

Sociology of empathy: a map

Sociología de la empatía: un mapa

Salzano, Giulia*

University of Naples "Federico II", Italy.

giulia.salzano@unina.it

Abstract:

Over the past two decades, the "affective turn" has sparked an "empathy boom", placing empathy at the centre of psychological, philosophical, and political debates. This article provides an overview of the growing attention devoted to empathy within contemporary sociology, outlining the main perspectives of inquiry and the theoretical tools developed in the field. The discussion engages with the work of key sociologists, including Candace Clark, Arlie Russel Hochschild, and Natalia Ruiz-Junco, who have advanced a cartographic approach to the phenomenon in order to map the distribution of empathy and its role in consolidating and reshaping social bonds. The article examines the boundaries, morphology, and structure of "empathy maps", as well as the social conditions that shape their reproduction, stabilization, and transformation. This perspective highlights the dialectical link between empathy and social reality: empathy contributes to the creation of social ties, while social, cultural, and power structures simultaneously influence its forms and configurations. By adopting a cartographic lens, the article provides conceptual and methodological tools to analyse how empathic geographies are distributed, negotiated, and reshaped, offering insight into the dynamics of empathy in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Empathy; Sociology of Emotion; Interactionism; Intersubjectivity.

Resumen:

En las últimas dos décadas, el "giro afectivo" ha desencadenado un "auge de la empatía", situándola en el centro de los debates psicológicos, filosóficos y políticos. Este artículo ofrece una visión general de la creciente atención que se le dedica a la empatía en la sociología contemporánea, describiendo las principales perspectivas de investigación y las herramientas teóricas desarrolladas en este campo. La discusión aborda el trabajo de sociólogas claves, como Candace Clark, Arlie Hochschild y Natalia Ruiz-Junco, quienes han desarrollado un enfoque cartográfico del fenómeno para mapear la distribución de la empatía y su papel en la consolidación y remodelación de los vínculos sociales. El artículo examina los límites, la morfología y la estructura de los "mapas de empatía", así como las condiciones sociales que configuran su reproducción, estabilización y transformación. Esta perspectiva destaca el vínculo dialéctico entre la empatía y la realidad social: la empatía contribuye a la creación de vínculos sociales, mientras que las estructuras sociales, culturales y de poder influyen simultáneamente en sus formas y configuraciones. Al adoptar una lente cartográfica, el artículo proporciona herramientas conceptuales y metodológicas para analizar cómo se distribuyen, negocian y remodelan las geografías empáticas, ofreciendo una perspectiva de la dinámica de la empatía en las sociedades contemporáneas.

Palabras claves: Empatía; Sociología de la emoción; Interaccionismo; Intersubjetividad.

* Research fellow at the University of Naples Federico II with a project that explores the relationship between imitative processes and sympathetic dynamics. Her main research fields are sociology of emotions and phenomenological sociology. She carried out researches on empathy, on youth mobility, especially on the experience of "coming back", and on daily practices of digital communication, using the conceptual tools and the theoretical frame of phenomenological sociology. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1153-9218>.

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Introduction

The so-called "*affective turn*" (Clough, 2007), which characterized the second half of the last century, led in the first decades of the 2000s, to what can be defined as a real "empathic boom" (Boella, 2018). The attention devoted to the affective dimension has brought to light the centrality of empathy as a phenomenon capable of revealing our sensitivity toward others and of bringing distinct emotional spheres into contact. Whether it is conceived as an inevitable human destiny, attributable to evolutionary (de Waal, 2011) or economic and social reasons (Rifkin, 2009) or, conversely, as a strategy of resistance to the impact that the neoliberal and globalized society had on the social fabric (Pulcini, 2009), the concept of empathy seems to resonate with increasing recurrence and extension both in the public and scientific debate. In just a few years, most disciplinary field have been invested by an increasing attention to the phenomenon, questioning both its effects and limitations. From this perspective, contemporary discourse increasingly refers to an empathy turn in public administration (Mussagulova, 2024), a pedagogy based on empathy (O'Grady, 2020), empathic politics and empathetic leadership (Yorke, 2025), empathic information and communication (Fuller et al., 2021), empathetic media (McStay, 2018), and an empathic development of technology,¹ or marketing strategies which can empathize with the customers' desires and emotions (Padersen, 2021).

