

# **EMPATHY IN NEUROSCIENCE AND PRACTICE - A REPORT FROM THE CONFERENCE OF “EMPATHY NEUROSCIENCE: TRANSLATIONAL RELEVANCE TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION”, ROME, 18th AND 19th OCTOBER 2017**

*Professionals from around the world convened in Rome to explore the impact of **empathy** in the context of human relations.*

**Empathy** is the ability to put yourself in somebody else’s shoes and to walk a mile in them; as well as the ability to see the world through someone else’s eyes without losing your own identity.

The importance of **empathy** is a topic that is being increasingly discussed beyond relational and clinical contexts. The conference organised by Fondazione Child and held in Rome focused on this very notion. It was a two day conference held on the 18th and 19th of October last year at the Nazionalità di Sanità institute, and which called together scholars from around the world (USA, UK, Israel, Palestine) and professionals with different backgrounds in research and intervention (university professors, researchers, psychologists, psychotherapists, teachers and educators). The focus of the conference was to discuss the concrete impact that **empathy** has in the context of human relations.

The two primary areas explored were: the importance of teaching **empathy** as an interpersonal skill to be instilled and actively nurtured since childhood, and an analysis on how **empathy** is concretely applied in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to encourage understanding and mediation whilst respecting and maintaining different identities. Teaching children an empathic approach is carried out as a preventive measure to show them that it is possible to peacefully coexist with diversity, whether it’s cultural, religious, or other forms of diversity.

## **Empathy in research: contributions by neuroscience**

The conference opened with institutional greetings by Ernesto Caffo, professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia; Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of Developmental Psychopathology from the University of Cambridge; and by Fabio Lucidi, professor of Psychometry from the faculty of Medicine and Psychology at the University of La Sapienza in Rome.

The first day of the conference focused on different aspects of researching empathy through the contribution of neuroscience. Emile Bruneau, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, offered a comprehensive look on how the construct of **empathy** has been analysed in a neuroscientific context in order to delimit the field of study.

It is important to make a distinction between cognitive and emotional **empathy** to avoid significant repercussions when shifting from research to practice. Cognitive empathy refers

to the recognition of someone else's situation and the understanding of a concept from the point of view of someone else, also known as perspective-taking.

Emotional empathy, on the other hand, refers to the act of responding to how a person is feeling. This can occur in two ways:

- Feeling what the other person is feeling, so feeling as they do.
- Feeling in response to what the other person is feeling, so feeling for them. For example, coming into contact with another person's negative emotions may cause a stress reaction in the second individual involved. In some cases this may negatively impact the relationship and generate a non-empathic attitude as a consequence of feeling overwhelmed and feeling adequately capable of immersing one's self in the other person's situation.

An empathic approach has its limits, such as cognitive biases, that may cause someone to empathise with some situations and not with others. In some cases **empathy** becomes the glue that holds together a group by strengthening the sense of belonging while simultaneously thickening the boundaries between the group and those outside the group. When situations of conflict arise, cognitive empathy is more effective during the initial negotiations, while emotional empathy is more competent in the later stages.

Professor Ahmad Abu-Akel of the University of Lausanne; Salvatore Maria Aglioti, professor of cognitive neuroscience at the University of La Sapienza in Rome; and professor Bhishmadev Chakrabarti of the University of Reading, went on to illustrate and cross-examine the results of a series of studies conducted on **empathy** in a neuroscientific context. Relationships are analysed through neuroimaging, confronting the perception of pain (i.e. seeing somebody getting pricked by a needle) and **empathy** (imagining how you would feel if you were in the same situation), and what tools can be used to help improve situations of conflict.

Professor and researcher Theresa Betancourt of the University of Harvard and James F. Leckman, professor of Child Psychiatry of the University of Yale, respectively illustrated the results of a series of studies conducted on child soldiers in Sierra Leone with a focus on the impact that the trauma of war has on their psychological development. Furthermore, they highlighted the advantages of promoting empathic skills since childhood in order to foster adequate emotional and cognitive development.

### **Empathy and the experiences in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere**

The second day of the conference focused on practical aspects and on storytelling. Different participants presented their personal experiences of working in the field and shared the different activities that educators working in conflict zones implement in order to promote **empathy**; which is perceived as a transversal skill that can be taught through other notions.

Educators working in the Israeli-Palestinian context shared their daily difficulties in dealing with the conflict and proposed alternative interventions and approaches for interaction. For example, a movie was produced called "*Two sided story*" which stems from a project

involving both Israelis and Palestinians. The trailer of the movie was screened and it showed how those involved were able to move from hostility and distrust to a more understanding view of the other person to the point of not perceiving them as an enemy any longer but rather as an individual with a life story that mirrored their own.

**WATCH THE TRAILER FOR “TWO SIDED STORY”**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzJkBxQC4Tg>

Empathy represents a field of study as well as a tool that can be used to intervene in conflict situations both as a preventive measure and a solution focused instrument.