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Empathy, Group Identity, and the Mechanisms of Exclusion: An Investigation into the Limits of Empathy

Thomas Fuchs[1]

Abstract There is a conspicuous tendency of humans to experience empathy and sympathy preferentially towards members of their own group, whereas empathetic feelings towards outgroup members or strangers are often reduced or even missing. This may culminate in a "dissociation of empathy": a historical example are the cases of Nazi perpetrators who behaved as compassionate family men on the one hand, yet committed crimes of utter cruelty against Jews on the other. The paper aims at explaining such phenomena and at determining the limits of empathy. To this purpose, it first distinguishes between two levels of empathy, namely primary or intercorporeal and extended or higher-level empathy. It then investigates the mutual interconnection of empathy and recognition, which may be regarded as a principle of extending empathy to others regardless of whether they belong to one's own group or not. However, this principle is in conflict with ingroup conformism and outgroup biases that hamper the universal extension of empathy. Thus, a denial of recognition and exclusion of others from one's ingroup usually results in a withdrawal or lack of extended empathy which then influences primary empathy as well. On this basis, and using the historical example of mass executions during the Holocaust, the paper investigates the mechanisms of exclusion which may lead to a withdrawal of recognition and finally to a dissociation of empathy.

Keywords Empathy · Recognition · Group identity · Exclusion · Objectification · Dehumanization

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1 Introduction

There is a conspicuous tendency of humans to experience empathy, and even more so sympathy, preferentially towards members of their own group. On the contrary, empathetic feelings toward outgroup members or strangers may often be diminished or even be missing completely. This may culminate in a *compartmentalization* or *dissociation of empathy*: a well-known historical example can be seen in the cases of Nazi perpetrators who behaved as compassionate family men on the one hand, yet committed crimes of utter cruelty against Jews on the other, apparently with little or no feelings of empathy or pity. Sadly enough, one could add many other examples such as the genocide perpetrated by the Serbs against the Bosnians in the Balkan war, or by the Hutu against the Tutsi in Rwanda, both occurring in the 90s of last century. In all these cases, the crimes were committed against a group that had previously lived in peaceful neighborhoods with the perpetrators and had first to be defined as an outgroup, often on the basis of highly questionable criteria.

Thus, the capacity of empathy as such is apparently not sufficient to be felt and realized towards all members of the human species as a matter of course. A first assumption would be that its extension beyond the primary group requires an additional *identification with the other* as one's equal, which in social philosophy is usually conceived as a relationship of *reciprocal recognition*. A further conclusion can be drawn from the historical examples: through a kind of redefinition and a corresponding reframing of interpersonal perception, recognition may be withdrawn or denied. Then people who previously belonged quite naturally to one's own community, right up to one's immediate neighbors or acquaintances, may suddenly become outsiders, pariahs or unpersons towards whom even basal

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human feelings of empathy or compassion are no longer felt. Empathy may then be "unhooked", as it were, or dissociated. The question how this unsettling dissociation of empathy may be explained is the central topic of my paper.

This question is not easy to answer, and to prepare the ground, we will need a rather broad basis in social philosophy and psychology. An important concept in this context consists in the notion of *recognition* as introduced famously by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807/1967), and readopted more recently by Cavell (1969), Taylor (1992) and Honneth (1996, 2008), among others. The recognition or acknowledgment of the other as a person to whose claim or call I have to respond has been proposed as a fundament of human relationships, sometimes even as a presupposition of empathy itself. Recognition may be denied, however, in particular as a result of a deprivation of the fundamental claims and rights that a person enjoys as a member of a community of mutual obligations. Such experiences of misrecognition and social exclusion often result in a "struggle for recognition" (Honneth 1996) on the part of individuals or whole groups who suffer from the discrimination. They are usually connected to a withdrawal or lack of empathetic feelings on part of the members of the discriminating group.

This helps to specify the question I want to investigate in the following, namely how empathy is connected to (a) recognition and (b) group identity in such a way that a lack or loss of empathetic feelings may occur under certain circumstances. This can be further expressed by the following questions:

– What is the nature of empathy? Should we regard it as a primary form of interpersonal connectedness or rather as being dependent on antecedent recognition and identification with the other?
– How far does empathy reach? Is there something like a general empathetic disposition ("universal empathy") which can be restricted or suspended secondarily, or is empathy only gradually and under certain conditions extended from one's kin to outgroup members?
– What are the presuppositions for a withdrawal of empathy from other people? What are the mechanisms of exclusion that cause a dissociation of empathy?

I will investigate these questions in the following steps:

(1) I start with the distinction between a level of *primary empathy*, which is mainly based on intercorporeality and interaffectivity, and a level of *extended empathy* informed by perspective-taking and other cognitive means.
(2) I will then investigate the mutual interconnection of empathy and recognition, drawing in particular on Honneth's and Cavell's concepts. My thesis will be that recognition is based on primary empathy, but as such only emerges at the higher level of reciprocal intersubjectivity where it is mainly interrelated with extended empathy.
(3) The assumption of a natural "universal empathy" is then rejected on empirical grounds: research in developmental and social psychology points to a close connection of empathy with group identity. Thus, a denial of recognition and exclusion of others from one's ingroup usually results in a restriction or withdrawal of extended empathy which then influences primary empathy as well.
(4) On this basis, and using the historical example of mass executions during the Holocaust, I will then look more closely at the mechanisms of exclusion which may lead to a withdrawal of recognition and to a dissociation of empathy. Among these, I emphasize in particular the reification and dehumanization of victims and the self-instrumentalization of perpetrators.

