What is empathy? Although seemingly simple, this question has proven surprisingly difficult to answer. For over 200 years, thoughtful people have tried to understand the general phenomenon in which one individual, through observation of another, comes to experience some change in his or her thoughts or feelings. These efforts have typically fallen into one of two broad categories. One approach has been to consider empathy an essentially emotional phenomenon, with the defining feature of the empathic experience consisting of observers either coming to share the target’s emotional state (e.g., Eisenberg and Strayer 1987) or to experience some emotional state in response to the target’s (e.g., Batson 1991). The other approach has been to consider empathy an essentially cognitive phenomenon, with the defining feature of the experience consisting of observers coming to discern accurately the target’s internal state, but without necessarily experiencing any emotional change themselves (e.g., Wispe 1986).

Recent years have seen growing acceptance of a third approach, which is to explicitly treat empathy as a multidimensional phenomenon that inevitably includes both cognitive and emotional components (e.g., Davis 1983; Hoffman 1984). In this vein, I have previously proposed a model designed to organize all of these approaches into a comprehensive treatment of the empathy phenomenon (Davis 1994); Figure 19.1 contains a somewhat revised and updated version of this model. In contrast to much previous work, the spirit of this model is deliberately inclusive, designed to emphasize the connections between these constructs. Thus, empathy is broadly defined here as a set of constructs that connects the responses of one individual to the experiences of another. These constructs specifically include both the processes taking place within the observer and the affective and nonaffective outcomes that result from those processes. Based on this definition, the model conceives of the typical empathy “episode” as consisting of an observer being exposed in some fashion to a target, after which some response on the part of the observer—cognitive, affective, motivational, or behavioral—occurs. Four related constructs can be identified within this prototypical...
episode: antecedents, which refer to characteristics of the observer, target, or situation; processes, which refer to the particular mechanisms by which empathic outcomes are produced; intrapersonal outcomes, which refer to cognitive, affective, and motivational responses produced in the observer that are not necessarily manifested in overt behavior toward the target; and interpersonal outcomes, which refer to behavioral responses directed toward the target. One critical feature of this model is that it considers both cognitive and affective outcomes to be part of empathy.

Because of its breadth and versatility, in this chapter I will use the model as a framework for selectively presenting and discussing past and current work on the general topic of empathy. At the conclusion of the chapter, I will offer some suggestions regarding promising areas for future research. To begin, however, let us consider in more detail the various elements contained within this model.

**EMPATHY: AN ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK**

**Antecedents**

The first component of this framework encompasses antecedent factors—features of the observer, target, or the situation that might influence, in some way, the subsequent empathy episode.

**THE OBSERVER.** All observers possess certain characteristics that have the potential to influence the empathy episode. One of these is the biological capacity for empathy-related processes and outcomes. Almost all members of our species possess these capabilities, although sometimes serious deficiencies do occur in the ability to imagine other perspectives (e.g., autism) or to experience compassion for distressed others (e.g., sociopathy). Of more importance for the purposes of this chapter are the individual differences that exist in nonclinical populations in the tendency to engage in empathy-related processes or to experience empathic outcomes. A variety of individual difference measures has been developed over the years for the purpose of assessing the dispositional tendency to engage in empathy-related processes such as perspective taking (e.g., Hogan 1969) or to experience empathy-related affective responses (e.g., Mehrabian and Epstein 1972). Of special note here are individual differences in the tendency to experience two particular affective reactions to the distress of others. Specifically, the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy for a person in distress and the tendency to experience personal unease in such cases are especially important antecedent characteristics that have considerable relevance for social interactions.
**The Situation.** All responses to another person, whether cognitive or affective, emerge from some specific situational context, and these contexts vary along certain dimensions. One such dimension is the strength of the situation, defined as its power to evoke an emotional response from observers. For example, a situation that includes a clear display of negative emotion by a weak or helpless target is particularly able to engender powerful observer emotions and would be classified as a “strong” situation. In contrast, situations lacking such evocative emotional cues would be characterized as relatively weak. A second situational feature is the degree of similarity between the observer and target. Although similarity is, of course, affected by characteristics of the observer, it is really a joint function of the target and observer and is thus considered a feature of the situation.

**Processes**

The second major construct within the framework consists of the specific processes that generate empathic outcomes in the observer. Based on the work of Hoffman (1984) and Eisenberg et al. (1991), the model identifies three broad classes of empathy-related processes, chiefly distinguished from one another by the degree of cognitive effort and sophistication required for their operation. In a sense, it is potentially misleading to characterize these processes in terms of dimensions like “cognitive” and “affective.” It is really the outcomes of these processes that can be more clearly identified in this way, and each process is capable of producing both cognitive and affective outcomes. However, given the clear differences in the level of cognitive sophistication required for their operation, it seems reasonable to use this dimension to describe these three broad classes.

**Noncognitive Processes.** Some processes that lead to empathic outcomes require very little cognitive activity. The apparently innate tendency for newborns to cry in response to hearing others cry, which Hoffman (1984) refers to as the primary circular reaction, is one example. Another noncognitive process is motor mimicry, the tendency for observers automatically and unconsciously to imitate the target. Although early conceptions of mimicry viewed it as a somewhat deliberate strategy for “feeling into” the other (e.g., Lipps 1903), more recent approaches (e.g., Hatfield et al. 1994; Hoffman 1984) have treated it as a relatively automatic, largely noncognitive process.

**Simple Cognitive Processes.** In contrast, other processes require at least a rudimentary cognitive ability on the part of the observer. Classical conditioning is an example; if an observer has previously perceived affective cues in others while experiencing that same affect (perhaps because both observer and target are simultaneously exposed to the same unpleasant stimulus), then the affective cues of targets could come to evoke that emotional state. Similar processes of comparably modest sophistication—direct association (Hoffman 1984) and labeling (Eisenberg et al. 1991)—have also been proposed.

**Advanced Cognitive Processes.** Finally, some processes require rather advanced kinds of cognitive activity. One example is what Hoffman refers to as language-mediated association, in which the observer’s reaction to the target’s plight is produced by activating language-based cognitive networks that trigger associations with the observer’s own feelings or experiences. For example, a target who says “My manuscript has been rejected” might exhibit no obvious facial or vocal cues indicating distress, but an observer might respond empathically because her relevant memories (perhaps of an especially undiplomatic review) are activated by the target’s words. The
elaborated cognitive networks of Eisenberg et al. (1991) refer to a very similar process. The most advanced process, however, and the one that has received the most empirical attention, is role-taking or perspective-taking: the attempt by one individual to understand another by explicitly imagining the other’s perspective. It is typically considered an effortful process, involving both the suppression of one’s own egocentric perspective on events and the active entertaining of someone else’s.

Intrapersonal Outcomes

The model’s third major construct deals with intrapersonal outcomes—the cognitive, affective, and motivational responses of the observer that result from exposure to the target. These outcomes are thought to result primarily from the various processes identified at the previous stage in the model.

