

THE MEANING OF EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING  
IN HUMAN INQUIRY

1. 'DO YOU HAVE TO BE ONE TO UNDERSTAND ONE?'

In his textbook *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science* (1996) Brian Fay holds the opinion that empathy is neither sufficient nor necessary for understanding another person. In this context he conceives 'empathy' as 'being one' or 'psychic identification'. His argumentation may mainly be found in the chapter titled 'Do you have to be one to understand one?' Many university students and others may have digested this text. Hopefully they will agree with my comments.

According to Fay empathy would not be sufficient for understanding another person because of the following arguments. 'To be one' implies 'to have the same or similar experiences as one'. However, 'having the same or similar experiences' does not imply understanding these experiences. Understanding an experience does not just mean having it, because understanding also implies description, interpretation and explanation (p. 18ff.). Moreover, if 'to be one' would also imply 'to have the self-understanding of one', 'to be one' will still be insufficient for understanding because self-knowledge, self-understanding is limited. Self-knowledge and self-understanding are limited regarding one's drives, emotions, motivations, abilities, communicative interactions and mutual influences. In addition, self-knowledge and self-understanding are limited with respect to influences of history, society, institutional contexts, etc. In short, empathy is not sufficient for understanding one, because, first, having the same experiences as one does not imply understanding (interpreting or explaining) these experiences and, second, even if self-understanding would be optimally achieved, it is still limited. Indeed, empathic understanding is not sufficient for scientific understanding in all respects, even in a broader sense.

According to Fay empathy would even be unnecessary for understanding another person. His main argument is that others may understand us better than we understand ourselves, because they are not us, they are different from us and do not become us. Why would this be the case? First, we are often too

enmeshed in the flow of our own activity and feeling to grasp what this flow is all about. Psychic identification will even hinder reflection and understanding. Second, the activities and feelings which make up our lives are often confused and therefore confusing. Ambivalence and mixed-up motives hinder self-knowledge. So, psychic identification would not help. Third, often others can more readily grasp connections between our experiences and feelings on the one hand and external situations and prior events on the other. Others can more easily detect causal patterns, influences and effects, because they have a wider view and are less involved. Fourth, we sometimes hide ourselves from ourselves out of fear, guilt, or self-protection. Self-deception plays an extensive role in our lives. Again, psychic identification would not help. Therefore, empathy in the sense of psychic identification is not necessary for understanding another person. Being one may even hinder understanding one. However, I do not think that empathic understanding is not necessary.

Fay is very satisfied with his conclusion that empathy is not necessary to understand one. To him empathy means to be one and the thesis that you have to be one to understand one is an instance of solipsism. Indeed, if you have to be one to understand one, understanding another would be impossible or at least quite problematic, because to be one is impossible, to have the same or similar experiences as one is impossible or improbable. Hence, the conclusion that empathic understanding is not necessary removes a barrier to mutual understanding. As a matter of fact, understanding another is still possible by describing, identifying and explaining the feelings, thoughts, actions and relations of another, and empathy is not needed.

Fay's conception of empathy as psychic identification is the basis of his argumentation. I do not agree with this conception, because it is one-sided and too narrow. Consequently, I reject his argumentation. I agree with his conclusion that empathy is not sufficient to understand another in all respects, but I disagree with his conclusion that empathy is not necessary for understanding another person. Furthermore, Fay's conception of 'to know' as 'to describe, identify and explain' seems rather cognitivistic to me in the sense of ignoring emotional and affective aspects. In this article, I will argue that optimal empathy is needed in particular types of social research and that emotional and affective aspects of understanding another cannot be ignored.

Fay himself moderates his rejection of the epistemological and methodological significance of empathy as he conceives it:

Sensitivity heightened by shared experience is often an important step in understanding the lives of others: this is the truth contained in the thesis that "You have to be one to know one." But genuine understanding goes beyond sensitivity. To know others – indeed to know oneself – is to be able to make sense of their experience. For this one needs, in addition to sensitivity, the