1.1 Levels of Empathy

In the following, I take empathy to denote the complex human capacity to understand, to share, and to adequately respond to, the emotions and intentions of others. This may be achieved

(a) On a basic level, through direct embodied perception of another's expressive behavior, implying one's own bodily resonance as well as one's spontaneous feelings towards the other *(primary, intercorporeal empathy)*;
(b) On a higher level, through cognitive capacities such as psychological knowledge, inference from situational cues, communication, perspective-taking and imaginary self-transposal, that means by putting oneself "into the other's shoes" *(cognitively extended empathy)*.[1]

While the first kind of empathy is bound to embodied or face-to-face interactions, the second may either amplify

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[1] This is now often simply called "cognitive empathy", particularly in cognitive neuroscience (for example Smith 2010; Shamay-Tsoory et al. 2009). However, since the very term empathy implies an affective (not necessarily positive) attitude towards the other, the notion of "cognitive empathy", rather seems an oxymoron. The cognitive processes involved rather serve to differentiate and usually to intensify one's empathetic feelings. This is not to deny that for example psychopaths may use merely cognitive means of imagining others' feelings and thus all the more effectively manipulate them. However, if there is really no affective experience involved whatsoever, it would be more adequate to speak of "quasi-empathy" in this case.

or specify one's understanding in the direct interpersonal encounter or also work in detachment from it, that means, while only imagining absent others or only virtually communicating with them (Decety 2005; Fuchs 2014, 2017a). It is also important to note that both forms of empathy mutually influence one another: primary empathy can pave the way for additional efforts to understand the other by cognitive means, whereas taking another's perspective may in turn enhance primary feelings of empathy, as well as sympathy.[2]

Primary empathy thus arises from the direct, bodily contact with another person—in other words, from an interactive process in which both partners are immersed. This intercorporeality, as Merleau-Ponty (1960) termed it, means experiencing others as embodied subjects who display expressions of their emotions and show their intentions in their behavior. At the same time, one feels physically moved to respond to them in adequate ways. This primary empathy has been emphasized by phenomenologists as a particular kind of interpersonal perception (Thompson 2001; Zahavi 2001, 2011). As Husserl (1952) and Scheler (1923/2008) have argued, we are originally directed towards others in the *"personalistic"* or engaged attitude, perceiving them as psychophysical unities, and thus being "…directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing" (Scheler 2008, p. 260). Similarly, Schütz regarded direct face-to-face encounters as basic in the sense that all other forms of interpersonal understanding derive their validity from the pre-predicative relation to the other or the "thou-orientation" (*Du-Einstellung*, Schütz 1967, p. 162). Here the other's body is not just a tool for conveying signs of hidden intentions to be detected by a "theory of mind", but it is rather itself intentional and expressive.

Primary empathy develops as early as the first year of life, corresponding to the notion of "primary intersubjectivity" coined by Trevarthen (1979). In their first months, infants are capable of discerning emotions in the facial expressions, gestures, vocal intonations, postures and movements of others (Hobson 2002, pp. 39ff.; Fuchs 2013, 2017b). For example, they discriminate and imitate facial expressions of happiness, sadness, surprise, and the like (Field et al. 1982), and they respond to them in affective synchrony (Trevarthen 1979). Thus, they attune to an adult's smile and other facial gestures with a mimetic response, on the basis of a proprioceptive sense of their own body and an intermodally linked perception of the

other as an agent "like me" (Meltzoff and Moore 1997; Meltzoff 2007).

Since bodily imitation evokes corresponding feelings as well, a mutual affective resonance gradually develops within the primary dyad. Six to eight weeks olds already engage in proto-conversation with their mothers by smiling and vocalizing (Trevarthen 1979, 1993). According to Stern (1985) and Tronick (1998), the temporal flow patterns and kinematics of the interaction that are felt by both partners result in *affect attunement*. Thus, emotions are primarily not enclosed in a hidden mental sphere to be deciphered from outside, but emerge between self and other in the expressive intercorporeal dialogue. Long before the development of verbal communication or a concept of "other minds", bodily interaction already forms a bridge for emotional understanding. Primary empathy is thus bound to intercorporeality and interaffectivity (Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009; Fuchs 2017b).[3]