Cognitive Outcomes. One cognitive outcome is interpersonal accuracy—the successful estimation of other people’s thoughts, feelings, and characteristics; typically, such interpersonal judgments have been viewed as resulting to a considerable degree from role-taking processes (e.g., Dymond 1950). Empathy-related processes have also been implicated in affecting the attributional judgments offered by observers for targets’ behavior (e.g., Regan and Totten 1975). More recently, perspective-taking has been linked to changes in the cognitive representations that perceivers form of targets—in particular, the degree to which these representations resemble the cognitive representations of the self (Davis et al. 1996).

Affective Outcomes. This category consists of the emotional reactions experienced by an observer in response to the observed experiences of the target and is further subdivided into two forms: parallel and reactive outcomes. A parallel emotion might in a sense, be considered the prototypical affective response: an observer’s actual reproduction of the target’s feelings. This sort of emotional matching has clearly been the focus of several historical approaches (McDougall 1908; Spencer 1870). Reactive emotions, on the other hand, are defined as affective reactions to the experiences of others that differ from the observed affect. They are so named because they are empathic reactions to another’s state rather than a simple reproduction of that state in the observer. One response that clearly falls into this category is the feeling of compassion for others referred to variously as sympathy (Wispe 1986), empathy (Batson 1991), and empathic concern (Davis 1983); another example would be personal distress: the tendency to feel discomfort and anxiety in response to needy targets.

Motivational Outcomes. A third category of intrapersonal outcomes, somewhat related to the second, are motivational states produced in the observer by empathy-related processes. For example, forgiveness is often conceptualized as a transformation of motivation toward a transgressing partner in which desires for revenge are reduced and desires for reconciliation are increased (McCullough et al. 1997). More generally, empathic processes have also been linked to increased motivation to value the other’s outcomes (Batson et al. 1995).

Interpersonal Outcomes

The final construct in the model encompasses interpersonal outcomes, defined as behaviors directed toward a target that result from prior exposure to that target. The outcome that has attracted
the most attention from empathy theorists and researchers is helping behavior; both cognitive and affective facets of empathy have long been thought to contribute to the likelihood of observers offering help to needy targets. Aggressive behavior has also been linked theoretically to empathy-related processes and dispositions, with the expectation that empathy will be negatively associated with aggressive actions. The effect of empathy on behaviors that occur within social relationships—a topic that has only recently begun to attract consistent research interest—also falls into this category.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE RELEVANT TO THE MODEL

It should be apparent from this brief overview that this model aspires to incorporate most, if not all, of the social psychological research carried out in the name of empathy. Thus, it is well suited for use as an organizing device, and in this section I will selectively discuss past and contemporary research on empathy, using the organizational model as a framework. The goal is to provide some sense of the history of research efforts in each area, but to also highlight some of the most interesting and provocative lines of research currently under way.

Antecedents

As Figure 19.1 suggests, there are several ways to think about the antecedents of empathic processes and outcomes. At one level, explanations might focus on the inherent human capacity for empathic responding that grapple with the issue of why such capacities would evolve in humans at all. At another level, explanations might focus on our dispositional tendencies to utilize the capacities we possess. Finally, explanations focusing on empathy as it occurs within specific situations must examine features of both the particular setting and of the individuals involved. At each level of analysis, of course, it will be important to carefully distinguish among the various kinds of cognitive and affective process and outcome.

Evolvational Origins of Empathy. The idea that an empathic capacity might have its roots in humans’ evolutionary history has been around for some time. The earliest impetus for such thinking came from theoretical attempts to reconcile altruistic behavior with evolutionary theory. Self-sacrificing behavior, which on the surface seems incompatible with the notion that we are all engaged in a struggle for survival, has been found in many species and has been explained by such additions to evolutionary theory as inclusive fitness (Hamilton 1964), genetic similarity theory (Rushton et al. 1984), and reciprocal altruism (Trivers 1971). Each of these approaches accounts for altruistic behavior by arguing that the genes contained within an individual “benefit” from behavior that increases their survival chances. This holds true even if we are talking about identical genes residing in others—especially close relatives. Thus, a genetic tendency to offer help—even costly help—to those who share our genetic make-up can be evolutionarily advantageous.

Empathy comes into this discussion because of the need for some proximate mechanism to produce altruistic behavior. It is one thing to say that genes “for” altruism produce altruistic behavior, which, in turn, leads to greater survivability for those genes in the population. However, the altruistic behavior is still undertaken by the individual organism and not the gene; some mechanism must exist within that individual—between the gene level and the behavioral act—to prompt the individual to act against its own short-term interest. Hoffman (1978) has made the case
for empathy’s role by arguing that any mechanism responsible for producing altruism in humans must be reliable, but also flexible; that is, it should not be so automatic in operation that behavior could not be modified as a result of environmental conditions. In particular, the mechanism should allow the behavior to be affected by judgments regarding costs to the individual and benefits to the recipient(s). Thus, Hoffman argued that what must have been selected for during evolution was a biologically based predisposition to act altruistically, but one that was still subject to control by cognitive processes. In his view, empathy, defined as a vicarious affective response to the experiences of others, meets these criteria. This analysis therefore suggests that the empathic response selected for by eons of evolutionary pressure is the sharing of negative affect.

**INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN EMPATHY.** Another way to think about the antecedents of empathy is to focus on individual differences in empathy-related constructs—that is, the degree to which individuals possess the ability or the motivation to think, feel, or act in an empathic fashion. Several approaches have been taken in attempts to measure these differences. One early and influential technique was that of Dymond (1950), who defined empathy in terms of the accurate transposition of the self into the thinking, feeling, and acting of others. Thus, her method consisted of assessing the accuracy with which observers could estimate how targets describe themselves on trait-rating scales. Unfortunately, high levels of accuracy in this technique can result from several different factors, most of which have nothing to do with empathy (Cronbach 1955; Gage and Cronbach 1955). Once this was recognized, this method rapidly fell from favor.

The most widely used contemporary measure based on a cognitive definition of empathy is, no doubt, Hogan’s (1969) empathy scale, which was developed based on a definition of empathy that emphasized the intellectual attempt to imagine another’s point of view without experiencing any affective response. The 64-item scale is made up of items drawn from other psychological instruments (e.g., the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the California Psychological Inventory (CPI)). Just as Hogan’s scale is the most widely used measure employing a purely cognitive definition of empathy, the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE; Mehrabian and Epstein 1972) has been the most widely utilized instrument adopting an affective definition. The QMEE was designed explicitly to assess the chronic tendency to react emotionally to the observed experiences of others. Its 33 items assess the likelihood of experiencing such affective responses in a variety of contexts.

In addition to those instruments based on cognitive or affective definitions of empathy, one measure based explicitly on a multidimensional view of empathy has also been developed. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis 1980, 1983) takes as its starting point the notion that empathy consists of a set of separate but related constructs and seeks to provide measures of dispositional tendencies in several areas. The instrument contains four, seven-item subscales, each tapping a separate facet of empathy. The perspective-taking (PT) scale measures the reported tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others in everyday life. The empathic concern (EC) scale assesses the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for unfortunate others. The personal distress (PD) scale taps the tendency to experience distress and discomfort in response to extreme distress in others. The fantasy (FS) scale measures the tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into fictional situations. In recent years the IRI has become increasingly popular, and in the sections that follow, some of the research using this instrument will be mentioned.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SITUATION.** A third approach to the question of antecedents has been to focus not on the empathizer but on characteristics of the situation—in particular, the target, or the relationship between the target and observer. Much less systematic
Empathy

study has been devoted to this approach, and the issue that has received the most study is probably the degree of similarity between observer and target.