In the philosophical debate, empathy has experienced a first wave of studies aimed at highlighting the prosocial character of the phenomenon (Baron-Cohen, 2012; Krznaric, 2012), often identifying it with phenomena such as compassion, care, altruism, sympathy, or placing it at the basis of these emotional dimensions. This

1 <https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/252275-moving-towards-an-empathic-world-new-technology-is-recognising-affective-states/it>

approach then gave way to research tending to problematize this immediate reference to the ethical dimension of empathy (Donise, 2019) and its ability to mediate or even preclude conflicts, presenting itself as a fundamental tool for promoting social justice. These studies have revealed how empathy can also pursue irrational, familial, exclusionary logics (Bloom, 2016), and be used not only for the adoption of solidarity or social cohesion strategies but also for control (Clark, 1997), manipulation (Tisseron, 2017), and affirmation of oneself and one's prestige.

Recently, reflections on empathy have also emerged within the sociology of emotions, particularly within the interactionist tradition (Shott, 1979; Hochschild, 2013, 2016; Ruiz-Junco, 2017). Engaging with the vast body of literature that has developed on the topic, as briefly outlined above, these contributions have sought to integrate different perspectives on empathy and its consequences on both intrapersonal and interpersonal level, in order to further conceptualize empathy as a socially situated and relational phenomenon. This approach allows us not only to focus on the social implications of empathy, but also on the social conditioning of its forms of activation, distribution and consolidation. Neither a guarantor of social cohesion, nor a mere obstacle to its realization, empathy must be conceived beyond Manichaeism, in the plurality of its manifestations, as a litmus test for understanding the kaleidoscopic panorama of interactions and emotional interactions that develops with the encounter between subjectivities. From this perspective, a sociological approach can be useful in understanding the reasons why empathy can take on different forms and produce diverse effects on the development of social bonds and interactions.

Building on these premises, we will first outline a theoretical framework within which

empathy can be analysed and its entanglement with social reality examined. We will then map the theoretical approaches, conceptual tools, and research perspectives developed within the sociology of emotions in order to highlight the social implications and conditions of empathy, advancing what may be described as a cartographic approach to the phenomenon. In conclusion, we will explore the potential and possible applications of this approach in sociological research, seeking to systematise a sociology of empathy that, through its cartographic lens, not only reconstructs the landscape of social relations but also offers critical insight into the configuration's empathy assumes today and opens up spaces for reflecting on the possible reconfiguration of empathic boundaries.

Between reason and emotion: the ambiguous nature of empathy

In order to get a more complete picture of the social implications of empathy, we must first clarify the nature of this phenomenon.

The most radical theories of empathy, which tend to generate a polarization between prosocial conceptions of empathy and views that portray it as antisocial, can often be traced back to a reductionist emphasis on one single component of this multifaceted phenomenon. Empathy, in fact, is a complex and stratified experience (Boella, 2005; Zahavi, 2010; Tisseron, 2010; Donise, 2019), characterized by the coexistence of perceptual, cognitive and emotional elements. It holds together a multiplicity of passive and active, unreflected and conscious levels of experience, which are mobilized when one comes into contact with other people and their lived experience. Empathy is not linked to a mere cognitive ability of perspective taking, nor to a specific feeling of emotional sharing. It calls into question the sensitivity of the empathizing subject themselves, which must be conceived in its dual nature: as receptive and responsive (Waldenfels, 2003). Empathy then identifies the disposition to grasp the other and their feeling and to get involved, at various emotional and cognitive levels. Empathy, therefore, takes the form of an encounter between sentient subjectivities capable of being affected by the presence of others (Cerulo, 2024), even before this fundamental interaction takes on a specific "emotional style" (Illouz, 2007), a specific form of interaction (McCaffree, 2020), the physiognomy of a dissonance or a consonance. This primary level of affective involvement can produce different emotional responses, positive or negative,

as well as different practical strategies *toward, against* or *with* the empathized subject (Ruiz-Junco, 2017) or of an involution of this resonance into the forms of inhibition, or indifference towards the other.

Empathy also entails the activation of cognitive dimensions within the empathizing subject, fostering a more nuanced understanding of others' experiences, grasping their underlying motivations, aims, context.

