ELISABETTA ANGELA RIZZO
University of Dundee
eazrizzo@dundee.ac.uk

TINA RÖCK
University of Dundee
t.rock@dundee.ac.uk

AUTISTICS AS EMPATHIC SUBJECTS. PHENOMENOLOGY AND INTENSE WORLD THEORY

abstract

Despite the belief that autism is an empathy disorder, autistics declare their ability to empathize. To explore this experiential vision, we present the alternative explanation for social impairments in autism offered by the Intense World Theory (IWT) and substantiate it through the phenomenological analysis of empathy as an experienced phenomenon. According to IWT, autistics are characterized by hyper-emotionality and therefore their detachment is not the sign of a disrupted empathy, but a strategy to face a world of overwhelming stimuli. Taking the phenomenological account of empathy as a tendency to minimize the emotional and conceptual space dividing embodied and conscious subjects, our purpose is to explain that although autistics seem to expand this space, they may still be considered empathetic.

keywords

autism, empathy, phenomenology, intense world theory

Phenomenology and Mind, n. 21 - 2021, pp. 34-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17454/pam-2103
Web: http://www.rosenbergesellier.it/elenco-libri?aaidriv=14

ISSN 2280-7853 (print) - ISSN 2239-4028 (on line)

> *A description of individuals with AS that includes 'deficits in empathy' as a central characteristic carries with it several moral implications and may even lead to adverse social consequences* (Rogers *et al*., 2007, p. 714).

This statement may be applied to all types of autism, as it is often considered a 'disorder of empathy'.
Instead of defining autistics in terms of being primarily characterized by a lack of empathy, Intense World Theory (IWT) describes their observable behaviors as a response to the perceived intensity of the world.
In comparison to the other theories, IWT seems to capture the subjective truth of autistic world most adequately so far (Hansen, 2019), since a substantial number of autistics claim that it does justice to their perspective; they would be not only able to emotionally empathize, but also to do it in an overwhelmingly way (Jack, 2020). In short, IWT reflects their profound experience of emotions:

> I will not be tired to repeat that the autistic world is not made by silence and coldness, of a lack of emotions and stimuli: it is the contrary. It is an internal rich world, extremely stimulating and even too much stimulated; it is a world of quick thoughts and strong emotions, too intense to be handled.[1]

Therefore, although the IWT is not yet backed up sufficiently by scientific evidence, the impact it had on the autistic community by bringing to the fore the experiential self-account of autistics renders it significant, at least from the perspective of phenomenology.
In this paper we take a phenomenological stance highlighting the experience of autistics as a fundamental cornerstone for understanding autism. Our purpose lies on the phenomenologically described effects of autism as they are experienced by autistics and their families, thus on a view of autism that does not immediately render it a syndrome, but a phenomenon to describe before being scientifically classified. In order to offer a balanced view, we will present IWT and a phenomenological definition of empathy illustrating then a

1 Our translation of: "*Non mi stancherò mai di ripetere che il mondo autistico non è fatto di silenzio e gelo, di mancanza di emozioni e stimoli: è il contrario. È un mondo interiore ricco, estremamente stimolante e anche troppo stimolato; un mondo di pensieri veloci ed emozioni forti, troppo intense da poter essere gestite*" (Acanfora, 2018).

general description from a neurobiological perspective. These will be used to fully understand empathy in the context of IWT by providing a philosophical perspective that could help develop a more robust version of IWT for further study.

1. Autism 'Intense World' syndrome

Autism is defined as a neurodevelopmental condition, a description indicating a dysfunction in the regular development and/or growth of the brain (E. L. Casanova & M. F. Casanova, 2019, p. 17), and one of its most peculiar factors is the continual deficit in social communication and social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
The vision of autistics as "blind to the boisterous, complicated, emotionally loaded give-and-take of human interaction" (https://iancommunity.org/cs/autism/impairments_in_social_interaction) with the tendency to inhabit an impenetrable inner world is not recognized by autistics themselves (Silberman, 2015, pp. 331-332) and people that know them more intimately.
Characterizing observable behaviors of autistics as the result of being hyper-emotional instead of hypo-emotional, as being *overminded* and not 'mindblinded', IWT supports the experientially grounded counter argument and explains why many mothers would consider their autistic child to be the most empathetic among their children (Szalavitz, 2013).
Despite many first person reports to this effect, in scientific literature the term 'autism' is still often used to signify a deficit in empathy.