Early investigations of this question tended to support the link between similarity and empathic responding (Krebs 1975; Stotland 1969; Stotland and Dunn 1963). For example, Krebs (1975) manipulated observer-target similarity and found that observers who believed that they were similar to the target displayed heightened skin conductance and vasoconstriction when the target appeared to receive shocks; they also reported feeling worse during the procedure. However, not all investigations have supported the notion that similarity produces affective reactions in observers (Gruen and Mendelsohn 1986; Marks et al. 1982). Most recently, Batson et al. (2005) found in two studies that observer-target similarity produced no reliable increase in reported sympathy for a distressed target. Given the somewhat inconsistent prior evidence for the role of similarity in producing affective responses, Batson et al. interpreted the results of their investigations as consistent with the view that similarity does not have the impact on empathic processes and outcomes that is often supposed.

Processes

The second major component of the organizational framework is concerned with the processes that take place within an observer during an empathy episode—in short, the actual mechanisms that bring about changes in thoughts, emotions, or behavior. It is possible to identify a number of such processes that vary in terms of the cognitive complexity required for their operation (see Figure 19.1). To date, however, there has been considerable variation in the degree to which these processes have been studied, and some have received almost no systematic investigation at all. Two of these processes, though, have generated a considerable literature.

Motor Mimicry. Motor mimicry refers to the fact that observers often imitate (usually unconsciously) a wide variety of behaviors observed in others. This tendency appears early in life—infants will imitate the facial expressions of adults (Meltzoff and Moore 1977)—and does not seem to abate over the life span. Indeed, adults have been shown to mimic not only the facial expressions of their interaction partners but also body posture, gestures, and vocal characteristics (see Hatfield et al., 1992, for a fuller description).

What implication does such mimicry have for empathy-related outcomes? One possibility is that it allows observers to more accurately infer targets’ internal states, and in fact Lipps (1903) and Titchener (1909) both argued that such imitation was at the heart of our ability to “feel into” another person. In recent years, however, research has focused less on the issue of accuracy and more on delineating how mimicry can lead observers to experience emotional responses similar or identical to those of the target.

One approach has been taken by Hatfield et al. (1992, 1994), who have termed this general phenomenon emotional contagion. In order for such emotional contagion to occur, two separate processes must unfold. First, it is necessary that observers mimic the behavior of targets and, second, that this mimicry produces in the observers an emotional state that parallels that of the targets. Evidence for the first process (mimicry) is plentiful, as noted above. In addition, considerable research supports the conclusion that this mimicry of others produces in observers emotional states consistent with the observed affect (e.g., Adelmann and Zajonc 1989).

Recent work by neuropsychologists has begun to identify the neural mechanisms that might underlie these processes. Evidence suggests that humans, along with other primate species, possess specialized neurons that are activated both when we engage in a certain action (e.g., grasping a tool)
and when we simply observe that action carried out by someone else (Gallese 2003). Because these “mirror neurons” respond in the same way whether an action is carried out by the self or other, the implication is that we are, in a sense, primed for behavioral mimicry. Preston and Dewaal (2001) have argued that the fundamental mechanism underlying empathy is this perception action mechanism (PAM)—a biological tendency, when observing the state of another, to automatically activate one’s internal representations of that state, which, in turn, generate autonomic and somatic responses in the observer.

Given the considerable evidence that mimicry can produce parallel emotional states in observers, what is the effect of this emotional synchrony between observer and target? The most socially important outcome seems to be greater feelings of rapport between the target and observer—variously operationalized as feeling “in step,” involved, or compatible with the other person. Lafrance (1979), for example, found that when participants in an interaction had greater liking for one another, they also displayed greater posture similarity. Chartrand and Bargh (1999) manipulated mimicry by having confederates mimic (or not) the physical actions of their partner during a 15-min interaction; those in the mimicking condition reported greater liking for the confederate and a stronger perception that the interaction had gone smoothly. Most recently, Van Baaren et al. (2004a) found that people who have been mimicked during a brief interaction are more willing later to help not only the mimicker but unrelated individuals as well. Thus, growing evidence supports the view that the net effect of emotional synchrony is to increase feelings of closeness with, and goodwill toward, other people.

Although the ubiquity and automaticity of mimicry suggests that it is part of our biological heritage, it also appears that mimicry is more likely for some people and in some situations. Chartrand and her colleagues have found that mimicry is at least sometimes more likely among individuals who are high in self-monitoring (Cheng and Chartrand 2003), who have a field-dependent cognitive style (Van Baaren et al. 2004b) or who come from a culture with a more interdependent construal of self (Van Baaren et al. 2003). In addition, Bavelas et al. (1987) have found that mimicry is more frequent and pronounced when observers are aware that the targets will perceive the mimicked expressions, a pattern consistent with the view that one purpose of mimicry is to direct an affective message to the target. Thus, although mimicry appears to frequently occur outside of conscious awareness, it might also be sensitive to more strategic concerns.

PERSPECTIVE-TAKING. At the other end of the continuum of cognitive sophistication is perspective-taking: the deliberate attempt to imagine the internal state of another person. Historically, the concept of perspective-taking can be traced back to Smith in the eighteenth century, and somewhat more recently to Mead (1934), who argued specifically for the importance that role-taking ability has in allowing humans to effectively perform in society. According to Mead, perspective-taking allows us to overcome our usual egocentrism, tailor our behaviors to others’ expectations, and, thus, make satisfying interpersonal relations possible. The capacity to engage in role-taking has also been theoretically linked to the development of moral reasoning (Kohlberg 1976), altruism (Batson 1991; Eisenberg and Miller 1987), and a decreased likelihood of interpersonal aggression (Feshbach 1978; Richardson et al. 1994). In each of these cases, the ability to entertain the psychological points of view of other people is said to result in some outcome that elevates—relative to one’s own self-interest—the interests of the other person.

The empirical evidence gathered by social psychologists over the past 35 years has been broadly consistent with this theoretical view. In particular, research has convincingly documented two fundamental phenomena that result when an observer actively attempts to entertain the perspective of another person. First, perspective-taking makes the observer more likely to offer causal
Empathy

attributions for the target’s behavior that resemble the target’s own—that is, attributions that emphasize situational factors relative to dispositional ones (e.g., Regan and Totten 1975). In essence, active role-taking has the effect of reducing or eliminating the usual actor-observer difference (Jones and Nisbett 1971). Second, when observers engage in perspective-taking while exposed to a needy target, their affective reactions also change. In general, role-taking observers become more likely to experience two affective states: feelings of sympathy and compassion for the target (e.g., Batson et al. 1989) and feelings of personal unease and distress (e.g., Betancourt 1990). Thus, consistent with theory, empirical investigations also support the view that perspective-taking provides a kind of "favored" status for the person whose perspective is being taken; observers explain the target’s behavior in a way that resembles explanations for the observers’ own behavior, and observers are more likely to experience emotions congruent with the target’s own.