The complex, stratified, nature of empathy, from which also arise the difficulties in understanding its internal dynamics, is not only inherent in the structure of the phenomenon but also in its correlate. As mentioned, in fact, in the empathic encounter one can settle at the level of the perception of the other, focusing on the expressiveness that emanates from their body, reifying it (Honneth, 2012), or proceed towards the perception of their mental and/or emotional state, or broaden the range of attention towards the consideration of the history or personal character that are expressed in that empathized experience.

The ambivalence of the empathic phenomenon reveals a further constitutive aspect of this experience: that of self-involvement. Empathy, as emerged, although it is constituted as an allocentric experience, focusing on the "empathized subject", necessarily implies the involvement of the empathizing subjects themselves in their affective nature, emotional sensitivities, attentional and responsive predispositions, and cognitive abilities. This involvement does not only concern the perceptual, experiential, evaluative and practical dimensions of the empathizing subject, which are mobilized in the empathic encounter, but the possibility of becoming aware of one's own exposure to otherness, as it is highlighted in what the phenomenologist Edith Stein defines as the reiteration of empathy, or "reflexive sympathy" (Stein, 1989, p. 18). Hence, the possibility of triggering dynamics of reciprocal interaction or precluding this possibility, developing empathy unilaterally with the consequence of denying the effects of simultaneous and reciprocal involvement. The recognition of this exposure to the "other" requires to take into account the transformative character of the empathic experience. The empathic activation reveals not only aspects concerning the empathised subject, and the relationship with the empathizer, but also some information about the empathising subjects themselves, who experience themselves through the other's gaze, in a game of empathic mirroring.

This aspect shows how empathy plays a fundamental role in the processes of social integration, through which collective imaginations and shared rules are consolidated and reproduced, structuring the emotional culture (Gordon, 1981) of the group with which one interacts. Through its reiterative dynamics, empathy also influences the processes of individuation and identification that underlie the formation of individual identity.

Davis's organizational framework: empathy's conditions, components and effects

Once the complexity of the phenomenon has been articulated, one can ask how empathy could be theoretically framed to investigate the empathic weave of the social fabric. In this regard, it may be helpful to refer to organizational framework proposed by social psychologist Mark Davis who edited the entry "empathy" in the *Handbook of sociology of emotions* (2006). Davis aims to clarify the "active components" involved in the phenomenon and its effects on both the individual and intersubjective level. The first component of this framework encompasses the condition of the empathic encounter: an observer (the empathic subject); an observed subject, (the *target* of the empathic episode) and finally the situation, i.e. the context in which the episode takes place.

Before focusing on the situation, Davis emphasizes the need to consider some factors that precede it: the individual characteristics of the subjects involved in the empathic episode, their predispositions, their psychological state ("biological capacity"), their personality, their biographical itinerary ("learning history"). The situation, on the other hand, must be considered in relation to three factors such as: relational proximity; degree of similarity between the empathic subject and the empathic target, and the strength of the situation. The similarity between empathetic and empathetic subjects refers to "objective" data such as physical conformation, socio-economic condition, cultural codes, symbolic and cultural capital. The strength of the situation identifies, instead, the influence that the context can exert encouraging or not empathic activation. This aspect takes into account the prevailing rules, the context, and the atmosphere, which shapes the affective tone of the situation (Riedel, 2019).

Davis describes the different experiential levels which may be implied by empathy. His analysis starts from the consideration of a first level of passive-receptive empathy which is rooted in physical, psychomotor, affective dynamics. Processes such

as motor mimicry (Holland, O'Connell & Dziobek, 2020), intracorporeal coordination and synchrony (Besel & Yuille, 2010; Dimberg, Andréasson & Thunberg, 2011) can be associated with this stage. These mechanisms underlie and guide more complex processes of cognitive coordination represented by the phenomena of shared attention (Moore & Dunham, 2014) or intersubjective cooperation (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2017). Finally, the cognitive activation of empathy involves the ability to mobilize knowledge, personal memories, and logical reasoning in order to understand another's experience and the situation in which it occurs, examining the context from a projective or perspective-taking standpoint (Goldie, 2011).