Presupposing such a deficit in scientific literature necessitates an explanation as to the root of this deficit. We will present one of the most widespread of these accounts to give the reader an idea of the general treatment of autism as a deficit. A popular answer as to the roots and causes of autistic behavior is the claim that autistics might not have a Theory of Mind (ToM), i.e. the ability to recognize foreign mental states and to attribute mental states to herself/himself (Premack & Woodruff, 1978, p. 515).
In 1985 it was argued for this position in the article "Does the Autistic Child have a 'Theory of Mind'?" (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985) and in 1990 the term 'Mindblindness' was coined to characterize the deficit in the development of ToM in autistics (Baron-Cohen, 1990).

This line of thinking is often grounded in the amygdala theory of autism. The purported reason underpinning the inability to attribute mental states to others would be the lack of activation of the amygdala, that was observed when autistics were asked to infer mental states of a subject from their eye expression in experimental settings (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 2000). In short, the amygdala theory holds that there is an abnormality in an autistic amygdala, which was then correlated to a diminished ability for social interaction, for intersubjective capacity and empathy.
One central difficulty with ToM in this context is its reduction of 'empathy' to the cognitive dimension and thus the exclusion of emotional empathy.[2] Due to this presupposition many studies focused on cognitive empathy alone in examining empathy in autism, without considering emotional empathy (Rogers *et al.*, 2007). Since "the two different kinds of empathy are combined in one English word [...] this idea that autistic people 'lack empathy' has taken hold" (Szalavitz, 2013).

2 In the empathizing–systemizing theory, ToM has been revised to include the affective aspect of empathy. Autism was investigated in the light of empathy (cognitive and affective) and the ability to systemize. As result, autistics seem to have an aptitude for the second, while keeping a below average in the affective empathy (Baron-Cohen, 2009).

However, there is a significant difference between cognitive empathy that is a 'mental perspective taking', i.e. putting one's self in another's shoes, and emotional empathy which instead indicates "the vicarious sharing of emotion" (Smith, 2006, p. 3). If research is done based on a multidimensional measure of empathy (IRI), then while autistic subjects scored lower control of cognitive empathy, they score the same result of neurotypical people in control of emotional empathy (Rogers *et al.*, 2007, p. 713). This evidence sheds light on how emotions could be the key to understand empathy in autism.

2. Intense world Theory

In contrast to the traditional amygdala theory IWT posits a hyper-activity of the amygdala. The theory "is experimentally based on direct neuronal recordings and behavioral testing on rat offspring exposed prenatally to a single dose (500 mg/kg) of VPA" (valproic acid) and on the "re-examination and re-interpretation of previous studies on human autism in the light of these experimental results from the animal model" (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, pp. 2-3).
According to the IWT, as a consequence of a hyper-functioning brain the neural microcircuits in autistics are characterized by hyper-reactivity and hyper-plasticity.[3] Their behavior patterns thus would be a result of the "hyper-functional local neural microcircuits" that become autonomous too easily, "leading to runaway information processing, over-specialization in tasks and a hyper-preference syndrome" (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, the authors conclude, autistics are characterized by an over-specialization. Coping with this form of hyper-functioning could present as an intense experience of the world that appears invasive. The resulting pain and distress could clarify why autistics prefer to distance themselves from too much chaotic or intense input: "Autistic people may, therefore, neither at all be mind-blind nor lack empathy for others, but be hyper-aware of selected fragments of the mind, which may be so intense that they avoid eye contact, withdraw from social interactions and stop communicating" (H. Markram *et al.*, 2007, p. 87).

The term 'hyper-functioning brain' as used by the authors to characterize these traits mainly implies three cognitive consequences: i) hyper-attention, ii) hyper-perception, iii) hyper-memory and a fourth consequence related to the emotional dimension, iv) hyper-emotionality. It is the last point that our study will focus on.

Through the concept of i) 'hyper-attention' Markram and Markram explains the phenomenon that it is problematic to direct autistics' attention. However, they posit that this is not the result of a cognitive deficit, instead it is a "form of exaggerated self-engrossment with internally on-going processes [that] could perhaps also explain the apparent deficit in theory of mind so often reported in autism" (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, p. 12).