In addition to the large number of studies that have examined the consequences of perspective-taking, in recent years modest but increasing attention has been given to the actual mechanisms underlying perspective-taking. In short, what do people do when they attempt to imagine another’s perspective? One approach to this question can be seen in Karniol’s (1986) model that describes perspective-taking as a process by which people choose and employ “transformation rules” in order to move from observable behaviors and reactions by a target to an inference about the target’s internal states. These rules reflect different ways that observers access and use existing knowledge to make such predictions. Karniol and Shomroni (1999) predicted and found that high school students high in dispositional perspective-taking made use of a greater variety of transformation rules when attempting to imagine the perspective of a dissimilar target.

It also appears that not all forms of perspective-taking are alike. For example, Batson et al. (1997a) have demonstrated that what might appear to be relatively small differences in perspective-taking instructions can produce significantly different outcomes in observers. They instructed some observers to “imagine how the target feels” before exposing them to a distressed target, and they instructed others to “imagine how you would feel” in the target’s situation. Compared to a control condition, both instructional sets produced increased levels of sympathy for the target. However, the “imagine self” instructions also produced an increase in personal discomfort that the “imagine target” instructions did not. Clearly, something was different about the cognitive processes engendered by these two instructional sets. Davis et al. (2004) further demonstrated that these two sets also produce different kinds of thought in observers: those receiving “imagine self” instructions report more self-related thoughts than target-related thoughts, whereas those receiving “imagine target” instructions display the reverse pattern.

As with the research on mirror neurons, recent work by neuropsychologists has also begun to identify specific structures associated with perspective-taking. Evidence suggests that the brain activity that occurs when imagining another person’s point of view is different from the activity that accompanies imagining one’s own perspective: imagining another’s perspective is associated with increased activity in the right inferior parietal lobe and the frontopolar cortex, whereas taking one’s own perspective increases activity in the somatosensory cortex (Ruby and Decety 2003, 2004). Thus, it appears that both mimicry and perspective-taking—empathic processes that vary considerably in their cognitive complexity—are reliably associated with specific neural structures.

Intrapersonal Outcomes

The next component in the organizational framework consists of intrapersonal outcomes, defined as changes within the observer that result from exposure to the target. These outcomes might in
turn, contribute to overt behavior toward the target, but they do not necessarily have this effect. There are at least three distinguishable categories of such outcomes: cognitive, emotional, and motivational.

**Cognitive Outcomes.** A variety of cognitive outcomes has been linked to empathic processes. Taking the perspective of a target, for example, has been found to alter the type of causal attributions that observers make for the target’s behavior, generally leading observers to make attributions for the target that mirror the kind of attributions observers usually make for their own behavior (e.g., Regan and Totten 1975). In recent years, perspective-taking has also been found to influence the cognitive representations that observers form of targets, and, again, the effect of perspective-taking is to lead observers to construct representations of the target that more closely resemble their own self-representations (Davis et al. 1996; Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000).

However, the cognitive outcome that has received the most attention is undoubtedly inter-personal accuracy, the degree to which the observer comes to have an accurate knowledge of the target. This is certainly an important outcome, and a desire for such accuracy is probably the primary reason that observers attempt to imagine the target’s perspective in the first place. Early research in this tradition often attempted to identify the characteristics of “good judges”—that is, highly accurate observers. It typically assessed accuracy by having observers estimate how targets would evaluate themselves on a series of trait-rating scales. Unfortunately, this method for assessing accuracy had some significant problems, and with the publication of several critiques of this method, especially that of Cronbach (1955), things came to a rather abrupt halt. The problem was that accuracy in the rating-scale method is made up of several different constructs, some of which seem to be the result of judge or target response sets (e.g., a tendency to use the midpoint of the rating scale) rather than any kind of empathic transposition. As a result, accuracy scores based on this method contain an unknown amount of statistical confounding.

With increases in methodological sophistication, however, there has been a growing realization that accuracy can be studied in ways that avoid the problems described by Cronbach (e.g., Funder 1987; Kenny and Albright 1987). As long as the undesirable components of accuracy can be removed from the total accuracy score, or eliminated through the use of other techniques, it is possible to assess accuracy in a meaningful way. The result of this realization has been a growing number of studies that address interpersonal accuracy in a methodologically sound fashion.

Perhaps the most intriguing research in this modern tradition is Ickes’ empathic accuracy (EA) paradigm (Ickes 1997, 2003). Ickes et al. (1990) reported the first use of this interesting and relatively naturalistic procedure. Mixed-sex dyads made up of unacquainted undergraduates were secretly videotaped during a 6-min period as they sat waiting for an experiment to “begin.” Later, each participant separately viewed the tape and systematically indicated the specific thoughts and feelings that he or she recalled having at specific points throughout the 6-min period. Finally, the participants individually viewed the tapes a second time, with the experimenter stopping the tape at every point where their dyad partners had reported having a specific thought or feeling; the subjects then estimated their partners’ thoughts/feelings at each point. Accuracy was indexed by the frequency with which subjects were able to estimate successfully the dyad partner’s thoughts and feelings. This basic technique has now been used in numerous investigations, both by Ickes and his colleagues and by independent researchers (see Ickes, 2003, for a review). Observers in these investigations consistently exceed chance accuracy levels, and there appear to be reliable individual differences in performance.

From where does this accuracy come? The evidence from a number of investigations suggests two possible answers. The first is that accuracy results from the observer and target having some shared knowledge and experience. For example, EA studies often find evidence for an
“acquaintance effect” such that dyads made up of friends or romantic partners display greater accuracy than dyads made up of strangers (e.g., Stinson and Ickes 1992). Although accuracy is certainly possible when predicting a stranger’s responses, greater levels of EA are more likely when predicting someone with whom you have shared prior experiences.

The second answer is that EA is, to a considerable degree, the result of a strong motivation to be accurate; for example, Klein and Hodges (2001) found that the EA of observers can be enhanced by offering monetary incentives for better performance and Graham and Ickes (1997) have also found that men and women typically display equivalent accuracy levels—unless attention is called to the nature of the task so that women see it as relevant to the female sex role (e.g., more socially sensitive). In these cases, women outperform men, suggesting that the improved performance is due to increased motivation to do well. On the other side of the coin, Simpson et al. (1995) found that in certain circumstances (e.g., when one’s dating partner is interacting with an attractive member of the opposite sex), the motivation to be accurate is diminished and, as a result, accuracy declines.

**AFFECTIVE OUTCOMES.** Although the study of cognitive outcomes—especially accuracy—has a long history, recent years have seen a greater emphasis on the affective changes that exposure to a target can produce in an observer. One type of emotional response to a target is to experience parallel affect, and a substantial number of investigations have examined potential influences on such responses. We have already considered one important mechanism by which parallel responses are generated—motor mimicry. As noted earlier, considerable evidence supports the notion that mimicry produces a convergence of affect between observers and targets.