In contrast, *extended empathy* develops later on. By the end of the first year of life, infants become able to share their attention with an adult through pointing towards external objects and mutual gaze-following. In the course of these and other triangulating interactions, they start to grasp the others' point of view and learn to take their perspective (Tomasello 1999; Tomasello and Haberl 2003; Fuchs 2013). This crucial stage of development has also been termed "secondary intersubjectivity" (Trevarthen and Hubley 1978). On this basis, and supported by narrative practices (Gallagher and Hutto 2008), infants gradually extend their understanding to hidden or longer-term intentions of others. Thereby they also enhance their empathetic capacities, for example by imagining to be in the other's place. However, as Stern (1985) and Hobson (2002) have argued, this cognitive development is nevertheless based on interaffectivity: it is because infants are already connected with others through mutual affection that they become able to understand them as intentional agents, and thus, to transcend their own egocentric point of view. Moreover, primary embodied understanding and empathy are not replaced when verbal interaction develops later on. Founded in early infancy, they are more deeply anchored in the body and its spontaneous resonance. Hence, they

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[2] On a third form of "reiterated empathy" (Stein 1989), that means, feeling the other's empathetic feelings towards oneself, see Fuchs 2017a.

[3] A neurally based resonance system ("mirror neurons") contributes to this intercorporeal resonance at the roots of empathy (Gallese 2002; Bråten 2007). To take only one example: seeing someone else being painfully hurt activates one's own neural pain matrix in the cingulate cortex (Hutchison et al. 1999), as if one would feel the pain in one's own body. It should be noted, however, that primary empathy, as being based on a "dialogical" process, has to be distinguished from emotional *contagion*, in which a similar emotion is induced in oneself without being aware that it is caused by the other (e.g. babies start crying when they hear other babies cry, to give a well-known example).

remain the basis of our social interactions and relationships throughout life.

1.2 Empathy and Recognition

Now let us consider the relation between empathy and recognition. The notion of recognition is famously derived from Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity, where it implies recognizing the other as the "other of myself" and thus, a self-other reciprocity, which is at the same time the foundation of reflective self-consciousness—seeing oneself with others' eyes. However, both Cavell (1969) and Honneth (2008) have also argued for a primary form of recognition or acknowledgment (which is the term Cavell uses) that is not based on a reflective stance. This elementary form of recognition, as we will see in a moment, may be regarded as largely equivalent to primary empathy, and like the latter, it is not captured by cognitive theories of social understanding based on mind-reading, inference or perspective-taking either.

Cavell (1969) introduces the notion of acknowledgment as a response to skepticism about other minds. His argument against the skeptic would not be that we can have any direct knowledge about others' thoughts or feelings—in this the sceptic always has an advantage—but that *our primary relation to others is not of an epistemic nature at all*. Understanding others means to adopt an attitude of involvement or concern in which their expressive behavior, for example of pain, is not taken as a basis of a questionable certainty but as a call for an adequate response. I understand that the other is in pain precisely inasmuch as I feel a concern and obligation to 'answer' his expressions. This is the attitude of acknowledgment, and it is not taken by an epistemic subject but by a subject of empathetic engagement, or of Schütz's "thou-orientation" mentioned above. Similarly, and drawing on the evidence from developmental research, Honneth (2008, pp. 40ff.) has argued that "recognition is primary to cognition": babies are emotionally attuned to their caregivers from the first months of life on; they experience their welcoming and caring attitude and identify with them. This results, according to Honneth, in a primary form of recognition which precedes any cognitive access to other minds, and which is therefore more or less tantamount to primary empathy. Hence, Honneth gives a two-level account of recognition: there is an "elementary", pre-reflective recognition at the level of primary intersubjectivity, and second-order, normative recognition at a higher level, implying the affirmation of the other *as a person*.

However, one may question whether such an extension of recognition to primary stages of intersubjectivity is appropriate to the concept and its Hegelian background

of reciprocity.[4] Moreover, it is not clear how such a deeply rooted form of recognition could possibly be suspended or lost through later acts of withdrawal or deprivation of recognition *("Aberkennung")* as they were investigated by Honneth in his earlier work. I agree with Cavell and Honneth in that understanding others as intentional agents with their own purposes and beliefs is based on a pre-established empathetic relationship and community; it is thus not a merely cognitive achievement. However, the actual *recognition* of the other, in my opinion, presupposes at least secondary intersubjectivity; for it means an affirmation and approval which is bound to the cognition of the other *as other*. It therefore cannot be based on an affective relationship alone.

In its fully developed sense, recognition would thus depend on a 'decentering': I experience the other as someone with his own point of view, his own wishes and purposes; as someone whose claim I have to answer, who restricts my unlimited freedom and suspends my egocentric perspective. Far from being just a form of primary empathetic relation, recognition means to acknowledge the other as a person with claims and rights that are in principle equivalent to my own.[5] It is thus closely related to the stage of extended empathy which also depends on taking the other's perspective: to perceive the other *as other*. Moreover, recognition is accompanied by higher-level emotions and attitudes which belong to the reciprocal commitment of persons: respect,[6] fairness, consideration, concern, gratitude, but also feelings of shame, guilt, indignation, resentment, forgiveness, etc. All these self-other-related emotions

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[4] A similar critique of Honneth's overstretching the concept of recognition has been put forward by Butler (2008), Geuss (2008) and Varga and Gallagher (2012). The latter propose to use the term "affective proximity" instead, which characterizes primary intersubjectivity in a similar way as my notion of primary empathy.