The mobilization of more sophisticated cognitive processes of a projective or reconstructive (Stueber, 2006) nature can further solicit the activation of emotional layers of empathic experience. Davis distinguishes reactive and parallel emotional responses. The former can be of various types: they may participate in the empathized emotion, or they may be of an opposite nature (indignation, embarrassment, anger, hope, or pride) in response to the emotion experienced by the other. The latter, instead, take the form of a vicarious feeling in which the empathized emotion is echoed (either in unreflected forms, such as emotional contagion, or in more conscious forms of sympathetic sharing of the other's feelings).

Davis' model highlights the multiple outcomes of empathy, distinguishing them into affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains, and analyzing them both in terms of their relational consequences and their effects on the empathizing subject themselves.

Among the affective outcomes, Davis includes the empathic concern (Batson, 2023), i.e. the degree of empathic engagement with the target, which can take on a cognitive dimension and manifest as sustained attention to the other, their situation, or practical ones, potentially translating into altruistic strategies, conflictual responses. Indifference itself or friction, experienced in cases of negative empathy, can be counted among the *affective outcomes*.

This model helps to account for the actual components of the phenomenon. It allows us to examine what is engaged in the empathic encounter, how different trajectories of intersubjective interaction can lead to the activation and articulation of distinct experiential spheres, while leaving other activations latent or inhibited. These dynamics help explain why,

at times, even when we are cognitively inclined and capable of adopting the perspective of others, we may not feel emotionally involved; conversely, in other situations, our emotional responses appear to dominate over the complex interplay of reasoning, feeling, and reflection on self and on the other that empathy seems to require.

Davis's model therefore provides a framework through which empathy and its socio-cultural premises can be critically examined, allowing us to understand which factors influence its various forms of activation, distribution, and modulation: a central theme in what has in recent years been emerging as a sociology of empathy.

Mapping empathy: empathy in sociology of emotions

The recent literature that has emerged in the sociological field on empathy proved to be sensitive to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon.

Notably, in the landscape of sociological studies, the question is often explored using a cartographic lexicon. The experience of otherness is often identified with the image of the exploration of a foreign territory (Ferrarotti, 2011). One moves groping, through the senses, one is struck by a series of sensations with which one tries to familiarize, to interpret, to subsume within models that help to interpret and interact with other people, to build a personal type of the interactor – more or less detailed and familiar, ductile and detached from stereotypes – abstract types and social roles. One proceeds by experiences and failures, often remodulating one's expectations, anticipations of meaning in an attempt to understand the other, to get in touch with their emotional sphere. Empathy therefore tends to define a sort of cartography of the other, tracing areas that are more or less known and resonant with one's own, foregrounded areas and others left in shadow, zones of intersection, convergence, proximity or greater distance and others that remain unexplored.

From this perspective, as will be shown, sociological literature has introduced a range of conceptual tools, including empathy maps, empathy paths, empathy patterns, empathy walls, and intersubjective bridges. The cartographic lexicon that has emerged in the sociology of empathy corresponds to the analysis of the affective dimension, which is often itself conceived in spatial terms. We often speak of the inner emotional landscape to define the vast panorama of emotions that invests us at every moment. Affective manifestations can be more or less patent, linear, magmatic, ambivalent, arranging

themselves in varying patterns, overlapping and layering. Our emotional life combines different phenomena, some deeper and more recurrent than others, shaping our feelings, moods, basic affective states, and inclinations, and thereby delineating the emotional horizons within which we encounter others. Emotions take the form of a map that follows the course of our experiences which is shaped by social imaginaries, cultural resources, processes of socialization, and norms of feeling and expression that structure one's emotional culture and characterize the situations in which one finds oneself, and the other. Facing an emotional landscape means immersing oneself in the ebb and flow of a personal and yet social psychogeography (Bruno, 2007). The empathic encounter rewrites these emotional geographies, serving as a moment in which the coordinates through which we relate to others – and to our own emotional landscapes – are reproduced, reoriented, and transformed in social interactions. This perspective allows us to show how, through the empathic encounter, it is possible to access previously unexplored areas of one's own inner landscape – areas that are activated, stimulated, and sometimes challenged by the empathized's experiential world. This process lays the groundwork for the reaffirmation or modification of self-knowledge, empathic dispositions and for shaping the way to perceive and come into contact with other people.

Empathy in Candance Clark's affective micropolitics

We now turn to the development of this cartographic approach within the sociology of emotions, especially from an interactionist perspective, which examines the uses, potential, and social implications of empathy.