Another empathic process described earlier—perspective-taking—has also been linked with parallel affective responding. In this research, role-taking has typically been manipulated by providing observers with instructional sets explicitly directing them to adopt the psychological perspective of the target. Two variants of these instructions, both initially developed by Stotland (1969), have been commonly employed: imagine-self and imagine-the-other instructions. Most investigations employing either of these instructional sets also include a “control” set that directs the observer to simply observe the target carefully, noting and remembering audio or visual details with as much clarity as possible.

Both types of perspective-taking instruction seem to increase parallel responding. Stotland (1969), for example, exposed observers to a target undergoing a diathermy (heat) treatment described as either painful or pleasurable. Observers receiving either instructional set exhibited more arousal than control subjects—albeit on different physiological measures—when the treatment was thought to be painful. Aderman and colleagues (1974; Aderman 1972) found that imagine-self observers were more likely to experience affect consistent with a distressed target. Batson et al. (1989, study 3) provided observers with imagine-the-other or control instructions and then exposed them to an audiotaped depiction of a female college student trying to support her family following the death of her parents; those attempting to imagine the other’s feelings reported more sadness than did the control subjects.

There is another kind of affective reaction as well. In contrast to parallel emotions, reactive emotional responses do not match those of the target, but are, in some sense, a reaction to the target’s situation. Although this in theory could encompass a wide variety of emotions, practically speaking, only two reactive responses have received much sustained research attention. The first of these is empathic concern—the other-oriented emotional response of compassion for the target; the second is personal distress—the self-oriented response of discomfort and anxiety to another’s misfortune (Davis 1994).
Most of the investigations examining empathic concern’s antecedents have focused on role-taking and have used instructions to induce a role-taking set toward the target. Moreover, virtually all of the studies have employed one type of instruction: the imagine-the-other instructional set. Following delivery of the instructional set, subjects in these studies were typically exposed to a target in some distress. One frequently used target is “Katie Banks,” originally introduced by Coke et al. (1978). In this paradigm, subjects listen to an audiotape in which the plight of a young college student—Katie—is described. Following the recent death of her parents, Katie is struggling to support her younger brother and sister while finishing school. After listening to this tape, participants typically complete a questionnaire containing the empathic concern items. Other commonly used paradigms have exposed observers to targets who were injured in an automobile accident, who were experiencing college-related stress, who needed volunteers for a research project, or who were receiving painful electric shocks (see Batson 1991). The vast majority of these investigations, whether using “Katie Banks” or some other target, have found imagine-the-other instructions to produce significantly greater feelings of sympathy for the target than control instructions.

The other reactive emotional response to have received substantial research attention is personal distress. Because contemporary theorizing has so frequently focused on the contrasting motivational properties of empathic concern and personal distress, almost every study explicitly addressing the antecedents of personal distress has simultaneously examined empathic concern; thus, many investigations mentioned in the previous paragraph on empathic concern also address the issue of personal distress. One consequence of this is that virtually the same experimental procedures and targets have been employed in investigations of both affective states. In contrast to the pattern found for empathic concern, however, the effect of these instructions on feelings of personal distress is not quite as reliable. As Davis (1994) noted at the time that he reviewed this literature, imagine-the-other instructions produced heightened empathic concern in over 80% of the investigations, but had such an effect on personal distress only 50% of the time.

**Motivational States.** A third intrapersonal outcome of empathy-related processes is some change in the motivational state of observers—that is, in their internal desires, needs, and concerns. In some ways, of course, this outcome resembles the previous one—affective states—because of the link that often exists between emotion and motivation. How can these be distinguished? One important difference between them, at least insofar as this chapter is concerned, is that motives and emotions frequently operate at somewhat different levels of specificity, with motivations typically being more general and emotions more specific. For example, the presence of a given motive (e.g., a general need for achievement) might give rise to a variety of specific emotional states (e.g., satisfaction following success; shame following failure).

One example of an empathy-mediated effect on motivation comes from the burgeoning literature on forgiveness. The past decade has seen an increasing amount of attention paid to this important interpersonal phenomenon (e.g., Enright et al. 1992; McCullough et al. 2000). Although a variety of definitions have been advanced, one influential approach is that of McCullough et al. (1997), who defined forgiveness as a set of motivational changes characterized by lowered desires to retaliate against and maintain estrangement from an offending relationship partner and a heightened desire for conciliation. Thus, forgiveness at its heart is a set of changes in the motivations of the offended party.

What is empathy’s role? McCullough et al. (1997) have proposed a model that identifies empathic concern for the transgressor (which they simply term “empathy”) as the most important cause of forgiveness following a transgression. Only to the extent that wronged parties feel empathic concern (perhaps as a result of an apology by the transgressor) do they experience a
motivational change that replaces desire for revenge or estrangement with a wish for reconciliation. Considerable recent evidence supports this model. In a pair of investigations, McCullough et al. (1997) found that feelings of empathy, as hypothesized, were associated with greater forgiveness for a transgressor; moreover, forgiveness was then associated with less avoidance and greater conciliation. McCullough et al. (1998, study 4) reported similar findings in an investigation that examined two distinct behavioral responses to being wronged by another: avoidance and revenge. Feelings of empathy for the transgressor were associated with decreased motivation for both behaviors. In a sample of Italian married couples, Fincham et al. (2002) found the same pattern: More tolerant attributions for a partner's misbehavior led to feelings of empathy, which, in turn, led to increased forgiveness. Finally, in a pair of longitudinal studies, McCullough et al. (2003) repeatedly queried individuals for weeks after they suffered an interpersonal transgression. In both studies, empathy at the time of the transgression was significantly related to immediate forgiveness but was much less likely to predict additional forgiveness over time. Thus, it might be that empathic concern has its greatest effect on the motivation to forgive in the immediate aftermath of another's misbehavior.

Interpersonal Outcomes

The end point in the organizational model is an overt behavioral act by the empathizing individual. Unsurprisingly, much of the past research on empathy has consisted of attempts to discover which empathy-related antecedents or processes are reliably associated with specific behavioral outcomes. A number of such outcomes has been studied over the years, but these can largely be subsumed by three categories: helping behavior, aggression, and a more general category of social behavior. By far the most studied of these areas is the first.

Empathy and Helping. The evidence is convincing that a dispositional tendency to engage in perspective-taking—the relatively nonemotional facet of empathy—is associated with greater helpfulness (Eisenberg and Miller 1987). However, most recent attempts to examine the empathy/helping connection have focused on the more clearly affective elements in the organizational framework.

One way that empathically created affect can lead to helping is straightforward. If seeing another in distress leads observers to experience parallel affect and if that affect is experienced as unpleasant, then helping might result simply to reduce this undesirable state. Because the ultimate goal in such a sequence is to improve the well-being of the observer, such helping seems clearly egoistic. This logic underlies a variety of social psychological theories of helping; one good example is the negative state relief (NSR) model (Cialdini et al. 1973; Cialdini and Kenrick 1976).