[5] This normative concept of recognition is also supported by Brandom: "To recognize someone is to take her to be the subject of normative statuses, that is, of commitments and entitlements, as capable of undertaking responsibilities and exercising authority" (Brandom 2007, p. 136). One may argue that this does not apply to Cavell's notion of acknowledgement which is not necessarily related to a Hegelian background. This cannot be discussed here in more detail; however, I am inclined to demand higher-level intersubjectivity as a presupposition for acknowledgment as well.

[6] Interestingly, Kant also emphasizes the decentering that is implied in the important notion of respect: "Respect is properly the conception of a worth which thwarts my self-love. (…) The object of respect is the law only, that is, the law which we impose on ourselves, and yet recognize as necessary in itself. (…) Respect for a person is properly only respect for the law (of honesty, etc.) of which he gives us an example" (Kant 1873, p. 18). One might not share Kant's emphasis on an abstract principle of law in this context; nevertheless it becomes clear that feelings belonging to recognition such as respect presuppose a higher-level standpoint, from which the "general other" (Mead) comes into view.

develop only from the 2nd year of age, on the basis of decentering and perspective-taking (Tangney et al. 2007; Fuchs 2013). Recognition is thus bound to a network of reciprocal social relations and emotions in which the others count as my equals, or, in other words, it presupposes a community of subjects which share their views, values and commitments.

1.3 Empathy, Recognition, and Group Identity

I have pointed out that primary or affective empathy is a foundation of recognition, but that the latter is bound in addition to a decentered perspective through which the other appears as "the other of myself" (Hegel). I now turn to the relation between empathy, recognition and group identity. If recognition is bound to a community of subjects, we may first ask how far primary empathy is extended to different communities in the course of early childhood. We will see that despite the particular prosocial orientation of humans, there are clear limits to this extension, depending on the equally important tendency towards conformity with one's group and its identity.

A first differentiation between familiar and non-familiar persons manifests itself in the infant's fear of strangers usually arising between 4 and 8 months of age. It depends on the specific socialization whether this fear persists in the form of a shy attitude or whether it is replaced by openness and curiosity. Apart from this, however, the infant's empathetic capacities and concerns are usually extended to non-family members from a very early age. A number of recent studies have shown that children as young as two generally show a co-operative attitude and helpful behavior even towards unfamiliar adults, mediated by sympathetic concern for the plight of others, a phenomenon that is not found in great apes (Warneken and Tomasello 2006, 2007; Nichols et al. 2009; Tomasello 2016, p. 47). Hence, there seems to exist a particularly human tendency towards social co-operation and altruism.

On this basis, Honneth and others have argued that children quite naturally learn to perceive all other humans as humans and may transfer their empathy in principle to all conspecifics. Only later on the individual may become blind to this habitual "antecedent recognition" (Honneth 2008, p. 45), mainly due to reifying and dehumanizing social practices and ideologies.[7] However, in view of further developmental research, this assumption of a natural extension of empathy seems rather too idealistic. The main

reason is the high relevance of *group identity and conformity* for children which develops already in preschool age. Then their empathetic concerns become clearly graduated in accordance to growing social distance from others and to the definition of who belongs to their own group and who is foreign. Thus, a restriction of empathy is not only due to secondary "forgetfulness of antecedent recognition", as Honneth assumes (2008, pp. 75ff.), but rather the normal case. I will now look more closely at the empirical results.

Compared with other primates, human children generally show a much stronger tendency to social affiliation, imitation and adaptation very early on. Around 3–4 years of age, they also start to develop clear in-group biases in making simple perceptual judgments and show other signs of group conformity (Corriveau and Harris 2010; Haun and Tomasello 2011). Similarly, their loyalty, sympathy and helping behavior is preferably directed toward members of their ingroup (marked by shared language, ethnicity, or joint action and other situational labels), particularly when they reach school age (Dunham et al. 2008; Killen et al. 2013). For example, 4- to 5-year-olds expect and favor loyalty to the group from their ingroup mates, whereas they rather expect disloyalty to the group in outgroup individuals (Misch et al. 2014). Under peer group pressure and fights for status, emphasis on group identity as well as tendencies towards social exclusion may become effective. 5-year-olds who witnessed ostracism of others increase their own affiliative imitation within their group as a consequence (Over and Carpenter 2009). Thus, the tendency of humans "to selectively help, cooperate, and trust those who behave like them, look like them or are labelled with a common group name" already manifests itself early on (Tomasello 2016, p. 92).

Correspondingly, research into altruism in *adults* has shown in numerous studies that prosocial behavior is more focused on members of one's own group or close kin than on distant or non-kin. Important cues for kinship are facial resemblance or sharing the same family name, which has been found to increase helping behavior (Hunt 1990; Okasha 2005, 2013). Equally important are overarching ethnic and cultural characteristics (e.g. looking or dressing alike, talking the same language) and corresponding self-definitions and identities of ingroups ("I am a Greek/a Waziri/a Bushman"), as delimitated from foreigners, "Barbarians", or other outgroups. Research suggests what may be called an "empathy gap" dependent on group affiliation: people are generally less likely to understand and match the emotions of outgroup members, to help them when in need, and even to value their lives as much as those of ingroup members (Gaertner et al. 1982; Saucer et al. 2005; Kunstman and Plant 2008; Pratto and Glasford 2008).

