Online Empathy

Niki Lambropoulos
Intelligenesis Consultancy Group, UK

BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

Scientific research on empathy started in the early 20th century. Only in 1992 did the development of cognitive neuroscience help di Pellegrino, Fadiga, Fogassi, Gallese and Rizzolatti to identify the mirror neurons related to representations of an Object from a Subject, verifying Lipps' (1903) and McDugall's (1908) suggestions on empathy. Primary empathy is related to the automatic matching of the feelings of the other person (Fischer, 1980). An example is the relationship newborns have between each other on their first days on the earth. Another verification of mirror neurons was made by Rizzolati and Arbib (1998), as well as identification of the areas where the mirror neurons are located, interacting with areas in both hemispheres (Broca area 44 and PE/PC).

Hiltz and Turrof (1978) referred to members' comments on their closest friends, whom seldom or never see each other face to face. Preece and Ghozati (2001) made the first serious attempt to search and analyze empathy in online communities as well as understand it better towards sociability and usability. They used the process-based model of knowing, feeling and responding compassionately for *distress* by Levenson and Ruef (1992), and the results showed that empathy is widespread in communities. In 2002, Preston and de Waal presented their Perception-Action Model (PAM), a process-based suggestion on empathy. PAM states that:

attended perception activates subject's representations of the state, situation and object, and that activation of this representation automatically primes or generates the associated autonomic and somatic responses, unless inhibited. (p. 4)

PAM also relates empathy to the levels of awareness, reconciliation and vicarious learning as well as effortful information processing. The latter, and the mirror neurons discovery, suggest that empathy can be taught and learned as it creates symmetries between the Subject and the Object, activating the primary empathy in human perception. Self-awareness leads to self-directed behaviour, then empathy arousal and, as such, arousal of shared intentions, feelings and thoughts for common goals, desires and beliefs for community building. Eslinger, Moll and de Oliveira-Souza (2002) are among the first neuroscientists to search for Subjects' empathy from written text. They found that text judging showed different human brain pattern activation, strongly influenced by emotional experience of the text due to reasoning and judgment.

As such, the hypothesis was the following: If empathic members are sensitive organs who have the ability to simulate members' common visions, needs and suggestions (Goleman, McKee & Boyatzis, 2002), they could be detected on the Internet, form a group and be mediators or messengers between authorities and the public.

THE STUDIES

In the first study, conducted in 2003, 13 individuals accepted to participate in a discussion forum on Peace and War before, during and after the invasion in Iraq (March 10 through August 23, 2003; the invasion was conducted on March 20). The subjects were from 16 to 48 years old and came from Canada, India, Greece and the U.K. They had to read the messages in the forum and keep notes simultaneously for three weeks in a self-observatory way. Then, they had to answer semi-structured interviews and hand in their notes. The results suggested that all members were initially open to other members. The second week, two respondents developed empathy (15.3%), as they reported identification of other members' profiles, writing styles and similarities in feelings derived from the text. The same members decided to reply to the forum, which indicated that 100% of the members who developed empathy were activated.

In the second study, conducted July 2004, a focus group of 28 online community managers discussed active participation and groupz-ware. The Social Network Analysis (SNA) on social behaviour and interaction—using Netminer as the research software and Content Analysis on textual communication using ATLAS.ti—revealed that the most empathic members gave important insights to the discussion. In addition, specific message structures appeared from empathic members who followed PAM.

DISCUSSION

The mechanism of reading and understanding others' meaning from a text leads to emotional contagion and motoric responses exhibited as online engagement. PAM showed that empathy has social consequences on community building, relating activation as a motoric response to empathy. Familiarity and similarity increase the levels of interpersonal trust (Feng, Lazar, & Preece, 2004), which is very important for rising and, as such, predictability of members' actions could facilitate towards goals and common visions. The levels of empathy are increased when based on empathic members' accessing and assessing members' states, which direct them to initiate or terminate actions for the sake of the community. Interpersonal trust is the key for developing empathy in order to cross the red line of inactive participation to energetic engagement. SNA research could bring the actors on stage and suggest the individuals who are able to help the community.

CONCLUSION

The results indicated that online empathy exists; in addition, it helps members to construct roles as in Community of Practice. The members identify and define roles for themselves and roles for the other members in a self-organized, organic way. If we use the Internet and online communities to reach our targets as citizens in an active society, then we incorporate the basic qualities of eDemocracy. We suggest the wide use of focus groups in order to gather and assess online communities' members suggestions and identification of people who are able to help our communities, either as volunteers or, even better, as our representatives in public affairs.

REFERENCES

di Pellegrino, G., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., Gallese, V., & Rizzolatti, G. (1992). Understanding motor events: A neurophysiological study. *Experimental Brain Research, 91*, 176-80.

Eslinger, P.J., Moll, J., & de Oliveira-Souza, R. (2002). Emotional and cognitive processing in empathy and social behaviour. *Behavioral and Brain Science, 25*, 34-35.

Feng, J., Lazar, J., & Preece, J. (2004). Empathic and predictable communication influences online interpersonal trust. *Behavior and Information Technology* (in press).

Fischer, K.W. (1980). A theory of cognitive development: The control and construction of hierarchies of skills. *Psychological Review, 87,* 477-531.

Goleman, D., McKee, A., & Boyatzis, R.E. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence.* Harvard, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Hiltz, S.R., & Turoff, M. (1978). *The network nation: Human communication via computer.* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Levenson, R.W., & Ruef, A.M. (1992). Empathy: A physiological substrate. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63*(2), 234-246.

Lipps, T. (1903). Einfühlung, Innere Nachahmung und Organempfindung. *Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie, 1*, 465-519.

McDougall, W. (1908). *An introduction to social psychology.* London: Methuen.

Peace and War in Taking IT Global. (2004). Retrieved November 5, 2004, from *www.takingitglobal.org/*

Preece, J. (2000). *Online communities: Designing usability, supporting sociability.* Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.

Preece, J., & Ghozati, K. (2001). Observations and explorations of empathy online. In. R.R. Rice & J.E. Katz (Eds.), *The Internet and health communication: Experience and expectations* (pp. 237-260). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Preston, S.D., & de Waal, B.M. (2002). Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases. *Behavioral and Brain Science, 25*, 1-72.

Rizzolatti, G., & Arbib, M.A. (1998). Language within our grasp. *Trends in Neurosciences, 21*, 188-94.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KEY TERMS

Empathy: Matching other persons' feelings. There is a Distinction between Empathy and projection; the direction of matching the feelings is opposite. In empathy, the Subject moves towards the Object of observation; whereas in projection; the Subject projects his/her own feelings to the Object, acquiring a false image of the Object.