The term ii) 'hyper-perception' characterizes the reasons for the detail-focused processing in autism.
According to Weak Central Coherence Account (WCC) autistics tend to have a piecemeal perception instead of accounting for the global processing. This inclination is no longer taken

3 While traditional investigations tended to lead to partial explanations as to causes and symptoms of the different types of autism, IWT attempts to bring to the fore the common denominator for the whole spectrum also providing a unifying theory for the neurobiological and affective-cognitive foundations of autism (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010).

as a deficit, rather as a superiority in local perception (Happé & Frith, 2006).[4] IWT and WWC posit different reasons to illustrate this characteristic; in fact, IWT implies that the cause of better performance in perceive fragments may come "from autonomous hyper-functional neocortical columns that are more difficult to control and orchestrate by both top-down and stimulus entrainment by bottom-up mechanisms, rather than a deficit in top-down pathways or mechanisms" (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, p. 11). Although the different explanations for the same phenomenon presented by IWT and WCC, the results are the same: a better detail-focused perception (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, p. 11).

The iii) 'hyper-memory' component is considered the result of the hyper-perception and hyper-attention. Hyper-memory on the low-level sensory as well as basic cognitive areas may be the cause of the over-specialisation occurring during early childhood development. Therefore, autistics may not only miss the possibility to acquire higher cognitive abilities, but they also could become 'stuck' to their memories: "Quick and almost arbitrary association building based on enhanced perception of sensory features paired with excessive internal emotions – positive or negative – may rapidly lock the person down into behavioral routines" (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, p. 13).[5]

The iv) hyper-emotionality, finally, may cause social avoidance. Whereas traditional amygdala theory presupposes a stunted or less active amygdala in autistics, there are several studies that describe the autistic amygdala as hyper-reactive.[6] Thus, autistics could possess the ability to create an adequate ToM to identify other mental state and to emotionally empathize, because what is often considered an absence of social interaction may be not caused by inability to process social and emotional signals, but by the degree of intensity involved in everyday engagements with the world that would that result in fear and anxiety. Therefore, social avoidance would be a coping strategy (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010).

After having introduced this alternative view on autistics and their experiential and emotional depth, in what follows we will be looking at the nature of empathy as an intersubjective mode of being from the perspective of phenomenology and neurobiology before trying to give a concise definition. These results will be applied to the question whether autistics are able to empathize.

3. Empathy

Since 'Empathy' is a buzzword "there are almost as many definitions of *empathy* as there are researchers in the field" (Singer & Lamm, 2009, p. 82). Instead of comparing the different views on 'empathy' as they are proposed from various scientific fields, we will begin with a philosophical meta-interpretation and here more precisely a phenomenological account. The philosophical method of phenomenology is a powerful tool to understand the way we think, understand, and interpret ourselves and the world around us, by investigating actual experience instead of interpretations of experience. We want to apply the results of the phenomenological method to deepen the understanding of intersubjectivity and empathy, and the interrelation between these moments to substantiate IWT.

4 Even the Enhanced Perceptual Functioning Theory recognizes in autism "a superiority per se of low-level perceptual operation" (Mottron *et al.*, 2006, p. 29).
5 IWT proposes a deeper research on the fear memory that could offer a further explanation about the social elusion (K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, pp. 13-14).
6 See K. Markram & H. Markram, 2010, p. 14.

In what follows we will present two phenomenological descriptions of empathy, namely by Edmund Husserl,[7] the founder of phenomenology, who introduced the issue of empathy as grounded in bodily intersubjectivity and of his student Edith Stein, who focused on understanding empathy in more detail and depth. This introduction will focus on the essential aspects only and disregard much detail to provide a general overview that can be used to substantiate IWT.[8]

According to Husserl the nature of human beings is best understood if we consider our essentially dual nature. We are both embodied and conscious beings, our subjectivity presupposes a living, functioning body and this objective bodily existence is present to each and every human being through their self-awareness of their own body as an object belonging to the physical world. We would neither be subjective, self-aware beings nor objectively existing beings without the body, but is only our conscious nature that lets us uncover this truth. It is this dual nature of embodied conscious human existence that is at the root of both intersubjectivity and empathy.