Moreover, the more prejudiced people are, the less likely will they intuitively catch the emotive states of outgroup

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[7] "Under the effect of reifying stereotypes (of women, Jews, etc.), groups of individuals are retroactively deprived of the personal characteristics that have been accorded to them *habitually and without question* on the basis of antecedent recognition" (Honneth 2008, p. 81; emphasis added).

members and react to them adequately (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2012). Mimetic reactions to others' expressions, corresponding to implicit or primary empathy, are significantly reduced in case of disliked outgroup members (Likowski et al. 2008), and racial biases influence the degree of empathetic response to others' physical pain (Azevedo et al. 2013). In sum, social attitudes and group biases act as top-down influences and interfere with primary empathetic capacities when outgroups are concerned. Lack of empathy may then in turn lead to an increasing objectification and schematization of others not belonging to one's own group. One could conclude that it is precisely the exceptionally social orientation of humans which hampers the universal extension of empathy.[8]

Taken together, we may speak of an ambivalent status of empathy in human sociality. On the one hand, the coherence and stability of a group depends not only on shared practices, habits, norms, and traditions, but also on a basic feeling of togetherness and belonging, as a crucial component of a group- or *we-identity*. As Hobson and Hobson (2007) and Zahavi (2015) have pointed out, sharing each other's emotions is an important presupposition for identifying with others, for it means not only feeling the same emotion, but also includes *reciprocal* awareness of jointly participating in an emotional experience. Repeated experiences of such sharing further one's identification with others and with the group as a whole. Though empathy is not necessarily equivalent with actually sharing an emotion,[9] it certainly supports or even enables it. Thus, empathy becomes a paramount medium of establishing group cohesion, both on the level of primary interaffectivity where it favors mutual attachment and bonds, and on the higher level of perspective-taking, norms and rules. Here, it particularly supports moral orientations of fairness and equalization such as the "Golden Rule" or *ethic of reciprocity*: it implies perceiving and recognizing my neighbor as "the other of myself", sharing with me in principle the same claims and rights. The individual "identifies with another in his situation based on a sense of self-other equivalence" (Tomasello 2016, p. 49). So far, both primary and extended empathy clearly support the extension and consolidation of social relationships.

On the other hand, the establishment of group cohesion and we-identity is usually accompanied by an implicit or explicit separation from the alien or 'non-we'. This takes place either as an *external delimitation* of one's own group from foreign ethnicities, or in various forms of *internal discrimination* such as ancient or modern slavery, the caste system in India, or the system of Apartheid in South Africa up until 1991. In all these cases, empathetic dispositions are usually more or less restricted to the ingroup.[10] Early acquired habits, discriminative norms and the denial of recognition compromise or even prohibit the extension of interaffectivity and empathy to outsiders. This is often realized by a distinctive system of separation or of 'purity' versus 'impurity', with the corresponding barriers of taboo, contempt and disgust towards outgroup members—one may think of the pariahs or "untouchables" in India. Here the limits of empathy are clearly visible.

As we can also see, empathy and recognition are interdependent: recognition is based on a primary capacity to be affected by others and to identify with them. Conversely, recognition and misrecognition, that is the affirmation or the denial of perceiving the other as "an other of myself", in turn influence the quality and define the range of empathy which a person invests beyond his primary group. Recognition, for its part, depends to a large extent on social and cultural definitions of ingroup and outgroup, of inclusion and exclusion, of self and alien. Granted, the idea of human rights and human dignity may be regarded as an attempt to extend recognition and empathy to all members of the human species regardless of their ethnic identity— as the Kantian "respect for the humanity in each person". Recognition as the principle of reciprocity has an inherent tendency towards universalization or a *shared humanity*. However, this tendency has always been in conflict with group identities and their bias towards favoring their own and excluding the alien.

Thus, empathy, group identity and recognition stand in a complex and in part contradictory relation with each other. The principle of recognition is not sufficient to overcome empathy biases caused by strong group affiliation. This becomes most obvious by the historical examples of exclusion and dehumanization that I will now investigate. My focus will be on the question how empathy may be withdrawn or dissociated with the result that primary empathetic feelings towards others are no longer effective or even felt. I will explain this mainly by the top-down influence of a denial of recognition and by a self-reification of the perpetrators.

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[8] Of course, this is not to deny that groups of individuals may also be "retroactively deprived" of recognition and empathy, as Honneth argues (and I will investigate these processes in what follows). I am rather defending the more skeptical view that universal recognition and empathy are from the outset the exception rather than the rule.

[9] One can empathically understand another's anger or shame without feeling angry or ashamed oneself.

[10] See Calloway-Thomas (2010) for an extensive study on the intercultural dimension of empathy.

