprets and constructs meaning through the social world through their research with others. Here empathy functions as a socially constructed symbol that can both facilitate and hinder objective research. The social researcher imagines herself in the position of those she is researching to better understand their perspective generating empathy that may help uncover unseen aspects. However, we have seen over-empathic connection can lead to entanglement generating hyperempathic bias crowding out objective information or interpretations rejected by the group being studied.

Researchers are certainly involved in their research. The researcher is an active participant in constructing an understanding of the issue being studied. Researching groups at the micro level, focusing on face-to-face interactions will likely generate empathy which is normally assumed to create better understanding. However, the researcher must beware of over-entanglement that would filter out relevant information or interpretations. This is especially important for the Christian researcher who operates from a Christian worldview informed by Scriptural which is often rejected by the social sciences because of the empirical and antifoundational bias that today’s postmodern culture is limited by.

# Truth: A Universal Longing

Bishop Tom Wright asserts that human beings have a universal longing for truth related to other longings such as beauty, justice, and relationship. Yet he says truth remains elusive and the quest for truth is complex beyond mundane matters using mundane methods but is a truth of a deeper sort that requires a different way of knowing. (2009, p. 48) Postmodernists and the 21st-century academy would reduce truth to nothing more than a socially constructed interpretation, hence justifying the existence of many truths and many micro-narratives expressing a plurality of truths. The Christian recognizes the challenge of finding the truth. Vos suggests that the world is limited by sin and imperfection and sees the truth as unattainable. (p. 13) Fortunately for a world of people whose interpretive insights are limited by and corrupted by sin, truth is still present. Truth is given. St. Paul wrote, “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (ESV, 1Co 1:20) God proclaimed “…my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways…” (ESV, 55:8) But in the Gospel of John Jesus promised to send the Comforter who would guide the faithful into all truth. (ESV, Joh 16:13) That truth is found in God’s Word as Jesus Himself prayed to the Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” (ESV, Joh 17:17) In our search for truth as Christian social researchers who borrow from various sociological perspectives, we do well to remember the limitations of these approaches and to acknowledge and counter our cognitive and emotional biases that would hinder our finding of this truth including hyperempathic bias whose emotional entanglements could lead us to interpret human behavior from the perspective of a fallen world than from a position enlightened by God’s Word.

# Conclusion

This paper addressed empathic connection as a potential bias in social research. While empathy is often seen as essential to facilitate social understanding and problem-solving, it can also lead to hyperempathic bias. Empathy is an emotionally laden cognitive process that can lead to biased interpretations and conclusions. Understanding the role of emotional processing and its limitations in human cognition we also understand the impact of social interactions on emotional interpretations. Hyperempathic bias occurs when researchers become overly entangled with their subjects, leading to biased judgments. Researchers must maintain a degree of emotional distance to ensure that empathy does not cloud their judgment and that they accurately interpret research findings. This is especially important for the Christian researcher whose interpretations dare not violate the clear teaching of Holy Scripture. As Christian researchers, we understand the limitations of human-created methodologies to comprehensively understand human behavior from God’s perspective. More importantly, we understand the power of sinful corruption over our own thinking and emotional processes, thus being aware of our own hyperempathic bias can assist us in finding and communicating truth.

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