This dimension of intersubjectivity is usually discussed in connection to 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*). While much of Husserl's work concerning intersubjectivity was focused on the constitution of intersubjective reality,[9] he did also investigate the dimension of the relation of subjects, of the relation of the I and the Other. He did so most famously in the fifth Cartesian meditation.

As we argued in the beginning for Husserl any subjective-objective being (i.e. any subject and any Other) is an embodied being: the experience of an Other is the experience of an embodied other. The reason why I can experience the Other as Other and not as an object rests on this embodied nature of the self. I can experience my body as an object while inhabiting it as a subject, for example when I hold my own hand. In this case I experience a feeling that is reminiscent of holing the Other's hand while at the same time experiencing my own hand being held.

In order to understand this structure of feeling the Other better Husserl introduces a complex analysis of empathy, that involves forms of mirroring, paring and analogizing. This complex interaction allows us to connect our own experience of ourselves as subjective-objective with our perception of the other as a bodily object that has subjective experience and thus be given the Other as an Other and not just as an object. This does not mean that the Other is fully given or fully accessible to me, the phenomenon of the Other is necessarily an experience of a subject that escapes full understanding. If it did not the experience would cease to be of an Other and become an experience of one's own subjectivity.

> Thus, although Husserl would argue that we do experience the Other, this does not imply that the Other is reduced to a mere intentional object. On the contrary, we are dealing with a subject-subject relation insofar as the Other is exactly experienced in

7 We will cite Husserl from the Husserliana (HUA) in the following format: volume/page.

8 For a more detailed account that also discusses Scheler and Schutz consider part II of Zahavi, 2014.

9 Without introducing the complexities involved in thinking intersubjectivity from a phenomenological perspective, suffice it to say that according to Husserl perception gives what is intersubjectively accessible, so what exists for everyone and not just for me. (Hua 9/431; 14/289, 390) What is given in perception is furthermore given as shared with a community of subjects (i.e., not as private). Intersubjectivity thus is a lynchpin for our understanding of truth and objective givenness and goes far beyond the relation between two subjects and the kind of intersubjectivity we are interested in. In the present investigation our interest in intersubjectivity is focused on the relation, understanding and interaction between two subjects, we thus exclude considerations referred to the more general constitution of objectivity and truth, also relevant when investigating intersubjectivity as such.

> its subjective inaccessibility. It is essential to the phenomenological description of the subject-subject relation that it involves an asymmetry. There is a difference between the experiencing subject and the experienced subject. But this asymmetry is a part of any correct description of intersubjectivity. (Zahavi, 2003, p. 114)

However, the experiencing subject and the Other are fundamentally correlated through empathy and therefore Husserl can argue that this complex empathic structure is not simply an analogical inference (Hua 1/141; 13/338-339) between two unrelated subjects, on the contrary it describes a direct empathic experience.
It is this direct givenness of the Other through empathy that Stein focuses on in much of her work. She defines Empathy as the experience of feeling the Other's feelings. Fundamentally empathy is the act of feeling oneself into another's experience ("*sich einfühlen*"). Her work focuses on demonstrating that empathy is a unique form of perception. Even if I as the perceiver am not given the emotion that is intuited through empathy directly, i.e. I do not 'feel' the pain that I perceive in empathy, there is nonetheless a form of feeling pain involved. Stein discusses the example of meeting a friend and seeing that he is in pain. Whatever the basis of this feeling is (his look, his behaviour or similar) is not at stake in her account, what is relevant is the structure underlying this process – this is the heart of empathy.
Let us begin by letting Stein herself speak:

> When it [the other's emotion] suddenly appears before me it faces me as an object (for instance, the sadness I 'read' in the other's face). But when I inquire into its implied tendencies (when I try to bring the other's mood to clear givenness to myself), the experience is no longer an object for me, but has pulled me into it. I am now no longer turned towards the experience, but instead I am turned towards the object of the experience. I am at the subject of the original experience, at the subject's place, and only after having fulfilled a clarification of the experience does it appear to me as an object again. (Stein, 2008, pp. 18-19)