1.4 Dissociation of Empathy: the Mechanisms of Exclusion

The genocides of the twentieth century, by which I mean the mass murders of the Armenians, Jews, Tutsi, Bosnians and others, despite all differences regarding their causes, conditions and extent, had one fundamental common feature: the genocide was preceded by an exclusion of an ethnic or religious group within the respective society. This exclusion was implemented, on the one hand, through a definition and radical separation of a "they-group" from the "we-group"; on the other hand, through an objectification and degradation by which the members of the excluded group were refused their recognition as persons and even denied their humanness. These excluding, depersonalizing and dehumanizing ideologies and policies were also able to neutralize or suspend basic empathetic feelings in the perpetrators toward their fellow humans.

In a widely respected study entitled "Ordinary men: reserve police battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland", Browning (2001) has analyzed a piece of history of the Nazi genocide, namely the mass execution of Polish Jews by the Hamburg police battalion 101. It consisted of almost 500 middle-aged reservists, many ordinary family men, no fanatic Nazis, who in 1942/43 killed 38,000 Jews, men, women and children within about 12 months, by shootings which often lasted for days. The policemen shot their victims at close range and often continued to do so for hours before they were replaced. A peculiar feature was that at the beginning of the executions the policemen were explicitly given the choice whether to take part in the killings or not. Scarcely a dozen of them refrained and subsequently were not punished in any way. As Browning writes:

> The fundamental problem is to explain why ordinary men—shaped by a culture that had its own peculiarities but was nonetheless within the mainstream of western Christian, and Enlightenment traditions—under specific circumstances willingly carried out the most extreme genocide in human history (Browning 2001, p. 222).

To give only one example of the mercilessness which the perpetrator in this case even rationalized as an abysmal form of mercy:

> I made the effort, and it was possible for me, to shoot only children. It so happened that the mothers led the children by the hand. My neighbor then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer. It was supposed to be, so to speak, soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers (2001, p. 73).

Given that we are dealing with rather inconspicuous persons, most of them family men who had received a normal upbringing and generally showed no severe (e.g. psychopathic) lack of empathy, we can only diagnose a more or less complete suspension or dissociation of empathy. How are we to understand this extreme failure of humanity and empathy?

Following Browning, Welzer (2004, 2009) and other social psychologists, we may generally identify five major conditions for genocidal acts:

1) The first is the *discriminatory definition* already mentioned: a specified group of persons, usually a minority, is gradually excluded from the universe of mutual obligations and deprived their rights of participation. Spatial separation, ghettos or distinctive signs such as the Jewish badge in Nazi-Germany visibly mark the members of the outgroup, and in combination with racist or similar stereotypes and ideologies contribute to an increasing withdrawal of recognition and solidarity. Thus, for the policemen of battalion 101 the Jews came to stand outside the circle inside which one would sense and expect human obligation or compassion. Frequently the discrimination of the minority helps to reinforce the otherwise compromised or threatened identity of one's own group, which is then inflated to being superior or unique, for example the "Aryan race".

2) The second condition may be seen in the *objectification or reification* of the discriminated persons. Nussbaum (1995) has summarized what treating another person as an object or thing implies:

   a. *Instrumentalization:* the objectifier treats the person as a tool of his or her purposes.
   b. *Denial of autonomy:* treating the other as someone lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
   c. *Inertness:* considering the person as lacking agency, and perhaps also activity.
   d. *Fungibility:* treating the person as interchangeable with objects;
   e. *Violability:* treating the person as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up and violate;
   f. *Ownership:* treating the person as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
   g. *Denial of subjectivity:* treating the person as someone whose experience and feelings need not be taken into account, or who even lacks the emotions (or at least their refinement) which are attributed to one's own group (Leyens et al. 2001).

h. A criterion not explicitly mentioned by Nussbaum is *de-individualization*, which is treating the excluded group as a faceless, anonymous mass.
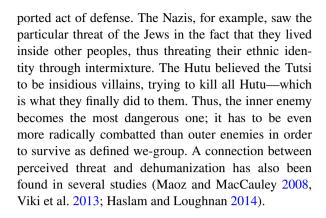
If we regard subjectivity, autonomy, agency, and according to Kant, "being an end in itself" as essential features of a person, then objectification amounts to a derecognition of personhood or to *depersonalization*.

3) The third condition may be termed *dehumanization*: the members of the discriminated group are regarded and treated as inferior, subhuman beings, often reinforced by degrading terms such as 'rats', 'parasites', 'bacilli', 'cockroaches' (as the Tutsi were termed by the Hutu), 'pest', 'vermin', or similar. Dehumanization is more severe than objectification, for it leads from an attitude of mere disregard or coldness to affects of contempt and disgust.[11] These correspond to the process of social exclusion and finally extermination: disgust is the affect which aims at the excretion of the alien from one's own body. Similarly, the disdained group is regarded as a kind of inner parasite of the society which has to be expelled, cleansed away or destroyed (and after all, the infamous Zyklon B originally was a pesticide, thus demonstrating how a certain way of perceiving ultimately becomes reality).