In this sense, one of the earliest useful sources can be found in Candance Clark's theory of understanding (Clark, 1997). The sociologist situates the analysis of empathic and sympathetic dynamics within socially constructed circuits, which are capable of change – becoming more or less rigid, permeable, or porous – through intersubjective experience. The sociologist focuses on the notion of empathy by drawing on the extensive literature on sympathy and on Shott's theory of role-taking emotions (1979), integrating these insights with reflections on the dynamics of power in the sharing and exchange of emotions elaborated by Theodore D. Kemper (1984). Clark dwells on the sympathetic phenomenon as a process in which the experience of other subjects is grasped, understood and shared,

conditioning and directing social interactions. In Clark's theoretical framework, empathy is one of the phases the sympathetic phenomenon is composed of. It represents the stage in which affective subjectivities come into contact with each other. This encounter produces a physical, cognitive and emotional stimulus through which the empathizing subject opens up to otherness and interacts with them. The empathic phase allows for the emergence of a mirrored experience of what is perceived. It can lead to the arousal of a real sympathetic feeling, and finally to express and display this emotional involvement. Clark illustrates how different combinations of these elements – empathic activation, sympathetic feeling, and display – give rise to diverse intersubjective interactions and to varying forms of sympathy, which may be more or less felt, displayed, detailed, or stereotyped. Clark believes that empathy functions as a sounding of the other's experiential field, allowing the individual to assess the possibility of sharing it and to adopt an attitude of greater or lesser resonance. Sympathetic feeling and its display, in turn, complete the formation of the social bond by translating this empathic connection into intersubjective practice. The sociologist uses the metaphor of the intersubjective bridge to describe sympathy. According to the sociologist sympathy establishes or consolidates a bond between subjects through the mutual grasp of their emotional spheres. Empathy acts as a preliminary evaluation, preparing the construction of the bridge, while the sympathetic feeling and its manifestation provide the structural support, like the beams and bolts that sustain the bridge.

Clark situates sympathetic discourse within her theory of the socioemotional economy. By distributing one's attention across different characteristics of the other, of oneself, and of the respective biographical trajectories and situations, the empathic phenomenon reveals itself as a particularly demanding experience. The sociologist emphasizes how empathic "effort" is also a debt, framing it according to Mauss's analysis of the social implications of gift. The 'empathic gift' generates an expectation that the empathic target will reciprocate the empathizer's sympathetic attitude and express gratitude (engaging both feeling and display rules, see Hochschild, 1979). From this perspective, Clark challenges the tight association of empathy with prosocial behaviour, offering instead a more nuanced view of the interactions that can emerge from empathy that she frames in terms of micropolitics. The author highlights how empathy is never neutral. In fact, it creates and dissolves social bonds, consolidates and reproduces hierarchies and power relations. For Clark,

empathy can also translate into an intrusive form of control and possible manipulation.

The micropolitical effects of empathy are grounded in the relational bond it creates between subjects. Feeling understood, the empathizer tends to develop positive emotional responses towards the subject who shows their sympathy. It also seems to outline a climate of confidence and trust in which the experience of others and their situation are valued, recognized and deepened. The "gift of empathy" thus enables the creation of sympathetic circuits, within which it becomes easier to feel mutually understood and accepted, and where affective responses are more likely to translate into felt and expressed forms of sympathy. This aspect can also generate exclusionary dynamics, concentrating the diffusion of sympathy within a circuit and excluding those who remain outside it. The introduction of a distinction between feeling and display, along with the consideration of circuit formation, allows us to highlight the inequalities that can accompany empathy. Empathy can also reproduce asymmetries, distribute attention or affect unevenly, and assume rigid configurations that sharply distinguish empathizers from the empathized, thereby disrupting the constitutive reciprocity of the encounter.

Clark's micropolitical investigations on empathy offer an important contribution to show how the empathic phase affects the type of more or less sympathetic response that will develop between individuals. If, as highlighted by the philosopher Aldo Giorgio Gargani (2002), the emotional sphere identifies a cut-out of possibilities of actions, the different way one relates to the affective life of other people shapes the kind of interaction that can take place.