Stein begins by describing that in empathy there is a givenness of pain, while I do not have a direct perception of the pain. Empathy, in contrast to other perceptions, involves a going beyond simple perception or givenness, because the intentional object, in this case the other's pain, is not directly given, the content is not '*leibhaftig*' present. There is no element of my experience that I could point to and say this is the object of my empathic pain perception. In this empathy is more akin to imagination or memory than to sense perception.
Still, watching someone burn their hand does cause a reaction and a sensation of being pained in me, it pulls me in as Stein puts it, but it is a reaction that is different from the feeling of me burning my own hand. This feeling-in (*Einfühlung*) is not simply a form of sense perception. Thus, empathy is also connected to sense perception in that its object is disclosed through the senses that present or give an object, just that the object of empathy is not a straightforward spatio-temporal object, but (in this case) it is the felt experiences of the other. These felt experiences are not given like spatio-temporal objects, instead they are appresented (co-given) in the perception of the other's pained expression, or what I take to be a pained expression:

> Stein's point is that the empathy experience is non-original in a way that is similar to the act of remembrance, but with the important difference that the content of the experience has never been bodily present to me but is present as such only to the other person that I am empathizing with. The term Stein will use to distinguish this special

> form of non-originality, which is peculiar to empathy, is 'con-original' ('*Konoriginarität*'). (Svanaeus, 2018, p. 744)

At first we experience empathy like any other phenomenon or object, something appears. What renders empathy unique is the fact that it pulls me into the other's experience. The distance between the experiencer and the Other's emotion that is experienced is reduced without being eliminated, the empathizer and the empathee are connected or related in the act of empathy – they share an emotional experience. This feeling of experiencing someone else's experience is fundamentally relational and connects the perceptual and imaginative feelings on the part of the empathic subject (empathizer) and the expressed feelings of the (empathee) quite directly. This relational nature necessitates a complex and subtle understanding of the nature of empathy and presupposes a direct connectedness of a very specific kind:

> Stein takes empathy to be a three-step process in which the experience of the other person (the empathee) (1) emerges to the empathizer as an experience had by the empathee, the empathizer then (2) follows the experience of the empathee through, in order to (3) return to a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the experience had by the empathee. (Svenaeus, 2018, p. 742)

This complex interaction of these levels of actualization ('*Vollzugsstufen*') according to Stein is only possible due to the attunement between these feelings. There are furthermore two interrelated regions ('*Schichten*') of empathy, namely sensual and emotional empathy (with the latter presupposing the former), that can be distinguished. However, we do not intend to present all these complex investigations of steps and levels in this context, but to indicate how intricate the act of empathy is if looked at from a phenomenological perspective.

From a phenomenological perspective, empathy is the complex intersubjective act of 'feeling into the experience of the other', that moves across the traditional boundaries of inner and outer, of self and other. 'Feeling into' not only means to i) experience the other as a conscious subject (instead of an object), but also to ii) directly perceive the other's experiences and their actions as expressions of this interiority. This experience-based account of empathy is 'feeling into' is to be distinguished from 'feeling for' and 'feeling with', both more traditional and science based conceptualizations of empathy.
It is quite clear that 'feeling for' can be captured by terms like 'compassion', 'sympathy' and 'concern'. These terms indicate that observer's emotions are felt for (and not with) the other person (Singer & Lamm, 2009, p. 84). Thus compassion, sympathy and concern constitute, like empathy itself, an alteration caused by perceived or assumed emotions in others, however, without any implication of sharing this emotion as is presupposed in the standard understanding of emotional empathy (feeling with).
'Feeling with', or 'putting oneself in the other's shoes' is the most common understanding of empathy, but this account maintains the clear distinction between self and other, an emphasis that is quite common in more quantitative and scientific approaches to empathy. Here a clear separation between the self and the other is presupposed, while phenomenology discovers a deeper dimension to empathy, namely a clear intentional connection, a feeling into the Other. This 'feeling into the Other' implies a shift that is not quite captured by the traditional difference between 'feeling for' and 'feeling with' that is often referenced in other accounts of empathy. Feeling into the other goes farther than feeling with the other, it implies a

transcendence of the boundary of you and I, a shared intentionality, a direct givenness of the other's feelings, without however creating a fusion between the subjects.