Dehumanization has been a subject of increasing research in social psychology, investigating its different forms, motives, occasions, social targets, and consequences (for an overview see Haslam 2006; Haslam and Loughnan 2014). Most importantly, it has been shown that besides explicit or blatant forms of dehumanization there are also more latent or implicit forms, consisting of prejudices and stereotypes which deny some of the full range of human properties to certain groups without necessarily declaring them non-human. These phenomena of "infrahumanisation" (Leyens et al. 2001) are particularly important in order to explore the various transitions leading from social openness and tolerance to full-blown dehumanization of outgroups.

4) A closely related condition is the definition of the discriminated group as *hostile and threatening*, often in an insidious manner, which makes the genocide a purported act of defense. The Nazis, for example, saw the particular threat of the Jews in the fact that they lived inside other peoples, thus threating their ethnic identity through intermixture. The Hutu believed the Tutsi to be insidious villains, trying to kill all Hutu—which is what they finally did to them. Thus, the inner enemy becomes the most dangerous one; it has to be even more radically combatted than outer enemies in order to survive as defined we-group. A connection between perceived threat and dehumanization has also been found in several studies (Maoz and MacCauley 2008, Viki et al. 2013; Haslam and Loughnan 2014).

5) The final condition refers to the perpetrator group itself (and if we follow Brown's discussion, it was the most important condition in the case of battalion 101): it is usually characterized by a *hierarchical, authoritarian structure* and *high peer pressure*, a situation which favors opportunism and obedience and makes autonomous decisions difficult, particularly under conditions of war. The principle of group conformity that we already met in section three is thus radicalized. The significance of subordination in particular has been repeatedly demonstrated in social psychological experiments. Among the best known are the *Stanford Prison Experiment* (Haney et al. 1973) where test persons were divided into prisoners and guards in a mock prison regime, leading to growing repression and psychological torture within a few days; and, more importantly, the *Milgram Experiment* (Milgram 1963, 1974) in which ordinary people were ready to apply even potentially lethal doses of electroshocks to other subjects when put under pressure by a scientific experimenter. It is remarkable that in both cases the victims did not even belong to a discriminated group before; they were defined by the experiments themselves.

These are the conditions which are more or less met in all historical cases of genocides. Without further differentiating their share in various cases, I return to my central question: what is the relation of these conditions to recognition and empathy? As we have seen, the mechanisms of exclusion take their beginning mainly on the level of *recognition* which the discriminated group is denied as a result of its definition as inferior, alien, hostile or even non-human. As Tomasello aptly summarizes,

the main way that people justify treating others inhumanely is not motivational but, rather, conceptual: they view them not as really human at all (Tomasello 2016, p. 162).

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[11] Thus, studies have found that dispositional disgust-proneness of individuals is associated with dehumanizing tendencies (Hodson and Costello 2007). Moreover, when test subjects were shown pictures of disgust-inducing groups (like homeless or drug addicts), their fMRI scans lacked activation of the medial prefrontal cortex, a brain region that is otherwise involved in social cognition and cognitive empathy (Harris and Fiske 2006). In other words, the presented groups were perceived as more object-like.

Withdrawal of recognition and increasing objectification lead first, then, to a failure of *cognitively extended empathy*: treating persons not as an end in themselves, but as mere objects of one's arbitrariness, will easily lead one to stop asking questions such as: "What is this person likely to feel if I do X? Will my doing X violate her concerns or wishes?" etc. Representing the other's state of mind in one's imagination will then be inhibited. As a result, feelings of indifference or contempt will replace the attitudes of respect, consideration or concern which we usually take towards persons whom we acknowledge.

In contrast, *primary empathy* on the level of intercorporeality arises rather spontaneously and is more difficult to suppress, all the more if children are concerned. An indication of this is the fact that the policemen of battalion 101 avoided shooting their victims in face-to-face situations as far as possible. Moreover, quite a few of them showed reactions of repulsion and sickness up to vomiting during the first mass shootings, whereas later on an increasing habituation and brutalization ensued (Browning 2001, pp. 74 f.). Obviously, the policemen's compliance and conformism on a cognitive level could not completely override their primary embodied reaction.

An important part of the explanation therefore concerns the mechanisms by which the individual perpetrators try to cope with their remaining sensibility and empathy. As we have seen in the example of killing the children, *rationalization* (in this case, as "mercy") is a frequently applied defense mechanism. Another one is grasped by the notion of *role distance*: the person acts without identifying with the role he takes, thus acting in an as-if mode, only externally, so-to-speak, without inner participation. Most important, however, is the mechanism of *self-reification*: the perpetrator takes a de-subjectivizing stance, regarding himself as being only an impersonal tool of his commanders, and acting automatically or spinelessly on behalf of an external order. Milgram called this the "agentic state":

> The essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view themselves as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and they therefore no longer see themselves as responsible for their actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all of the essential features of obedience follow (Milgram 1974, pp. xii, xiii).