Another mechanism by which empathy-related affect can lead to helping is not through parallel emotions but through some form of reactive affective response. In particular, considerable research has investigated the role of empathic concern in promoting helping behavior. Batson (1991) has been the primary advocate of this approach, and he has made the argument that helping motivated by feelings of empathic concern (simply termed “empathy” in his approach) might be considered truly altruistic—that is, not motivated by any desire to reduce one’s own distress or to enhance one’s own well-being. In a set of studies, Batson and colleagues (1981, 1983) attempted to demonstrate the existence of altruistic helping by constructing an experimental design that contrasts the effects of a truly altruistic motivation with those of an egoistic arousal reduction motivation. To do so, they made use of the differential impact that ease of escape should have on the behavior of those motivated by egoistic versus altruistic motives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominant Emotional Response</th>
<th>Ease of escape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distress</td>
<td>Easy Escape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern</td>
<td>Difficult Help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consider for a moment an observer who is experiencing a high degree of personal distress while in the presence of a needy target. The observer’s high level of aversive arousal creates in her a motivation to reduce it. If physically escaping from the situation is difficult for some reason, then this high level of arousal will probably lead her to help as a means of eliminating the source of the arousal; on the other hand, if escape from the situation is easy, then she might well choose that option instead. Therefore, the behavior resulting from this egoistic motivation depends on the ease or difficulty of escape. In contrast, consider a situation in which the observer is predominantly experiencing empathic concern for the target. In this case, the ease or difficulty of escape is irrelevant to her goal of reducing target distress; as a result, she is likely to help whether escape is easy or difficult. If this logic is correct and feelings of personal distress and empathic concern really do produce egoistic and altruistic motivational states, respectively, then an experiment producing the four conditions displayed in Table 19.1 should produce levels of helping that conform to the one versus three (personal distress/easy escape versus all other combinations) pattern depicted there.

This is precisely the pattern that has emerged in number of studies (Batson et al. 1981, 1983; Toi and Batson 1982). In each of these investigations, a comparison was made between subjects predominantly experiencing empathic concern and those predominantly experiencing personal distress. In some cases, these emotional reactions were produced through experimental manipulations, and in others, the predominant emotional response was simply assessed via questionnaire. In every instance, the observers who were experiencing empathic concern provided relatively high levels of help, regardless of ease of escape. Observers who were primarily experiencing personal distress displayed the predicted sensitivity to the ease of escape manipulation; when escape was difficult, they helped at the same level as those experiencing empathic concern, but when escape was easy, the level of helping dropped dramatically. Importantly, this pattern held over a variety of different need situations. Based on these investigations, a convincing case can be made that empathic concern and personal distress are two distinctly different affective reactions, that the motivation associated with personal distress is clearly egoistic in nature, and that the motivation associated with empathic concern is not egoistic in nature.

This conclusion is not universally accepted. Cialdini and colleagues (1997), in particular, have argued that the helping associated with empathic concern is in fact egoistic and, thus, does not constitute evidence for “true” altruism (Maner et al. 2002). The crux of their argument is that the same factors that cause feelings of empathic concern in observers (e.g., perspective-taking instructions; relationship closeness) will often engender self-oriented states as well. In particular, they argued that one such state is a feeling of shared identity or “oneness” with the target. This sense of oneness in a way constitutes a merging of self and other, and this “confusion” of self and other means that actions carried out to help the target are, in a sense, carried out to help the self
and are, therefore, egoistic in nature. Maner et al. (2002) conducted a study explicitly designed to evaluate this possibility and reported results supporting their arguments—feelings of empathic concern were associated with greater helping for a needy target, but this association disappeared once the effects of more egoistic states, including oneness, were controlled.

One other recent approach to the question of empathy and helping merits discussion. The kind of helping that often occurs in the laboratory research cited thus far is spontaneous and unplanned, with the opportunity to help typically coming without warning. In such research the focus is usually on single acts that take place in response to the presence of a clear and present victim. However, a tremendous amount of helping does not occur in this fashion. Community volunteering, for example, often represents a long-term commitment rather than a single act, and the decision to volunteer is not typically made spontaneously, but as a result of careful and deliberate thought. Consequently, the initiation and maintenance of volunteer activity might be governed by different variables than those that control spontaneous single acts of helping.

To examine this issue, Omoto and Snyder (1995) studied volunteerism using an approach that they termed the “volunteer process model”—a framework that conceives of antecedent factors (characteristics of the volunteer or the volunteer setting), volunteer experiences such as satisfaction or integration into the volunteer organization, and consequences of volunteering such as persistence or attitude change. Using a sample of AIDS volunteers, Omoto and Snyder found that personality measures of a “helping disposition” (nurturance, empathic concern) were not directly related to greater persistence, but were related to higher satisfaction with one’s volunteer work and to greater integration into the volunteer organization. Greater satisfaction, but not integration, was, in turn, positively associated with longer persistence as a volunteer. Penner and Finkelstein (1998) also evaluated the volunteer process model, again making use of a sample of AIDS volunteers. Like Omoto and Snyder, Penner and Finkelstein found that at least one measure of the helping personality (other-oriented empathy) displayed positive associations with volunteer satisfaction, although these associations were not consistently significant. As in the earlier study, volunteer satisfaction was positively, albeit modestly, related to greater persistence.

Using a slightly revised version of the volunteer process model, Davis et al. (2003) studied community volunteers during their first year of service. Volunteers were contacted four times during this year and queried regarding their emotional reactions (sympathy, distress) and satisfaction. Consistent with the revised model, feelings of sympathy and distress were substantially predicted by antecedent factors, especially dispositional empathic concern and the emotional intensity of the work itself. Also consistent with the revised model, volunteer involvement (number of hours per week volunteered) was predicted by satisfaction, although volunteer persistence over time was not. These findings, as well as others (Bekkers 2004; Stolinski et al. 2004), strongly and consistently implicate one empathy-related construct in particular: the dispositional tendency to experience empathic concern for needy targets. This disposition was associated in each investigation with at least one important aspect of the volunteer experience.

**Empathy and Aggression.** The role of empathy in reducing aggressive behavior has not received the same degree of research attention as the empathy-helping link but has nonetheless prompted some investigation. There are at least two primary mechanisms by which empathy can regulate hostile or aggressive behaviors. The first possibility is that observers’ emotional responses to the distress of others might lessen their likelihood of aggressing against those others. This might happen, for example, if observing the victim’s distress cues leads to a sharing of the victim’s distress. To escape this vicarious distress, the aggressor stops or reduces the aggression (e.g., Feshbach 1964). Victim distress cues can also produce the reactive emotion of empathic concern in perpetrator-observers, and these feelings of sympathy might then lead the observer to stop or
reduce the aggression (Miller and Eisenberg 1988). In both cases, however, it is the observers' affective response that is responsible for inhibiting aggression. Evidence reviewed by Miller and Eisenberg (1988) suggests that for adults there is in fact a reliable association between dispositional emotional empathy and aggressive behavior. Across the nine studies using adult samples included in that review, greater dispositional empathy was, for the most part, reliably associated with less aggressive behavior. Studies conducted since that time (Davis 1994; Richardson et al. 1994) have found a similar pattern.