Furthermore, the bulk of scientific literature on empathy often presupposes or implies the distinction between cognitive and emotional empathy (compare Bloom, 2016). Phenomenologists would contend that both rely on a more fundamental empathy that they derive from.

> According to phenomenologists, including Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl, and Edith Stein, the most basic form of empathy acquaints you – in the most direct and immediate manner possible – with another's experiential life. Importantly, on this account empathy is not about me having the same mental state as the other, but about me being experientially acquainted with an experience that is not my own. (Fernandez & Zahavi, 2020)

'Feeling into' is a more fundamental experience than cognitive or emotional empathy traditionally account for. 'Feeling into' does imply to directly experience another's affective state, but without necessarily having to share that same feeling.
In perceiving someone's fear it is certainly possible that the empathizer does share the fear, but that is not necessary in the act of empathically experiencing the other's fear.
In feeling into the empathizer puts himself into the position of the empathee, insofar as the empathee is present to the empathizer as a bodily subject with a lived experience and not a simple object. Thus, when we are involved in using our cognitive faculties to put ourselves in someone else's shoes or are feeling with someone else, we are exhibiting abilities that are closely related to empathy as understood by phenomenologists. But only focusing on these more complex, and in a sense derivative aspect alone does not give us the ability to fully understand empathy yet as it is conceived by phenomenologists. Only all aspects and levels together can constitute a genuine understanding of empathy.

From a scientific perspective empathy is usually accounted through two interrelated processes, one is bottom up, one top down. A mirroring of self in the other constitutes the bottom-up process, while a self/other difference awareness[10] at perspective-taking process constitutes the top-down process. The explanations of the bottom-up process involve references to mirror neurons (Jankowiak-Siuda *et al.*, 2011), that are activated either in case of a firsthand action and when the action is observed in another subject (Gallese *et al.*, 1996). The aspect of perceiving emotion as an external phenomenon is addressed as 'top-down processes'. These are situated on the level of cognitive perspective-taking, a position that implies a form of distance taking, and is the mechanism that allows for any constitution of a ToM.
These two processes are considered to be combined in such a way that the top-down mechanism limits the emotions shared in an automatic way (bottom-up). This automatic sharing of emotions could cause an emotional chaos, with a potential dissolution of the distinction between the self and the other, if it was not regulated by the top-down mechanism (Jankowiak-Siuda *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, through executive functions, top-down regulation not only adjusts the lower level but also adds flexibility liberating the subject from the dependence

10 Apparently in autism the brain shows a lack in those aeras that respond to self-information (Lombardo *et al.*, 2010, p. 620). This study could support a lack in ToM which may be explained not only as an "inability to understand other's people different belief" (Baron-Cohen, 1995, p. 71) but also as the missed inference of self-mental state.

on external input (Singer & Lamm, 2009, p. 89). Therefore, the automatic reflection of the self into the other is considered to be balanced by the awareness of the difference occurring between them: these are two different but intertwined processes.
Both the bottom-up and the top-down stages are essential for the empathic process, the third stage Stein describes the integration of these results to derive a more complex understanding of the empathee's perspective is however not considered.

While the dual account of empathy provides a clearer and more easily quantifiable picture, than the phenomenological account does, it fails to consider some of the more intricate dimensions of con-originality and the phenomenon of minimizing distance as a bodily subject and not just a disembodied mind through empathy as described by Stein. We propose that is this co-experiencing as embodied subjects, that is not merely a cognitive state but also embodied, creates further pressure on a hyper-emotional brain which in turn could lead to a rejection of empathic interaction in autistics.[11]

4. Conclusion

Although IWT is still far from an exhaustive explanation of how hyper-functioning brain in autistics works, it may be a starting point for an alternative way to conceptualize the emotional aspects of autism as not a disorder of empathy, but as an oversensitivity. Therefore, what is often perceived as deficits in attending social signals, feel emotions and take other perspective might be the result of emotions intensely felt and not some form of deficiency.

As a method, phenomenology investigates the phenomenon as it is given. In our case it means to explore empathy from the perspective of the subject involved in the empathic act of intersubjectivity: "[...] We are very experienced at intersubjectivity, just by virtue of our being so involved in it from the beginning of life, each in our own ways and also in many ways we share with others" (De Jaegher *et al.*, 2016, p. 492). Indeed, describing empathy without the inclusion of direct experience of autistics and subjects close to them could hinder our understanding of autism and jeopardize the possibility to see autistics as intersubjective subjects.