This self-instrumentalization mirrors the reification of the victims mentioned above (see 2a, b and d in particular). Taking both together, we can say that the personal relation between perpetrator and victim is reframed as an impersonal, mechanized and externally controlled occurrence stripped from subjectivity or intersubjectivity. This enables a situational detachment from primary feelings of empathy or compassion. By no means is a general lack of empathy presupposed in the perpetrators—they may well save people from drowning, play with their children, take their neighbor's son for a drive, and yet kill hundreds of people in a quite different context and a split-off mental state. Empathy is dissociated and selectively distributed according to the respective context. Spatial separation from one's everyday environment favors this compartmentalization. However, its crucial conditions are found in the discrimination and dehumanization of the outgroup, but equally in the peculiar structure of the ingroup, and finally in the self-reification of the perpetrators.

In sum, a first presupposition for the dissociation of empathy in genocidal actions is the radical separation of a "they-group" from the "we-group", the discriminated group being defined as alien, inferior and/or threatening. Its members are refused recognition as persons with equal rights and dignity, and, through a process of increasing objectification and devaluation, even denied their humanness. These excluding, depersonalizing and dehumanizing ideologies result in a neutralization and suspension of empathetic feelings in the perpetrators, reinforced by high ingroup pressure and mechanisms of self-instrumentalization.

Last but not least, the way the victims are treated—in the case of battalion 101, the mechanical, anonymous mass extermination of naked people—as such realizes the ultimate depersonalization and thus contributes to the suspension of empathy. The killing work itself leads to the fact.

> that the other is no longer seen in the categories of feeling, thinking and acting which we apply to ourselves. The suffering, the death of the victim becomes meaningless, because it has no equivalent in the feelings of the perpetrator. Even the statement: 'a man kills another' is then actually misleading. For the perpetrator the other does not belong to the same category of living beings as he himself (Popitz 1992, p. 57; own transl.).

Similarly, it is the continuous killing as such which exerts a habituating effect on the perpetrators, confirming their readiness to "do their job" even under the most extreme conditions and resulting in ever increasing disinhibition and brutalization. One might even argue that the ultimate dehumanization is not inflicted on the victims but occurs as a *self-dehumanization* of the perpetrators in the course of their actions, leaving an irreversible damage to their personality.

In this way, the genocidal acts themselves create and reinforce their own conditions of possibility, leading to the ever progressive unleashing of violence and extermination that we find particularly in the history of the twentieth century.

2 Conclusion

Starting out from the unsettling phenomenon of a dissociation of empathy in genocidal acts, my aim in this paper was to explain this phenomenon and to determine the limits of empathy. To this purpose, I have first distinguished between primary and extended forms of empathy and then investigated its crucial dependence both on recognition and on a we-identity. This is mirrored, on the opposite side, by the interrelation of exclusion, misrecognition, dehumanization, and a dissociation of empathy.

As I have pointed out, the capacity of primary empathy as such is not sufficient to be realized and felt towards all members of the human species as a matter of course. Instead, it is preferentially directed to one's own group and its members (family, kin, peers, community or home country) as being included in a shared group or we-identity. The extension of empathy beyond the primary group requires an additional identification with the other as one's equal and a relationship of reciprocal recognition that results from higher-level intersubjectivity. Universalist attitudes and values, be it the principle of the Golden Rule, the commandment of love of one's enemies, or the idea of human dignity, aim at extending recognition, empathy and compassion to all humankind. Yet they may come into conflict with the contrary human tendency to feel empathy preferably towards members of one's own group.

Every we-identity is based to some degree on a delimitation from what is foreign or outside. It establishes itself against the "they". To a certain extent, this belongs to the formation of identity and remains unproblematic inasmuch as the group boundaries remain permeable to the outside. However, the more the cohesion and identity of the group is endangered through inner conflicts or disintegration, the higher becomes the pressure to close the group's boundaries and to direct the inner tensions against external, but also internal enemies. Processes of separation and exclusion will then ensue which define a discriminated "they-group" within or outside of society and lead to an increasing denial of recognition, culminating in an objectification and depersonalization of its members.

This (re-)definition and derecognition has a top-down impact on empathy. First, it leads to a lack or withdrawal of extended empathy towards the discriminated group, that means, a refusal to take the other's perspective and imagine what he is living through. But the increasing transformation of the perception of the outgroup influences primary empathy as well, which may be diminished in the process, thus permitting acts of open degradation, violation or even extermination. More frequently, however, spontaneous feelings of empathy towards outgroup members are suppressed or dissociated by the perpetrators through adopting attitudes of self-detachment and self-reification. Thus, the failure of recognition and empathy leads not only to a dehumanizing view of the victims, but also to a dehumanization of the perpetrators themselves.

Although what I have described may convey a rather dismal outlook on the universal mechanisms of exclusion and the weakness of empathy even in highly developed societies, there are still some grounds for cautious optimism. In recent years, processes of reconciliation and forgiveness have increasingly been realized and studied, for example in Rwanda or Darfur, which enable a mutual understanding and to a certain extent a restitution of empathy between victims and perpetrators of the genocide (Staub et al. 2005; Kalayjian and Paloutzian 2009). The intercorporeal, face-to-face contact in an open dialogue is a crucial element in these difficult processes which may allow the perpetrators to regain access to their suppressed feelings of primary empathy. One might at least conclude from this that human empathy, though highly dependent on favorable social conditions and sometimes subject to most severe restrictions, may yet not be completely extinguished.

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