Arlie Russel Hochschild's empathy maps

The development of a cartographic approach to empathy in sociology is grounded in the work of Arlie Russel Hochschild. The sociologist introduced the concept of the "Empathy Map" to capture the various configurations empathy can take, emphasizing its unequal distribution not only among different targets but also among empathizers themselves. Like Clark, Hochschild employs the metaphor of the intersubjective bridge to describe the empathic phenomenon, emphasizing that such a bridge may be constructed through the cooperative engagement of the subjects involved or, conversely, in an unequal manner, through unilateral performances grounded in the assignment of fixed roles and tasks. In particular,

Hochschild highlights how, if on the one hand the empathic bridge establishes a bond between two or more subjects, at the same time the creation of such a connection ends up excluding other subjects.

Hochschild does not conceive empathy as the immediate sharing of another's experience, understood as parallel emotional activation and participation, but rather views it as a tension, an effortful understanding of the other that involves affective engagement, curiosity and interest, prompting the mobilization of various resources to grasp what the other is experiencing. For Hochschild, empathy is primarily an exercise of curiosity about the other, transcending prejudices and stereotyped understandings. This curiosity engages both affective and cognitive dimensions, fostering an interpretative and exploratory stance that involves the empathizer emotionally. The presence of the other impacts the empathizer, who becomes actively involved. Crucially, empathy entails an awareness of proximity – even amid apparent distance – acknowledging that the other's experience can resonate with the empathizer's actual or potential experience. These aspects lead to a third key element: a practical concern for the other.

As mentioned, Hochschild situates the analysis of empathy within a cartographic framework, structured into areas of varying extension and empathic intensity, across which attention and the capacity for involvement are unevenly distributed among subjects.

She observes that empathic sensibility is often directed consistently toward certain individuals, in forms of deep and accurate involvement. In contrast, engagement with other subjects or in specific contexts tends to be weaker, resulting in generalized or anonymous perceptions. To capture these dynamics, she introduces the concept of "empathy walls" (Hochschild, 2016) highlighting the difficulties in relating to some individuals and the limitations this imposes on the expansion of empathy maps. Hochschild does not frame these aspects as grounds for a negative conception of empathy as antisocial; instead, she highlights its ambivalent, light-and-shadow dimensions, often overshadowed by the prevailing focus on its altruistic and benevolent outcomes. Her cartographic approach underscores empathy's dynamic and mutable nature and the potential for continual remapping of empathic geographies. Awareness of one's empathic boundaries allows for their gradual extension and reshaping. Recognizing heterogeneity in the distribution of empathy and in one's sensitivity provides a lens for understanding the social and cultural conditions that

shape empathic capacities. Empathic barriers are influenced by class, race, and gender, structuring who can empathize with whom and in what ways. Such an orientation resonates with Martin Hoffman's account of empathy as a morally ambivalent phenomenon, whose development and scope are shaped by socialization and contextual factors (2023). Building on this insight, Hartmann (2023) introduces the notion of the "empathic gulf", inspired by the definition introduced by the political scientist Ian Shapiro (2002), to describe how cultural and social differences produce gaps in emotional, imaginative, and cognitive resources, complicating empathic understanding. Individuals from distinct social worlds, shaped by divergent values, interests, and priorities, are less able to empathize with distant others, lacking shared cultural or social resources. Such gaps translate structural inequalities into affective and relational disparities, shaping interactions and reinforcing social hierarchies.

Hochschild emphasizes that empathy requires both curiosity and practical interest in the other, a willingness to engage with experiences initially distant or foreign. Repeated empathic encounters allow maps to be extended, exceptions to be incorporated, and boundaries to be reshaped. Empathic engagement is iterative: attention may focus on different aspects of the other's experience, producing more or less resonant or dissonant forms of empathy, and activating perceptual, emotional, and practical dimensions to varying degrees. This process enables detailed and nuanced understanding, moving beyond stereotypes and rigid social roles. Empathy, in this sense, resembles the work of a cartographer: mapping moods, gestures, and words, exploring the other's personal and affective world to render it comprehensible. As Hochschild writes:

A surveyor gauges the height of the mountain, depth of a sea, expanse of the desert. She discovers a reality that exists in places where, generally, she is not. By means of aerial, radar, and sonar testing, the surveyor gathers information about where things are, climates, and the possibilities of life. She needs a steady hand to hold her surveying instruments. As the surveyor of an empathy map, one learns to hold 'a steady hand'—that is, to manage to some degree the anxiety, outrage, grief, or other emotion that the misfortune of another might evoke, so that the empathizer stays tuned into what the other is feeling, and to no-empathy zones. When we draw a map, we draw boundaries around high-empathy and low-empathy areas (Hochschild, 2013, pp. 37-38).