The second mechanism by which empathy might reduce the occurrence of aggressive actions is through the process of perspective-taking; that is, adopting the point of view of a person who acts in a potentially provoking way might lead to a more tolerant perception of that person's actions, which can consequently reduce the likelihood that retaliation will occur. A number of studies have examined this possibility and found evidence consistent with it.

Davis and Kraus (1991) reported, in two samples of adolescent and preadolescent boys, a significant negative correlation between dispositional perspective-taking and their self-reported number of fights and arguments over the previous 2 years. Two investigations (Richardson et al. 1994, 1998) examined the link between dispositional perspective-taking and actual verbal aggression in a laboratory setting and found evidence that high perspective-takers were less likely to retaliate against opponents who had mildly provoked them; this held true even if the opponents increased the magnitude of their provocation across trials. Finally, Giancola (2003) examined the effect of provocation, alcohol consumption, and dispositional empathy (both perspective-taking and empathic concern) on actual aggression (administering electric shocks). Using a sample of "healthy social drinkers," he found that alcohol increased aggressive responding, but that this was especially true for those who were lowest in dispositional empathy. Thus, not only does perspective-taking seem to make hostile responding less likely in general, it might also serve a buffering function by diminishing the harmful effects of other variables such as alcohol consumption. It should also be noted here that some of the effects of perspective-taking on aggression might be due to emotional responses produced by taking the perspective of the provoker. Given the well-documented links between perspective-taking and emotional reactions, it is likely that affective states such as empathic concern and personal distress often accompany perspective-taking and that they mediate—at least to some degree—the apparent influence of perspective taking on hostility.

**Empathy and Social Behavior.** The idea that social intercourse is significantly influenced by the capacity for empathy is certainly not new. Smith (1976) and Spencer (1870) have both argued that important social consequences flow from our tendency to "sympathize" with others' experiences—that is, to share a "fellow-feeling" with them. Theorists with a decidedly more cognitive view of empathy (Mead 1934; Piaget 1932) also hold that possessing such a capacity will improve the social climate. What both approaches have in common, although perhaps more clearly with regard to the role-taking argument, is the recognition that empathy in some guise is necessary to help us deal with the fundamental obstacle in social life, namely other people. Because other people commonly have needs, desires, and goals that differ from our own and because the attainment of their goals is frequently incompatible with ours, a powerful tendency toward conflict is inherent in all social life, resulting in high levels of conflict and disagreement. More accurately, the result *can* be such a conflict-filled existence if no mechanism—such as empathy—is available to interrupt this sequence. Over the past two decades, the possible role of empathy within social relationships has been examined in a variety of ways.

One approach has been to examine the association between dispositional empathy and overall relationship satisfaction, and several studies have adopted this strategy (Fincham and Bradbury
Empathy 459

1989; Franzoi et al. 1985; Long and Andrews 1990; Rusbult et al. 1991). Although the precise pattern of results varied somewhat from study to study, each investigation found at least some significant positive association between perspective-taking and satisfaction for at least one member of the romantic relationship and often for both. Thus, taking your partner’s perspective—or having a partner who takes yours—is associated with greater personal satisfaction with the relationship.

Another approach to the question of empathy’s role in social relationships has been to consider its influence on specific behavioral patterns that occur within relationships. One such pattern is the use of a considerate social style, defined here as displaying tolerance, cooperation, active support for others, and a general lack of egocentrism in thought and deed—characteristics that all reflect sensitivity to the other person’s needs and desires. Four studies using college populations have examined associations between dispositional empathy and measures of a considerate style. Davis and Oathout (1987, 1992) had college students report the frequency with which they engaged in a number of considerate behaviors toward their romantic partners, including “warmth” (acting in affectionate and supportive ways) and “positive outlook” (being friendly, positive, and dependable). In both studies, dispositional empathic concern was significantly and positively related to both kinds of behavior; although the pattern was not as consistent, dispositional personal distress was generally related to considerate behavior significantly but negatively. Trobst et al. (1994) measured college students’ dispositional empathy and also assessed their willingness to offer social support to both friends and strangers; in both cases, dispositional empathic concern was related to offering more support. Thus, the evidence suggests that empathic concern is positively and substantially related to a considerate style and that personal distress is more weakly and generally negatively associated with such a style.

The Rusbult et al. (1991) investigation cited earlier approached this question from a slightly different angle, through their focus on accommodation in close relationships. They assumed that when one partner in a close relationship behaves badly, the initial impulse of the other partner is typically to retaliate. In many instances, however, such retaliation never takes place; instead, the wronged party inhibits the immediate impulse and, instead, acts in a constructive fashion, perhaps ignoring the transgression or treating it as only a minor annoyance. Rusbult et al. termed this constructive reaction accommodation, and it seems reasonable to consider it part of the considerate social style. Rusbult et al. presented subjects with a series of hypothetical destructive acts that could be committed by one’s partner (e.g., criticizing you) and asked them to report their most likely response to such acts. The tendency to make accommodating responses was most powerfully influenced by the subjects’ commitment to the relationship: those more committed to the relationship were more likely to accommodate. Above and beyond the effect of commitment, however, a greater self-reported tendency to take the partner’s perspective was also associated with greater accommodation.

Another positive behavioral pattern is good communication, and several studies indicated that dispositional empathic concern has a constructive effect on social relationships. One set of studies (Davis and Franzoi 1986; Franzoi and Davis 1985) examined the link between high school students’ dispositional empathy and self-disclosure to peers; personal distress was not related, but empathic concern for both male and female students was significantly and positively related to disclosure to females. In two investigations mentioned previously, Davis and Oathout (1987, 1992) asked college students about the degree to which they “opened up” and “readily listened” to their romantic partner. For both men and women, empathic concern scores were significantly and positively associated with higher scores on this communication index; for women only, personal distress scores were negatively associated.
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This somewhat selective presentation of past and contemporary empathy research provides an overview of the current state of the field, at least as it is typically studied by social psychologists. Based on the picture that has emerged, I conclude this chapter by offering some suggestions regarding two interesting and potentially important directions for future empathy research.

Studying Perspective-Taking for Its Own Sake

Perspective-taking occupies a central place within the empathy framework. It has long been recognized as a uniquely important cognitive skill—in fact some approaches have essentially equated perspective taking with empathy. Even those who have favored an affective definition of empathy have seen perspective-taking as one of the most important methods for inducing such emotional responses. However, one fact that becomes apparent when examining previous research is that the focus has almost exclusively been on perspective-taking as a means to an end; that is, most research by contemporary social psychologists has been interested in perspective-taking, either measured as a disposition or situationally induced, because of its ability to influence some other phenomenon in which they were more interested: causal attributions, affective states, helping, accuracy in person perception, forgiveness, and so on. There is nothing wrong with such a strategy, but, as a consequence, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the study of perspective taking per se.