Phenomenology offers also theoretical instruments to characterize the phenomenon of empathy as a 'feeling into' the other by converging cognitive and emotional elements. Empathizing is the act by which I and You disregards the borders in favor of a shared intentionality encountering each other in an experience that Stein defines con-original. Empathy then is a like an emotional shared space that I and You as embodied and conscious subjects tend to minimize while maintaining a separate identity. This 'movement' through which the empathizer is pulled into the empathee's experience is generated by an intentional connection and represents the intrinsic nature of empathy in the phenomenological account.

Taking these results from phenomenology, it turns out that the question is not whether autistics are empathetic, but whether their difficulty to endure such a minimization of the space between self and the Other, caused by hyper-emotionality, is the root of the stipulated inability to empathize. IWT suggests that keeping distance would be a strategy to decrease

11 According to Fuchs (2015) autistics would seem more inclined to understand the other via inference from other mental states to compensate a disrupted embodied interaction that comes prior to the implementation of ToM. Also, Gallese (2006) argues that in Asperger syndrome there is a dysfunction of the embodied simulation caused by malfunctioning in mirror neurons.

the degree of the intensity. We also add that this strategy would be especially applied in the embodied relation: if inference of other mental states represents a more detach way to engage with another 'self', the embodiment experience of the Other requires a superior degree of emotions.

Using phenomenological concepts and IWT we could say that the amount of distance someone is comfortable with is a reaction to the intensity of the feeling required in the Other-relation. Expanding distance is not a sign of a disrupted empathy, rather a different manner to empathize which still includes con-givenness, but excludes elements of cognitive aspects of empathy and potentially of 'feeling with'. However, as phenomenology suggests, even when the distance is minimized there is always a gap between the self and the Other. Combined this way, phenomenology and IWT offer a vision of autistics as empathetic individuals who however prefer not to minimize the space dividing their self from the Other; what makes the empathy authentic is not the full reduction of the relational space, but the intentionality toward the Other.

Should such a phenomenologically enriched IWT hold, that would imply a need to develop different forms of therapy where autistics would be no longer exposed to overwhelming stimuli, but gently introduced to them: "Early intervention to reduce or moderate the *intensity* of an autistic child's environment might allow their talents to be protected while their autism-related disabilities are mitigated or, possibly, avoided" (Szalavitz, 2013). Moreover, showing that autism is not an empathy illness, but an over emotional way to engage with the Other, could affect how we see autistics and how we behave with them.

REFERENCES

Acanfora, F. (2018, November 7). La teoria del mondo intenso. [L'Indiscreto]. Retrieved from https://www.indiscreto.org/la-teoria-del-mondo-intenso/;
American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Neurodevelopmental Disorders. In *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.);
Baron-Cohen, S., Ring, H. A., Bullmore, E. T., Wheelwright, S., Ashwin, C., & Williams, S. C. (2000). The amygdala theory of autism. *Neuroscience and biobehavioral reviews*, 24(3), 355-364. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/s0149-7634(00)00011-7;
Baron-Cohen, S., Leslie, A. M., & Frith, U. (1985). Does the Autistic Child have a "Theory of Mind"? *Cognition*, 21(1), 37-46. doi:10.1016/0010-0277(85)90022-8;
Baron-Cohen, S. (2009). The Empathizing-Systemizing Theory of Autism. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1156, 68-80. doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04467;
Baron-Cohen, S. (1995). *Mindblindness. An essay on autism and theory of mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press;
Baron-Cohen, S. (1990). Autism: A specific cognitive disorder of mindblindness. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 2, 81-90;
Bloom, P. (2016). *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. New York, NY: Harper Collins;
Casanova, E. L., & Casanova, M. F. (2019). *Defining Autism: A Guide to Brain, Biology, and Behavior*. London, UK & Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers;
De Jaegher, H., Pieper, B., Clénin, D., & Fuchs, T. (2016). Grasping intersubjectivity: an invitation to embody social interaction research. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 16(3): 491-523. doi:10.1007/s11097-016-9469-8;
Fernandez, A. V., & Zahavi, D. (2020). Can We Train Basic Empathy? A Phenomenological