Overall, Hochschild's framework highlights empathy as simultaneously a social phenomenon, a personal skill, and a relational practice. Social conditions shape empathic capacities, yet empathy remains malleable, open to exploration, extension, and transformation. The cartographic metaphor provides a conceptual tool for analyzing social dynamics, mapping zones of resonance and distance, and reflecting on the factors that shape with whom and how we engage emotionally, cognitively, and practically. Empathy thus emerges as both a method of understanding others and a lens through which to examine the distribution of social and cultural resources that facilitate or constrain this skill.

After laying the foundations for her cartographic theory of empathy in a short essay titled *Empathy Maps* (Hochschild, 2013), the sociologist transformed this model into a theoretical framework within which to conduct empirical research among voters and sympathizers of the Tea Party (Hochschild, 2016).

Hochschild aimed to explore the political divide in the United States, which, beyond reflecting economic and social inequalities, also shapes individuals' empathic capacities. This led to the idea of entering a world marked by values, interests, and perspectives distant from her own political beliefs, in order to deepen her understanding and challenge the limits of her empathy maps. The core object of Hochschild's investigation was the perception of an apparently insurmountable "empathy wall" that seemed to divide the country, provoking feelings of bewilderment, discomfort, and widespread alienation. This, in turn, reinforced a sense of estrangement from other social groups, radicalizing otherness and distance, and hardening existing empathy maps by setting rigid boundaries. In this work, empathy becomes both a social phenomenon to study and a methodological tool through which the researcher interrogates her own inclinations and limitations. The research begins from the need to step outside one's own "bubble" and attempt to "imagine oneself into other people's shoes". This effort involved a five-year journey "into the heart of right-wing America", allowing Hochschild to confront her own empathic barriers, observe them shift, and experience their transformation into opportunities for the redefinition of her own empathic maps. Throughout her study, Hochschild emphasizes that this work is not the product of a unilateral exercise of empathy, but of a mutual effort to understand and renegotiate empathic boundaries. She highlights the "gift of trust and understanding" granted to her by participants,

and the sense of gratitude she feels toward them for welcoming her into their world while simultaneously challenging her own limits of comprehension. By openly sharing differences Hochschild was able to foster interest and trust from the groups she studied, creating a climate of frank and open exchange. For her, acknowledging one's own empathic barriers, as well as the social conditions that produce them, is a prerequisite for expanding one's capacity to understand and feel what is perceived as "foreign." Hochschild's investigation – or, more precisely, her experience – demonstrates the malleability of empathic maps. The object of study turns into a direct experience of the transformative power of empathy, revealing how personal engagement with others can reshape one's own emotional and relational understanding of them.

Natalia Ruiz-Junco's empathy maps

The Hochschildian intuition of empathic maps undergoes an important development in the work of Natalia Ruiz-Junco. The sociologist, as mentioned, developed the first real systematic proposal of a sociology of empathy, which is elaborated by adopting interactionism's conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks. Ruiz-Junco investigates empathic dynamics within specific contexts such as the medical one, focusing on the work of health personnel in midwifery wards and in the field of palliative care (Ruiz-Junco, 2017; 2019), as well as within forms of activism and social movements (Ruiz-Junco, 2013). These empirical studies identify empathy as a pick from which to analyse the interactional dynamics analysing not only the mechanisms that underlie the affirmation and consolidation of roles and social bonds, but also how every interaction represent an opportunity to redefine and personalize the relationships that take shape within it. Ruiz-Junco approaches the empathic phenomenon in terms of performance, framing it in a logic of frames, patterns, roles and norms. The sociologist emphasizes how assuming the physiognomy of a situational interaction, empathy is not extraneous to the logic of expectations and socio-cultural conditioning, which, however, can in turn be renegotiated within an empathic encounter. The latter is characterized by the presence of an empathizing subject and an empathized subject – between which unilateral or reciprocal empathic bonds can develop – and a "cultural *stock of empathy knowledge*" (Ruiz-Junco, 2017, p. 12), which collects the emotional culture to which the subjects involved belong, and their "empathic careers", i.e. the set of skills, inclinations and empathic sensitivities. Each empathic

performance, in addition to responding to certain expectations, is conditioned by the flow of information inherent to the empathized subject and by the level of familiarity and intimacy that characterizes their bond. Ruiz-Junco recognizes, alongside the incidence of socio-cultural factors on empathic sensitivity, the weight of the individual dimension, highlighting how empathized experiences of the subject can orient, inhibit or stimulate empathic activations and the level of extension of understanding and cooperation that empathy can inaugurate.