As mentioned previously, however, there has recently been an increased interest in such questions. The work of Batson et al. (1997a), comparing the effects of imagine-self and imagine-the-target instructional sets on observers’ affective responses, and the work of Davis et al. (2004), examining the effect of such sets on self-reported thoughts, both place more focus on perspective-taking as a process of interest for its own sake. Davis (2005), moreover, has argued for an even more systematic approach to the study of perspective-taking based on identifying its essential constituents. In particular, he has argued that perspective-taking attempts all have some aim (what the observer is trying to achieve), information used (the particular kind of information used in the perspective-taking attempt), process employed (the particular process or processes used in the attempt), and outcome (the end result of the perspective-taking attempt). Thinking about perspective-taking in such a systematic way leads to some interesting questions. The following are three of them.

First, is taking the perspective of others in everyday life “natural”? In other words, is our usual response to adopt the point of view of other people (to empathize with them, in the broadest terms), or does this kind of response usually require some kind of additional prompt from the environment? Very preliminary evidence suggests that at least when faced with someone not too dissimilar, the kinds of thought that naturally occur are very similar to those that result when explicitly instructed to imagine the target’s point of view (Davis et al. 2004). In fact, the results of that investigation suggested that it might take the presence of empathy-inhibiting instructions to disrupt the “default” thought pattern. The finding that neural structures predispose us to respond to the activities of others as though we had performed the activities ourselves is also tantalizingly consistent with the notion that we are in a sense “primed” to empathize. However, given the near-total absence in empathy research of the truly “neutral” instruction condition employed by Davis et al., there is little research to date that allows an evaluation of this question. Thus, it is far too early to conclude that empathizing is our default orientation.

Second, and relatedly, is perspective taking as effortful a process as is typically assumed? Virtually all theoretical accounts of perspective-taking conceive of it as a controlled, effortful
process (Hoffman 1984; Eisenberg et al. 1991), especially as compared to other empathy-related processes like mimicry. Although this assumption is plausible, it is also possible that the matter might not be so simple. In the one investigation to date that has explicitly addressed this question, Davis et al. (1996) found evidence that although some effects of perspective-taking instructions were reduced or eliminated by the presence of a competing task, not all were. (Finding that some mental process is diminished by the presence of a competing task suggests that the process in question is effortful, requiring some mental resources.) Specifically, evidence from that investigation indicated that the general tendency to ascribe a greater number of traits to a novel target was increased by perspective-taking instructions and that the presence of a competing task eliminated this effect. The specific tendency to ascribe self-related traits to the target was also increased by perspective-taking, but it is not clear that this tendency was reduced by the presence of a competing task. Thus, one interesting possibility is that perspective-taking might involve a family of different responses to the target—some intentional and some not, some effortful and some not—and that these responses might have different effects on later outcomes.

Finally, a third potentially useful avenue for future research is to distinguish between the intended and unintended effects of perspective-taking. This refers to the fact that when considering the history of social psychological research on perspective-taking, it turns out that, to a considerable degree, what social psychologists have studied for the past three decades are really the unintended effects of perspective-taking; that is, when we explicitly consider the aim of most perspective-taking efforts, it is clear that what is being sought by the observer is usually some kind of accuracy. What observers desire is some better insight into the internal state of targets—their thoughts, or motives, or goals.

However, when social psychologists have studied the consequences of perspective-taking, a huge proportion of this work has had nothing to do with this kind of accuracy. Dozens of investigations have been carried out to determine the effect of perspective-taking on observers’ emotional reactions, attributions, helping behavior, aggression, stereotype use, and so forth. As interesting and important as all of these phenomena are, they are also not typically the aim of real-world observers. Although it is not impossible that such observers sometimes have aims such as “behaving less aggressively” or “reducing stereotype use” when they engage in perspective-taking, it seems more likely that their usual goal is to gain some accurate insight into the target.

This somewhat surprising realization leads to some interesting questions. To take just one example, how frequently do people engage in perspective-taking for their own accuracy-oriented reasons but end up with some unintended consequence instead? For example, can an observer take the target’s perspective in order to defeat him in a negotiation and, instead, begin to experience sympathy or an increased sense of oneness with that target? For those with a taste for the ironic, this is a very interesting possibility; in fact, hints of it can be seen in some research by Batson et al. (1997b), in which observers who were led to take the perspective of an unsavory target (e.g., a convicted murderer) came to hold more favorable attitudes—not only toward that particular target but also toward the entire stigmatized class to which he belonged! It seems likely in this case that these more tolerant attitudes toward murderers as a class were an unintended outcome of perspective-taking; whether this also happens in more natural settings remains to be seen, but the possibility seems worthy of examination.

### The Practical Uses of Empathy

A second promising avenue for future research is in some ways the opposite of the first. In addition to studying empathy-related processes like perspective-taking for their own sakes, there is
also value in making a more careful study of what might called the practical uses of empathy. An example of this kind of approach can be seen in the work described earlier on empathy and volunteering. This research has typically examined community volunteers within their organizational settings and has sought to answer such practical questions as why people volunteer in the first place, what they seek and what they obtain from their work, what determines their satisfaction with the volunteer experience, and what affects volunteer persistence over time. All of these are questions of considerable practical importance for organizations that make heavy use of volunteers, and continued efforts in this area hold much value.

Another practical issue that seems ripe for serious attention is the question of empathy training. Given the widely recognized importance of empathy in many walks of life, one longstanding assumption has been that it is possible to develop methods for increasing empathic responding, however this might be defined. Thus, programs have been designed to increase the empathy of widely varying populations—psychiatric patients (Lomis and Baker 1985), delinquents (Pecukonis 1990), bullies (Eslea and Smith 1998), and parents (Gordon 2003), among others.

What has not yet been done is to subject such programs to a systematic and rigorous examination in an effort to determine what works and what does not. This task will not be easy. Training attempts have been carried out in so many different ways, using so many different definitions of empathy, with so many different goals, and with so many different populations that simply organizing them in a meaningful way will be a considerable undertaking. However, the benefits of such an effort could also be considerable. It seems likely, for instance, that a systematic review will reveal some forms of empathy training, or some components of such training, to be relatively ineffective; it is to be hoped, however, that others will turn out to be generally effective, at least under some circumstances. Such an identification of successful empathy training’s “active ingredients” will be of tremendous importance for those designing, implementing, or funding such programs.

CONCLUSION

Empathy occupies a strategically crucial location in modern social psychology; it lies at the border that separates the individual from the other, ego from alter. The capacity to set aside egocentric concerns and entertain the point of view of other people provides a kind of bridge that links otherwise isolated persons; it allows those separate entities, at least for a time, to share thoughts, feelings, and goals. This sharing makes possible some of the most admirable human activities—those that raise our motivations from the purely selfish to the selfless and that give us the occasional opportunity to display a true nobility of purpose. The possession of such empathic capacities does not, of course, ensure such nobility; evidence of that is all too obvious. Our capacity for other-oriented thinking and acting, however, makes it possible, and this makes the study of empathy and related phenomena a most worthy one for sociologists and psychologists alike.

REFERENCES


Empathy