Proposal. *Nurse Education Today*, 98(March 2021). doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2020.104720;
Fuchs, T. (2015). Pathologies of Intersubjectivity in Autism and Schizophrenia. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 22(1-2), 191-214;
Gallese, V. (2006). Intentional attunement: a neurophysiological perspective on social cognition and its disruption in autism. *Brain research*, 1079(1), 15-24. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brainres.2006.01.054;
Gallese, V., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., & Rizzolati, G. (1996). Action recognition in the premotor cortex. *Brain*, 119, 593-609. doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/119.2.593;
Hansen, Q. (2019, February 7). The Intense World Theory of Autism – What we've been saying all along! [Speaking of autism. An autistic speaks about living with autism]. Retrieved from https://speakingofautismcom.wordpress.com/2019/02/07/the-intense-world-theory-of-autism-what-weve-been-saying-all-along/;
Happé, F., & Frith, U. (2006). The weak coherence account: detail-focused cognitive style in autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 36(1), 5-25. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-005-0039-0;
Husserl, E. Husserliana Gesammelte Werke, 43 volumes. Edited under the auspices of the Husserl-Archives, Louvain;
Jack, C. (2020, June 14). Can I Have Empathy If I Am Autistic? [Psychology today]. Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/women-autism-spectrum-disorder/202006/can-i-have-empathy-if-i-am-autistic;
Jankowiak-Siuda, K., Rymarczyk, K., & Grabowska, A. (2011). How we empathize with others: A neurobiological perspective. *Medical Science Monitor*, 17(1), RA18–RA24. doi:10.12659/MSM.881324;
Lombardo, M., V., Chakrabarti, B., Bullmore, E. T., Sadek, A. S., Pasco, G., Wheelwright, S. J., Suckling, J., MRC AIMS Consortium, & Baron-Cohen, S. (2010). Atypical neural self-representation in autism). *Brain. A journal of neurology*, 133, 611-624. doi. https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/awp306;
Markram, K., & Markram, H. (2010). The intense world theory – a unifying theory of the neurobiology of autism. *Frontiers in human neuroscience*, 4, 224. doi. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2010.00224;
Markram, H., Rinaldi, T., & Markram, K. (2007). The intense world syndrome–an alternative hypothesis for autism. *Frontiers in neuroscience*, 1(1), 77-96. https://doi.org/10.3389/neuro.01.1.1.006.2007;
Mottron, L., Dawson, M., Soulières, I., Hubert, B., & Burack, J. (2006). Enhanced Perceptual Functioning in Autism: An Update, and Eight Principles of Autistic Perception. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 36(1), 27-43. doi:10.1007/s10803-005-0040-7;
Premack, D., & Woodruff, G. (1978). Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1(4), 515-526. doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00076512;
Rogers, K., Dziobek, I., Hassenstab, J., & Wolf, O. T. (2007). Who Cares? Revisiting Empathy in Asperger Syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 37(4), 709-715. doi:10.1007/s10803-006-0197-8;
Silberman, S. (2015*). Neurotribes: the legacy of autism and how to think smarter about people who think differently*. Australia: Allen & Unwin. Retrieved from https://books.google.com/;
Singer, T., & Lamm, C. (2009). The Social Neuroscience of Empathy. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1156(1), 81-96. doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04418.x;
Smith, A. (2006). Cognitive Empathy and Emotional Empathy in Human Behavior and Evolution. *Psychol Rec*, 56, 3-21. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03395534;

Stein, E. (2008) [1917]. *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*. Gesamtausgabe Bd. 5, Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder;
Svenaeus, F. (2018). Edith Stein's phenomenology of sensual and emotional empathy. *Phenom Cogn Sci*, 17, 741-760. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-017-9544-9;
Szalavitz, M. (2013, December 11) The Boy Whose Brain Could Unlock Autism. [Matter]. Retrieved from https://medium.com/matter/the-boy-whose-brain-could-unlock-autism-70c3d64ff221;
Zahavi, D. (2014). *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press;
Zahavi, D. (2003). *Husserl's Phenomenology*. California, CA: Stanford University Press.