Ruiz-Junco expands her analysis of the empathic experience by proposing the integration of the notion of "empathy path", a term with which the sociologist identifies the constitution of real empathic patterns defined on the basis of interpretative orientations coming from the stock of empathy knowledge available and the emotional culture of reference of the subjects involved. Ruiz-Junco emphasizes how these paths are socially constructed but individually crossed, alluding to and enhancing the possibility of personalizing this path. As evidenced by the strategies of resistance to the logic of rationalization of the doctor-patient relationship put in place by the healthcare staff. Where care tends to be oriented exclusively towards calculable parameters (Rosa, 2020) and an emotional detachment considered necessary and functional to patient care, professionals in the sector often tend to protect and privilege a more personal type of relationship, attentive to the impact that diseases have on the patient's entire existence, carrying out a complex empathic work of taking charge of the dense panorama of thoughts and emotional states of the people they assist.

Ruiz-Junco identifies three ideal types of empathic paths, identified on the basis of Simmel's types of association (Simmel, 1908). The association in which individuals are "one-in-another" grounds what may be termed the "self-transcendent" empathic path: a dynamic in which engagement with another's emotional life generates a self-implicating movement that exceeds one's initial perspective and opens onto a shared standpoint. It is a dynamic that allows the constitution of a "We". The second path is defined as "therapeutic" and is inspired by the form of association in which one individual is "for-the-other". In it, the perception of the other's experience orients the empathizing subject towards the adoption of altruistic practices, aimed at the well-being of the other. The last path, the "instrumental" one, differs from those previously described. It does

not necessarily translate into selfish behavior aimed at manipulating or exploiting the other for one's own benefit. It echoes Simmel's notion of association in which subjects are "through-one-another". In this configuration, the empathic dynamic functions as a medium oriented toward the attainment of external goals which may themselves be directed toward the other. This is evident, for instance, in the doctor-patient relationship, where an empathic attitude serves the primary aim of healing and thus extends beyond the interaction itself. This differs from a therapeutic path in which the focus lies in deepening and consolidating the empathic relationship as such, rather than mobilizing it instrumentally toward an external objective.

Ruiz-Junco's proposal, therefore, not only lays the foundations for a sociology of empathy, identifying its theoretical framework in symbolic and dramaturgical interactionism, but through the theory of empathy paths and her field studies further details the repercussions that empathy can have on interaction and the way in which the interaction between sentient subjects, endowed with their own biographies, frames of reference and social rules, carve out the horizon of possible relationships opened up by the empathic encounter.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to systematize and synthesize the growing attention to empathy within the sociology of emotions. Far from being a mere feeling, empathy emerges as a foundational phenomenon, triggered by encounters between subjectivities, whose articulation and modulation can shape the dissonances, resonances, or indifference that guide social interactions. This perspective not only highlights the empathic dynamics underlying social relationships but also emphasizes their constitutive plasticity and dynamism, their tendency to expand or contract, activate or inhibit, in the course of interaction. From this standpoint, empathy can be framed in cartographic terms. A sociological approach to empathy must take into account its distributional patterns and intersubjective effects, interrogating blind spots, boundaries, and areas of greatest activation, while revealing their social and cultural determinants. Such a perspective encourages critical awareness of one's own empathic maps, fostering reflection on the reasons behind them and the possibility of broadening them. As illustrated by Hochschild, this approach also has significant methodological implications. It emphasizes the researcher's engagement with the field, the need to reflect on one's own empathic

involvement or lack thereof, and the ways in which personal experience can reshape understanding. The cartographic approach underscores how empathy affects interactions, how it develops and consolidates within social contexts, and how it can be critically examined, expanded, and operationalized in both theoretical and empirical research, opening up a promising line of inquiry.

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